2

Volatility and Electoral Shocks

The period of British politics spanning the general elections of 2010 and 2017 was tumultuous, to say the least, and has been followed by an equally extraordinary period in British politics. The seven-year stretch between 2010 and 2017 saw five years of coalition government, three referendums, a general election in which minor parties achieved their highest ever vote share, and another that delivered the highest two-party vote share since 1970. In the space of two years, in 2015 and 2017, we witnessed first the heralding of the fragmentation of the British party system, and then the apparent rebirth of the two-party system. Figure 2.1 illustrates the dramatic change that took place between these two elections in terms of the total share of vote for the two largest parties. What seemed like an inexorable decline in the vote share of the two largest parties since 1945 was followed by a dramatic reversal in 2017. Likewise there was an abrupt halt to the decades-long trend towards a more fragmented party system, as shown in Figure 2.2. Having reached a high-point in 2015, the effective number of electoral parties (Laakso and Taagepera, 1979) dropped to levels not seen since the 1970s. Despite this pronounced shift, thanks to the nature of British electoral geography there was little corresponding change to the effective number of parliamentary parties.

   In this chapter we introduce the common factor that helps us make sense of these seemingly contradictory outcomes of very high party system fragmentation in 2015, and a very high two-party share in 2017. This common factor is the high level of electoral volatility—by which we mean the degree of change between elections, either in terms of the votes received by political parties or by the amount of switching by individual voters. We also reflect in this chapter on the key political developments that help us understand why some parties rather than others were the beneficiaries of this volatility between elections. In the next chapter we examine why individual-level volatility has increased. Subsequent chapters show how electoral shocks, acting in this volatile context, have provided the catalyst for rapid political change.
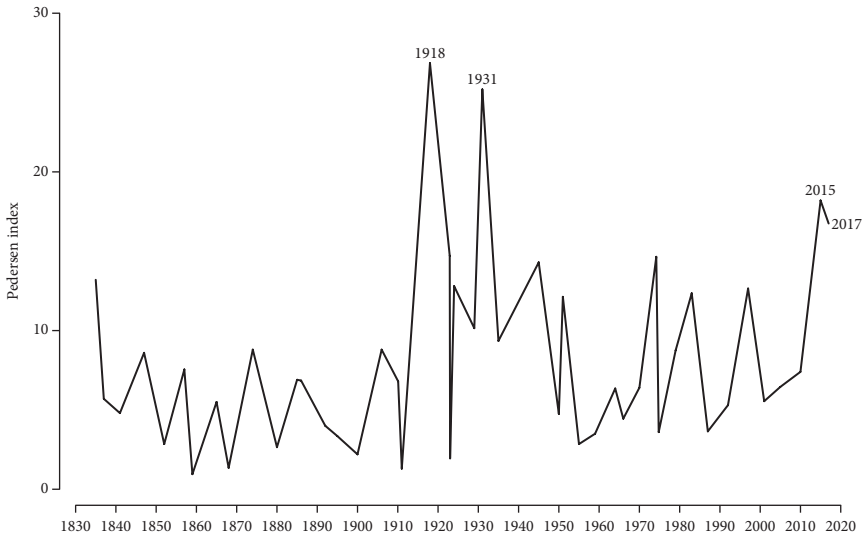
2.1 Aggregate-level volatility

When measured at the aggregate level, volatility is 'the net change within the electoral party system resulting from individual vote transfers' (Ascher and

Figure 2.1 Two-party share of the UK vote 1964–2017

Figure 2.2 Effective number of UK electoral and parliamentary parties 1945–2017

Figure 2.3 Pedersen Index of Aggregate Volatility 1835–2017

Tarrow 1975, 480). In other words, the system-level volatility is the aggregation of individual decisions.

Here we measure aggregate-level volatility by how much the national vote shares of parties have changed between two elections (Pedersen 1979).[1] Figure 2.3 shows over-time variation in aggregate volatility for British elections from 1835 to 2017. Taking this very long view of British elections allows us to place the 2015 and 2017 elections into context to see just how unusual they were. From the Liberal revival of 1974, the 1983 election which followed the Social Democratic Party (SDP) split, to Labour's landslides of 1945 and 1997, the twentieth century has seen many volatile elections. However, there have only been two UK general elections that were more volatile than 2015 and 2017, and both took place in very exceptional circumstances.

The first exceptionally volatile election, the 1918 General Election, followed the expansion of the franchise, giving women over the age of thirty the vote for the first time, and giving the vote to all men over the age of twenty-one. It came at the end of the First World War; a period of remarkable social and political change. The 1918 election, delayed because of the war, gave the coalition led by Lloyd George a landslide victory whilst the nascent Labour Party more than tripled its vote. The Liberals, who had not sided with Lloyd George, lost more than

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[1] Aggregate volatility is measured using the Pedersen index, which is the sum of differences between each party's aggregate vote shares in the two elections, divided by two. It would have a maximum value of 100 if every previous party received zero votes in the second election and a minimum of 0 if every party received exactly the same vote share as in the first election.

