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Brexit, the 2019 General Election and the Realignment of British Politics

David Cutts, Matthew Goodwin, Oliver Heath and Paula Surridge

Abstract.

The outcome of the 2019 general election—a resounding Conservative majority and an unprecedented defeat for Labour – delivered a decisive electoral verdict for the first time in recent years following a period where British politics has been characterised by instability and indecision. In this article, we draw on aggregate-level data to conduct an initial exploration of the vote. What was the impact of Brexit on the 2019 general election result? How far has Brexit reshaped electoral politics? Was 2019 a ‘realignment election’? And, if so, what are the implications? We show that although the Conservatives made gains deep into Labour’s working-class heartlands, these gains have been a long time coming, reflected in Labour’s weakening relationship with working-class Britain. As such, 2019 is not a critical election but a continuation of longer-term trends of dealignment and realignment in British politics.

Keywords: general election, Brexit, voting, turnout, Britain

Introduction

The 2019 general election marked another watershed moment in a tumultuous period in British politics. It was the third general election to be held in four years and the ninth major electoral contest in a decade. The election took place against the backdrop of Brexit, the failure of MPs to pass a Brexit deal and then Prime Minister Boris Johnson's inability to secure sufficient support for the timetable of his proposed Withdrawal Agreement Bill.¹ The 2019 election was thus widely seen as the latest episode in Britain's political drama over Brexit.

The election produced a large Conservative majority of 80 seats, the party's largest since 1987 and the largest for any party since New Labour's second victory in 2001 (when Labour were still dominant in Scotland). Contrary to arguments that stress the 'cost of ruling', the Conservatives, who had been in office for almost a decade, attracted nearly 44 per cent of the vote, an increase of 1.2 per cent on the previous election in 2017 and their fourth consecutive increase since entering power in 2010. Boris Johnson and his party bucked the tendency for incumbent parties to lose rather than gain support.

For Labour, the election produced a historic defeat. Under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, the party plunged to 32 per cent of the vote and 203 seats, a loss of 59 seats on 2017 and its lowest number of seats since 1935. Despite facing an incumbent Conservative Party that had presided over austerity, a prolonged economic squeeze and a divisive national debate over Brexit, Labour went backwards. The Conservatives, led by an Old Etonian Oxford graduate, captured 57 seats, all but three from Labour. These included traditional Labour heartlands in the so-called 'Red Wall'; Great Grimsby (Labour since 1945); Bishop Auckland (1935); Bassetlaw (1935); Wakefield (1932); Leigh (1922); Don Valley (1922) and Bolsover (a seat Labour had never lost when contesting).

The election also delivered disappointing results for challenger parties, in the form of the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats, who had come first and second place at the European Parliament elections just seven months earlier. Despite increasing their vote share by more than 4 percentage points, the Liberal Democrats only won 11 seats, down 1 from 2017. Their leader, Jo Swinson, also lost her seat to the SNP. The Brexit Party polled well in a number of target seats - Barnsley, Doncaster and Hartlepool – but ultimately failed to cut through amidst the Conservative surge. Meanwhile north of the border, the SNP won 48 of 59 Scottish seats, a net gain of 13.

What explains the outcome of the 2019 general election? In the aftermath of a historic defeat, many in Labour, including Corbyn, pointed to Brexit. "Despite our best efforts the

election became mainly about Brexit”.² But was the outcome really shaped only by Brexit? And what of the longer term factors that have shaped the geographic sources of support for Britain’s main parties? Does Brexit represent a ‘critical turning point’? Or is it part of a longer term process of change?

In this article we answer these questions and build and expand upon our earlier work.³ We take a step back and explore the long-term factors that shaped the result. In doing we consider the extent to which Brexit has disrupted traditional patterns of electoral support and the extent to which 2019 represents a turning point in the evolution of the British party system. The idea of turning points – or critical junctures, is related to the notion of ‘realignment’. This is an “aggregate-level concept that refers to an abrupt, large, and enduring form of change in prevailing electoral patterns, one that is initiated by a critical election and results in a significantly different partisan balance in the electorate”.⁴ In contrast to normal voting eras, during ‘critical’ elections citizens reject their habitual voting behaviours and the pendulum of party competition swings decisively in a new direction.⁵ Critical realignments are thus periods of dramatic rather than incremental change. The last critical election was arguably 1997, when New Labour swept to a landslide victory.⁶ And to that we can add two other decisive twentieth-century British watersheds – 1924 and 1945 – which both represented critical turning points in the long-term party order.⁷ Given the way in which Britain’s electoral map was shaken up, can we add 2019 to the list of critical elections? Or, alternatively, are we witnessing a more gradual realignment, that’s been taking place over a longer period of time?

We show that although Brexit has reconfigured the geographical base of electoral support for the main parties, this process is part of a longer trend that has gathered pace over recent years. Brexit may have paved the way for the Conservatives to make gains deep into Labour’s working-class heartlands, but these gains have been a long time coming and were only made possible by Labour’s weakening relationship with working-class Britain. As such, 2019 is not a critical election but a continuation of longer-term trends of dealignment and realignment in British politics. For much of the past two decades studies have been pointing to a tension at the heart of Labour between seeking to expand its support among the liberal, metropolitan middle class (whose size as a group in the electorate has been growing over the last thirty years) whilst retaining support in its traditional working class heartlands (whose size as a group has diminished over time). New Labour and Tony Blair famously sought to appeal to the middle class by projecting a more middle class party identity.⁸ As is well known, the party lurched to the right on economic issues during this period,⁹ but this was not the only development that weakened electoral support among the working classes. The representation

of working class MPs within the party also dramatically declined;¹⁰ the career politicians who replaced them were much less likely to support policies that helped the working class and those at risk of poverty;¹¹ and the party stopped talking about the working class and trying to appeal to them as a group.¹² As a result Labour alienated working class voters who increasingly abstained.¹³ Although this strategy paid off when working class voters had no one else to turn to; it did leave Labour electorally vulnerable to counter-mobilization, as the working class were now electorally available and potentially more responsive to other parties. Despite a leftward turn under Corbyn, in some respects then the 2019 General Election represents the culmination of this process, when the once loyal working class constituencies that had been taken for granted by Labour came back to haunt them.

An Overview of the Results

The 2019 general election took place against the backdrop of Britain's Brexit crisis. Ever since the vote for Brexit in 2016, MPs had repeatedly failed to agree on a Brexit deal. Along the way, Theresa May had failed in her quest to win a majority in 2017 and then, following the failure of Britain to leave the European Union by the original deadline of March 31 2019, a once-stable two-party system imploded into a four-party race. In the spring of 2019, the Brexit Party won the European Parliament elections while the anti-Brexit Liberal Democrats finished in second place. Boris Johnson then replaced Theresa May as Conservative leader and Prime Minister and, with the eventual support of opposition parties, called the 2019 general election after failing to win sufficient support for the proposed timetable of his revised withdrawal agreement bill. The election, he hoped, would deliver what MPs had proven unable to deliver: Brexit.

One 'known unknown' of the election was whether citizens would head to the polls. Would Leavers, frustrated with the parliamentary gridlock on Brexit, turnout in droves to endorse Johnson's central campaign message of 'Get Brexit Done'? Or would Remainers mobilise *en masse* to endorse one of the pro-Remain parties in order to get a 'final say' on Brexit? And with an apparent surge in registrations to vote, particularly among those aged 34 or under, could Corbyn's Labour enthruse them to participate in the 'most important election for a generation' and this time record a real 'youthquake'?

