9

Brexit and the Reshaping of British Electoral Politics

In April 2017 Prime Minister Teresa May announced an early general election in the expectation of achieving an increased majority to strengthen her hand in Brexit negotiations, and to provide a mandate for the government's Brexit strategy. The outcome was quite the opposite, with the Conservatives losing their overall majority (despite winning 42.4 per cent of the vote) and relying on a confidence and supply arrangement with the DUP in order to govern. Labour's revival under Jeremy Corbyn, which deprived the Conservatives of their anticipated majority, helped produce the highest two-party share since 1970. Moreover, not only did we see a return to 'two-party politics', but a restructuring of the basis of this two-party support. To give just two examples: in 2017 Kensington—the most affluent constituency in the country and one of the most cosmopolitan—fell to Labour for the first time ever; while Stoke-on-Trent South, a poor working-class area in a struggling former industrial city, went from Labour to the Conservatives—again for the first time ever. Within two years of the 2015 Election we had seen the political map of Britain redrawn.

In this chapter we show that the shock that led to these changes was the outcome of the 2016 referendum on Britain's membership of the EU. The EU referendum resulted in strategic decisions by political parties that brought about substantial changes in the alignment of party voting. Electoral competition between the two main parties, dominated ideologically since the Second World War by concerns relating to redistribution, taxation, and the free market versus social protection, now also focused on the EU, immigration, and liberal–authoritarian values. For the first time in modern history, economic left–right competition between Labour and the Conservatives was accompanied by a commensurate emphasis on a second cultural, or social, dimension of politics.

As a consequence of this transition in the links between voters' attitudes and their choice between Labour and the Conservatives, we also saw the rising importance of two key social bases of politics: education and age. This saw Labour become the party of the younger and more highly educated voter, and Conservatives the party of older voters and those without such qualifications.

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9.1 The evolving EU divide

As we discussed in Chapter 5, in recent decades, party positions towards the EU have become increasingly structured along the cultural dimension (Prosser 2016d). In the early days of Britain's membership of the EEC, party divisions over Europe fitted relatively neatly into Britain's traditional economic left–right axis of political competition. The single market was seen as a predominately capitalist enterprise on the left—among its most pronounced antagonists being the iconic left-wing figure Tony Benn—and was opposed by the Labour Party in the 1980s, while being favoured by pro-market Conservatives. However, as European integration progressed and parties switched their positions. Labour became increasingly pro-EU following their 1989 policy review and subsequent endorsement of the EU project by Tony Blair. At the same time, there was increasingly open Euroscepticism among the Conservatives in the 1990s. Together, these changes broke the link between economic left–right positions and the EU at the party level (Evans and Butt 2007; Evans 1999a). Likewise, as European integration changed, so too did the nature of voter attitudes towards European integration, which shifted from economic left-wing concerns about market integration to liberal–authoritarian issues like immigration and cultural threat (van Elsas and van der Brug 2015; Eichenberg and Dalton 2007; McLaren 2002; McLaren 2006; Tillman 2013).

Following the realignments of the 1990s, European integration had become in effect a cross-cutting political cleavage with the potential to be a vote loser for both the divided Conservatives (Evans 1998) and for a Labour Party that was moving away from the values of its core working-class base (Evans 2002; Evans 1999a). Nonetheless, these cross-cutting effects were of only minor political significance. A more fundamental shock was necessary for them to transform politics.[1] As one of us remarked at the time: 'Europe now cross-cuts the left–right basis of voting . . . at present this impact remains small. Yet it may become more important as integration proceeds and new and possibly more contentious questions than even monetary union arrive inescapably on the political agenda' (Evans 1999a). As we saw in Chapter 5, before the growth of immigration from the 2004 and 2007 accession countries, the EU question did not have the salience to transform politics. The increasing salience of immigration and the emergence of UKIP as an attractive destination for Conservative defectors (whether MPs or voters) was an obvious motive for Cameron's strategy of promising a referendum on the EU. By promising a vote on the EU, Cameron hoped Eurosceptic MPs and voters would not defect to UKIP, who were obviously advocating such a policy (Evans and Menon 2017; Prosser 2016a). The limited public salience of the EU twenty years

[1] Monetary Union may have exercised Tony Blair, the prime minister of the time, but it had little impact on the electorate because his Chancellor, Gordon Brown, removed it from the agenda (Evans 2003).

ago—even though there was even then intensive in-house fighting among the Conservative elite—is indicated by the failure of James Goldsmith's Referendum Party to obtain much support in the 1997 General Election when running on, in effect, a similar platform to that advocated later by UKIP (Heath et al. 1998).

As we saw in Chapter 5, the public salience of the EU increased over the years following the 2004 accession of primarily Eastern European countries from which there were high rates of immigration. Even then, however, concern about Britain's relationship with the EU itself was still muted. People were more concerned about immigration. Following the 2016 referendum, however, the salience of the EU itself increased substantially. In every wave of the BES panel study we asked about the most important issue (MII) facing the country. Even in 2015, Europe was only mentioned as the most important issue by 3 per cent of respondents. By 2017 it had become the most cited issue, named by no less than 36 per cent (it reached this point in the pre-EU referendum wave of the BESIP).[2] Brexit had arrived as a focal concern of the British public. To understand how Brexit then affected vote choice in 2017, we need first to understand the Brexit vote itself.

9.2 Social divisions, values, and Brexit

While the underlying causes of support for Brexit are complex, previous research has shown that voting to leave the EU was strongly associated with a number of social characteristics and political values (Hobolt 2016; Goodwin and Milazzo 2017). In particular, Brexit supporters were more likely to be older, male, less well-off, and far less likely to have higher educational qualifications than Remain supporters. Leave voters were also much more likely to oppose immigration and hold authoritarian attitudes.

Figure 9.1 shows how voting for Brexit varied by values and attitudes in the BES internet panel. Brexit voting was strongest among people with more socially conservative views, as indicated by responses on the liberal–authoritarian scale, and anti-immigration attitudes, while economic left–right values had no relationship with Brexit voting. This confirms findings elsewhere (Evans and Menon 2017; Kaufmann 2016): Brexit was about differences in social and cultural preferences, not economic inequality. It also helps to explain the social divisions that underpinned Brexit.

As has been known for some time, economic and liberal–authoritarian values are differentially distributed across the population: left–right economic values tend to be

[2] Despite this, Brexit was barely discussed as an issue by key figures during the campaign. As noted in Chapter 2, the discussion focused on a wide variety of other policy issues including social care, fox hunting, responses to terrorist attacks, and austerity. In the minds of many of the voters however, the most important factor at stake in the election was Brexit, see Prosser (2017).

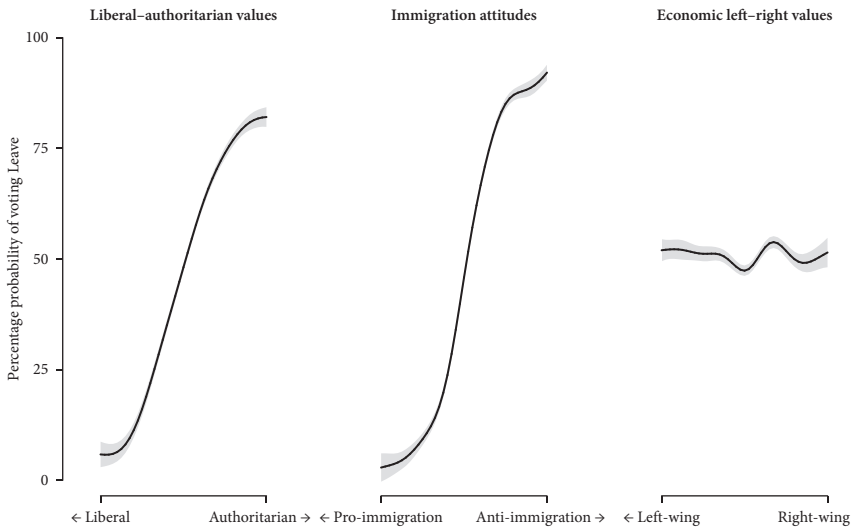

Figure 9.1 Brexit voting by key attitudes

influenced by economic circumstances such as income, while liberal–authoritarian ones are more closely connected with education and age (Heath, Evans, and Martin 1994; Evans, Heath, and Lalljee 1996). These patterns are also reproduced in our surveys. Figure 9.2 shows the mean scores on the left–right scale (where higher is more right-wing) and on the liberal–authoritarian scale (where higher is more liberal). The young, the highly educated, and those with very high levels of income are distinctively more liberal in their responses on the liberal–authoritarianism scale, although the relationship with income is not linear (as the poorest are also more liberal than those in the middle income range).[3] On the left–right scale the more educated and those with higher incomes are more economically right-wing, whilst the relationship with age is curvilinear (the youngest and oldest being most left-wing).