70 per cent of their vote and the Irish Parliamentary Party was almost wiped out by Sinn Fein.

The second exceptionally volatile election, in 1931, followed the Great Depression and a budget crisis which precipitated the collapse and resignation of the Labour government. A National Government was formed at the request of King George V and, following the removal of the Pound from the Gold Standard, won the election—primarily with Conservative support—in a landslide. The Labour Party split into two factions and the Liberals into three. Against these two elections of 1918 and 1931, the 2015 and 2017 general elections stand out as the next two most volatile elections at the aggregate level: more volatile than the landslide elections of 1945, 1979, and 1997; and more volatile than the February 1974 election that failed to deliver a majority government.

Aggregate-level volatility is an important indicator of the dramatic changes that took place in 2015 and 2017. However, the aggregate picture does not tell the whole story. Aggregate volatility only captures the top level changes in vote shares, meaning that it is possible for an election to appear stable, even if a large numbers of voters switch parties beneath the surface, providing those vote flows cancel out. To give a simple example, if voters were split fifty–fifty between two parties at one election and *everyone* swapped parties at the next election, we would want to classify this as extremely volatile voting behaviour. However, the aggregate volatility would be zero, implying a very stable election. High aggregate volatility indicates many voters switching parties, but low aggregate volatility does not necessarily mean the reverse. A complete picture of this period of British politics requires attention to both aggregate-level switching and the switching that takes place beneath the surface among individuals.

2.2 Individual-level volatility

We measure individual-level volatility by examining the same voters in pairs of elections using the British Election Study panel surveys[2] and reported vote choices at the time of each election.[3] Our measure of individual volatility is the

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[2] We also make use of British Household Panel Survey/Understanding Society (BHPS) data for available elections. The exact levels of switching differ slightly between sources, with the BHPS estimates consistently lower. There are a number of possible reasons for the gap. The BHPS tends to interview respondents considerably longer after the election than the BES. This may tend to lead respondents to forget behaviour that is out of line with their long-term partisan preferences (and therefore underestimate volatility). Alternatively, the BES may tend to retain more politically engaged respondents who may react to events more. Finally, the BHPS is a long-running survey, so the samples may skew older (we use unweighted estimates) and, as we will show in Chapter 3, older voters tend to switch at lower rates. Most importantly, however, both sources closely agree about the over-time trend in volatility.

[3] The data are derived from the British Election Study (and BHPS/Understanding Society) inter-election panels where the same group of voters are interviewed in two successive elections right after

proportion of voters who switch to a different party in the second election of each pair. Figure 2.4 plots this measure for every election since the 1960s, when the British Election Studies began with Butler and Stokes' (1969b) panel study of the 1964 and 1966 general elections.

While 12.5 per cent of Butler and Stokes' respondents (who voted in both 1964 and 1966) switched parties, this has ultimately turned out to be the lowest ever recorded level of switching. Individual volatility tells a different story of recent British electoral history to the spikey pattern of aggregate-level volatility we displayed in Figure 2.3. Rather than the pattern of peaks and troughs of volatility shown by the aggregate measure, the individual data shows the British voter becoming fairly steadily more volatile over time. The elections of 1966 and 2001 may look similar in terms of aggregate volatility, but Figure 2.4 shows that under the surface, voters were twice as likely to switch parties in 2001 as they were in 1966. Moreover, the 'landslide' election of 1997 does not look so different to the two elections either side of it. What really differentiates 1997 from 1992 and 2001 is not the number of voters switching parties, but the fact that much of the vote-switching was in one direction.

Using the measure of individual volatility, the 2015 election stands out as a clear high point: more than four in ten of those people who voted in both the 2010
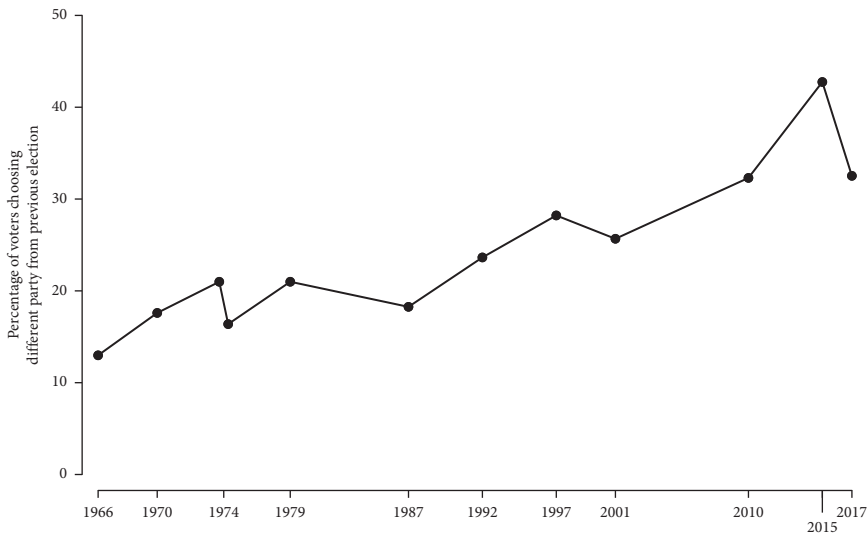
Figure 2.4 Individual-level voter volatility in Eleven pairs of elections between 1964 and 2017 in the British Election Study

each election, meaning we do not need to rely on respondents' recall of their previous vote choices, which previous research has shown are often unreliable (van Elsas, Miltenburg, and van der Meer 2016; Weir 1975).

and 2015 elections switched which party they voted for between the two elections. The 2017 election was slightly more stable, but only relative to the election of 2015. The level of switching between 2015 and 2017 still marks the second highest level of individual volatility in our data.