The overall rate of turnout was 67.3 per cent, 1.5 percentage points lower than in 2017. This is the first drop in participation from one election to the next since 2001, when turnout fell below 60 per cent. While a cold, dark December day leaves this figure as a respectable one,

the 2019 election is also the sixth contest in a row where turnout failed to breach the 70 per cent barrier; something that occurred at every election between 1922 and 1997. Only Scotland saw participation increase (by 1.6 percentage points), while turnout declined by 1.7 and 2 percentage points in England and Wales respectively. Northern Ireland recorded a drop of 4.4 percentage points, leaving turnout at just over 61 per cent.

Across England there was also a notable North-South divide. In the North East, North West and Yorkshire and Humberside, turnout dropped by around 2 percentage points, while the West Midlands saw the largest decline as participation fell by, on average, by 2.5 percentage points. Yet, in the South East the decline was closer to 1 percentage point while in the South West turnout was marginally higher overall than in 2017. There was also a complicated picture across London. As a region, participation fell, on average, by 2.6 percentage points but drops of 6 and 7 percentage points in Brent Central, Brent East and Ilford South were offset by increases in turnout of more than 4 percentage points seats such as Battersea and Putney. Marginality may explain part of the reason for these differences in turnout. Given that parties are more rational in their targeting of resources, it is unsurprising that there is a significant negative correlation (Pearson $R = -0.31^*$) between change in turnout and the marginality of the seat: turnout decreased more in safe seats than in marginal contests.

The turnout story, however, is more nuanced than this. Turnout, on average, fell more in Labour seats (by -2.6 percentage points) than in Conservative-held seats (-0.9 percentage points). Brexit makes the picture even more complicated. Turnout in Remain seats fell on average, by 0.6 percentage points compared to Leave seats, where it fell by 1.9 percentage points. In those Labour held seats that had strongly backed Brexit, turnout declined even more sharply, by 3 percentage points. This suggests that Labour may have suffered from a turnout problem. Scotland proved to be different than England and Wales. Not only did turnout, on average, increase but in SNP-held seats, participation increased by 1.7 percentage points.

The 2019 campaign was dominated by the Conservatives. The incumbent party led in every single poll during the campaign, a feat that Theresa May in 2017, David Cameron in 2015 and Cameron again in 2010 had not managed. One has to return to New Labour's third victory in 2005 to find the same degree of poll dominance. Organised around 'Get Brexit Done', the Conservatives set out to consolidate the Leave vote, neutralise Nigel Farage's Brexit Party and target working-class voters in Labour's pro-Brexit heartlands. Polling by YouGov during the campaign suggested that the Conservatives were successful in achieving these objectives, albeit aided by Nigel Farage's decision at the start of the campaign to stand down Brexit Party candidates in the 317 Conservative-held seats. Between the European elections in

the spring and the final polls of the 2019 campaign the percentage of Leavers backing the Conservatives increased from 36 to 71 per cent; the percentage of 2017 Conservatives returning to the fold increased from 58 to 85 per cent; and the percentage of 2017 Conservatives defecting to the Brexit Party crashed from 30 to 4 per cent.¹⁴

The Conservative Party strategy, therefore, marked a continuation of the approach that had been advocated by Theresa May's advisor, Nick Timothy. This contended that in the shadow of the vote for Brexit Conservatives should downplay David Cameron's more socially liberal brand of conservatism in favour of building a stronger relationship with the more socially conservative, working-class areas of the country that had turned out for Brexit three years earlier.¹⁵ Both Timothy and advisors to Boris Johnson had concluded that ever since voting for Brexit Britain was ripe for a realignment.

Johnson went further than May, combining strong support for Brexit with socially conservative messages on culture and identity and a more assertive response to austerity; reforming immigration, adopting a tough approach on crime; increased spending on the NHS and infrastructure; increasing the national living wage; addressing regional inequality; and providing state-aid for failing UK-based businesses. Such policies were clearly designed to appeal to Labour voters whose social conservatism had been loosening their connection to Labour for some time.

In 2017, May had gambled that her path to a majority ran through capturing a large number of the nearly 150 Labour seats that had voted for Brexit. But whereas May only won six pro-Brexit Labour seats, Johnson carved a much larger slice out of Labour's territory. Of the 54 seats that the Conservatives took from Labour, 50 had voted Leave in 2016 (all except Bridgend, Colne Valley, Kensington and Stroud). Of the 50 seats where the Conservative Party vote increased the sharpest all but one had voted Leave in 2016. Johnson's success thus built on the geography of the Leave vote. He also built on his party's result in 2017. Two years ago, the Conservatives increased their national vote share by 5.5 percentage points, but in the equivalent 'Red Wall' Labour seats gained by Johnson in 2019 the Conservatives increased their vote, on average, by 10.2 percentage points. Theresa May might have failed to capture a large number of Labour Leave seats but she did increase the Conservative vote share in the most strongly pro-Brexit Labour seats, to such an extent that Johnson on more modest increases in support was able to capitalise.

Estimates suggest that in 2016 Leave won more than 60 per cent of general election seats.¹⁶ Its vote was therefore spread far more evenly across England and Wales while the Remain vote was more concentrated in cities. Three years later, Boris Johnson succeeded by

capitalising on this in-built advantage. Of the 401 seats that were estimated to have voted Leave, the Conservatives won 73 per cent of them (292 seats). By contrast, of the 231 seats that were estimated to have voted Remain Labour only won 41 per cent of them (95 seats). Crucially, the Conservatives also won 32 per cent (73) of Remain seats. All of the 11 seats won by the Liberal Democrats had voted Remain.

Conservative success also built on a strong performance in England where it secured nearly 48 per cent of the vote. Given its stronger performance in Labour's northern Red Wall, the Conservatives unsurprisingly recorded their largest vote increases in the East and West Midlands, Yorkshire and Humber and the North East of England. More than half of its gains (32 seats) were in these regions. However, the Conservatives lost ground in London and barely made any advances on their 2017 vote share across southern England. In these places it only won 4 seats that it did not win two years previously. It did much better in Wales, increasing its vote share by 2.5 percentage points and winning six seats. Only the efficiency of Labour's vote in Wales saved it from further losses to the Conservatives. The only blemish for the Conservatives came in Scotland where it lost 3.5 percentage points of its vote and six seats to the SNP, though some had predicted a complete wipe out here.

