

Frequent Changes in the UK Prime Minister from 2016 to 2022: The Political Economy Perspective

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Keywords: Political Economy, UK Prime Minister, Political Stability, Economic Governance.

Abstract: Since 2016, the turnover rate of the United Kingdom's Prime Minister has reached a high level compared with recent years, with five leaders assuming office in just seven years. This paper analyzes this political instability through a political economy lens, arguing that the interplay between economic shocks and institutional vulnerabilities has created a self-reinforcing cycle of leadership turnover. Three key dynamics are being identified. First, successive economic crises have systematically weakened governing authority; second, the UK's political system lacks robust safeguards against rapid leadership removal; and third, policy missteps in responding to these crises have accelerated political fallout. Through case studies of Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and Liz Truss's premierships, how economic pressures translate into leadership vulnerabilities in the UK's unique constitutional context is demonstrated. Furthermore, this paper also compares the UK with Germany, whose leadership stability is worthy of being mentioned and praised under the current volatile international situation, contrasting the differences from a political, economic, and social point of view between the UK and Germany. This paper contributes to understanding the relationship between economic governance and political stability in advanced democracies facing multiple crises.

1 INTRODUCTION

When taking a brief view of the United Kingdom's political circles in recent years, we can find that, since 2016, the Prime Minister has changed frequently. Compared to the relative stability of earlier decades, when Prime Ministers usually held office for several terms, this extraordinary frequency of leadership transitions is a sharp contrast. The Brexit referendum in June 2016, which precipitated Cameron's resignation and started a series of political and economic crises that are still reshaping British politics, marking the beginning of the current turbulent period. Every changeover has revealed deeper structural issues in the political economy of the United Kingdom in addition to individual political shortcomings. Multiple overlapping crises have accompanied this instability, including the lengthy Brexit discussions, the COVID-19 epidemic, the cost-of-living issue, and the significant market turmoil that followed the Truss government's contentious "mini-budget."

This essay addresses two interconnected questions: What are the reasons for the UK's high rate of leadership transitions since 2016 and how might

political economic variables contribute to this instability? A more thorough understanding necessitates looking at the relationship between economic shocks, institutional frameworks, and policy responses, even though superficial explanations frequently concentrate on the faults of particular leaders or particular policy failures. The main problem is why, in contrast to other developed democracies dealing with comparable global issues, like Germany, the political system of the United Kingdom has proven especially susceptible to volatility in its leadership. This essay also makes the case that the UK's high Prime Minister turnover since 2016 is caused by three main factors: first, the long-lasting economic shocks brought on by Brexit and their escalation by later international crises; second, the UK's political system's institutional flaws that make leadership roles especially susceptible to crises; and third, a history of policy failures in handling economic difficulties that have damaged party and public confidence. The political economy method used here highlights how political actors are constrained by economic circumstances and how political choices influence economic results. The

study is centered on this recursive link between political survival and economic circumstances.

2 POLITICAL ECONOMY OF LEADERSHIP INSTABILITY

2.1 Definition of Political Economy Approach

The relationship between political decision-making and economic circumstances is examined via the political economy approach. This part examines how institutional frameworks, electoral pressures, and financial crises influence the tenure and turnover of political leaders in the setting of leadership instability.

2.2 Party Dynamic

The UK is a typical two-party state. Though the Conservatives and Labor parties see each other as their biggest rivals, having fought with each other for the formation of a cabinet, a more complicated picture with distinct party systems has replaced the traditional two-party system of early post-war Britain. According to Patrick Dunleavy and Francoise Broucek, who used quantitative analyses to show the declining "effectiveness" of the UK's two-party system. They argued that the rise of smaller parties like the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Liberal Democrats at the local and national levels has weakened the parties' control of parliament, resulting in frequent coalition governments and challenging policy compromises(Dunleavy & Broucek, 2003). Besides, the ideological rivalry between the Conservative and Labor parties has led to policy polarization, forcing voters to choose between extremes of 'either/or' and exacerbating voter dissatisfaction.