In order to understand this level of volatility in the 2015 and 2017 general elections, we revisit the political events of the period between 2010 and 2017 that contributed to these record levels of volatility and the resulting election outcomes.

2.3 Politics 2010–15

The 2010 General Election took place in the shadow of the Global Financial Crisis and the subsequent recession; events which had critically undermined Labour's reputation for sound economic management (Green 2010). The Conservatives also won over long-time Labour voters on the issue of immigration, which had risen in salience among the public (Evans and Chzhen 2013). Despite this, there were relatively low levels of aggregate volatility in 2010 (see Figure 2.3), with the Conservative Party failing to secure sufficient seats to form a government on its own. However, as Figure 2.4 shows, 2010 was a historically volatile election at the individual level, with large numbers of voters moving beneath an apparently tranquil surface. In 2010 these vote flows largely cancelled each other out, with voters moving in one direction being matched by others going in the opposite direction.

The degree of individual-level volatility in 2010 was a harbinger of the large changes to British politics that lay ahead. To give one example, the Liberal Democrat's vote share barely shifted between 2005 and 2010 (it increased by one percentage point). However, when we look at the individual-level BES panel data, we find that the Liberal Democrats lost 35 per cent of their 2005 voters between 2005 and 2010. It was only because they also recruited large numbers of voters in that period that their overall share was so stable. In fact, as we will see in Chapter 4, this is a fairly consistent pattern for the Liberal Democrats, who typically lose large proportions of their voters between elections and have to gain new voters to compensate.

The 2010 General Election also saw the continuation of a decade-long rise in voting for smaller parties. This was mainly reflected in the success of the Liberal Democrats, but was also evident in the rapidly increasing vote share of UKIP, the Greens (who also won their first seat), Plaid Cymru, and the SNP. UKIP achieved 3.1 per cent of the vote, which was their highest national vote share to that point. The 2010 General Election delivered the Liberal Democrats' highest ever vote share (23 per cent) and fifty-seven MPs, slightly short of the sixty-two Liberal Democrat MPs elected in 2005 (on 22.1 per cent share). By 2010, the combined Labour and Conservative share was just 65.1 per cent, whereas the Labour and

Conservative parties had consistently received a combined vote share of around 80 per cent in the 1960s (see Figure 2.1).

As a result of the narrow Conservative victory in 2010 and the Liberal Democrats' strong performance, British voters experienced Britain's first peace-time coalition government since 1922. After a short period of negotiation, the Liberal Democrats formed a coalition with the Conservatives, to the consternation of many of their voters, as we discuss in Chapter 7. The results did not in fact quite rule out a Labour-led coalition, but it would have required involving at least three parties to achieve a majority of even one seat.[4] Moreover, the Liberal Democrats were reluctant to be seen to be propping up an unpopular Labour government.

The hung Parliament and coalition government that ensued was only one of a series of shocks that contributed to an upturn in the fortunes of smaller parties in 2015. Eleven years previously, the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly had resulted in a substantial change in the UK's constitutional arrangements. Over the ensuing decade, the devolved governments gained further powers, increasing the importance of the devolved legislatures and the political significance of Scottish and Welsh elections. While the majoritarian Westminster system had just dealt a coalition at the 2010 General Election, a year later, in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary elections, the mixed-member proportional system delivered a single-party majority government. The SNP won a landslide victory on a platform that included a promise to call a referendum on Scottish independence. The independence referendum that the SNP had promised was held in Scotland on 18 September 2014. Had the 'Yes' independence campaign won, the vote would have led to the break-up of the United Kingdom. The result was a 55 per cent vote in favour of the status quo, with a reported 85 per cent of registered voters turning out to vote.[5] Turnout for the Scottish independence referendum was the highest recorded turnout for an election or referendum in the UK since the introduction of universal suffrage, considerably higher than the 63.8 per cent turnout in Scotland in the 2010 General Election. This very high turnout is indicative of the importance Scottish voters on both sides had placed on this outcome. The referendum divided Scottish public opinion in visceral and

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[4] Assuming Sinn Fein abstained, 323 seats were required for a majority in Parliament. Labour + Liberal Democrats + DUP = 323 seats. Alternatively (given the DUP's poor ideological fit for Labour and the Liberal Democrats), they could reach 324 seats with Labour + Liberal Democrats + SNP + Plaid Cymru. Various other arrangements were possible, but all involved reaching a tiny majority with an increasingly large number of parties. Politicians and observers generally considered these arrangements unlikely to be workable, given the large number of interests that would need to be reconciled and the small working majority that would result (Murray 2010; BBC News 2010).