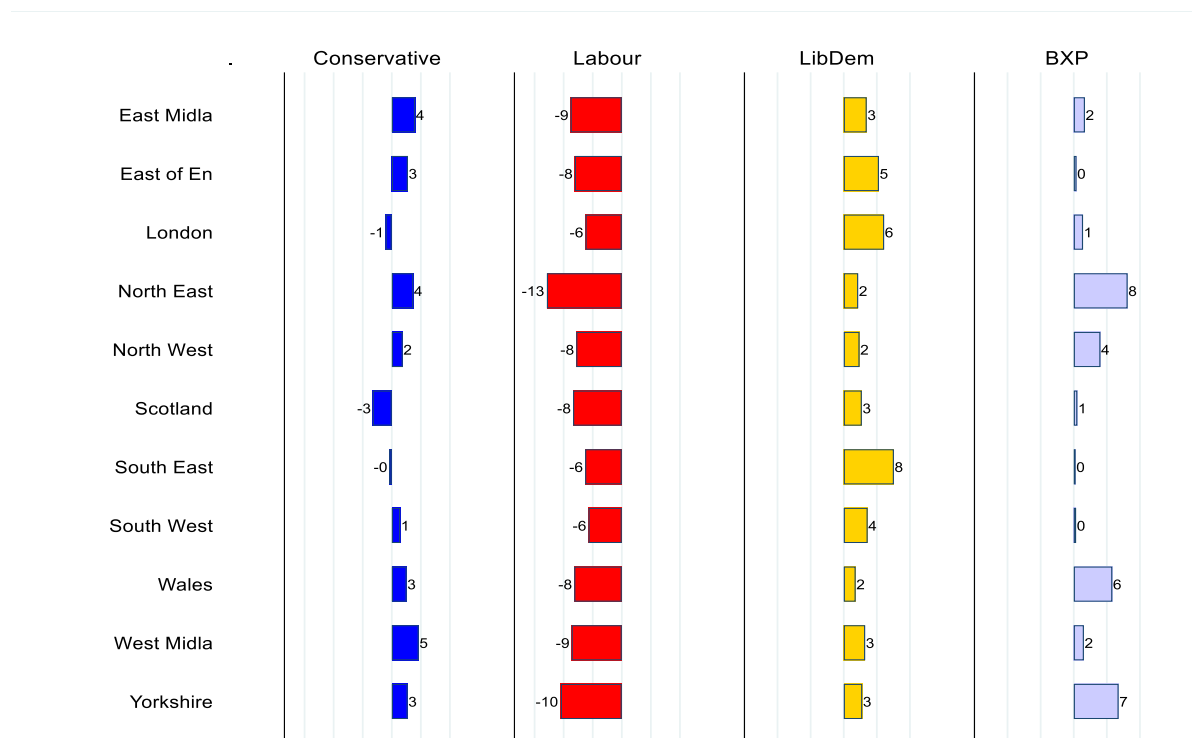
As in 2017, Labour had entered the 2019 campaign considerably behind in the polls. Two years earlier the party's fortunes and Jeremy Corbyn's ratings had improved throughout the campaign thanks to a well-received manifesto, the ineptness of Theresa May and unpopular Conservative Party pledges on social care. History was not about to repeat itself. Dogged by party defections, allegations of anti-Semitism and growing concerns on national security following the Skripal poisoning in Salisbury, Corbyn came under attack from those within his own party as much as his rivals. His leadership ratings were noticeably weaker than they had been in 2017; 76 per cent of Britons felt dissatisfied with the way Corbyn was doing his job, leaving the Labour leader with the worst 'net satisfaction' ratings of any opposition leader since Ipsos-MORI began asking the question in 1977.¹⁷

Labour was also divided on Brexit. After a humiliating defeat at elections to the European Parliament in May 2019, when Remainers left Labour in droves, leaving it in third place with its lowest vote share in the history of this contest, the party came out in support for a second referendum on EU membership. With the Liberal Democrats standing on a more extreme 'Revoke Article 50' position, Labour sought to 'own' a more moderate position by backing a 'People's Vote', which would include a Remain option for Remainers, and a renegotiated Brexit deal with a customs union, which it was hoped would appeal to Leavers.

Corbyn himself announced during the campaign that he would take a neutral position in the referendum.

Labour hoped that the compromise position would ‘bring the country together’ but the message lacked clarity when compared to Johnson’s ‘Get Brexit Done’ narrative. At the start of the campaign YouGov found that 2 in 3 voters thought that Labour’s Brexit policy was unclear.¹⁸ As a consequence, Labour attempted to make the election about issues other than Brexit. Their manifesto ‘It’s time for Real Change’ included radical proposals. Specific policies such as raising income tax on high earners, renationalising rail and utilities and reserving one-third of boardroom places for workers enjoyed strong public support. But Labour was also hampered by a public perception that the party lacked credibility and competence: only 16 per cent of voters trusted Corbyn most to run the economy (versus 34 per cent for Johnson); 57 per cent of voters thought it likely that Britain would enter recession if Labour won the election (versus 39 per cent for the Conservatives); and 67 per cent thought that Labour’s spending promises would require tax raises (versus 46 per cent for the Conservatives).¹⁹ Furthermore, Johnson and his party enjoyed ‘issue ownership’ not only on the economy but also Brexit, crime and in some polls had closed the historic gap with Labour on the NHS.

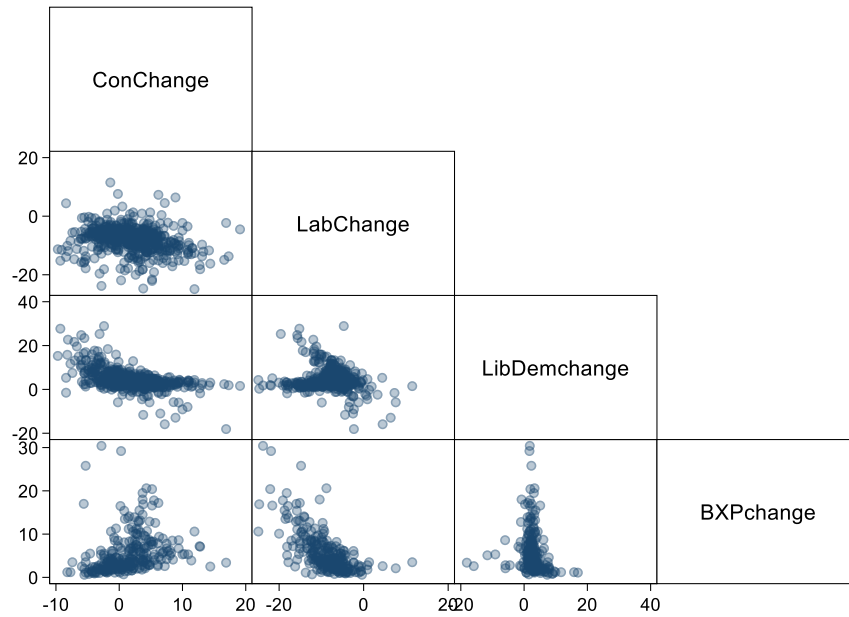
Figure 1 Vote change by region



In the end, Labour's support fell back by 8 percentage points in England, 8.5 percentage points in Scotland, where the party was reduced to just one seat, and 8 percentage points in Wales, where Labour lost six seats in another traditional stronghold. Labour's vote share plummeted by 13 percentage points in the North East, 10 percentage points in Yorkshire and 9 percentage points across the Midlands (see Figure 1). The uneasy coalition of its traditional heartlands with more remain and liberal seats in the South that Labour had managed to keep together in 2017 fell apart at the seams. In London and the South of England, Labour fell back by 6 percentage points. While Labour won marginal Putney, it failed to deliver other targets across the capital, like Chipping Barnet, Chingford and Woodford Green, Hendon, while in seats like Wimbledon it was replaced as the main challenger to the Conservatives by the Liberal Democrats. Despite backing a second referendum, Labour was exposed to the same 'pincer movement' that it endured in the European Elections less than seven months ago.²⁰

For the Liberal Democrats there was no repeat of their European election success. While the party increased its national vote share by 4.2 percentage points, primarily driven by strong performances in London and the South East, four losses (Carshalton and Wallington, Eastbourne, East Dunbartonshire and North Norfolk North) were only compensated by three gains (Fife North East, Richmond Park and St Albans). The decision by the Brexit Party not to stand in Conservative held seats may have hurt the Liberal Democrats in the South East and South West of England as it failed to register any gains where it was the main challenger to the Conservatives. The Liberal Democrats electoral pact with the Greens and Plaid Cymru to 'Unite the Remain' vote in 60 seats also failed to pay dividends. One of these three parties were successful in only 9 of the 60 seats, and this included only one gain (Richmond Park) as the other eight were already held. It was also a bad night for rebels; all of the MPs who had defected to the Liberal Democrats from Labour, the Conservatives, or short-lived Change UK, lost their race.

