

# 10

## Conclusions

V. O. Key (1955, 18) finished his essay on critical elections by posing the question:

what characteristics of an electorate or what conditions permit sharp and decisive changes in the power structure from time to time?

In the ensuing decades, a great deal of research has considered this question. Lipset and Rokkan (1967) famously documented how party systems became frozen, and Pierson (2000) described how positive feedback effects (or increasing returns on electoral success) help reproduce existing patterns of party dominance. However, in recent decades electoral alignments have been weakening in industrial democracies, and party systems have experienced increased fragmentation and electoral volatility (Dalton, Flanagan, and Beck 1985). But why do stable patterns of party support break down? Critical elections theory sets out the conditions under which realignments are likely to take place, including institutional, ideological, and social change (Evans and Norris 1999; Mayhew 2000). We have found that part of the explanation for recent sharp and decisive changes does indeed lie in such long-term developments. However, we show that this is only part of the story. This book reveals how the party system has become increasingly unstable in Britain and how this has made it more vulnerable to the impact of electoral shocks. These shocks shape election outcomes whether they be realigning or otherwise, and have led to the dramatic election outcomes experienced in 2015 and 2017.

We identified two important trends that have created instability and volatility in the British party system. The first is partisan dealignment, which is driven by the replacement of more partisan generations with new cohorts of citizens lacking partisan identities. The second is the gradual decline in the vote share of the two major parties, and corresponding increase in support for smaller parties, at least until 2017 ('party system fragmentation'). This was made possible by the rise of new issues outside the traditional economic left–right agenda on which new and smaller parties are better able to compete, and an increase in the supply of those parties facilitated by the expanding range of elections (especially European and devolved elections) in which smaller parties have been able to prove themselves to be viable competitors. The result of these changes is a more volatile electorate, characterized by an increase in the rate of voters switching parties between elections over time. The majority of British voters are now switchers, with around 60 per cent

switching their votes at least once over three elections. In this way, our analysis took us full circle to the very first volume produced using the BES: *Political Change in Britain* (Butler and Stokes 1969b), which observed the degree to which electoral volatility existed in the early 1960s, and the importance of this ‘short-term conversion’ in the context of a relatively stable and aligned electorate. That book is broadly remembered for addressing the question of stability in electoral behaviour as a result of strong class and partisan-based voting in British elections. In fact, it also set the stage for the importance of volatility, and provided the benchmark against which we can see the very substantial increase in switching in the British electorate, bringing us to the events of the present day.

These gradual, long-term changes to the electorate and party system, however, do not explain the uneven and volatile nature of recent elections on their own. Nor do they explain the destination of increased vote-switching: that is, which parties gain and lose most from volatility in any given election, and whether the vote-switching causes further fragmentation of the party system (as in 2015) or de-fragmentation of the party system (as in 2017). To understand these changes, another element is crucial—electoral shocks. We use the term ‘shocks’ to describe major political events or developments that have the potential to alter the political system and cut through the normal ebbs and flows of regular party politics.

We defined electoral shocks by three criteria:

1. *Electoral shocks are an abrupt change to the status quo. They are not necessarily exogenous to the party system, but they are more than simply the outcomes of normal everyday politics. They represent a significant and often unanticipated change.*
2. *Electoral shocks are manifest over prolonged time periods and are highly salient: they have the potential to be noticed and recognized even by people who do not have much interest in politics, and by people who might otherwise select information that fits their partisan beliefs and preconceptions. Electoral shocks are, therefore, very difficult for voters and politicians to ignore.*
3. *Electoral shocks are politically relevant and they have the potential to change how parties are perceived and therefore to reshape the party system.*

We presented evidence of five electoral shocks, each fulfilling these three criteria, and each leading to substantial changes in vote choice among the British electorate. Unlike existing approaches to understanding voting behaviour, our approach puts shocks at the centre of the explanation for understanding political change, rather than treating them as nuisance factors which interfere with ‘normal’ patterns of electoral behaviour. The effects of the different shocks we examined, however, vary considerably, both in terms of the voters and the parties that were affected, and also in terms of the mechanisms by which each shock mattered.