We would therefore expect these sources of social division to be expressed similarly when it came to voting in the referendum. Given the relationship between demographics and attitudes, we would expect demographic voting patterns to align with their attitudinal correlates: income should follow a similar pattern to left–right economic values, and age and education to liberal–authoritarian values. This is exactly what we see in Figure 9.3: pronounced differences by age and education—with younger and more highly educated people being far more likely to vote to remain in the EU. The effects of income are noticeably weaker than the gradients for age and education, although they are still present, with high-income respondents more likely to vote to remain. This income gradient is primarily a

[3] The curvilinear income effect is likely to be a result of the confounding effect of age, which as well as being related to liberal values (middle panel) is also related to income.

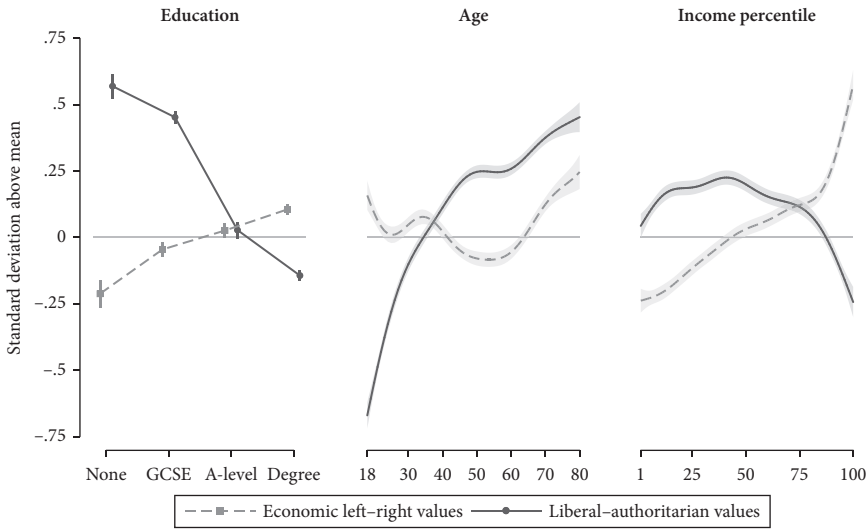

Figure 9.2 Bivariate relationship between economic right and authoritarian values, and education, age, and income

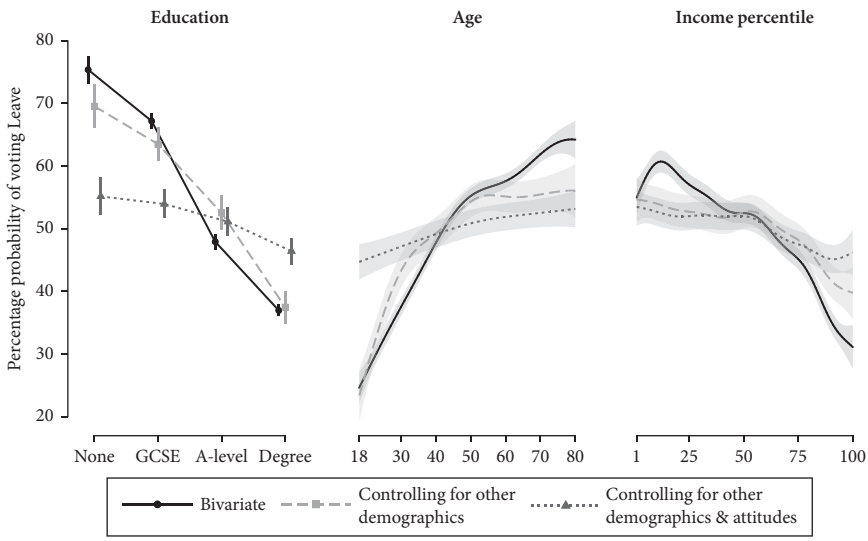

Figure 9.3 Brexit voting by key demographics

result of the link between higher education and higher income. Once education and age are controlled for, the effects of income are much reduced. The effects of education and age are largely removed by the inclusion of attitudes (left–right, liberal–authoritarianism, and immigration), indicating that the differences between young and old and between more and less educated are largely driven by their values and attitudes.

The issue of Leave versus Remain clearly cut across the traditional values dimension of British politics—economic left–right. However, it was not inevitable that this cross-cutting issue would disrupt vote choice in 2017. To understand why it did, we need to consider how the parties reacted to the strategic opportunities provided by the Brexit vote.

9.3 Post-Brexit Party strategy and voters' perceptions

In the run-up to the referendum, the parties—especially the Conservatives—had been split. Importantly though, most of the leadership of the party—and the official government position—was in favour of Remain. Following the EU referendum, however, Theresa May staked a claim for being *the* party of Brexit ('Brexit means Brexit' as she repeated on numerous occasions), and the vast majority of the Conservative Party followed suit. At the Conservative Party annual conference in Birmingham in October 2016 the prime minister made clear that the UK would control immigration, make its own laws, and strike trade deals with third countries with an overt rejection of a 'Norway' or 'Switzerland' model: Brexit meant 'hard Brexit'.

The motivations for this are easy to understand given the geographic distribution of Brexit votes and the rise of UKIP on the Conservatives' Eurosceptic flank. The Leave versus Remain divide cut across Labour and Conservative constituencies in various ways. Traditionally Conservative areas in Lincolnshire, East Anglia, and Kent had already seen UKIP garner significant support in 2015, and they formed the rural heartland of the Brexit vote in 2016 (Boston topped the chart with 75.6 per cent voting Leave). Various Conservative coastal towns with older populations had also seen substantial levels of UKIP voting in 2015, and likewise witnessed Leave victories.

Alongside these rural and coastal constituencies, smaller cities and northern towns—traditional Labour heartlands—also disproportionately voted to Leave. Stoke-on-Trent, dubbed 'Brexit central' during its February 2017 by-election, had a Leave vote of 69.4 per cent, while Hartlepool saw 69.4 per cent vote similarly. In both places, UKIP had received reasonable levels of support in 2015. A pro-Brexit stance placed both Midlands and northern working-class Labour Leave-voting seats in reach and held out the prospect of killing off UKIP.[4] This was a goal assisted by the implosion of UKIP, who in the aftermath of the referendum lost both their main reason for existing and their charismatic leader, Nigel Farage.

[4] Of course, the risk from this strategy was losing support in certain large cities. Labour strongholds such as Manchester (60.4 per cent) and London (59.9 per cent) were pro-Remain. Presumably, however, the apparently enfeebled pro-Remain parties—Labour under a very unpopular Corbyn and the discredited Liberal Democrats—were assumed to have been unlikely to make yet substantial further gains in areas where they were already strong.

A key part of the Conservative Party positioning itself as the party of Brexit was the pledge to end freedom of movement. As we discussed in Chapter 5, the Conservatives had long promised to reduce net migration but in practice had achieved very little. In part this was due to the inability to end EU freedom of movement (though non-EU immigration also remained high under the Cameron government). Leaving the EU gave the Conservatives considerably greater scope to control Britain's immigration policy. Figure 9.4 shows that there was a remarkable increase in the number of people who thought the Conservatives would be able to reduce immigration after the EU referendum. This perception was closely related to UKIP–Conservative flows, with 2015 UKIP voters who perceived the Conservatives as being able to handle immigration in 2017 almost twice as likely to defect as those who still perceived the Conservatives as unable to control immigration.

However, it was not just on immigration that the Conservatives appealed to Brexiteers. Figure 9.5 shows changing perceptions of party positions on the EU among Leave and Remain voters. It shows that, post-referendum, the Conservative Party successfully redefined themselves as the more hard-line party on Europe among Leave voters—precisely the voters the Conservatives sought to attract. Remainers had long seen the Conservatives as Eurosceptic and saw them as even more so after the referendum, but the shift among Leavers was far more dramatic. Leave voters on average moved from regarding the Conservatives as being in favour of further EU integration before the referendum to seeing them as very strongly against EU integration by the time of the 2017 General Election.