Figure 2 Correlation matrix for change in party vote shares, England and Wales (2017-2019)



The Brexit Party only stood in 275 non-Conservative held seats. Compared to UKIP, Farage's new party saw its vote increase substantially in Yorkshire and Humber and the North East where it had a number of target seats. It polled more than 15 per cent in 15 seats and more than 20 per cent in four seats. In Wales, it secured more than 5 per cent of the overall vote and only polled 9000 fewer votes than the Liberal Democrats. However, like UKIP, the Brexit Party struggled in Scotland, winning less than 1 per cent of the overall vote. Scotland remained the domain of the SNP. With 45 per cent of the vote, the pro-Remain and pro-Independence SNP swept aside Labour in all but one seat and more than halved Conservative Westminster representation. Its only loss came in Fife North East where the Liberal Democrats defeated the SNP incumbent.

Figure 2 depicts a correlation matrix for the change in the vote between 2017 and 2019 for each of the main parties that contested England and Wales. There is a moderate negative relationship between the Conservative change in vote and Labour's change in vote ($r = -0.26$). This implies that the Conservatives gained votes in places where Labour's vote share declined. There was also a moderate, albeit slightly stronger negative relationship between the change in vote for the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats ($r = -0.55$) but a weaker although still significant relationship between change in support for the Liberal Democrats and Labour ($r = -0.18$). The Liberal Democrats did make a modest resurgence at the expense of Labour (some notable outliers include Cities of Westminster; Finchley and Golders Green, Esher and Walton, Guilford, Wimbledon etc.) but our evidence suggests that much of the Liberal Democrat gains

came at the expense of the Conservatives. By contrast, there is a strong negative relationship between the Brexit Party share of the vote and the change in Labour's vote ($r=-0.68$). This implies that strong performances by the Brexit Party tended to be associated with a decline in Labour's share of the vote. By contrast, the correlation between the Brexit Party and Conservative vote is relatively weak but positive ($r=0.25$).

A Brexit election?

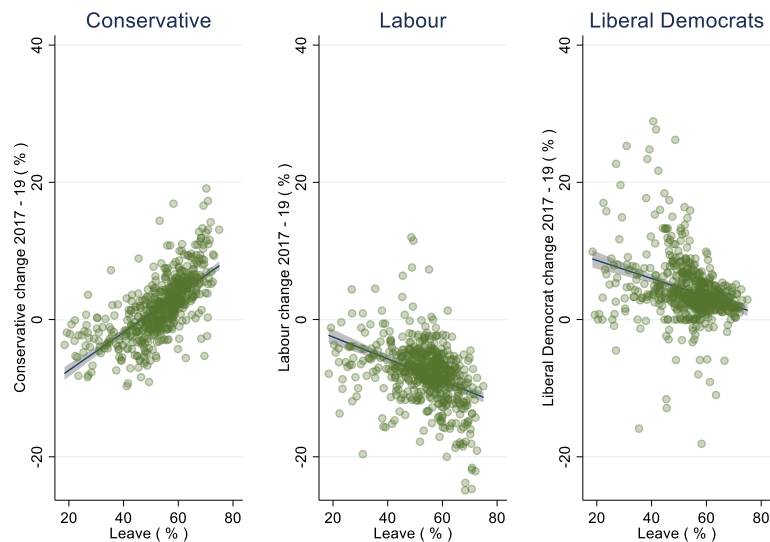
What factors motivated changes in public support for the Conservatives and Labour? To what extent, if at all, was this a 'Brexit election?' And what types of areas tended to turn towards the Conservatives? To see if this election can pass even the most basic test to be considered a 'Brexit election', we begin by looking at how changes in the share of the vote for each of the main parties relate to the estimated Leave vote in each constituency in England and Wales (Figure 3).²¹

The core aim of the Conservative Party campaign was to unify the Leave vote, an effective strategy given our earlier point that there were far more Leave-leaning seats than Remain-leaning ones. As the SNP had shown in Scotland in 2015, uniting one side of a divide from a close referendum while the other side is divided can have a disproportionate payoff in first-past-the-post elections. Figure 3 shows that the change in the Conservative vote share was quite strongly positively related to the estimated Leave vote. Although the Conservatives suffered minor setbacks in very pro-Remain seats, they more than compensated for this by making greater gains in constituencies that had backed Leave.

Labour, by contrast, lost votes everywhere. Yet this retreat was particularly evident in Leave seats. The Liberal Democrats, in contrast, tended to increase their vote share in Remain seats, which further underlines how the Conservative Party strategy of consolidating Leavers against a fragmented Remain vote was, ultimately, successful. Labour had sought to stop a haemorrhaging of support to pro-Remain parties by shifting behind a second referendum on EU membership. The party had also sought to exploit the longstanding structural deficiencies of the Liberal Democrat vote. Not only did the Liberal Democrats suffer from an electoral credibility problem, but poor performances in prior elections meant that there were few seats where they were the main challenger. Even though many Remain supporters were sceptical about the Labour leadership's support for a second referendum, Labour hoped that many would lend their vote to Labour as the best way of stopping Johnson's Brexit deal. However, the

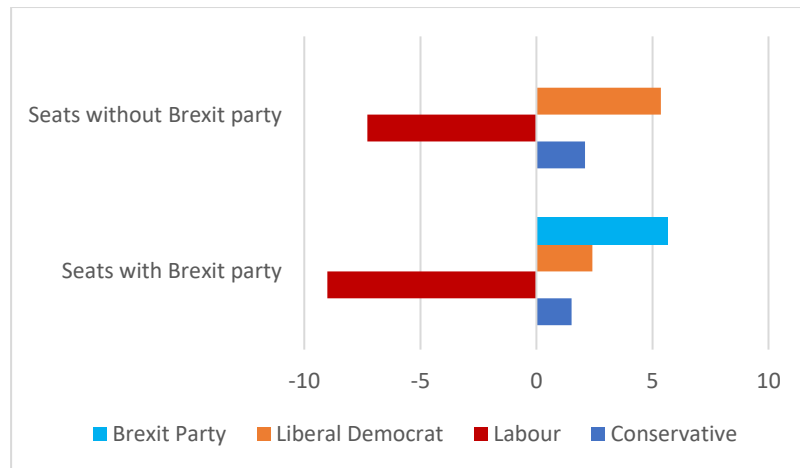
electoral geography that had followed the general election of 2017 had actually left few opportunities to make further inroads into Remain seats.