Some electoral shocks, such as the economic crisis and Brexit, are relevant to most, or all, of the electorate, but not all shocks affect all voters. For example, the immigration shock had a much greater effect among opponents of immigration, who were much more likely to switch to UKIP in 2015. We also saw how the formation of the 2010–15 coalition hugely affected 2010 Liberal Democrat voters, but was less relevant to people who supported other parties. However, the haemorrhaging of the Liberal Democrat vote inevitably meant a larger pool of voters for other parties to compete for. Similarly, the Scottish independence referendum only directly affected voters in Scotland, but the SNP's success had spillover consequences for party competition in the rest of the UK. The prospect of Labour losing many of its Scottish seats undermined their chances of winning an outright majority and contributed to speculation about potential coalition partnerships.

The mechanisms by which these electoral shocks led to vote-switching vary from case to case. We identified three ways in which shocks can affect vote-switching: via changing perceptions of competence; changes to the salience of particular issues and dimensions; and changes to the social and political image of a party. We also pointed to the importance of shocks as political opportunities that increase uncertainty but at the same time create a strong pressure on political parties to respond in some way. Shocks can change the ways parties compete for and win votes, making their consequences unpredictable and contingent on political strategies and the politicization of shocks in public and media discourse.

Looking first at shocks to competence, in Chapter 4, we demonstrated how the global financial crisis damaged Labour's reputation for economic management, with long-run consequences. Our analysis showed that voters who judged the economy as performing badly before 2010 were still punishing Labour—and rewarding the Conservatives and UKIP—in 2015. This is a much longer-term economic voting effect than has been assumed in the economic voting literature. It suggests that voters are able to attribute responsibility for past performance and—under certain circumstances—continue to punish the party perceived to be responsible for economic downturns over prolonged time periods. This blame was, of course, politically contested. Labour was blamed for the national debt *after* 2010 because the Conservatives successfully made Labour's alleged fiscal irresponsibility part of political discourse. This discourse contributed to the Conservative Party's arguments that the austerity measures adopted by the coalition government were necessary. This demonstrates how shocks can create political opportunities that can continue to shape political competition for an extended period of time.

Chapter 5 provided evidence for another shock that affected the perceived competence of parties: the surge in immigration following the UK government's decision not to delay free movement of people from EU Accession countries. The inability of successive governments to respond to growing concerns about

immigration severely damaged the perceived competence of Labour on the issue, and then the Conservatives. This provided the opportunity for an anti-immigration party to fill that gap, leading to a dramatic upsurge in anti-European attitudes and support for UKIP.

The immigration shock did not only work through competence. The rise in EU immigration also increased the salience of immigration among the electorate. Immigration routinely featured as one of the most important issues in BES surveys in the run-up to the 2015 General Election, and was one of the two issues most cited by Leave voters to explain their choice in the EU referendum. Similarly, an increase in the salience of Scottish nationalism was a crucial aspect of the Scottish independence referendum shock, insofar as Westminster vote choice became very closely aligned with attitudes towards independence. As a result of the referendum campaign, the emphasis on issues beyond the dominant left and right economic dimension provided a basis for vote-switching in Scotland. Most notably, those that favoured independence deserted Labour in large numbers and voted for the SNP in 2015. In both these cases, the issues that underpinned voters' own views on the shock—immigration and Scottish independence respectively—became more important in determining electoral choices.

The impact of the independence referendum was not only about the salience of Scottish independence and devolution. In Chapter 3, we described how a shock may alter the social and political image of parties by forcing parties to respond to an issue that may have been of little importance to vote choice, and to clarify their position which previously may have been obscure. Although it is difficult to differentiate between the effect of the independence referendum shock on the salience of independence and its impact on the political image of Labour, it seems likely that both played an important role in the strengthening of the association between Yes voting and SNP voting in 2015. Whereas before the independence referendum voters could view Labour primarily through the lens of the economic left–right dimension, after the referendum campaign—in which Labour campaigned alongside the Conservatives to stay in the UK—voters also viewed Labour through the prism of the battle over independence. As a result of the shock to both salience and party images, the referendum precipitated a shift in allegiances of those backing independence to such a degree that 90 per cent of Yes voters voted for the SNP, including most of those who had previously voted Labour. Labour lost nearly half of its 2010 voters to the SNP at the 2015 General Election, the vast majority of whom had voted for independence the previous year.