[5] Figure for turnout as a percentage of registered voters are always underestimates in the UK, as they do not account for duplicate entries which inflate the denominator (Mellon et al. 2018b). The actual turnout in the Scottish referendum was therefore almost certainly considerably higher as a percentage of registered voters.

highly significant ways. These divisions would shortly reshape Scottish electoral politics, as we discuss in Chapter 8.

Parties other than the two largest in Westminster were also gaining support on specific issues including the environment, immigration, and Europe. Having previously found success in the 2004 and 2009 European Parliament Elections, where they had won around 16 per cent of the vote on both occasions, UKIP began to enjoy further electoral success with their opposition to immigration and the EU. First, they made significant inroads in the 2013 English and Welsh Local Elections, winning 147 local councillors (up from eight). Then, spectacularly, UKIP won 26.6 per cent share of the vote in the European Parliament election in June 2014, a higher vote share than either Labour or the Conservatives. UKIP also gained representation in the Westminster Parliament when the Conservative MP, Douglas Carswell, defected to UKIP from the Conservatives in 2014.

2.4 The 2015 General Election

The 2015 General Election campaign took place in the context of a recovering economy after years of sluggish performance and austerity policies under the Conservative-led coalition. The polls suggested that the most likely outcome was another hung Parliament with Labour as the largest party, but the SNP was in the ascendance in Scotland in the aftermath of the independence referendum in 2014, and also saw a rapid rise in the polls in Scotland throughout the campaign. The combination of these factors led the Conservatives to focus on two messages: Labour could still not be trusted on the economy, and if Ed Miliband became prime minister, any Labour coalition would be influenced by the SNP. The Conservatives promised 'competence with the Conservatives or chaos with Labour'. This framing was largely successful in setting the campaign agenda. Labour appeared unsure whether to apologize for, or defend, its former record in office, struggling to identify an effective counter-message. As we will show in Chapter 6, economic competence played a key role in the 2015 General Election. However, our analysis suggests little evidence that the threat of the SNP won the Conservatives votes (Jane Green and Prosser 2016).

The expectation that there would be a hung Parliament with Labour ahead was confounded, with observers and parties misled by inaccurate polls that substantially understated the Conservatives' lead (Mellon and Prosser 2017; Sturgis et al. 2018). In the end, the Conservatives increased their vote share by a tiny 0.8 percentage points but gained twenty-four MPs, and could therefore govern with an unanticipated Conservative majority (see Table 2.1). One implication of this surprise victory was that the Conservatives had to deliver on their election pledge to hold a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union.

As shown in our earlier plot of aggregate volatility in Figure 2.3, the 2015 General Election was the third most volatile election since 1835. At the individual

level, volatility was immense by relative standards, with 43 per cent of BES panel respondents reporting a different vote choice in 2015 to the one they reported in 2010. As Figure 2.4 showed, this level of switching was the highest seen across any pair of elections since the BES began in 1964. Unlike 2010, when individual switching mostly cancelled out, in 2015 the net effect of individual-level switching was large-scale changes in vote shares. In particular, there was a much larger increase in voting for minor parties, leading many commentators to announce the fragmentation of British politics. Table 2.1 displays the substantial increase in vote shares for UKIP, the SNP, and the Greens.

Were it not for the collapse in support of the Liberal Democrats in 2015, the combined vote share for the two largest parties might have been far lower. As it was, the vote share for the two largest parties increased very marginally, as shown earlier in Figure 2.1, whilst the vote choices split much more broadly across the smaller political parties, leading to a much more fragmented party system.

The flow of the vote between the 2010 and 2015 elections is illustrated in Figure 2.5. The size of each bar at either end of the ribbons representing the vote flow shows the total share of the vote each party received at the election (ordered from most votes at the top, to least at the bottom). The size of each ribbon represents the proportion of all 2010 and 2015 voters who voted for each pair of parties in 2010 and 2015. One of the most dramatic ways in which the large-scale switching manifested in 2015 was the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote, as discussed. The Liberal Democrat vote share, which was 23.6 per cent in 2010, plummeted to 8.1 per cent in 2015, with the party losing a total of forty-nine of its fifty-seven MPs. The Liberal Democrats retained only 25 per cent of their 2010 supporters, compared to the equivalent figure of 65 per cent retained voters in 2010.[6] While the opinion polls had been very poor for the Liberal Democrats since entering the coalition in 2010, many MPs believed that a personal vote

Table 2.1 Results of the 2015 General Election. Figures shown are calculated for Great Britain (i.e. excluding Northern Ireland)

	% votes	Change in % votes	Total seats	Change in seats
Conservative	37.7	0.8	330	24
Labour	31.2	1.5	232	−26
UKIP	12.9	9.7	1	1
Liberal Democrat	8.1	−15.5	8	−49
SNP	4.9	3.2	56	50
Green	3.8	2.9	1	0
Plaid Cymru	0.6	0	3	0

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[6] While the Liberal Democrats performed historically badly at recruiting new voters in 2015, they did gain a small percentage of new recruits (~2 per cent of voters).

would be enough for them to hold on to their seats. The modest incumbency advantage they actually enjoyed did not save many of them (Curtice, Fisher, and Ford 2016). The Liberal Democrats' greatest losses in 2015 were to Labour, but they also leaked a large number of voters to the Conservatives, the Greens, and even UKIP. While the Conservatives gained fewer Liberal Democrat deserters than Labour, those they did gain were disproportionately in marginal seats which they were consequently more likely to narrowly win.