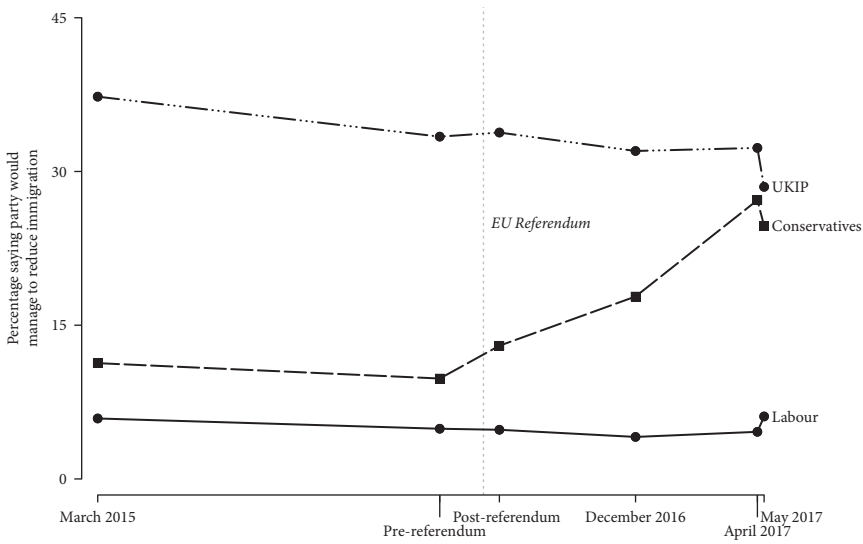

Figure 9.4 Ability to reduce immigration

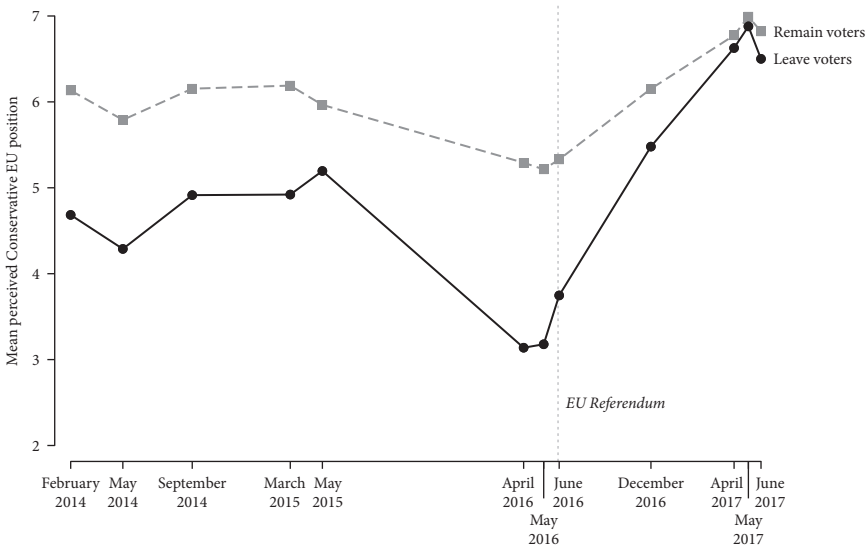

Figure 9.5 Perceived Conservative position on EU integration

As Figure 9.6 shows, no such changes occurred for Labour who, in contrast to the Conservatives, had been equivocal about their Brexit position, criticizing the government's handling of the negotiations while maintaining that they too supported leaving the EU. Despite some ambiguity over what Labour's actual position on Brexit was, it was widely perceived to be softer than the Conservatives. The two parties were now clearly demarcated on the key issues of EU immigration and Brexit.

To further explore the effects of these changes, we estimated the counterfactual difference in 2017 vote share if the perceptions of party positions had not changed from their pre-referendum level to their pre-2017 election level. We estimated this as a conditional logit model with alternative specific coefficients for self and party distance on three policy scales: left–right, EU, and immigration, and a binary variable for each party measuring their perceived likelihood of successfully reducing the level of immigration if they were in government, and controlling for which party the respondent voted for in 2015. We estimate the vote choice model using pre-election values for the distance and immigration competence variables (see Table A9.1 in the appendix for the results). The counterfactual is then estimated by substituting the same respondents' pre-referendum values for the observed 2017 values for all parties simultaneously. The counterfactual shows that two changes were important—Conservative EU distance, and the Conservative's immigration competence (Figure 9.7). If these variables had not changed from their pre-referendum values, the counterfactual estimates that the Conservative

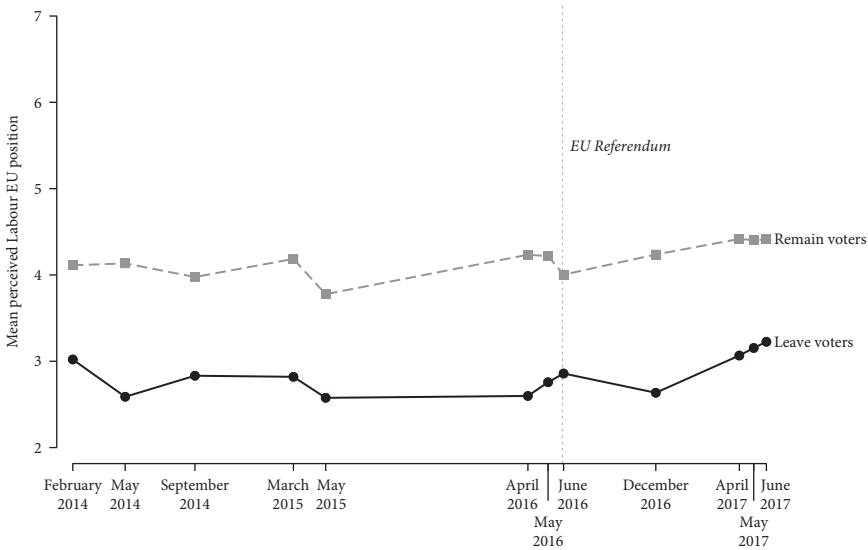

Figure 9.6. Perceived Labour position on EU integration

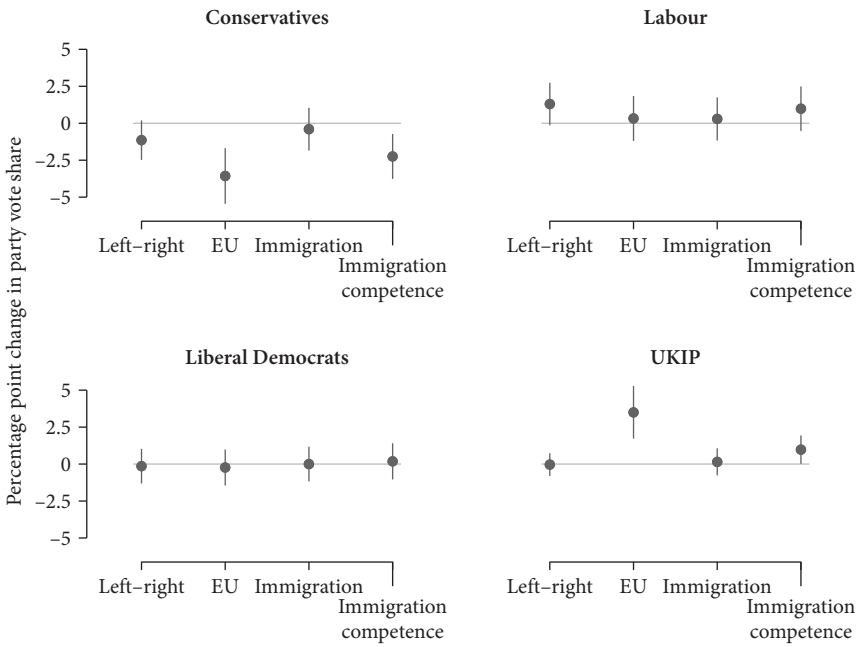

Figure 9.7. Change in 2017 vote share under counterfactual observations of voter–party left–right, EU, immigration distance, and perceptions of immigration competence

vote share would have been 3 to 4 percentage points lower than it actually was, with UKIP's vote share correspondingly higher.[5]