2.3 Electoral System

The UK Prime Minister has no fixed term, serving at the pleasure of their party and Parliament. This will lead to a great deal of uncertainty about who the Prime Minister is and what his term of office will be. Another characteristic of the UK electoral system is First Past the Post (FPTP), which means that voters in a single constituency are required to vote only once, and the person receiving the greatest number of votes of all the candidates is elected, irrespective of the absolute number of votes. Though this kind of

electoral system has its advantages in saving time and cost, it tends to favor majorities and large parties to the detriment of small parties (Lewis-Beck & Stegmaier, 2000). As a result, with the continuous growth and development of some small political parties in the UK, the existing FPTP can no longer make the parliamentary election able to satisfy and reflect the proper representation of the House of Commons. More specifically, this calls into question the democratic nature of the election results and the representativeness of the membership of the Parliament. As a two-party country, the current electoral system is likely to continue to change Prime Ministers more frequently than the Western European average.

2.4 Economic Crisis

In democracies around the world, election results are influenced by economic factors. The level of unemployment and the pace of inflation have a significant impact on government authority. Recessions, particularly those characterized by high unemployment and negative GDP growth, greatly lower the likelihood of re-election for ruling parties, according to Michael S. Lewis-Beck and Mary Stegmaier. When the incumbent government performs poorly in elections, voters often blame it on economic factors. In other words, a vote against the person in charge is far more likely when citizens are unhappy with the state of the economy. Since 2016, the UK has experienced Brexit and Covid-19, both of which have posed great threats to the UK's economy, especially after the pandemic. These conditions caused citizens' great distrust of the existing government (Collignon et al., 2021).

3 ECONOMIC SHOCKS AND THEIR POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

Economic shocks have the power to topple governments, alter political environments, and reduce people's confidence in the political system (Margalit, 2019). Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the 2022 cost-of-living crisis have all occurred since 2016, illustrating how economic upheavals exacerbate political unrest. Three significant shocks, as well as their effects on the economy and their political ramifications, are examined in this section.

3.1 Brexit as an Economic Disruptor

In 2016, the UK held a referendum on the continued participation of the United Kingdom in the European Union, and Brexiteers narrowly won. The subsequent withdrawal from the EU in 2020 caused immediate and long-term economic disruptions. Since then, as a significant world economy, the UK has been deeply shocked.

The first and most tangible change is that the trade between the UK and the EU has been reduced. After Brexit, the tariff and non-tariff barriers are on the rise. The UK and the EU no longer enjoyed the original zero-tariff free trade arrangement, even with the Trade and Co-operation Agreement (TCA), which went into effect in 2021. Tariffs on certain goods, such as automobiles and agricultural products, raised operating expenses for enterprises in the UK. Besides customs inspections, certification of rules of origin, sanitary and quarantine standards, and other processes have become more cumbersome, leading to a decrease in trade efficiency. According to a survey, the non-tariff barriers have increased average business costs by 15-20%, with small and medium-sized enterprises being hit hard (Bloom et al., 2019). Secondly, Brexit also caused investment uncertainty. Foreign direct investment (FDI) dropped, as firms delayed expansion due to regulatory uncertainty. Finally, as the UK no longer belonged to the EU, the free flow policies of the labor market were no longer applicable to the UK. That caused EU migrant workers to decline, exacerbating shortages in healthcare, agriculture, and logistics.

The referendum on Brexit being approved has directly led to the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron, who was in favor of remaining in the EU. After the resignation, Theresa May became the new Prime Minister. In the early period of her tenure, May made the moderate Brexit and maintaining economic stability her target. In March 2017, she announced the official start of the process of Brexit. However, the key point of contention in the first version of the Brexit deal was the Northern Ireland border Backstop option, whereby Northern Ireland would remain in the European Union customs union to avoid a 'hard border' if the UK and EU did not reach a future trade deal. This option was seen as a 'permanent trap' by the Brexiteers in the British Conservative Party, agreeing to be rejected three times in the House of Commons. The Democratic Unionist Party of Northern Ireland opposed her handling of the border and saw her as compromising too much to the EU. Business leaders, they criticized her inability to secure a stable transition, worsening

economic anxiety. Under these circumstances, May's intention to deliver her Brexit proposal to Parliament for the fourth time in May 2019 has been even more controversial and has been the impetus for her downfall. Under pressure, she announced on 24 May that she would resign as leader of the Conservative Party.

