

EUROPE

# Boris Johnson's Next Brexit Hurdle Is U.K. Parliament

Prime minister needs to hold Conservative rebels to a minimum, and win backing of Northern Ireland party and about a dozen Labour lawmakers



British Prime Minister Boris Johnson is planning to convene Parliament for a rare Saturday sitting. PHOTO: DANIEL LEAL-OLIVAS/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

*By Jason Douglas*

Updated Oct. 17, 2019 2:52 pm ET

LONDON—After securing an agreement with the European Union on a revised Brexit agreement, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson now turns to a daunting challenge at home: persuading the U.K.'s fractious parliament to support it.

Mr. Johnson lacks a majority in the U.K.'s 650-seat House of Commons, though because around a dozen lawmakers don't participate in parliamentary votes he needs only 320 to approve his plan for Britain to leave the bloc.

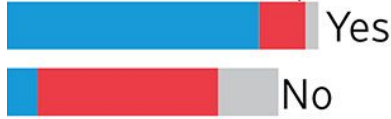
To get there, he has to do much better than his predecessor Theresa May, whose own deal was voted down three times in the Commons. The closest she got was on the third vote on March 29 when she lost by 58 votes.

## The Four Key Groups That Could Pass the Brexit Deal

### PREVIOUS VOTE



### NEXT VOTE?



← **VOTES NEEDED FOR DEAL**



Does Boris Johnson have a chance of getting his revised deal through parliament?

That means Mr. Johnson must persuade at least 29 lawmakers who voted against Mrs. May's deal on March 29 to back his deal—while not losing any of those who supported Mrs. May. Time is short if he is to meet the current Oct. 31 deadline. He is planning to convene lawmakers for a rare Saturday sitting to get started.

A rejection of the deal by Parliament would set the stage for a general election later this year. In such a scenario, Mr.

Johnson could campaign on a message that parliamentarians have frustrated his attempt to deliver on the 2016 Brexit referendum, in which a majority of Britons voted to leave the bloc. The prime minister has seen his popular support rise since taking office this summer, in part on frustration in some quarters that the U.K. remains an EU member more than three years after the vote.

There are 287 lawmakers in Mr. Johnson's Conservative group. Another 22 former Conservatives sit as independents after being kicked out of the party or quitting for defying the government.

Opposition parties including Labour, the Scottish National Party and the Liberal Democrats together account for 309. Eleven seats are held by nonaligned lawmakers of various stripes, while Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party has 10 seats. The small, fervently pro-British party, though Conservative allies, earlier Thursday said it couldn't support Mr. Johnson's deal, citing concerns over new provisions affecting Northern Ireland, including customs, the post-Brexit value-added tax regime and the role of Northern Ireland's legislature in approving changes to the region's status.

The party was instrumental in sinking Mrs. May's Brexit deal because its members said the so-called backstop provisions related to the border with the Republic of Ireland would have weakened the bonds between Northern Ireland and the rest of the U.K. DUP leaders now say the new provisions that replace the backstop also threaten the integrity of the U.K.

So it is imperative for Mr. Johnson to keep the number of Conservative and ex-Conservative rebels to a minimum. A group of 28 committed pro-Brexit lawmakers voted against Mrs. May's deal on all three occasions she brought it to Parliament. They, too, opposed the backstop, but that has now been replaced. They also share Mr. Johnson's enthusiasm for a loose free-trade accord

---

## MORE ON BREXIT

---

- U.K., EU Agree on Draft Brexit Deal, Paving Way for Key Vote (Oct. 17, 2019)
  - Global Markets Edge Higher After Brexit Deal Is Struck (Oct. 17, 2019)
  - Why the Irish Border Has Hamstrung Brexit (Oct. 13, 2019)
- 

with the EU rather than the closer cooperation envisaged by Mrs. May, giving them possible cause to get in line behind his deal.

“I believe we can leave on the 31st of October and I believe that we will,” William Cash, a prominent euroskeptic lawmaker, said

Tuesday. A potential difficulty, though, is that some of this group have signaled they won’t budge unless the DUP do as well.

Ex-Conservatives such as former leadership contender Rory Stewart and Nicholas Soames, Winston Churchill’s grandson, are mostly likely to back Mr. Johnson. Many supported Mrs. May’s deal and have signaled they would approve a withdrawal plan. They only split with the party over Mr. Johnson’s plan to leave the EU without any deal if necessary.

To get the agreement through without the backing of the DUP, though, Mr. Johnson must win over a dozen or more lawmakers from the main opposition Labour Party, most members of which will follow the party leadership and vote against it.

Six Labour lawmakers backed Mrs. May’s deal, but a handful of others who represent pro-Brexit constituencies might be tempted to back Mr. Johnson’s deal to ensure the U.K.’s withdrawal from the EU. His plan to not commit the U.K. to EU standards on issues such as labor regulation may, however, lead some to hesitate.

Mujtaba Rahman, managing director for Europe at the Eurasia Group consulting firm, said Mr. Johnson appears around 15 to 20 votes short of a majority without the DUP, making defeat likely.

If the Brexit deal is defeated, Mr. Johnson is required by law to ask for an extension of the Oct. 31 deadline for the U.K.’s departure from the EU—a scenario that Mr. Johnson has sworn he would avoid. A delay would, however, provide time to organize an election, giving the prime minister a shot at winning a majority to make passage of his Brexit deal easier.

A potential curveball for Mr. Johnson is the price Parliament might seek to extract to approve his deal. Many opposition lawmakers, and some pro-EU former Conservatives, are discussing putting the terms of Britain’s withdrawal to voters in a second referendum on whether to leave the EU at all. They might try to alter legislation to engineer one in return for their support.

**Write to Jason Douglas at [jason.douglas@wsj.com](mailto:jason.douglas@wsj.com)**