9.4 Brexit, values, and realignment

To see the effect of the referendum on the way attitudes towards EU integration mapped onto major party competition we can compare how support for the major parties changed among pro- and anti-EU people between 2015 and 2017. The changing alignment of vote choice between 2015 and 2017 is illustrated in Figure 9.8 which shows the percentage point change in the vote share of the Conservatives and Labour by EU attitudes, liberal–authoritarian values, attitudes towards immigration, and economic left–right values.[6] In 2015, the Conservatives

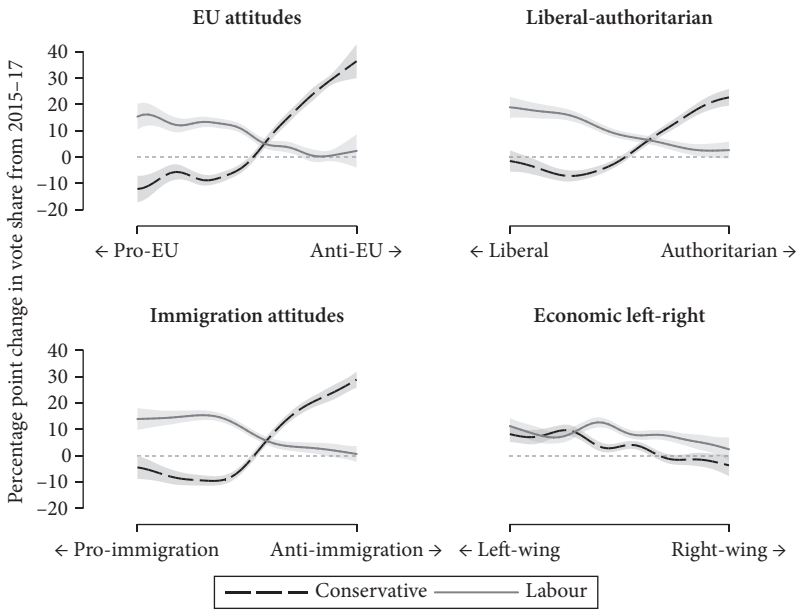

Figure 9.8 Bivariate relationship between liberal–authoritarianism, economic left–right, anti-immigrant attitudes and anti-EU attitudes, and change in the Conservative and Labour vote share 2015 to 2017

[5] The counterfactual UKIP vote for EU distance would have been higher because of the drop in vote share won by the Conservatives under the pre-referendum perception of Conservative EU distance (rather than a change in the perceived position of UKIP).

[6] Because we are interested in change between 2015 and 2017, rather than use votes in a referendum that took place a year after the 2015 election, we operationalize EU attitudes in the same way as our other scales, by pooling answers to questions in multiple waves of our panel (for more detail see Table A8.5 in the appendix). As well as allowing us to examine the relationship between EU attitudes and

already enjoyed a considerable advantage over Labour at the anti-EU side of the scale, but in 2017, this advantage increase sharply. While Labour made gains on the pro-EU side, the change in Labour vote was less strongly related to EU attitudes than the Conservative vote.

When we look at liberal–authoritarian values and attitudes towards immigration (which are both highly correlated with support for Brexit), we see a similar, albeit slightly less pronounced, shift in party support. The Conservatives took an increased share of socially conservative voters between 2015 and 2017, while Labour took a higher share of socially liberal voters. The same pattern is even more noticeable for attitudes towards immigration: those opposed to immigration became substantially more likely to vote Conservative, whilst those more favourably disposed to immigration were increasingly more likely to vote Labour. The Conservatives' increased share of anti-EU, anti-immigration, and authoritarian voters reflected their recruitment of a large proportion of 2015 UKIP voters. In contrast, when we look at change along left–right lines—a values dimension which we saw above (Figure 9.1) is uncorrelated with Brexit voting—change in both Labour and Conservative support was almost completely unrelated to voters left–right position despite Labour's leftward shift in policy, which was widely recognized by the electorate.[7]

So far, we have looked at the issues that tap into the cultural dimension of politics separately. However, we know that the issues of the EU and immigration are closely entwined with one another, and with liberal–authoritarian values. We also know these issues were already important in 2015 (see Chapter 5). To assess the combined impact of the cultural dimension on competition between the two major parties, and how it changed between 2015 and 2017, we estimate a series of vote choice models using BES Internet Panel respondents who voted in 2015 and 2017. Because of our interest in the competition between the major parties in our initial models, we restrict our analysis to English respondents who voted for Labour or Conservative in either election. Below we extend the analyses to voters for all parties and to Scotland and Wales.[8] The first model estimates the role of the

vote choice prior to the referendum, this approach gives us the additional advantage of being able to differentiate between strong and weak supporters of either side. This is important because strong Remain/Leave supporters were much more likely to change their political behaviour as a result of Brexit than people who did not care much either way. This measure of EU attitudes scale is a very strong predictor of Brexit vote, a bivariate logit model predicting EU referendum vote correctly classifies 90 per cent of respondents. We measure the other variables using the same approach: liberal–authoritarian values (Table A6.2), immigration attitudes (Table A9.2), and economic left–right values (Table A6.1).

[7] Voters perceived the change in Labour position on economic issues moving from a mean of 3.6 in 2015 to 2.9 in 2017 on the redistribution scale (where low is pro-redistribution) and from 3.1 to 2.6 on the left–right scale (where low is left).

[8] Our Conservative vs. Labour model excludes Scotland and Wales because the party choice set is different in those countries making the Conservative–Labour contrast non-comparable due to infringement of the assumption of independence of irrelevant alternatives.

economic dimension, using left–right values and attitudes towards redistribution (measured, like the other variables, as a derived variable from an IRT model, see Table A9.3 in the appendix). The second model estimates the role of the cultural dimension, using liberal–authoritarian values, the EU integration scale, and the immigration scale. The third model combines all of these variables to estimate the overall impact of the two dimensions. The results of these models are shown in Table A9.4 in the appendix.

We are not interested here in the predicted probability of voting for the Conservatives or Labour. Rather, we are interested in how much of the overall pattern of voting in each election is explained by each dimension. We assess this using a measure of overall model fit, McFadden's pseudo R-squared.[9] Figure 9.9 shows this statistic for each of our three models in 2015 and 2017. As we saw in Figure 9.8, the relationship between vote choice and the left–right and cultural dimensions did change between 2015 and 2017. This is confirmed in Figure 9.9, which shows little change in the overall explanatory power of the political values but marked changes in the relative contribution of the economic and cultural

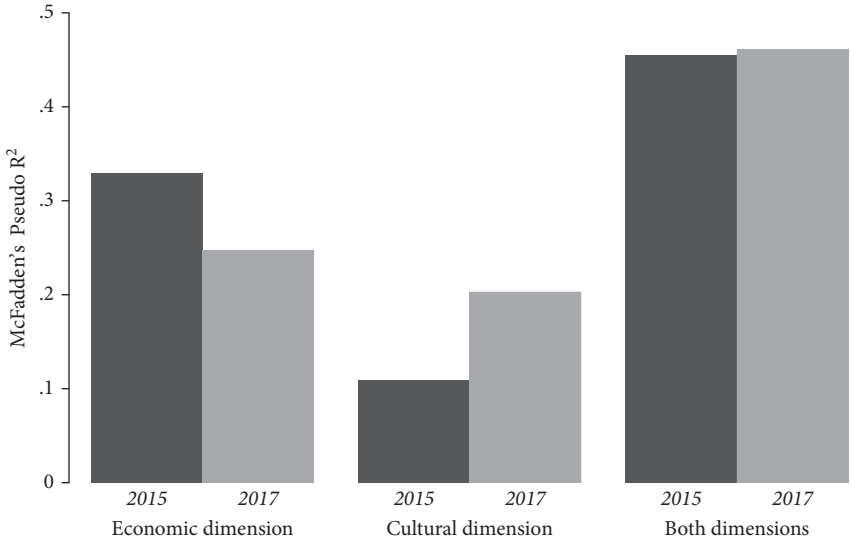

Figure 9.9 Goodness-of-fit of three logit models of Conservative–Labour vote choice in England in 2015 and 2017

[9] Unlike the R-squared statistic in an OLS regression, McFadden's pseudo R-squared cannot be interpreted in terms of proportion of variance explained. A well-fitting model will give substantially lower values than an equally well-fitting OLS model. McFadden suggests that a pseudo R-squared of between 0.2 and 0.4 represents an 'excellent' fit (McFadden 1979). Although by this measure, our combined models do provide an excellent fit of the data, we are more interested in the *relative* fit of the models between elections.

dimensions. More specifically, there is a large drop in the importance of the economic dimension between 2015 and 2017 and a corresponding rise in the importance of the cultural dimension. We do need to be cautious about running a variable race over which dimension is the more important at each election as the pseudo R-squared for each model is affected by how well each dimension is measured as well as how important that dimension is for vote choice. Nevertheless, the changes are sufficiently large that we can reasonably draw the conclusion that the economic dimension was more important than the cultural dimension in explaining Conservative–Labour vote choice in 2015. However, following the EU referendum, the cultural dimension became a better predictor of Conservative versus Labour voting, meaning that in 2017 the importance of both dimensions was roughly equal. This represents perhaps the most notable shift in the value basis of major party competition in recent history.