Figure 2.5 also shows substantial flows of voters moving from the Conservatives to UKIP. In 2015, UKIP's vote share quadrupled to 12.9 per cent, representing almost 4 million votes. UKIP won votes most notably from the Conservatives, but also from Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the British National Party (BNP). Importantly, many of the Conservative to UKIP switchers had previously defected to the Conservatives from Labour in 2010 (Evans and Mellon 2016b). UKIP also captured nearly two-thirds (63 per cent) of the BNP's 2010 voters (the BNP fell from half a million votes to fewer than two thousand between 2010 and 2015). While the electoral system deprived UKIP of equivalent representation in terms of parliamentary seats (retaining only the one MP who had previously defected from the Conservatives), they won their highest ever national share of the vote in 2015.

The Green Party won 3.8 per cent of the vote, increasing its national vote share from 1 per cent in 2010 and achieving the highest ever popular vote share for the Green Party in a British general election, retaining its one parliamentary seat (Brighton Pavilion).
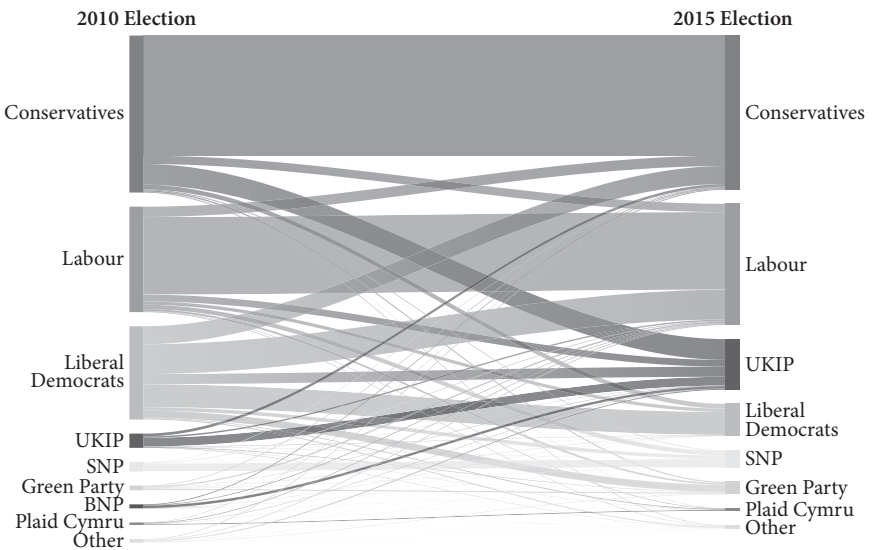

Figure 2.5 Vote flows between 2010 and 2015

The 2015 General Election was also remarkable for the result in Scotland (see Chapter 8). As shown in Table 2.1, the SNP almost trebled its GB vote share from 1.7 per cent in 2010 to 4.9 per cent. This equated to a huge increase of 30 percentage points in Scotland and a vote share of 50 per cent of Scottish voters; the highest share of the vote for any party in Scotland since 1931 when the Conservatives won 54.3 per cent of the vote. The SNP deprived Labour of forty of its former Scottish seats in 2015, the Liberal Democrats of all but one of theirs, and overturned more than fifty years of Labour dominance in general elections north of the border. It was Labour's lowest Scottish vote share since 1918.

Not only was the 2015 General Election volatile in electoral terms, it also had dramatic political consequences. For Labour, the election triggered a leadership election under new rules proposed by Ed Miliband, giving members and supporters a greater say. The outcome was the election of Jeremy Corbyn as Labour leader, a backbench MP for thirty-two years, one of the party's most rebellious MPs, a noted campaigner for nuclear disarmament, and a leader labelled the most left-wing since Michael Foot (Pickard and Parker 2017). The surprise outcome gave further rise to the conclusion that the mainstream political establishment was under challenge. Labour now had a leader that two-thirds of its MPs did not support and voters saw the party as increasingly divided.[7] The other hugely significant outcome was that the Conservatives, now forming a majority government against former expectations, committed to deliver on their manifesto pledge to hold the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union.