With Theresa May's resignation as Conservative leader in June 2019, Boris Johnson then declared his candidacy. Johnson capitalized on public frustration, winning a landslide in 2019 by promising to finalize Brexit. However, his strict stance increased economic instability. Brexit exposed how economic shocks may paralyze the government and lead to changes in leadership and restructuring of party politics.

3.2 The Covid-19 Pandemic and Fiscal Stress

Since 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic has caused economic depression, exposing the UK economy's dependence on services and supply chain vulnerabilities. On top of that, the pandemic triggered unprecedented fiscal interventions. After the pandemic, the UK's GDP plunged 20.4 % in the second quarter of 2020 from a year earlier, the biggest drop since records began in 1955. Preliminary statistics released by the Office for National Statistics (ONS) on 12 December showed that the UK's GDP contracted by 9.9 % in 2020, the biggest annual fall since records were kept. As for the unemployment rate, it rose from 3.8% to 4.8% in 2020 (ONS), with youth unemployment reaching 16% at one point (Resolution Foundation).

To make matters worse, while initially stabilizing, the UK's response to the COVID-19 epidemic had serious long-term effects, especially in terms of public debt and inflation, which changed political and economic stability. The first challenge was that the massive public spending caused debt surge and fiscal risks. To avert widespread unemployment, the government spent £70 billion to pay 11.7 million workers 80% of their earnings. However, this resulted in a large increase in the national debt. Apart from that, the government has provided grants and loans to enterprises to keep them alive, which has resulted in fraud and zombie corporations. All these actions made the debt-to-GDP ratio skyrocket, rising from 85% in 2019 to 104% in 2021, the highest level since the 1960s (Gopinath, 2022).

All these situations marked economic mismanagement, eroding the citizens' trust in the government. At that time, the British anti-epidemic policy led to the banning of most gatherings.

Although the UK government also implemented several closure policies to prevent the epidemic, the politicians continued to hold gatherings in violation of the epidemic regulations, with Prime Minister Boris Johnson attending at least three of the gatherings. Public anger grew as inflation squeezed households while elites appeared unaccountable. After this "Partygate" scandal, which revealed that the lockdown-breaking parties overshadowed economic recovery efforts, Johnson was forced to resign as a result of scandals and economic unrest that damaged his reputation.

3.3 The 2022 Cost-of-Living Crisis and Marketturmoil

The year 2022 was a year of ups and downs. This year, a combination of external shocks and internal policy failures worsened the situation. In February 2022, the conflict between Russia and Ukraine broke out. The UK was not an exception to the global energy crisis brought on by the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which had far-reaching and significant ramifications for global energy development. The direct influence was the disruption of natural gas supplies from Russia. To solve the problem, the government was forced to buy gas from other countries like the USA and Norway, which not only increased the cost but also directly contributed to inflation and significant increases in household energy expenditures. Chris Rogers, a prominent supply chain economist, notes that the biggest economic consequence of this crisis on the UK and Europe at large "is very much going to be in terms of what it means for supply chain cost inflation" (Mbah & Wasum, 2022).

To boost growth in the inflation-stricken British economy through massive tax cuts and increased fiscal stimulus, Liz Truss, who became Prime Minister of the UK in September 2022, launched a radical tax cut program, releasing the "mini-budget" program of the government in September. This policy included a massive tax cut package, with plans to reduce the 45% top income tax levied on people earning more than £150,000 a year to 40%, and canceled the previous government's plan to increase the corporate tax rate from 19% to 25%, maintaining the 19% rate.