Whilst Figure 9.9 shows a clear increase in the importance of the cultural dimension in Conservative versus Labour competition, we show below that switching from smaller parties played an important part in the restructuring of major party voting around Brexit. In particular, the Conservatives gained a large number of Leave voters who are more socially conservative from UKIP, whilst Labour made more gains amongst more liberal Remain voters, especially from the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. So was the cultural dimension better at explaining party choice overall in 2017 than in 2015 or was it that competition on this dimension simply became better at differentiating Conservative and Labour voters? To address this question we estimated equivalent multinomial vote choice models for everyone who voted in 2015 and 2017.We fitted separate models for England, Scotland, and Wales to reflect the different choice sets available (the results are shown in Tables A9.5, A9.6, and A9.7 in the appendix respectively). The results for England, shown in Figure 9.10, suggest that there was very little change in the predictive power of the two dimensions when we consider vote choice across all parties. The importance of the economic dimension did decline very slightly in 2017 relative to 2015. Conversely, the importance of the cultural dimension increased very slightly in 2017 relative to 2015. Combining both dimensions together substantially improves the fit of the model, and again it fits the data slightly better in 2017 than it does in 2015. However, while there were small changes between these two elections, the relative importance of each dimension changed very little between 2015 and 2017. The models for Scotland and Wales also include IRT scales representing respondents' views on devolution and independence (see appendix Table A8.4 for Scotland and Table A9.8 for Wales). Taking these into account, in Scotland there is almost no change in the explanatory power of the economic dimension and an increase in the importance of the cultural dimension. However, in both years these were dwarfed by the importance of the devolution dimension. The picture in Wales was similar to that in England, with a small drop in the explanatory power of the economic dimension and an increase in the cultural

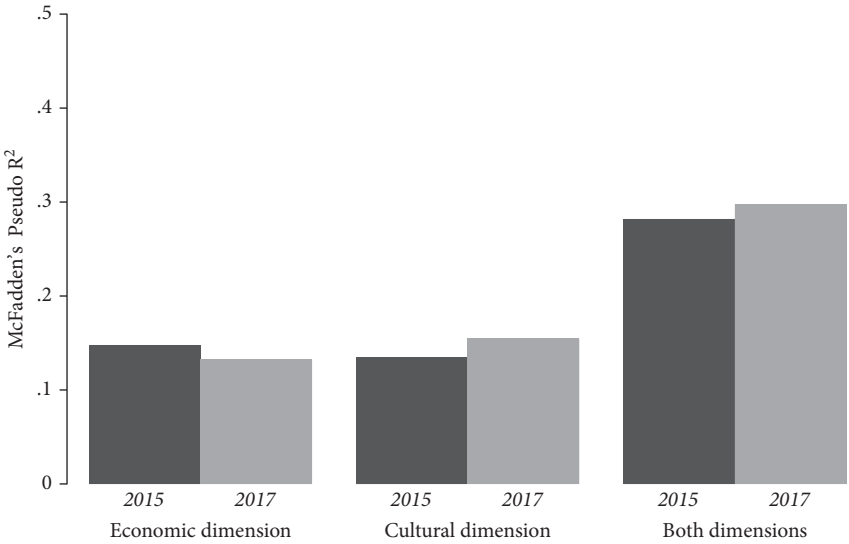

Figure 9.10 Goodness-of-fit of three multinomial logit models of Conservative, Labour, Liberal Democrat, UKIP, and Green Party vote choice in England in 2015 and 2017

dimension, while the devolution dimension was much less important than in Scotland, and relatively less important than the economic or cultural dimensions.

In summary, while the cultural dimension became a much stronger predictor of Conservative versus Labour vote choice in England in 2017, in terms of overall party competition, both dimensions remained important to understanding the vote, and the overall picture is one of stability (Surridge 2018).

To show how the EU referendum triggered these changes we can examine when the changes in relative levels of support for different parties among Leave and Remain voters took place. Figure 9.11 shows the voting intention for each party in each wave of the BES 2014–17 panel survey. There is a very clear jump in Conservative support among Leave voters immediately after the referendum. The trend in UKIP support mirrored that of the Tories, but the decline occurred mainly between November 2016 and the General Election in 2017, after Nigel Farage resigned his leadership of the party.[10] Labour support had increased among Remainers between the 2015 General Election and the referendum. However, these gains were reversed immediately following the referendum when tensions within the Labour Party came to a head. Labour support only recovered during the 2017 Election campaign, among voters from both sides of the EU divide, suggesting that Labour's 2017 campaign performance was attributable more to Corbyn's election campaign than to Brexit (Mellon et al. 2018a).

[10] Wave 11 of the BES panel survey was undertaken in November 2017 and wave 12 in April 2017.

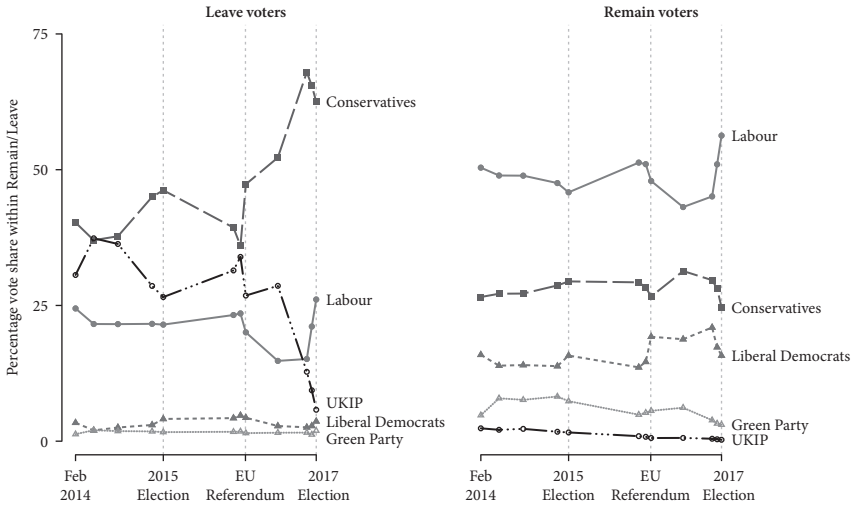

Figure 9.11 Party support by EU vote 2014–17

In order to demonstrate show how these Brexit-related changes led to vote-switching between the parties, we can examine the flow of the vote between 2015 and 2017. Figure 9.12 shows how Leave voters who started at different 2015 party origins cast their vote at the 2017 election. Most notably, the UKIP vote collapsed, with by far the largest portion switching to the Tories. More than half of UKIP's 2015 voters who voted again in 2017 switched to the Conservatives, compared with only 18 per cent to Labour and a further 18 per cent who stayed loyal to UKIP. Labour picked up some Leave voters from UKIP, but lost even more to the Conservatives.