Figure 3: Change in the Share of the Vote (2017-2019 General Elections) by % Leave vote in English and Welsh constituencies



Of the 231 seats that had backed in Remain in 2016, only 78 were held by the Conservatives. Labour by contrast held 104. Of the 95 seats which recorded an even stronger Remain vote (over 60 per cent), only 16 were held by the Conservatives while Labour held 52. But it was not only in Remain seats where Labour faced a dilemma. The Liberal Democrat ‘revoke’ position was designed to harden its support among Remain voters and as such there was an expectation that this would increase the floor of the Liberal Democrat vote across the whole country. The knock-on consequences for Labour in their pro-Brexit heartlands were profound. If Labour could not unite the ‘Remain vote’ as they had in 2017 then they would need to win back Labour ‘Leave’ voters who ever since the referendum had decamped to other parties. Labour looked exposed from all angles and this is reflected in its pattern of losses.

Figure 4 The Brexit party effect: Change in support for each party in England and Wales



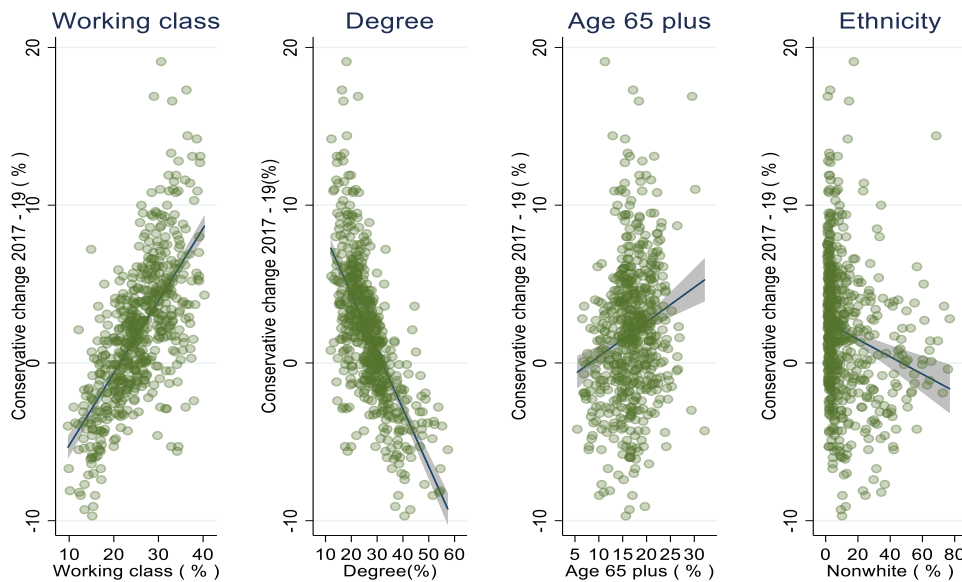
In Leave seats the picture is complicated by the Brexit Party. Farage had claimed throughout the campaign that his party could win in places that the Conservatives simply could not reach – though as illustrated above in many cases the Conservative proved to be more than capable of capturing Labour heartlands. How then did the presence of the Brexit Party impact on the other parties? Figure 4 shows how Labour lost support regardless of whether or not there was a Brexit Party candidate. However, the extent to which the change in Labour’s vote share was related to the Leave vote share varies. In seats where the Brexit party stood a candidate the change in Labour’s vote share was more strongly (and negatively) correlated with the Leave vote ($r=-0.61$); while in places where the Brexit party did *not* stand the relationship was much weaker ($r=-0.14$). In other words, Labour’s support declined more heavily in pro-Leave seats when there was a Brexit party candidate than when there was not.

It is important to stress that we cannot from these aggregate-level data infer that Labour support went directly to the Brexit Party in these areas; these changes may be masking complex patterns of movement among individual voters. So, while the Brexit party may have negatively affected Labour, it is highly plausible that it may have dampened any large-scale shifts in Conservative support in a number of seats. Simply put, without individual level data, such relationships are difficult to tease out.

As shown in Figure 5, these changes have dramatically changed the profile of places that the parties now represent. The Conservatives gained votes in places where they have historically struggled; seats with large numbers of working-class, where average levels of education are low, populations are older and predominantly white. Sequencing is important to making sense of this change. These are the sorts of places that previously backed UKIP and which then voted strongly for Brexit. And whereas Conservatives have long prospered in older

and heavily white seats, their breakthrough in strongly working class and less well educated seats is a much more recent and potentially dramatic, development.

Figure 5: Change in Conservative Share of the Vote (2017-2019 General Elections) and demographics in English and Welsh constituencies



A key feature of Conservative support, therefore, is its changed relationship with class and education. Although at the aggregate level these factors are closely related, at the individual level class and education are often associated with different value dimensions. Education in particular is strongly related to the ‘new’ socially liberal versus social conservatism divide, of which the vote for Brexit was also one by-product. In England and Wales, under David Cameron the Conservative Party in 2010 and 2015 won more votes where there were more graduates. In 2017 this pattern had disappeared but by 2019 it had reversed so that there are today fewer Conservative voters in places that have more highly-educated voters. While places with more 18-24-year-olds had long recorded lower support for the Conservatives, and while this pattern strengthened a little between 2015 and 2017 it was virtually unchanged between 2017 and 2019. This perhaps reflects the educational changes whereby the party gained older non-graduates from Labour but lost older graduates to the Liberal Democrats. While this ‘new’ divide is reshaping the Conservative vote, pushing it further away from more educated areas and toward communities in which the party has less history and where voters will be more demanding of socially conservative policies, it is even more critical for Labour as it has cut across its 2017 coalition even more sharply.²²

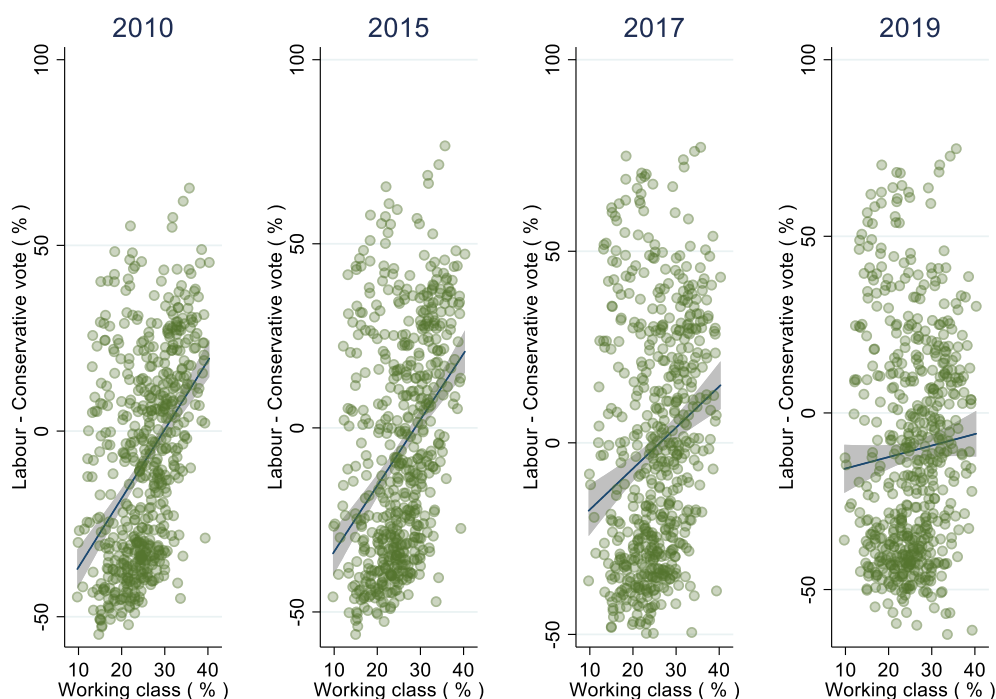
Electoral realignment?