2.5 The 2016 EU referendum

The Conservative EU referendum manifesto pledge was part of the Conservatives' attempts to stem the flow of votes to UKIP and manage decades of bitter internal Conservative parliamentary divisions over the question of Europe. However, rather than paper over the cracks in the Conservative Party, the EU referendum heightened them; first in the campaign and then, of course, in the resulting period of Brexit negotiations. High-profile Tories such as Boris Johnson and Michael Gove led the Leave campaign in 2016, while David Cameron and George Osborne campaigned for the Remain side.

The internal divisions were not limited to the Conservative Party. Despite strong support for Remain among Labour MPs and Labour voters, Jeremy Corbyn ran a low-key referendum campaign that many commentators believed reflected his long-standing scepticism about the EU. Labour's ambiguity on Brexit also

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[7] Twenty-seven per cent of BES panel respondents said that the Labour Party was 'very divided' or 'fairly divided' in the pre-election wave in April 2015, but 45 per cent said the same by April 2016 (denominator includes don't knows).

served the strategic purpose of helping to avoid Labour losses in heartland seats, many of which went on to strongly vote for Leave. These splits left the Remain campaign in the odd situation of having one of its most prominent figures on paper offering only lukewarm support for EU membership.

The British public had never been strongly supportive of EU membership, even though 67.2 per cent of Britons in 1975 voted in the last EU referendum to stay in the European Community (Evans and Menon 2017). Nor had they developed a strong sense of European identity (Curtice 2016). The campaign therefore centred on practical questions of the costs and benefits of EU membership. On the Leave side this focused on the issues of immigration from the EU, and sovereignty; 'taking back control'. The Remain side focused on the economic benefits of EU membership and the costs of leaving the EU. These issues were also reflected in the reasons BES panel respondents gave for their vote at the time (Prosser, Mellon, and Green 2016).

The referendum took place on 23 June 2016 with the dramatic—and for many, surprise—result that Britain voted 51.9 per cent to 48.1 per cent to leave the EU. The vote was an endorsement of the most significant constitutional, economic, policy, and political change of direction in decades. It was another sign of the rejection of the status quo and of mainstream politics and politicians, especially as the vast majority of the political establishment had campaigned for Remain. The referendum also exposed deep attitudinal and geographic divisions that were emerging in the UK (Jennings and Stoker 2017).

Other than UKIP, none of the parties' 2015 voters overwhelmingly supported one side or the other in the referendum. The Conservatives' 2015 voters leaned 60 per cent towards Leave, while Labour's leaned 62 per cent towards Remain. The SNP faced a similar breakdown to Labour, with 67 per cent of their 2015 supporters backing Remain. The Liberal Democrats' 2015 voters were the most Remain leaning, but even among these, 27 per cent voted Leave. The EU referendum cut across the existing political divides in a way that would have substantial consequences for electoral politics (see Chapter 9).

The outcome of the referendum had immediate ramifications for the political parties. David Cameron resigned the morning after. Following a relatively short leadership contest, Theresa May was elected Conservative leader. Many Labour MPs felt let down by Jeremy Corbyn's weak support for the Remain campaign and triggered a new leadership election, with two-thirds of the Labour Shadow Cabinet resigning. This attempt to replace Corbyn ultimately backfired. In the ensuing leadership election, Corbyn expanded his majority among the Labour membership. Corbyn's second leadership win quelled the brewing civil war within the parliamentary Labour Party, at least temporarily. UKIP, meanwhile, was in internal disarray. Nigel Farage resigned immediately after the referendum, declaring that he had achieved his political goal. He was succeeded for eighteen days by Diane James (who then resigned) and subsequently by Paul

Nuttall. A series of internal disputes led to funders withdrawing, a fist fight between two UKIP MEPs, and UKIP's only MP leaving the party to sit as an independent MP.

The immediate aftermath of the EU referendum was a turbulent period in Britain's political history, during which the government needed to conduct crucial and complex negotiations for Britain's exit from the EU, and pass important legislation and key parliamentary votes. While the 2015 General Election had delivered a majority Conservative government, the result was a slender working majority of only seventeen MPs. After the EU referendum, however, the tide looked like to be turning in the Conservative's favour. A week before the election was called, one poll gave the Conservatives a twenty-one point lead over Labour (YouGov 2017). On 18 April 2017, with Labour and UKIP both internally divided and crashing in the polls, and the Conservative Party with a large lead, Theresa May called a snap general election.

2.6 The 2017 General Election

The 2017 General Election was almost universally expected to increase the Conservatives' majority, perhaps with a landslide. However, instead of increasing the Conservative majority, the result was a huge blow to May's leadership. The Conservatives increased their share of the vote, but they lost thirteen seats and with them, their parliamentary majority. A subsequent 'confidence and supply' deal was forged with the Northern Irish Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). At a time when the Irish border would be paramount in Brexit negotiations, the Conservatives relied on the votes of the Leave-supporting DUP.