The pattern for Remain voters is slightly more complex. As befitting their stance on Brexit, the Conservatives lost Remain voters to the Liberal Democrats and Labour (Figure 9.13). Despite having the clearest pro-EU position and a promise of a second referendum, the Liberal Democrats failed to pick up many more Remain voters than they lost. Instead, Labour, who were already the most popular party in 2015 among voters who voted Remain in 2016, won the lion's share. Despite an ambiguous position on the single market, Labour was seen as the best bet for those wanting to keep closer ties with our European neighbours. Not only did they win over a large number of Remainers from the Conservatives, but also from the pro-EU Greens and Lib Dems. Nearly two-thirds of 2015 Greens went to Labour as well as around a quarter of Liberal Democrats. However, the Green defection does not seem to be primarily driven by the EU issue. Most of the Green voters defected to Labour before the EU referendum had taken place. Instead, the Green defection appears to be driven by Labour's changing leadership under Jeremy Corbyn (who was personally very popular with those who voted Green in 2015 and was ideologically much closer to them than previous Labour leaders)

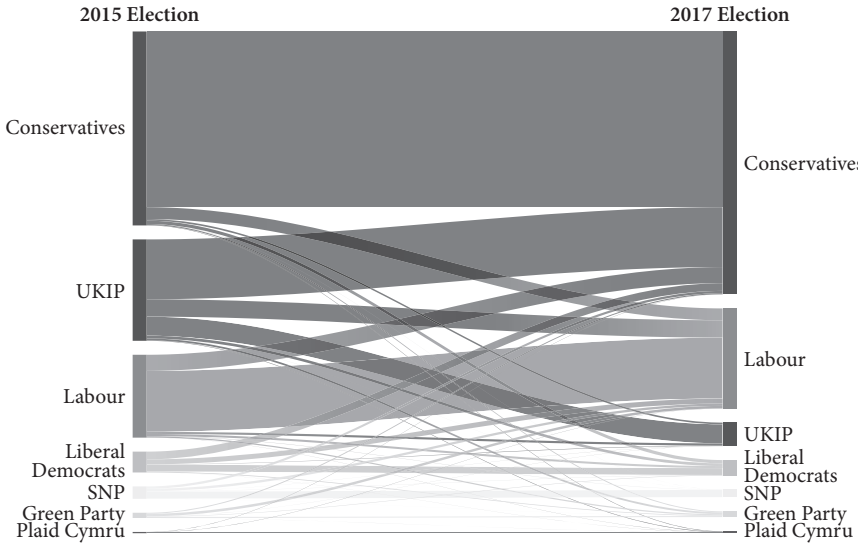

Figure 9.12 Where the Leave vote went

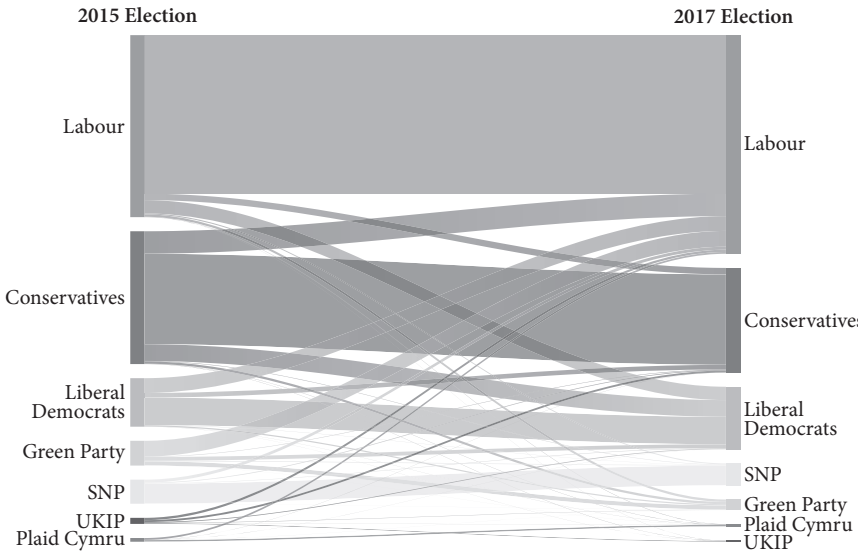

Figure 9.13 Where the Remain vote went

and their dislike of New Labour.[11] In fact, Corbyn was substantially more popular among 2015 Green voters (with a mean of 6.4 out of 10 on April 2016 like scores) than he was among 2015 Labour voters (with a mean of 5.7 out of 10). Importantly,

[11] In a model of switching from the Greens, attitudes to Tony Blair negatively predicted choosing Green over Labour in 2015, controlling for overall perceptions of the Labour Party.

the bulk of this switching took place prior to the EU referendum, with 40 per cent of 2015 Green voters (of those who stated a preference) in the pre-referendum wave already intending to vote Labour. Ultimately 60 per cent of 2015 Green voters defected to Labour.

The cumulative effect of Brexit on party choice is clear from the relationship between vote choice in 2015 and 2017 and EU referendum vote (Table 9.1). In 2015, Labour already had a 14 percentage point lead over the Conservatives among voters who later voted to Remain in the EU referendum. This lead increased to 29 percentage points in 2017. There was even greater polarization on the Leave side, where the Conservatives went from a 20 percentage point lead over Labour in 2015, to a 36 percentage point lead in 2017. In 2017, it seems clear that the Conservatives had become the party of Brexit, winning 63 per cent of the Leave vote, with Leave voters making up 71 per cent of Conservative support. In contrast, Labour won over half the Remain vote, relying heavily on Remain support which made up two-thirds (67 per cent) of their voters in 2017. The Liberal Democrats failed to make headway among Remainers despite a clear commitment to backing a second referendum, and experienced an unusually high volatility in their support with more than half of their 2017 voters recruited since 2015. The vast majority (79 per cent) of these new voters supported Remain. However, this recruitment did not translate into increased vote share at the aggregate level because they lost half of their 2015 voters with a higher rate of loss (65 per cent) among the 27 per cent of their 2015 voters who supported Leave.[12] In Chapter 7

Table 9.1 Vote share by EU referendum vote, 2015 and 2017

	2015		2017	
	Remain	**Leave**	**Remain**	**Leave**
Conservative	30	44	25	63
Labour	44	24	54	27
Lib Dem	11	5	13	3
SNP	4	2	4	1
Plaid Cymru	1	0	1	0
UKIP	1	22	0	3
Green Party	7	2	2	1
n	7,033	7,186	7,217	7,056

Source: BESIP wave 6 and wave 13 wt_new_w6w13

[12] Although the Liberal Democrats have long been a pro-EU party, they nevertheless attracted a large contingent of anti-EU voters in elections prior to 2017 (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005). The considerable churn in their vote in 2017 is also reflected in the Liberal Democrat seats. The Liberal Democrats finished the election with a net gain of four seats, but this hides considerable turnover. Half of the 2015 Liberal Democrat seats were lost—including the seat of former leader Nick Clegg—as was their recently won by-election seat of Richmond Park. These losses were offset by regaining seven seats they had lost in 2015 and one they had lost in 2010.

we showed how the Liberal Democrats failed to recover in 2017 because of the lasting impact of the coalition shock on their core support, together with the damage to their electoral viability that entailed. As a result, they improved on their average 2015 level of support only among pro-European voters.

Other significant changes were also correlated with Brexit: the Greens lost more than four out of five of their 2015 supporters, the vast majority of whom had voted to Remain in the EU. As noted above, this shift largely took place before the EU referendum campaign, yet was still an important part of how Labour's 2017 vote became dominated by Remainers. Meanwhile, UKIP's 2015 vote, almost entirely made up of Leave supporters, was devastated.

These patterns of switching suggest a fundamental shift in British politics. In total, 32 per cent of respondents voted for a different party in 2015 and 2017, a slightly lower percentage than switched between 2010 and 2015, although 2010, 2015, and 2017 are the three highest recorded levels of volatility across all elections covered by BES panels between 1964 and 2017 (see Chapter 2). More importantly, however, despite spanning only a two-year period, 2015–17 saw the highest recorded level of combined Labour–Conservative switching as a percentage of Labour and Conservative voters at the previous election (in either direction) in any BES inter-election panel (the full series is shown in Chapter 2).[13] Other elections that saw high levels of switching between Labour and the Conservatives took place during periods of convergence between the parties, which may have made it easier to jump the 'gap' between the two major parties. The fact that 12 per cent of 2015 Conservative voters switched to voting for a Corbyn-led Labour Party indicates a major change in the political landscape.

We have shown in earlier chapters that party identification acts as a constraint on volatility, but did it offer any protection against the Brexit shock? Figure 9.14 shows the retention rates for the Conservatives and Labour on each referendum side and for party identifiers and non-identifiers. Both the Conservatives and Labour retained high proportions of their 2015 voters who shared the same referendum side as the party majority (Leave for Conservatives and Remain for Labour) among both party identifiers and non-identifiers (at the time of the 2015 election). However, among those who voted against the majority position of their 2015 party in the referendum, there are very different retention rates for identifiers and non-identifiers. The Conservatives lost nearly half of their non-identifying 2015 voters who voted Remain. By contrast, the Conservatives only lost around a fifth of Conservative-identifying Remain voters. We see a parallel picture on the Labour side among Leavers. Party identification cushioned the effect of the Brexit shock. Had levels of party identification been higher, Brexit—as with other shocks—would have had a smaller impact on the outcome of the election.