Perhaps a more straightforward example of a shock to the image of a political party was described in Chapter 7. The main reason that the Liberal Democrat vote collapsed after the formation of the 2010 coalition was not primarily about responsibility for unpopular policies. Rather, it was a change in what its supporters perceived the party stood for once it had sided with the Conservatives—the

‘old enemy’ of many Liberal Democrat voters. It was the very nature of the Liberal Democrat support base that meant that the coalition with the Conservatives damaged their popularity so much. Not only was that support base predominantly on the economic centre-left with a social liberal bias in political values, but many Liberal Democrat voters were natural Labour supporters lending the Liberal Democrats tactical support to keep out Conservative candidates. The coalition therefore affected the image of the Liberal Democrats as a plausible alternative for moderate centre-left voters. Their more left-wing supporters were much more likely to grow to dislike the party after coalition than those on the right, leading them to desert in large numbers 2015.

As we have already noted, electoral shocks need not work through a single mechanism. Perhaps the biggest electoral shock of all (at least in the period in which we primarily focus: between 2008 and 2017) was the 2016 referendum on EU membership. The impact of the referendum acted through all three of the mechanisms we have described. First, it was a shock to salience. The EU referendum raised the importance of the issue of Europe in vote choice, such that support for the major parties coalesced around how people voted in the referendum, and strengthened the link between immigration and major party vote choice. The increased salience of the cultural dimension was reflected in the number of voters who identified Europe and immigration as their most important issues. Second, we showed how, following the EU referendum, the Conservatives’ perceived competence to reduce immigration rose sharply, helping them win over people who had voted for UKIP in 2015. Third, the referendum altered the image of the Conservatives, such that they were now seen as *the* party of Brexit following the EU referendum. By the time of the 2017 General Election, both Leavers and Remainers were in firm agreement about where the Conservatives stood on Europe. We showed in Chapter 9 how the strategic decision to get firmly behind Brexit helped the Conservatives sharply increase their vote share, underlining the importance of shocks as political opportunities. Of course, this might only have had a short-term electoral pay-off in 2017, and might be the root of a longer-term penalty depending on the outcome of Brexit.

These electoral shocks—and the political responses to them—shaped the elections of 2015 and 2017, increasing volatility and dramatically affecting the political winners and losers. In 2015, the net beneficiaries were the smaller parties, although both Labour and the Conservatives were able to capitalize on the collapse of the Liberal Democratic vote. In contrast, in 2017, the clear beneficiaries of volatility were the two major parties, leading to the largest two-party vote share since 1970. The record levels of switching were possible, in part, because of the long-term weakening of attachment of voters to political parties and the increase in voter volatility we described in Chapter 4. Indeed, each of the shocks we examined had a greater impact on vote-switching among weak or non-party identifiers, as party identification acts as a buffer against vote-switching.

## 10.1 Future shocks

As we write, British politics continues to stumble through a period of seemingly interminable crisis. The obvious question is what will happen in future elections? Will levels of individual volatility remain high or will we see an increase in partisan loyalty? Does the abrupt shift towards two-party politics at the 2017 Election mark the beginning of a new era of Conservative and Labour dominance, or will 2017 turn out to be a blip on an otherwise continued trend toward party system fragmentation? Will Scottish electoral politics continue to be defined by the nationalist–unionist dimension or will Westminster politics return to pre-eminence? Will issues connected to the liberal–authoritarian dimension continue to increase their importance or shall we see a return to the politics of left and right?

The short answer—and this will hopefully not come as a surprise at the end of a book about political shocks—is that *it depends what happens next*.

The electoral shocks we have discussed in this book were largely unanticipated and their consequences unforeseen. Even the effects of anticipated shocks are unknowable. At the time we are putting the finishing touches on this book, we still do not know whether Brexit will definitely happen, and, if it does, what Brexit will actually look like, let alone what its economic and social and political consequences will be. If Brexit goes well and the economy quickly recovers, or booms, would divisions over Brexit be quickly forgotten? Or, given that the main drivers of attitudes towards Brexit, such as authoritarianism, have little to do with economic preferences, would voting be increasingly defined by the social dimension? Recent elections have clearly shown that campaigning on second-dimension issues can be a successful strategy, and it is unlikely that future political entrepreneurs will forget this lesson. If Brexit goes badly and the economy crashes, however, might future elections be driven by Brexit blame, incompetence, and recrimination? An economic crash could result in the perennial issues of redistribution, austerity, and economic competence reasserting themselves.