The election had been billed as the Brexit election, but the campaign failed to focus very much on Brexit as an issue (Prosser 2018). Instead, the public debate focused on controversial Conservative manifesto promises on social care and fox-hunting, Theresa May's controversial policy U-turn on social care, and two terrorist attacks that took place during the campaign. Theresa May appeared as an ineffective campaigner as she repeated her campaign slogans with lacklustre performances and avoided taking part in a televized head-to-head debate with Jeremy Corbyn. By contrast, Jeremy Corbyn enjoyed a highly successful campaign and the two leaders' ratings had converged by election day. The campaign confounded expectations that short periods of campaign activity are rarely decisive for the outcome of the election. The 2017 General Election campaign was a highly influential campaign in which the main beneficiary of vote-switching was Labour (Mellon et al. 2018a). Once again, the outcome of the vote confounded the expectations of many observers. Corbyn, who many had written off as incapable of improving Labour's electoral fortunes, in fact led the party to an increase in their vote share of 9.8 percentage points (see Table 2.2), reaching

Table 2.2 Results of the 2017 General Election. Figures shown
are calculated for Great Britain (i.e. excluding Northern Ireland)

	% votes	Change in % votes	Total seats	Change in seats
Conservative	43.4	5.8	317	−13
Labour	41	9.8	262	30
Liberal Democrat	7.6	−0.5	12	4
SNP	3.1	−1.7	35	−21
UKIP	1.9	11	0	−1
Green	1.7	−2.2	1	0
Plaid Cymru	0.5	−0.1	4	1

a level for Labour not seen since 2001. Labour enjoyed success in parts of the country that had not voted Labour in such numbers since Blair's historic victory in 1997. The Conservatives increased their vote by 5.8 percentage points to 43.4 per cent. Together, the two largest parties scooped up almost 85 per cent of the vote, but the large increase in Labour support cost the Conservatives their majority, turning the expected easy election victory into something that was widely perceived to be a disaster for Theresa May. Its consequences would overshadow the subsequent Brexit negotiations and weaken Theresa May's authority among her MPs in Parliament.

At the aggregate level, 2017 was nearly as volatile as 2015, making it the fourth most volatile election in British history (Figure 2.3). Nowhere was this aggregate volatility clearer than in the dramatic change in the two-party share of the vote (see Figure 2.1). The steady and significant decline of the two-party vote over many consecutive elections, which had culminated in the largest share for parties other than Labour, the Conservatives, and Liberal Democrats in 2015, was dramatically reversed only two years later. Because both major parties gained substantial numbers of votes at the same time, neither reaped a huge electoral reward in terms of seats.

The rapid change in the aggregate vote shares between 2015 and 2017 was reflected in large vote flows at the individual level. In total, 33 per cent of BES respondents reported a different vote choice in 2017 to the one they reported in 2015. This individual-level switching was lower than in 2015, but still somewhat higher than 2010, making it the second highest on record. Although the period between 2015 and 2017 was dramatic, including as it did the EU referendum and Britain's vote to leave the EU as a result, it was still only a two-year period in which we would normally expect overall switching to be lower than in a longer five-year election cycle when voters have more time to be persuaded to switch votes between parties. Given this, we can see 2017 as a highly volatile election, not least because of the dramatic change at the aggregate level.
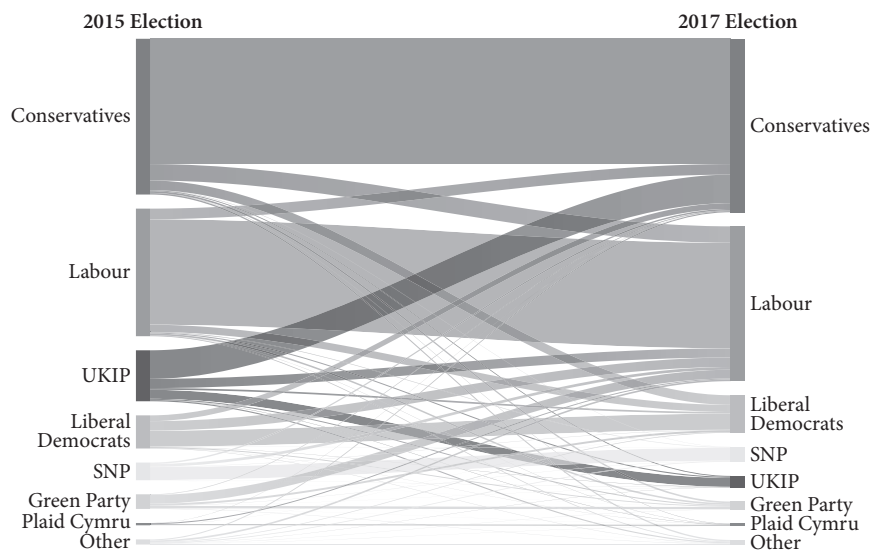
Figure 2.6 Vote flows between 2015 and 2017

Furthermore, the cumulative effects of individual-level volatility meant that of those that voted in 2010, 2015, and 2017, only 51 per cent voted for the same party in all three elections.

Figure 2.6 shows the flow of votes between the parties in the two-year period between 2015 and 2017.