[13] These figures are for Britain as a whole for comparability across the whole series.

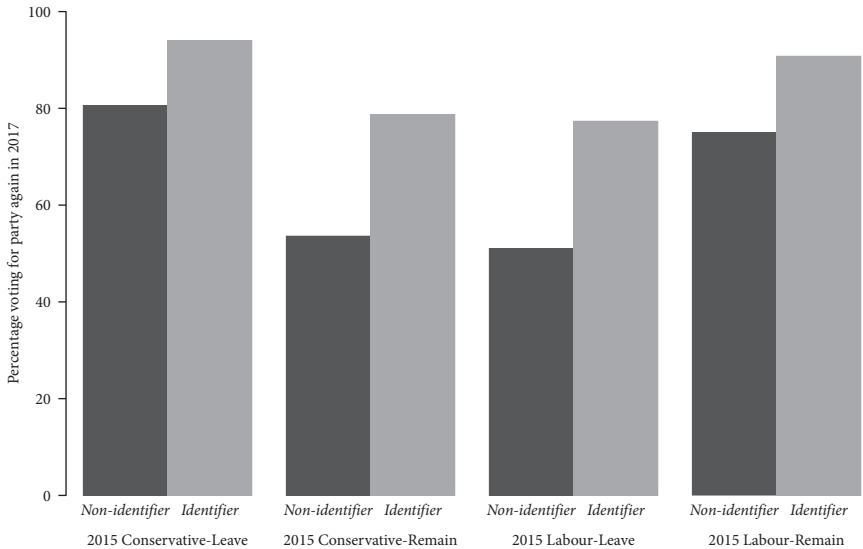

Figure 9.14 Loyalty rates 2015–17

We saw earlier how values and social characteristics were related to one another, and to support for Brexit. We also know that these intertwined values and social characteristics are related to party preferences. However, the degree to which any one of them is important for someone's vote will be influenced by the extent to which the parties differ over the issues at stake. The EU referendum made opinions on issues such as immigration and Brexit more relevant to party choice than they had been in 2015. We would therefore expect to see the Conservatives become more popular among older, less educated, and more socially conservative voters in 2017 compared to 2015, whilst Labour should have become more popular among younger, more highly educated, and more liberal voters. When we examine these changes, this is indeed what we see.

Figure 9.15 shows the relationship between age and vote in 2015 and 2017. There is a clear shift between the elections that is correlated with the demographics of Brexit. In 2015, older voters were more likely to be Conservative and younger voters more likely to be Labour. In 2017, this trend was exaggerated even further, with a sharp increase in the age gradient of vote choice. This reflected the success of the Conservatives among the older Leave vote, many of whom defected from UKIP, and the success of Labour among the more pro-Remain younger voters. Thus, although there was no 'Youthquake' in voter turnout (which among the 18–24 year-old group was under 50 per cent in both 2015 and 2017), there certainly was a dramatic change in the electoral choices of younger voters (Prosser et al. 2018). The changing age relationship does not seem to be driven primarily by education or income, as controlling for these does little to attenuate the change

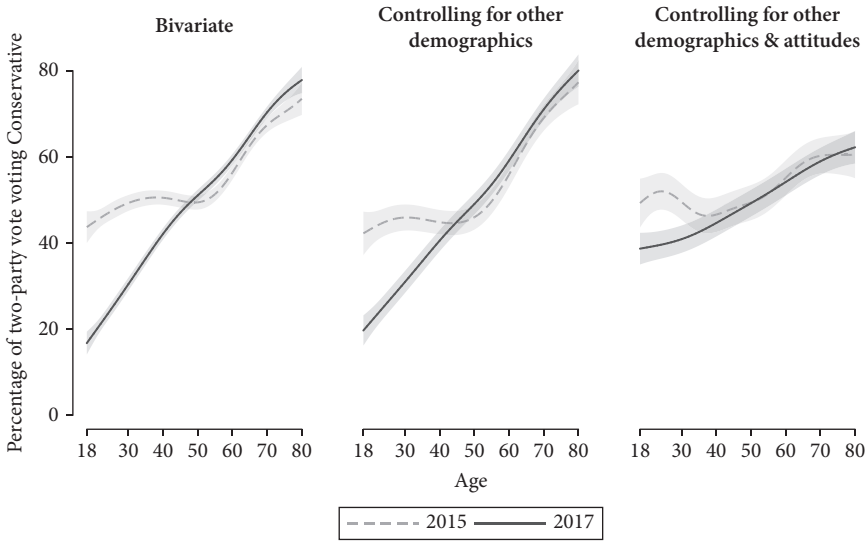

Figure 9.15 Bivariate relationship between age and Conservative share of the Labour/Conservative vote in 2015 and 2017

in the relationship. However, controlling for values and attitudes (including immigration and EU attitudes) does greatly reduce both the age gradient and the change between the two elections. This suggests that the changing age relationship is driven to some degree by the stronger role that the issues of immigration and the EU played in Conservative versus Labour vote choice in 2017.

Similarly, when we look at education (Figure 9.16) there are large changes that are again correlated with the pattern of Brexit support. From one election to the next, we see large increases in Conservative support among those with the lowest levels of education and a rise in Labour support among those with the highest levels of education. Much of the changing relationship seems to be driven by the changing age and income relationships we saw in the previous figure, as educated respondents tend to be younger and more affluent than less educated respondents. Consequently, controlling for income reduces the Conservatives' advantage among degree holders in 2015 and controlling for age reduces Labour's advantage among degree holders in 2017. Controlling for attitudes further flattens the relationship between Conservative–Labour vote choice and education, indicating that the relationship is partly accounted for by the more anti-EU and anti-immigration attitudes of less highly educated voters.

There were also changes in the relationship between household income and vote choice between 2015 and 2017, as shown in Figure 9.17. Labour increased its share of the two-party vote in the richer half of the income distribution, especially in the upper-middle income range. The net effect of these changes was that the income gradient on Conservative and Labour voting flattened in 2017, except for

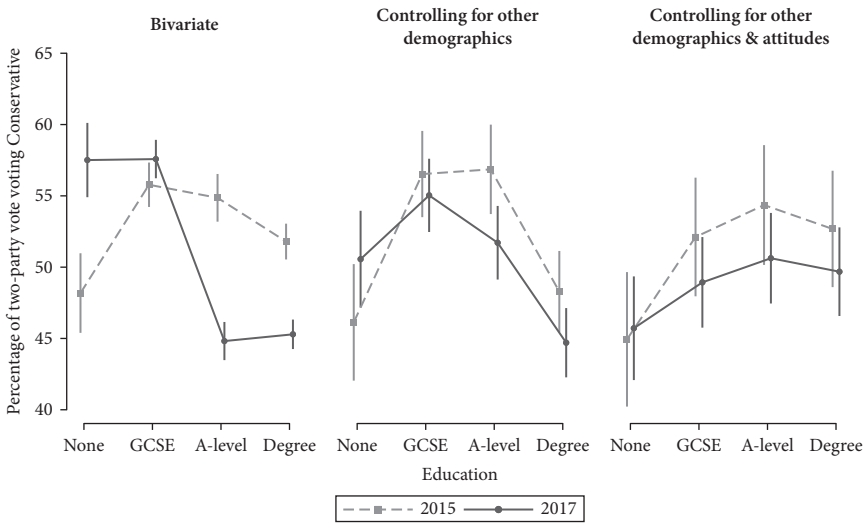

Figure 9.16 Bivariate relationship between education and Conservative share of the Conservative/Labour vote in 2015 and 2017