We might not be able to predict with any certainty how future shocks will affect the fortunes of specific political parties. However, just as we have situated shocks in the context of long-term trends in British politics, we can point to features of the British electorate and institutions that might encourage or impede future volatility and fragmentation. In other words, while we might not be able to anticipate future shocks, we are able to identify the conditions that will be likely to shape their impact.

Our analysis points to two long-term factors that predict voter volatility: the level of partisanship and the size of the minor party vote. The size of the minor party vote shrunk in 2017 with Labour and the Conservatives both greatly increasing their vote shares. This strong two-party performance may be associated with lower levels of volatility at the next election, because major parties are better at retaining their voters than minor parties. We do have to be careful about this

extrapolation, however. Chapter 9 showed that Labour and the Conservatives are now competing on both the economic and social dimensions. Because these dimensions are uncorrelated in the population,<sup>1</sup> this leaves large numbers of voters for each party cross-pressured, making it potentially harder than usual for the major parties to retain their 2017 support. Given the high degree of polarization of attitudes on Leave and Remain, a compromise Brexit that pleases neither side has the potential to harm both Labour and the Conservatives.

One important consideration that might point towards the possibility of a period of primarily two-party politics is that smaller parties are likely to find establishing viability even more challenging than they have in recent elections. The 2015 Election demonstrated for UKIP what 1983 did for the SDP: diffuse national support is very difficult to translate into seats under the British electoral system. In Chapter 7 we showed that the Liberal Democrats face a viability problem that will likely continue to impede their electoral rehabilitation. History shows that the Liberal Democrats know how to overcome those viability problems through targeted campaigning in by-elections and local elections (Russell and Fieldhouse 2005), but these strategies take time. Brexit will also result in an important electoral change for Britain's minor parties—the end of European Parliament elections. As we discussed in Chapter 4, European Parliament elections have provided a national platform for minor parties and have been an important stepping stone for later success in British elections. Via MEPs, European Parliament elections have provided an important source of funding and resources for smaller parties. Without this platform, minor parties will likely find getting their foot in the electoral door an even greater challenge.

The second factor influencing volatility is partisan dealignment. The level of partisanship no longer appears to be falling in Britain, but it does not appear to be increasing either. Our analysis shows that partisan dealignment has taken place mostly through a process of generational replacement. Therefore, any changes will tend to be slow, with a sudden surge in levels of partisanship seeming unlikely. Voters with no partisanship or low levels of party identity are much more likely to switch parties between elections, and so voters are still relatively unconstrained from switching parties. It therefore seems likely that partisan dealignment will continue to promote volatility at future elections. It would be a mistake, though, to assume that changes in partisanship can only move in one direction, or that partisanship must become less relevant to political decisions over time. Comparative research generally shows declines in partisanship across countries, but the size of these declines has varied substantially (Dalton 2012a; Dalton 2012b). Even where partisanship has declined, it does not necessarily translate into the kinds of volatile outcomes we have seen in Britain.

<sup>1</sup> In the BES Internet Panel the economic left–right and liberal–authoritarian scales have a correlation of 0.03.