Following the announcement of the proposal, the pound sterling hit a record low versus the dollar, driving up the cost of borrowing for the government and forcing the Bank of England to temporarily buy bonds to calm the debt market. Under this circumstance, Kwasi Kwarteng, UK Chancellor of

the Exchequer, announced the scrapping of tax cuts in October, and he was asked to resign 10 days later, with successor Jeremy Hunt reversing almost all tax cuts. In the aftermath, despite Truss apologizing for the turmoil caused by the tax cut plan, her support within the Conservative Party plummeted. Under pressure, Truss announced her resignation as leader of the Conservative Party on October 20, and she officially left her post as Prime Minister of the United Kingdom to be replaced by Rishi Sunak on October 25, whom she had defeated in September.

4 INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Some existing contradictions in British politics are seen in the UK's recent high turnover of Prime Ministers, which included David Cameron and Liz Truss in just six years. The UK's unwritten constitution, internal party dynamics, and media pressures make it possible to remove leaders quickly. This section looks at how leadership instability is influenced by the political system of the UK, the instability of the Conservative Party, and outside forces.

4.1 The UK's Unwritten Constitution and Leadership Vulnerability

Since the UK does not have a written constitution, it is the traditions rather than fixed laws that control the Prime Minister's authority. UK Prime Ministers are only in office for as long as they maintain the support of their party and Parliament, in contrast to US presidents, who are elected to four-year terms unless removed. Through internal party processes like no-confidence votes or leadership challenges, this system enables quick removal.

New circumstances and situations encountered by the government can be resolved through precedent or customary means (Johari, 2006). As for the UK, however, while the Fixed-Term Parliaments Act (2011–2022) set general election dates every five years, it did not protect Prime Ministers from internal party removals. A sitting Prime Minister can be ousted if they lose a leadership challenge, like Theresa May in 2019, or face overwhelming pressure to resign, like Boris Johnson in 2022. Additionally, the Conservative Party's 1922 Committee has upheld leadership regulations, which means that even in the absence of a general election, a Prime Minister may be removed if they lose support from the backbench.

Unlike the USA, whose president serves fixed terms unless impeached, the UK's Prime Minister can be easily removed by their members of parliament, as seen in Liz Truss's resignation after only 45 days. Under the parliamentary system, the Prime Minister is accountable only to Parliament, and when the Prime Minister fails to obtain a majority of votes in Parliament, he or she, along with the cabinet, must resign. When groups within the ruling party conflict, this flexibility—which is meant to maintain party unity—often causes instability. In a presidential system, on the other hand, the president is elected by the voters and is directly accountable to the people. The parliament or congress is usually unable to hold a vote of no confidence in the president.

4.2 The Conservative Party's Internal Instability

The Conservative Party has been sharply split since 2016 over issues of leadership, economic policy, and Brexit. As many facets of the party compete for dominance, these factional conflicts have sped up the turnover of leadership.

The first division was the difference between the Leavers and the Remainers in terms of the UK's role in the EU, which has been talked about in detail above. For instance, the party was divided by the 2016 referendum into pro-EU (like Theresa May) and pro-Brexit (like Boris Johnson) sections. May's failure to bring these groups together ultimately resulted in her resignation. Secondly, since 2010, the Conservative Party's economic policies have been characterized by a fundamental conflict between fiscal conservatism and the rising demand for public investment, which has exacerbated instability in the party's leadership. Following the 2008 financial crisis, the government implemented strict austerity measures under David Cameron and George Osborne to lower the budget deficit. However, following the EU referendum in 2016, there was a significant change in the political and economic environment. New demands for more public spending were brought about by Brexit. This placed the Conservatives in a challenging position: a growing faction, led by Boris Johnson and Liz Truss, argued for looser spending to spur growth and win electoral support, while the party's traditional fiscal conservatives, like Rishi Sunak, insisted on maintaining budgetary discipline. This episode also highlighted a broader trend: the Conservative Party's inability to settle on a coherent post-Brexit economic strategy has left it vulnerable to repeated leadership challenges, as different factions push competing visions for the country's fiscal future.