How far do these changes in the geography of support signal a break with the recent past? To what extent, if at all, does the 2019 general election represent a ‘critical realignment’?

Figure 6 presents the electoral margin of Labour over the Conservatives for each constituency in England and Wales by the percentage of the population employed in working class occupations. We derive these data from the census classification of routine and semi routine occupations and we explore the data for each election since the Conservatives came to power in 2010. One striking feature of the 2019 general election is the collapse in Labour’s support in its traditional, working-class heartlands. Although the decline of class voting is a well-studied phenomenon, even as recently as 2010 Labour performed substantially better than the Conservatives in working class areas. Yet even while the Conservatives have been in power, presiding over austerity and an economic squeeze, Labour’s historic in-built advantage in their working-class heartlands has been on the wane.

In 2010, despite losing the election, Labour still enjoyed a healthy lead over the Conservatives in seats with a large working-class population. But in each successive election this advantage gradually dissolved. In 2019, Labour lost its competitive edge in its blue-collar heartlands and its advantage is now not statistically different from zero. This is a watershed moment for Labour. It is one thing to lose an election but it is quite another to lose your advantage in the very working-class communities which the Labour movement was founded to represent.

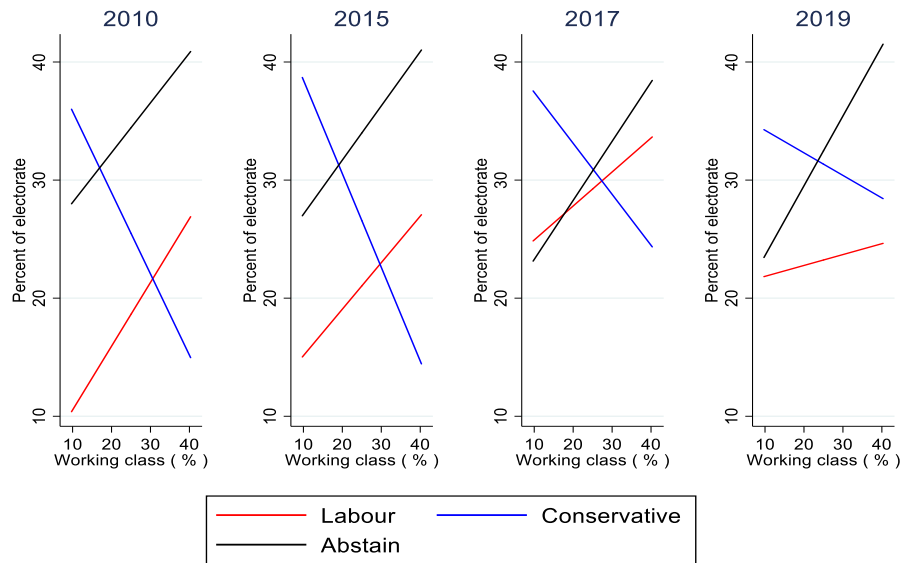
Figure 6 The difference between Labour and Conservative vote share by class composition of English and Welsh constituencies, 2010-2019



Notes: Working class comes from Census 2011 combining Routine and Semi-Routine occupations

While Labour's *post-mortem* focused on Brexit, the reality is that its collapse was a long-time coming. The 2019 election was not a 'critical election' as such but rather marked a continuation of the long-term trends of dealignment and realignment. This complex interplay between turnout and party support is illustrated in Figure 6, which shows the percentage of the electorate (eligible voters rather than actual voters) in each seat who voted Labour, Conservative, or abstained, by the seat's class composition. Some key trends stand out. Firstly, in recent years abstention has been much higher in working class seats than in more middle class ones. In the past, this didn't necessarily hurt Labour, since the party tended to perform better in working class seats – and more importantly, tended to perform better than the Conservatives in places where there was a high concentration of people in working class occupations (circa 30%). But, remarkably, in 2019 Boris Johnson and the Conservatives outperformed Labour in even those places which were very working class.

Figure 7 Support for Labour, Conservative and abstention share by class composition of English and Welsh constituencies, 2010-2019



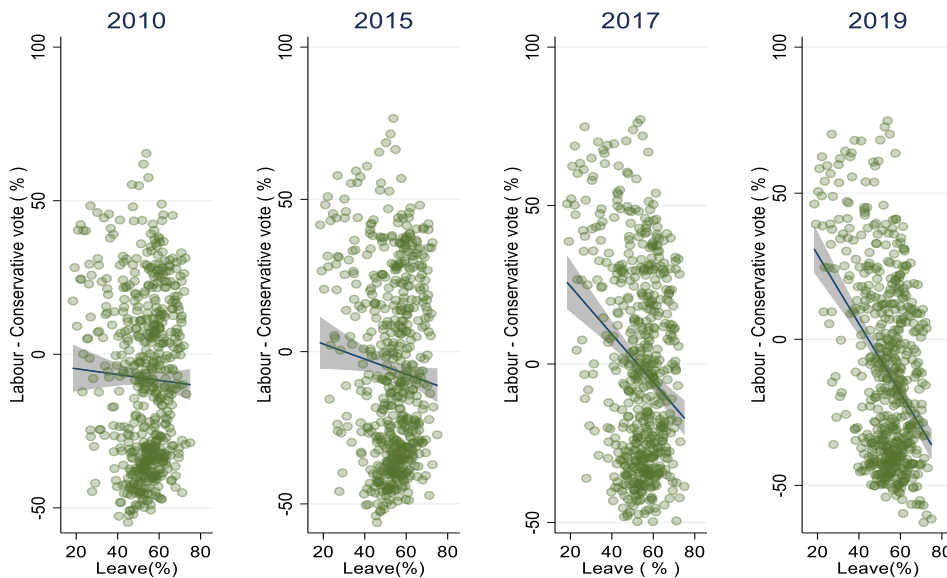
In 2019, abstention increased more in seats where there were larger numbers of working-class people. Across England and Wales, the significant negative relationship (Pearson $R = -0.34^*$) indicates that voters in more traditional working-class seats were particularly less likely to turn out. With Labour disproportionately, relative to its rivals, the incumbent in these seats, this provides some circumstantial evidence that Labour failed to mobilise its more traditional working-class support.

The overall level of support for the Conservatives in working class constituencies increased somewhat in 2019 compared to 2017 (and their level of support in middle class constituencies declined somewhat). Thus, the decline in support for Labour did not map neatly on to an increase in support for the Conservatives. Some of Labour's lost voters probably abstained; and others may have switched to the Brexit Party or the Liberal Democrats. But it is too simplistic to say that the Conservatives prospered in working class areas because traditional Labour voters stayed at home. Even when we consider the electorate as a whole, the Conservatives still managed to increase their level of support.