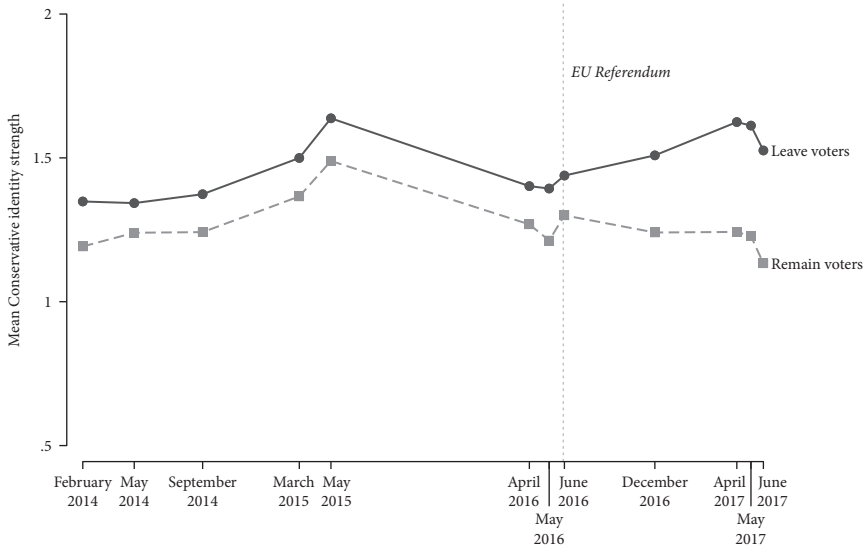
The example of the United States is instructive. Overall levels of partisanship in America have declined but partisanship has become *more* important to vote choice over time (Bartels 2000; Brewer 2005). There is academic disagreement over whether this is because the American public has polarized (Abramowitz 2010) or merely sorted (Fiorina and Abrams 2008; Fiorina, Abrams, and Pope 2006) but the result is the same: Americans are less likely to switch away from ‘their’ party than in the past. The effect of polarization on volatility might be expected to counter the effects of partisan dealignment, making voters less willing to switch between parties. For example, in Chapter 4 we showed that major party voters who saw greater difference between the Conservatives and Labour less more likely to switch their votes between elections. However, since the early 1990s, not only have British voters become less aligned to parties, they have also become less polarized (Adams, Green, and Milazzo 2012), making the potential impact of shocks all the more powerful. Should the British electorate become *more* polarized (as recent evidence indicates they might) then we might expect the effects of future shocks to be dampened.

A further lesson from the American experience of polarization is that the nature of political issues under contention is very important. In the US, partisan sorting has been shown to be driven by ‘culture wars’; issues such as race (Carmines and Stimson 1989), abortion (Adams 1997), gun control, and the environment (Lindaman and Haider-Markel 2002). These issues tend to be structured by authoritarianism (Hetherington and Weiler 2009), and as the salience of ‘culture wars’ issues has increased, American partisanship has in turn become increasingly structured by authoritarianism (Goren and Chapp 2017). Hetherington and Weiler (2009) argue that affective polarization has increased in the US because authoritarianism results in a fundamental clash of worldviews. People are now ‘divided over things that conjure more visceral reactions than economic issues (Hetherington and Weiler 2009, 11).

Until recently, Britain had largely escaped political conflict over the sorts of issues that have defined the American culture wars, but Brexit has highlighted similar conflicts. As we showed in Chapter 9, the cultural dimension is a key structuring factor in voters’ Brexit positions. We demonstrated the importance of Brexit for understanding voting in 2017, but what are the consequences for partisanship?

Figure 10.1 shows how the strength of Conservative Party identity among 2015 Conservative voters varied over the waves of the BES Internet Panel for those who voted Leave or Remain at the 2016 EU referendum. From early 2014 to the EU referendum in 2016, the strengths of Conservative Party identity among Remain and Leave voters moved in parallel (although Remainers started off with weaker Conservative Party identities). Following the EU referendum, however, we see a divergence. Among Leavers, Conservative identity strength increased. Among Remainers, it declined. In other words, the large-scale switching of



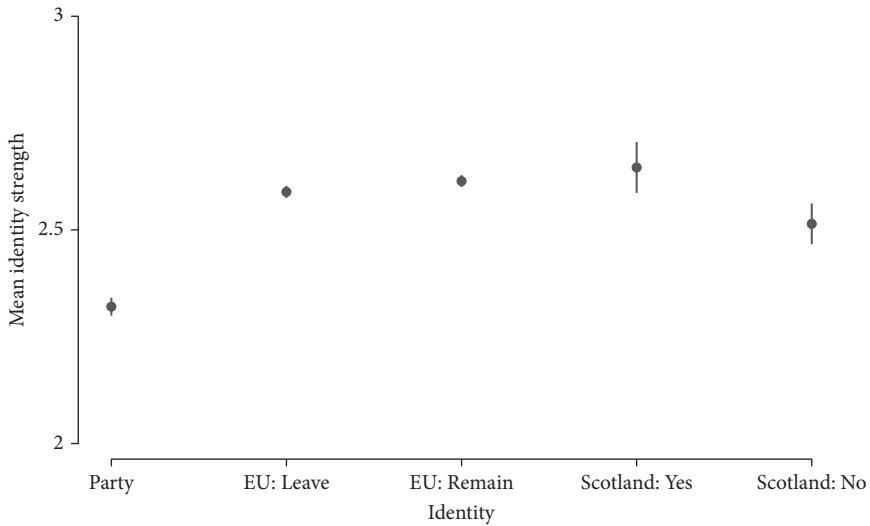


**Figure 10.1** Mean strength of Conservative Party identity among Leave- and Remain-voting 2015 Conservative voters, on a scale where 0 = no/other party id, 1 = not very strong Conservative id, 2 = fairly strong Conservative id, 3 = very strong Conservative id