There was much more to the 2022 Conservative leadership contest between Liz Truss and Rishi Sunak than just a power war. Regarding the role of the government in the economy, it revealed a deep ideological division within the Conservative Party. In addition to determining the Conservative Party's course of growth, this conflict between opposing economic theories ultimately revealed how susceptible the UK political system is to abrupt changes in leadership based on unproven policy programs. And two completely different ideas for the future of the British economy were exposed by the competition. Former Chancellor Rishi Sunak, who personified the Tory legacy of fiscal restraint, was on one side. His platform promoted gradual deficit reduction to fight inflation and stressed keeping current tax levels to restore public finances (Li, 2022). Liz Truss, in contrast, presented herself as a radical reformer who supported what she called a "new economic approach" that included supply-side measures to boost growth and immediate, comprehensive tax cuts of £45 billion.

4.3 Media and Public Opinion Pressure

With the Conservative Party's sustained drop in public popularity, the UK's unusually combative media landscape has produced an atmosphere where leadership positions are becoming more precarious. British Prime Ministers have to deal with a constant, round-the-clock news cycle, partisan tabloid campaigns, and internal party panic over polling collapses, all of which can force a leader out before their term naturally ends. This contrasts with many other democracies where leaders are usually removed only through elections or significant scandals.

The right-wing tabloid media in the UK, especially The Sun, Daily Mail, and Telegraph, have a significant influence on political narratives and frequently serve as executioners for Conservative politicians. Before the formal Brexit, to give the public an imagined sensation of empowerment over a perceived threat to the British nation and its popular sovereignty, a significant portion of the tabloid press framed the Brexit decision (Zapettini, 2021). On top of that, opinion polls have shown the Conservatives lagging behind Labor by double digits since 2021, which has left Conservative MPs in a constant state of worry. As the party looks for a "reset" to prevent electoral destruction, this has resulted in a rotating door of leaders.

A contradiction has been produced by the media-political ecosystem in the UK: although it is simpler to change leaders than in presidential systems, short-

term panic rather than democratic mandates is increasingly driving these moves. Because leaders are removed before their programs have had a chance to be thoroughly assessed, the Conservative Party's reliance on tabloid support and poll-driven survival strategies runs the risk of weakening long-term governance.

5 COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS: STABILITY IN GERMANY

Former German Chancellor Angela Merkel served as Chancellor of Germany from November 2005 to December 2021 after she was elected in 2000 as head of Germany's Christian Democratic Union (CDU) party. In contrast to the UK's tumultuous political scene, this German woman has been re-elected four times as chancellor and has been in power for as many as 16 years, a record since the reunification of East and West Germany. Merkel's capacity to remain in power for an extended period is extremely uncommon in Western democracies, where party turnover has become the norm. This further demonstrates that, as a female head of state, she possesses a significant level of political literacy and personal strength. This chapter concentrates on the late stage (2016–2021) of Merkel's rule in Germany in comparison to the UK to provide a more equitable comparison.

5.1 Difference in Political System

Three grand coalition administrations were in place during Merkel's four sessions as federal chancellor of Germany. Additionally, Germany has established a comparatively developed pattern of cooperation after eight grand coalition governments in its post-war history. The grand coalition government in the Merkel era has therefore been more stable, and its effective operation has established a strong basis for the CDU and SPD's (Social Democratic Party of Germany) success in their future collaboration. Although Merkel is the leader of the CDU party, the party also made significant concessions during the 2018 negotiations to successfully form a cabinet. If the Social Democrats reject the grand coalition government, Merkel's only options are to form a "minority government" or call fresh elections, both of which could cause a significant political upheaval in Germany. Zheng Chunrong, director of Tongji University's Center for German Studies, told Xinhua News Agency that while Merkel and her CDU did not entirely abandon their core stance, the ruling allies

made more compromises to successfully form a cabinet and avoid re-election. Even though the loss of CDU was not small, the two sides were able to hold back and reach a mutual compromise that, to some extent, strengthened the stability of the coalition government. In the end, the Social Democrats were awarded the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Finance, the Ministry of Labor, and six other important ministerial positions. Furthermore, Germany's federal system and more decentralized governmental power help to mitigate the disputes that result from central decision-making.

For the UK, as previously stated, the UK's FPTP electoral system typically results in a single-party majority government; however, since 2016, the Conservative Party has been embroiled in internal strife. On the issue of Brexit, the Conservative Party is deeply divided: there were those who supported Brexit and those who opposed it; there were both soft Brexiteers and hard Brexiteers.