What role then did Brexit play in this realignment? As has been well documented, the vote to Leave tapped into long-standing divisions in Britain that were evident long before the referendum took place. However, they have only recently been politically activated. As Figure 8 shows, the sort of places that ended up backing Leave in great numbers did not vary much in terms of their support for Labour or the Conservatives in 2010. However, since the referendum the partisan balance between Labour and the Conservatives in England and Wales has

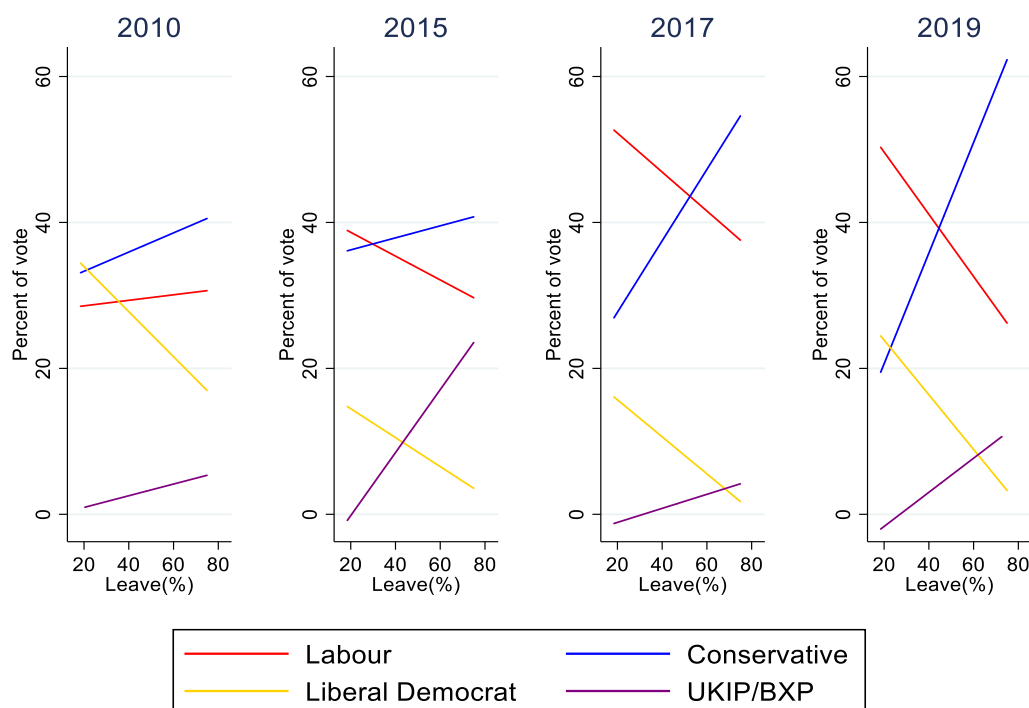
intensified around the Brexit dimension. In particular, the Conservatives now do very much better than Labour in the sort of seats that voted Leave in 2016.

Figure 8 The difference between Labour and Conservative vote share by support for Brexit in English and Welsh constituencies, 2010-2019



Part of this realignment can be traced back to events that took place before the referendum occurred. Figure 9 plots the average vote share for each of the main parties in England and Wales against the level of support for Brexit in 2016. Even as far back as 2010 we can see the genesis of the sort of divisions that would go on to dominate the country as the Liberal Democrats and UKIP tapped into the embryonic divides that Brexit would come to crystallise. The Liberal Democrats polled very well in the sort of places that would go on to back Remain in 2016 while Nigel Farage and the UKIP polled more strongly in the sort of places that would go on to back Leave. But then the collapse of these two challengers, first the Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015, and then UKIP between 2015 and 2017, led to these divides being more clearly represented by the two main parties.

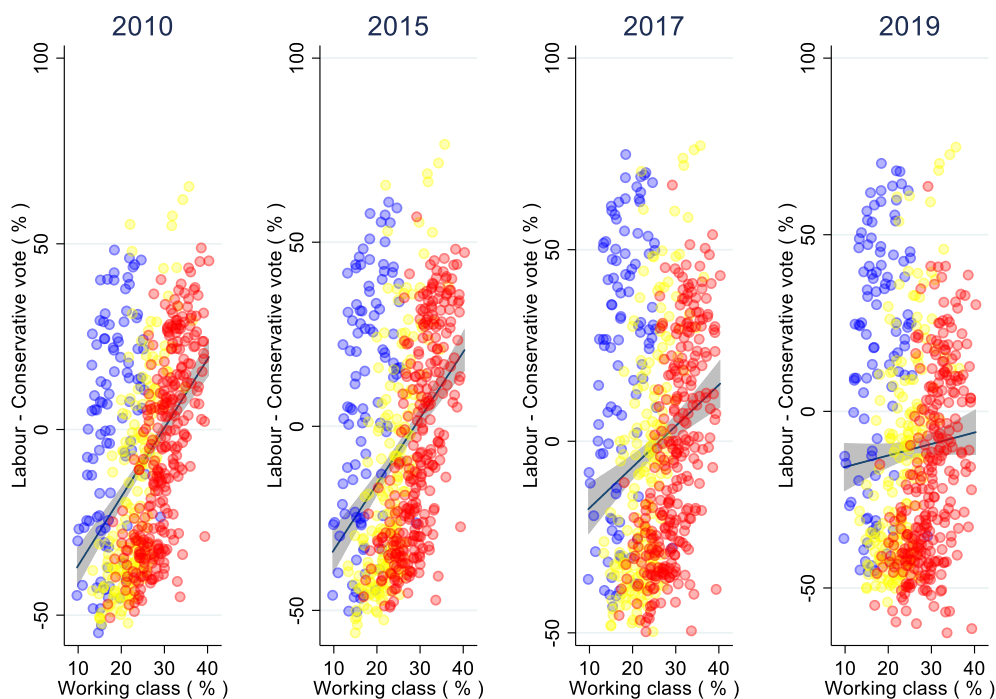
Figure 9 Vote share of parties by support for Brexit in English and Welsh constituencies, 2010-2019



What this indicates, then, is that Brexit has accelerated a longer-term realignment in British politics and reshaped the country's political geography. This owes much to how political parties have mobilized the issue; with Nigel Farage, UKIP and then later the Brexit Party playing an important role in politicising the question of EU membership, and also merging it with immigration, and then the Conservatives building directly on this.

How much of this is to do specifically with Brexit and how much is to do with the underlying value divides that precipitated the vote to Leave in 2016 is an open question. In some respects, support for Brexit taps into and is strongly associated with cultural values that cut across the traditional left-right divide. And if it wasn't for this cultural cross-pressure then class voting would be stronger. Brexit and the Conservative response to it appear to have activated this cultural pressure and so working class communities are more cross-pressured than they used to be, which in turn may be partly responsible for what is reshaping class alignments. Support for Brexit is strongly correlated with the class composition of a constituency ($r = 0.78$ in England and Wales and $r=0.65$ across the country as a whole). Class realignment and Brexit realignment thus go hand in hand and appear to have implanted a new, potent cultural divide at the heart of British politics.

