

# **Britain was supposed to be on its way out of the E.U. Instead, it may have to hold European elections.**

Britain's Parliament on Friday voted down Prime Minister Theresa May's Brexit deal for the third time. The vote, which came on the day that Britain had originally been scheduled to leave the European Union, added another layer of uncertainty to an already unclear path forward.

Days before, Parliament had held several "indicative," nonbinding votes designed to find an alternative to May's deal. All eight proposals failed to find a majority. The deadline is now April 12 to find a new plan or leave the bloc without a deal.

But if you think this all sounds convoluted, hold on to your hats: It could get even more confusing still. One possible scenario is that the E.U. grants Britain a longer extension to work out a new deal — and that may mean that three years after voting to leave the E.U., Britain would be expected to field candidates in European elections.

This is not an unlikely scenario. It may be as likely as anything else in Brexit's ongoing chaos.

The extension "is almost certain to involve the United Kingdom being required to hold European Parliament elections," May told Britain's House of Commons on Friday after her vote failed.

The vote in the European Parliament, the only directly elected legislative body of the E.U., is slated to take place May 23 to 26. These elections are held every five years to select new members of the European Parliament, or MEPs, with every E.U. citizen over 18 able to vote.

Before Brexit, there had been 751 MEPs in the European Parliament, with votes apportioned under Article 14 of the Treaty of Lisbon, similar to the electoral college in the United States. Before Britain voted to leave the E.U., in June 2016, it had 73 seats, giving it the third-largest representation in the bloc after Germany and France and on par with Italy.

After the country voted to leave, there was widespread discussion over what should happen to those seats. Last year, the European Parliament agreed to reduce the number of elective representatives to 705, with 27 of the former British seats distributed among 14 countries that were underrepresented.

*[Frexit? Italeave? After watching Brexit, other European countries say no thanks.]*

Alas, Britain's ongoing Brexit drama now threatens to mess up the new system. It's not exactly clear how Britain would participate in the European parliamentary election.

But if it did, it could get ugly — and certainly farcical.

Some fear that angry Brexiteers, bitter at not yet being out of the E.U., would attempt sabotage by voting for anti-E.U. politicians who would have even less to lose than usual. There's certainly some history here: Nigel Farage, the relentless Brexit campaigner, has been an MEP since 1999. (He has tried, and failed, seven times to get a seat in Britain's Parliament).



*Isabel Oakeshott@IsabelOakeshott*

*I am actually excited by the prospect of UK participation in EU elections. Time to give political parties that have abjectly failed to deliver Brexit a very bloody nose.*

But the inverse — that pro-European groups would use the elections to express their dismay at Brexit — may also be true. On Friday, a group of independent politicians in Britain's Parliament who oppose Brexit said they had registered a party that could compete in the European elections.

It's unclear which of those wings would gain more from Britain's chaotic attitude toward Europe at the moment. A poll conducted for Politico Europe in January found that traditional parties such as Labour and the Conservatives would still dominate the vote, with the anti-Europe U.K. Independence Party likely to lose seats.

But many European politicians have no desire to put the idea to the test. Belgian MEP Guy Verhofstadt told reporters March 21 that his colleagues thought it would be "impossible to have an extension beyond May 23," as a delay that ran

into the vote would “create an enormous problem.”

Ironically, the vote may end up becoming one of the most closely watched European Parliament votes in Britain in years. British turnout was just 35.6 percent in 2014, compared with 72.2 percent in the referendum on whether to leave the E.U.

Brexit could finally make Britain care about European Parliament elections.

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