5.2 Economic Perspective

The stability of the German political landscape cannot be separated from the inclusion of economic elements, as Germany has maintained the largest economy in Europe during Merkel's tenure. The first factor is that the labor market has benefited greatly from the institutional legacy of the "Hartz Reform" (2003-2005), which has increased women's labor force participation and decreased Germany's unemployment rate from 11.2 percent in 2005 to 3.2 percent in 2019. This change enhanced labor market flexibility and encouraged low-wage employment. In addition to increasing employment and reviving the labor force, this also set the stage for promoting market dynamics and economic expansion. One of the main factors contributing to the Merkel government's lengthy rule was the strength of its economic policies. During this time, stability, fiscal restraint, and sustainability were the main focuses of German economic policy. Germany's economy continues to prosper between 2016 and 2021 because of its robust industrial foundation, export-focused economy, and effective social market economic system. Despite the globalization trend, Germany has managed to stay somewhat competitive, particularly in high-tech industries like engineering, mechanical, and automotive. Additionally, Germany maintained its "black-zero" policy—that is, zero tolerance for fiscal deficits—during this time. By closely regulating public spending and taxation, the German government aimed to preserve a balanced national budget and guarantee long-term economic stability.

Germany is now a foundation of the eurozone economy and has gained international trust because of its conservative economic strategy. Furthermore, Germany's unemployment rate stayed consistently low during this time, and the country's social assistance system protected the people's fundamental level of living, preventing social unrest from getting worse.

On the other hand, the UK encountered more intricate economic difficulties throughout that time. The referendum on the UK's exit from the European Union was conducted in 2016, and several economic issues, including slower economic development, fewer company investments, and pound devaluation, resulted from this decision. The UK government's economic policy is also in disarray because of the Brexit process's delays and repetitions. The UK's economic strategy is less stable and coherent over the long run than Germany's, which makes it less competitive in the global market.

5.3 Social Policy Perspective

As for social policy, the Merkel Administration prioritizes social stability, social welfare, and inclusivity. Germany has offered workers comparatively comprehensive medical care, pensions, and unemployment insurance through a rigorous social security system. In addition to fostering long-term social stability, these policies have protected the German people's fundamental means of subsistence throughout periods of economic turmoil. At the same time, Merkel has maintained a very liberal immigration policy, particularly during the 2015 refugee crisis when Germany took in a significant number of migrants. Even though this policy has generated a great deal of controversy within the nation, it demonstrates Germany's sense of accountability and inclusivity in the face of globalization. By implementing this approach, Germany has not only increased social diversity but also positioned itself as a responsible large nation abroad, which has improved and preserved Merkel's reputation among Germans.

On the other hand, social policy in the UK has changed significantly since Brexit. Social welfare programs have been put to the test by the uncertainties created by the EU referendum and the resulting economic unrest. In the UK, immigration has also emerged as a major sociopolitical issue. The post-Brexit changes in immigration policy have exacerbated social tensions and polarization. Social stability in the UK has been impacted by this string of

policy changes and social unrest, which has also resulted in frequent changes in political leadership.

6 CONCLUSION

According to the analysis, a cycle of political vulnerability has been created in the UK since 2016 by the interaction of significant economic shocks with inadequate institutional safeguards, which has resulted in repeated changes in Prime Minister. Economic shocks, such as Brexit, the pandemic, or inflation, initially undermine leaders' authority, compelling them to implement policy responses. However, ill-conceived or rushed measures, like austerity budgets or unfunded tax cuts, often exacerbate the crises, triggering market turmoil or worsening living standards. This sparks fierce backlash from both party factions and the public, ultimately forcing the leader's resignation. Incoming successors then inherit even more severe unresolved problems with diminished policy flexibility, creating a vicious cycle of process from crisis to leadership change. This chain reaction demonstrates how short-term policy pressures, institutional features like no-confidence mechanisms, and structural economic weaknesses such as stagnant growth have collectively driven the UK's frequent leadership turnovers in recent years—where each new Prime Minister faces progressively more constrained options to break the cycle of instability.

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