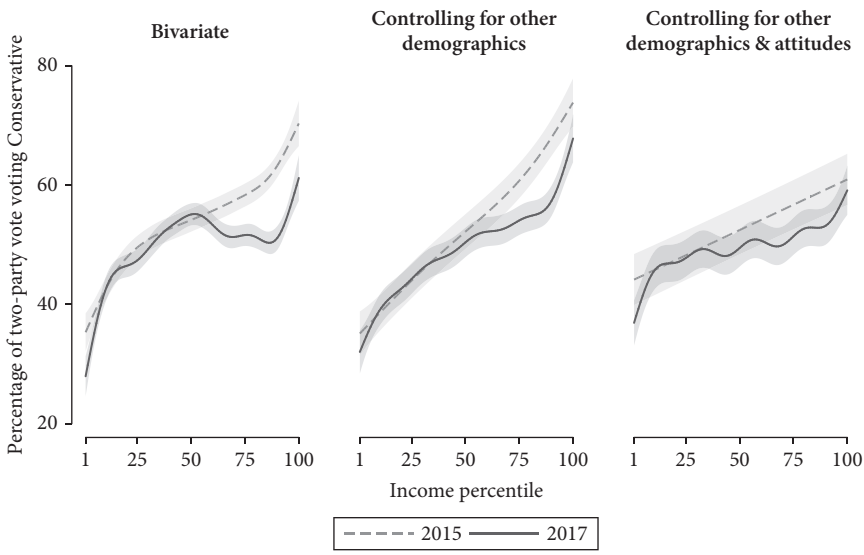

Figure 9.17 Bivariate relationship between household income and Conservative share of the Conservative/Labour vote in 2015 and 2017

the poorest groups, who swung towards Labour.[14] This is also reflected in class voting (measured on the 2015 and 2017 face-to-face BES and BSA surveys). They show Labour's lead remaining constant among working-class voters but narrowing the Conservative's lead among middle-class voters.[15] Again, these income changes seem to partially reflect the changing age and education gradients as the relationship looks much more similar across the years after controlling for the other demographics and flattens further after controlling for values and issue preferences.

To summarize what we have shown here, the shock of the EU referendum greatly increased the link between attitudes towards the EU and Conservative versus Labour voting. This change propagated a series of other demographic and attitudinal realignments. First, because immigration attitudes and the EU are closely linked (see Chapter 5), 2017 also saw a strengthening of the link between immigration attitudes and Conservative versus Labour voting. Next, because immigration is also closely linked to authoritarian values, 2017 witnessed an increased link between authoritarian values and Conservative versus Labour voting. Finally, the increased salience of issues linked to the cultural dimension also strengthened the link between Conservative versus Labour voting and various demographic correlates of that dimension. Most notably, because education is associated with more liberal values, higher levels of education switched from predicting Conservative voting in 2015 to predicting Labour voting in 2017. Similarly because older voters are much more anti-EU, anti-immigrant, and authoritarian, the age gradient steepened in 2017. However, these new cleavages cut across existing cleavages such as income (lower income is associated with authoritarian/economically left-wing attitudes).

9.5 Conclusions

The Brexit referendum was the biggest shock to British politics in decades and affected the 2017 General Election via each of the three mechanisms we described in Chapter 3. The Brexit vote fractured party competition in Britain. In 2015,

[14] The relationship between social characteristics, values, policy preferences, and vote choice changed substantially between 2015 and 2017. Inevitably however, these variables and their patterns of change are not independent of each other. Social characteristics predict values, which in turn predict policy preferences. To unravel the interdependence of these variables and to understand how Brexit changed the alignment of social characteristics, values, and party choice we have also estimated a series of SEM models. The patterns shown in the figures in the text all proved to be robust in these multivariate analyses.

[15] The BES and BSA face-to-face surveys tell somewhat different stories about the changes in class voting between 2015 and 2017, but the most accurate analysis is probably to combine both surveys. When we do that, the Conservatives held a 13 percentage point lead over Labour among middle-class (higher managerial and professional plus lower professional) voters in 2015 which fell to 7 percentage points in 2017. Labour led by 9 percentage points among working-class (routine and semi-routine) voters in 2015 which increased to 10 percentage points in 2017.

social and cultural issues such as the EU and immigration had previously driven voters *away* from the major parties. In the aftermath of Brexit, these issues drove the choice between the Conservatives and Labour. This was a manifestation of the increased salience of the issues of EU and immigration in the wake of the vote to leave the EU. The increased salience of these issues was also reflected in the number of voters who identified Europe and immigration as the most important issues during the 2017 campaign. Salience alone, however, does not fully explain the dramatic shifts seen in 2017. The shift to major party voting in line with attitudes towards Europe and immigration was also a product of changes in voters' evaluations of competence that followed the Brexit vote. After the referendum, the Conservatives' unambiguously pro-Leave stance and their opposition to immigration were seen as more credible once the EU was no longer seen as a constraint on their actions. We saw how, following the EU referendum, the Conservatives' perceived willingness to reduce immigration rose sharply, helping them win over Leave voters, especially from UKIP. This was made all the easier by UKIP's loss of their charismatic leader, and the internal disputes and financial chaos that rendered the party ineffective.

Moreover the outcome also depended heavily on the political response to the Brexit vote and the resultant shifts in the *image* of parties. Most notable was the Conservative Party's strategic decision to get firmly behind Brexit—promising to ensure that Brexit really meant Brexit, and to put an end to freedom of movement of labour from the EU. Consequently, the aftermath of the referendum changed Leave voters' perceptions of where the Conservatives stood on Europe, giving voters a clear choice and transforming the image of the Conservatives on Europe.

Labour's consolidation of the Remain vote was perhaps less the product of their position on Brexit—which was more ambiguous—and as much to do with traditional left–right economic divisions. Labour's move to the left under Corbyn, and away from any remaining association with New Labour, drained the Green Party of support even before the EU referendum took place. This left the Liberal Democrats and Labour as the only Remain-leaning parties in contention in England, while the choice for Remainers also included the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales.[16] The Liberal Democrats did not meaningfully recover from the collapse in electoral viability that contributed to their 2015 losses (as identified in Chapter 7), and their unambiguously pro-European stance alienated many of their remaining Eurosceptic supporters. As a result, Labour were the only viable option for many English voters wishing to support a Remain-leaning party.

However, the EU referendum positions of the major parties was not all that mattered, but also what kind of Brexit the parties would seek to achieve in the negotiations that lay ahead. Labour was supported by those favouring continued economic

[16] Among Welsh BESIP respondents, Plaid Cymru won 13 per cent of Remain voters and 9 per cent of Leave voters.

integration while allowing freedom of movement, whereas the Conservatives were strongly favoured by those who wanted to control immigration. By providing a stark choice on such a crucial national issue, the EU referendum resulted in a reversal of the fragmentation of support we saw in 2015, and the unprecedented surge in the combined two-party vote. Although Brexit was not the only explanation for this change it was certainly important. Not only did it help bring about the collapse of UKIP, boosting the Conservative vote in England and Wales, but, as we saw in Chapter 8, it assisted the Conservative revival in Scotland at the expense of the SNP. On the Remain side, outside Scotland, Labour benefited from being the only viable party for those wanting a 'soft' Brexit.

The effects of Brexit on electoral alignments are not limited to values. The relationship between these values and social and demographic characteristics means that existing social cleavages have been disrupted. While social cleavages are typically thought of as long-standing rifts in society that change only slowly, our analysis shows that moving from an economic basis of major party competition to a two-dimensional one can bring about a rapid realignment of social groups. Brexit has realigned voters and parties with regard to age, education, and income as well as along the lines of social values.

A key theme of this book is that the British electorate is now capable of very high levels of volatility. The gains for the major parties are by no means secure. Neither are the transformational changes in the ideological and value bases of their support, nor are the new social cleavage of education and the demise of the traditionally role of income and class. As we saw in Chapter 4, the fundamental conditions of declining party identification and high levels of voter volatility mean that if parties change their positions, then different voters will vote for them. The new support base for the Conservatives has to a large degree been taken from UKIP, but if the Conservatives are seen to have failed to deliver on Brexit, especially on control over immigration, then it is unlikely that these supporters will stick with them. Newly recruited party supporters are even less loyal than the average voters in our generally volatile electorate.

In the longer term, the outcome of the Brexit process can be expected to affect the electoral relevance of Britain's relationship with the EU. If freedom of movement is finally ended, concern about immigration is likely to decline, making it less likely to provide a driver of support for the Conservatives, or indeed any other party. If immigration and Britain's relationship with the EU become less salient then we are likely to see domestic economic issues and social divisions based on inequality re-emerge as the primary basis of electoral competition. Should freedom of movement continue, however, or non-EU immigration increase markedly, then it seems likely that parties will continue to compete on this issue.

As the ramifications of Brexit play out, the longer-term impact of the Brexit shock remains to be seen. What is clear is that the dramatic changes between the 2015 and 2017 General Elections were not determined primarily by traditional economic issues, although these continued to be important. Nor were the changes the result of social change—a two-year time span is a blink of an eye in that respect. The shifts can only be understood by reference to the biggest political shock that Britain has experienced for many years.