Figure 10 How Brexit has reshaped class alignments in English and Welsh constituencies, 2010-2019



Given the strong correlation between class and support for Brexit we have to be careful about how we interpret the data. Figure 10 colour codes constituencies according to whether they backed Remain (coloured blue, where support for leave <45%); were relatively evenly balanced (coloured yellow, where support for leave $\geq 45\%$ and $\leq 55\%$) or whether they backed Leave (coloured Red, where support for Leave $> 55\%$). Over the last few elections we can see how the blue ‘Remain’ and mainly middle-class seats have shifted up towards Labour (most of them are now above 0 indicating a Labour lead over the Conservatives). Meanwhile, the red Leave and predominantly working-class seats have shifted down towards the Conservatives (the majority of them are now below 0 indicating a Conservative lead over Labour). Britain’s electoral map has thus been fundamentally reshaped.

Discussion: A result that was a long time coming?

When seen from a short-term perspective, the outcome of the 2019 general election was a by-product of the country’s post-2016 divides over Brexit. The contest saw the British people

deliver what over the course of the previous three years their elected representatives had proven unable to deliver: an answer to Brexit. Boris Johnson's 'Get Brexit Done' campaign ended in triumph, leaving him with John Major as only the second leader in British history to lead his party to a fourth term in office. Boris Johnson could also claim to be the first Conservative leader to triumph over the Europe question, an issue that had undermined Margaret Thatcher, John Major, David Cameron and Theresa May.

The outcome of the election owed much to Britain's changing electoral geography, electoral rules and party strategy. The Conservatives simply did a far better job than the Labour Party at holding together the coalition of voters that they had mobilised in 2017. While public support for parties that had backed Remain, and now campaigned for a second referendum, was greater than support for parties that had backed Brexit, Boris Johnson benefitted from the fact that the Leave vote was not only more consolidated than the Remain vote but was also more efficiently distributed across parliamentary constituencies, which translated into a large parliamentary majority. The Conservatives were more effective at unifying Leave voters than Labour were at unifying Remain voters. This enabled Johnson and his party to make substantial inroads into Labour's traditional working-class heartlands while also fending off the divided opposition parties in their southern strongholds, where they were further helped by the absence of internecine rivalry from the Brexit Party.

In the shadow of the result, Boris Johnson visited Tony Blair's former seat of Sedgefield, which for the first time in eighty-four years had elected a Conservative MP. "I can imagine people's pencils hovering over the ballot paper and wavering before coming down for us and the Conservatives, and I know that people may have been breaking the voting habits of generations to vote for us". How did the Conservative Party make so much ground in Labour's 'Red Wall'?

Our analysis suggests that while the Red Wall may have been breached in 2019, the foundations had been weakening for some time. The surge of Leave voters may be the final element which cracked the brick work, but the decay, reflected in Labour's weakening relationship with working-class Britain, had been setting in over much of the last decade, if not earlier. The 2019 general election was not a critical election that signalled a radical departure from the past but rather marked the continuation of longer-term trends in the dealignment and realignment of political loyalties in British politics.

While Labour stumbled in its response to these longer-term trends, a reoriented Conservative Party has far more effectively outflanked its main competitor on the right, consolidated the Leave vote and revised its economic offer to attract voters in left behind

communities. But the roots of these changes are long. To truly make sense of the 2019 general election we need to take sequencing seriously. A long-time weakening of Labour's relationship with the working-class was first, during the 2000s, reflected in rising rates of apathy among working-class voters and also some limited pockets of support for the far-right British National Party, which polled most strongly in outer-London but also parts of the Midlands, Yorkshire and North West. Nigel Farage and UKIP then further cultivated this soil while also merging the issues of EU membership and immigration. By 2014, Farage was drawing much of his support from working-class and self-employed voters. Then, in 2016, many of these same areas, including 60 per cent of Labour-held seats, voted heavily for Brexit. In 2017, many of these same areas then started to break more heavily for the Conservative Party under Theresa May, before all of this churn and change in 2019 then allowed Boris Johnson to make major gains across Labour's Red Wall.

Along the way, Labour's electorate has gradually become less cohesive and structurally unsound with socio-demographics such as class, education and ethnicity cross-cutting their alliance of voters thereby complicating the party's appeal and political message.

Labour is thus left to digest a difficult result. Since 2015, under Jeremy Corbyn, the party has experienced its worst ever result in elections to Scottish Parliament, its worst ever share of the vote at any European Parliament election, the worst sets of local election results for any opposition party in recent times and two consecutive general election defeats. Labour has failed to sustain the loyalty of its 2017 electorate, which delivered a surprisingly strong result. Its failure to retain this coalition and also navigate the Brexit divides left the party exposed on multiple flanks.

As Britain's political geography continues to change, it is possible that Labour may expand its support among the liberal, metropolitan middle class while the Conservatives pursue a more socially conservative and nationalist programme. The problem for Labour, however, is that it already holds most of these seats and so increasing its vote share further by squeezing the Liberal Democrats or Greens will not be sufficient to win a general election in the foreseeable future. While a 'one-nation' Conservative Party continues to explore ways of cementing its support in the Red Wall, Labour urgently need to find a way to reconnect with left behind areas that do not instinctively share the more socially liberal outlook of its activist and parliamentary base.

The Conservative Party faces its own dilemma. In the midst of Conservative euphoria, it is important to be cautious about their longer-term prospects. Against the backdrop of the vote for Brexit, Boris Johnson has recruited an electorate that is fundamentally different from

the electorate that handed David Cameron his majority in 2015; it is older, more working-class, more socially conservative, less ethnically diverse and more supportive of redistributive measures. Whereas Johnson can claim to have triumphed over the Europe question, the roots of future tensions within the Conservative Party -between liberals and conservatives, free traders and protectionists- are already visible. While Johnson managed to recruit cross-pressured voters to his party these tensions may yet come to define his premiership.

Notes

¹ The 2019 general election followed the 2009 European Parliament elections, the 2010 general election, the 2014 European Parliament elections, and also referendum on Scotland's independence, the 2015 general election, the 2016 EU membership referendum, the 2017 general election and the 2019 European Parliament elections.

² Jeremy Corbyn, 'We won the argument, but I regret we didn't convert that into a majority for change', *The Guardian* December 14 2019

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⁶ Evans, Geoffrey and Pippa Norris. (1999). *Critical Elections: British Parties and Voters in Long-term Perspective*. London: Sage.

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- ¹³ Oliver Heath (2018) 'Policy alienation, social alienation and working class abstention in Britain, 1964-2010' *British Journal of Political Science* 48 (4): 1053-1073
- ¹⁴ Polling data taken from YouGov polls May 13-14 2019 and December 5-6 2019. Available online: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opinion_polling_for_the_2019_United_Kingdom_general_election#2019
- ¹⁵ Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin (2014) *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, Routledge; see also Goodwin and Heath (2016)
- ¹⁶ C. Hanretty, (2017). 'Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership' *Journal of Elections and Public Opinion*, 27:4, 466-483,
- ¹⁷ 'Jeremy Corbyn has lowest leadership satisfaction rating for any opposition leader since 1977', Ipsos-MORI September 20 2019. Available online: <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/jeremy-corbyn-has-lowest-leadership-satisfaction-rating-any-opposition-leader-1977> (accessed December 22 2019)
- ¹⁸ See <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/05/most-brits-uncertain-labours-brexite-policy>
- ¹⁹ 'Labour economic policies are popular, so why aren't Labour?' YouGov November 12 2019. Available online: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/12/labour-economic-policies-are-popular-so-why-arent-> (accessed December 22 2019).
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- ²² Paula Surridge, 'The fragmentation of the electoral left since 2010', *Renewal: A journal of social democracy*, December 2018.