Boris Johnson takes lead in race for British prime minister

Boris Johnson is the front-runner to replace Theresa May as British prime minister. File Photo by Heinz Ruckemann/UPI | License Photo

June 13 (UPI) — British politician Boris Johnson took a big step toward succeeding Theresa May as prime minister, winning the first round of Conservative Party voting Thursday.

Johnson secured 114 votes in party balloting of 313 conservatives members of parliament. Jeremy Hunt finished second with 43, followed by Michael Gove with 37.

Mark Harper, Andrea Leadsom and Esther McVey dropped out of the race after failing to meet the 17-vote threshold. Others remaining in the race are Dominic Raab (27 votes), Sajid Javid (23), Matt Hancock (20), and Rory Stewart (19).

The Conservative Party will hold its next round Tuesday, when candidates with less than 33 votes will be eliminated. More votes will be held until two are left for an election among the 160,000 party membership. The winner will be announced on July 22.

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"Thank you to my friends and colleagues in the Conservative and Unionist Party for your support," Johnson said in a Twitter post. "I am delighted to win the first ballot, but we have a long way to go."

The other candidates have not yet conceded. Gove, Britain's environmental secretary, suggested he could make up ground in upcoming debates.

"This campaign is just getting started, and we've got a good base to build on," he said. "I'm the change candidate who can be trusted to deliver Brexit by October, and has the vision and energy to take Britain forward."

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Johnson has promised to leave the European Union with or without a deal on the Oct. 31 deadline. May resigned as party leader earlier this month, and will depart as prime minister, after failing to sell lawmakers on an exit agreement.

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