pro-Brexit voters to the Conservatives was not simply an example of ‘short-term conversion’ (Butler and Stokes 1974) but also marked an underlying shift in the structure of partisan alignment.

Brexit might play a more direct role in influencing political identification in Britain by acting as an identity in its own right. Hobolt, Leeper, and Tilley (2018) demonstrate the degree to which people have come to identify with Remain and Leave as a social identity, akin to partisan identities. Indeed, BES data shows that people express a stronger identification on average with one of the referendum sides than they do with any political party, not just in the EU referendum but also the Scottish independence referendum.

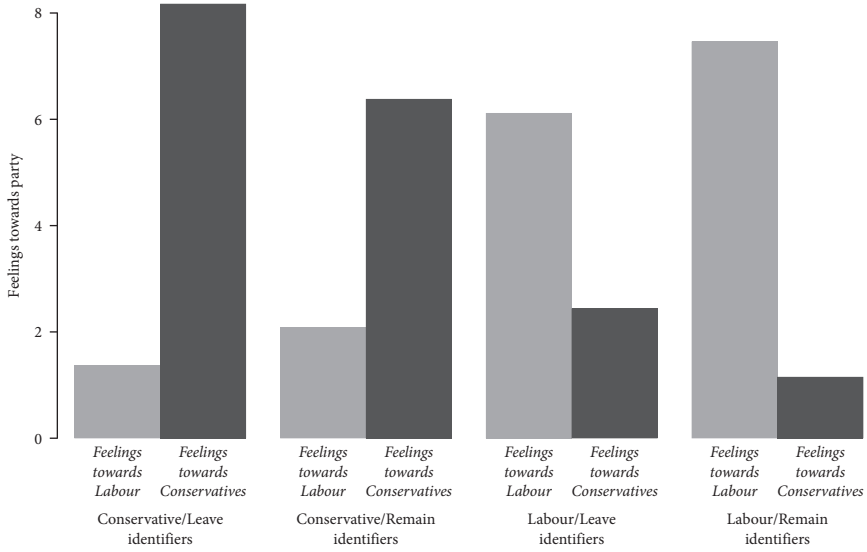
Figure 10.2 shows the strength of party identity captured through a battery of items designed to measure party identification as a social identity (Bankert, Huddy, and Rosema 2017), compared with equivalent identity scales for the EU and Scottish referendums (see appendix for details). In every case, voters report stronger identification with their side on the cross-cutting issue than they do with parties. Additionally, the proportion of people who report an identity on either side of the issue is higher for both referendums than for party identity. In other words, the decline of party identity may not necessarily reflect a decline in political identities more generally. Whether identification with the causes of leave or remain (or independence in Scotland) turns out to be sustained political *identities* remains to be seen.



**Figure 10.2** Strength of political identities measured using the seven-item social identity scales for party, EU referendum side, and Scottish referendum side

The American experience again provides some clues as to what the future effects of Brexit identities might look like. Mason (2015, 2016) argues that cross-cutting identities weaken the perceived distinctiveness of different groups and allow people to feel like they belong to a broader range of identities, undermining ‘the cognitive and motivational bases of in-group bias and negative emotion’ (Mason 2015, 131). Mason argues that racial, religious, cultural, and political identities have come into alignment in the US. As Americans have become increasingly socially sorted, affective polarization has followed. In Britain, as we demonstrated in Chapter 9, party choice has become more closely aligned with Brexit voting. The implications of that for polarization are explored in Figure 10.3. This shows the predicted scores (from a regression model, see Table A10.1 in the appendix) of how much respondents like the Conservative and Labour parties as a function of party strength and referendum identity immediately before the 2017 General Election.<sup>2</sup> The results show that when holding the strength of each identity constant, Conservative identifiers, who also identify as Leavers, feel more positively about the Conservatives and more negatively about Labour, compared to Conservatives who also identify as Remainers. Similarly, Labour identifiers who identify as Remainers feel more positively about Labour and less positively about the Conservatives than their Labour and Leave-identifying counterparts. This provides preliminary support for the expectation that any increasing alignment

<sup>2</sup> The strength of each identity is set to the overall mean strength of identity with each group (i.e. how strongly Conservatives identify as Conservative, how strongly Leavers identify as Leavers, etc.).



**Figure 10.3** Predicted feelings towards the Conservative and Labour parties for aligned and unaligned party and Brexit identities of equal strength (wave 11 of the BES Internet Panel)

of competing political identities has some potential to fuel affective polarization in Britain.

Perhaps the most powerful factor that may counteract this is the continuing importance of social class in British politics (Evans and Tilley 2017; Evans and Mellon 2016a) which cuts across the party–Brexit alignment. Even in 2017, when Brexit heavily influenced voting decisions, social class still proved to be an important predictor of vote, albeit slightly weaker than in 2015. Labour, under Corbyn’s leadership, pursued traditional left-wing policies which appealed to its traditional working-class base at the same time as its socially liberal policies increased its appeal among highly educated professionals. Cross-cutting political cleavages are likely to result in lower overall levels of affective polarization. How cultural and economic issues structure vote choice in the future—and influence political identities and affective polarization—will depend on both the nature of the parties’ economic appeals and how they navigate the process and outcome of Brexit.

It is important not to underestimate the potential for future shocks to disrupt the effects of the Brexit shock. We do not have to look far for an example of one shock disrupting the effect of another. In Chapter 8 we showed how Scottish independence supporters flocked to the SNP in 2015, only for Brexit to peel Leave-supporting Yes voters away in 2017. In Chapter 6 we showed how the Brexit shock interrupted the effect of the global financial crisis.

The very nature of shocks means that it is impossible to predict the form that any future shocks will take. From major institutional reforms such as an elected

House of Lords, a split in one (or both) of the major parties, to military conflict, economic crisis, or a major environmental catastrophe—the list of possible future shocks with the potential to disrupt British politics is endless. With hindsight, it has been possible to identify the concatenation of trends, decisions, and events that resulted in the shocks we have examined in this book. Future researchers will likewise be able to identify the portents of future shocks in our current politics. Undoubtedly, the seeds of future disruption have already been sown.

Our aim in this book is not to foretell future events, but to understand the impact of such events and to provide a new way of approaching the study of elections. We have set out an approach to the study of elections which emphasizes the interplay between the slowly evolving social and political context and the impact of electoral shocks. Just like complex systems in other domains, party systems are susceptible to change, depending on the level of inertia and volatility in the system and the exposure to external shocks (Prindle 2012). The long-term decline in partisan alignment in Britain and the rise of smaller parties have weakened the forces which have helped maintain the status quo and left the party system more volatile and more vulnerable to the impact of electoral shocks. To understand electoral outcomes, we need to consider not only the reaction of voters to shocks but the behaviour of political parties and other political actors. Electoral shocks present an opportunity (or a threat) to which politicians and parties must respond. How they do so shapes whether they are the winners or the losers of voter volatility.

The mechanisms by which shocks matter to electoral outcomes complement rather than compete with existing theories of voter behaviour. The mechanisms that we identified each draws directly on established theories of voter choice. First, to understand the impact of shocks to salience we rely on positional (spatial) and salience theories of voter behaviour. Second, to understand how shocks to competence affect vote choices we must draw on performance and valence theories. Third, to understand the impact of shocks that change the social and political image of parties, we draw on sociological, psychological, and spatial theories of voter behaviour. Thus, we do not advocate abandoning any of these long-established theories, but rather we suggest that there is no one-size-fits-all model that explains voter behaviour and electoral outcomes across different geographic and historical contexts. Different theories explain voter choices in different electoral circumstances. As those circumstances change as a result of electoral shocks, the relevance of one theory or another is also liable to change. What matters in one election or one country might not matter so much in another. Although we have presented evidence relating to the UK elections of 2015 and 2017, our approach is applicable across different contexts, even though the nature of electoral shocks and the underlying conditions of stability or volatility will vary.