In addition to the aggregate-level and individual-level amounts of volatility, the 2017 General Election also witnessed the highest levels of an unusual *form* of volatility in British politics: switching between Labour and the Conservatives. The usual view of British voters sees them as 'bounded partisans' who switch within party groups, but consistently reject one of the major parties (Zuckerman, Dasovic, and Fitzgerald 2007). In 2017, as Figure 2.7 shows, a more substantial proportion of Labour and Conservative voters switched to the other major party than in any previous election we can compare. This direct swapping between the major parties contributed to some surprising changes in the geographic distribution of the Labour and Conservative vote, resulting—for example—in Labour taking the highly educated Conservative strongholds of Canterbury and Battersea, and the Conservatives wresting working-class constituencies such as Mansfield and Middlesbrough South from Labour.

While Labour and the Conservatives gained large numbers of voters, including from each other, the Liberal Democrats failed to improve on their disappointing 2015 performance. As might now be apparent, this apparent aggregate stability hid substantial individual-level volatility: 51 per cent of 2015 Liberal Democrat voters defected to another party choice in 2017. The Liberal Democrats made up
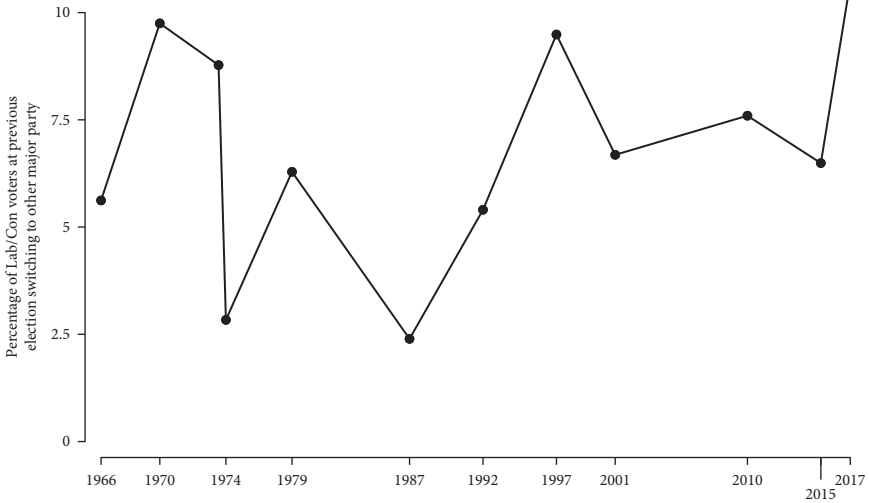
Figure 2.7 Combined switching from Labour to the Conservatives and from the Conservatives to Labour between one election and the next as a percentage of Labour and Conservative voters at the previous election

the difference by recruiting substantial numbers of 2015 Labour and Conservative voters. This individual-level volatility was also reflected in seats. While the Liberal Democrats ended the election with twelve seats—four more than in 2015—they won eight new seats in comparison to 2015 but also lost five (including the Richmond Park constituency they had won in a by-election the previous year).

Labour and the Conservatives also gained votes from the smaller parties. Most dramatically, UKIP's support fell from their 12.9 per cent high in 2015 to only 1.9 per cent in 2017. The earlier 2017 local elections had wiped out all of UKIP's local councillors, and the 2017 General Election, in which they fielded less than 400 candidates, largely eliminated their electoral base. The Conservatives were the major beneficiaries of this collapse, securing 56 per cent of all 2015 UKIP voters, according to our BES panel data. The Conservatives also gained votes from Leave-voting 2015 Liberal Democrat, Labour, and SNP supporters. Labour's success came from sweeping up huge proportions of 2015 Green and Liberal Democrat voters, as well as a modest portion of UKIP voters (Mellon et al. 2018a).

Labour to Conservative switching was especially strong in Scotland, where the Conservatives campaigned as the party of leaving the EU and keeping Scotland part of the UK. Their appeal to Unionist voters helped them gain 22 per cent of 2015 Scottish Labour voters along with 25 per cent of 2015 Scottish Liberal Democrats. Their appeal to Leave voters, meanwhile, meant that they even succeeded in attracting 8 per cent of 2015 SNP voters. The SNP's vote share fell

from 50 per cent in 2015 to 36.9 per cent in 2017, the largest direct beneficiary being Labour, although these gains were mostly cancelled out by Labour's other losses. The net result of these shifts was a twenty-one seat loss for the SNP, with corresponding gains for Labour, the Liberal Democrats and, most notably, the Conservatives, who gained 28.6 per cent of all Scottish votes and twelve seats (see Chapter 8).

2.7 Conclusions

The General Elections of 2015 and 2017 marked a historically high level of volatility, both at the aggregate level and also at the level of the individual voter. In this chapter we described how this increased volatility is part of a long-term trend in British politics, but one which accelerated markedly after 2010. At the aggregate level, 2015 and 2017 were the two most volatile elections since 1931. At the individual level, they were the two most volatile elections for which we have data to measure. Unlike with aggregate volatility, which has changed erratically over time, we showed that individual-level volatility has been steadily and significantly increasing since 1964. The changes seen at the 2015 and 2017 elections were not the sudden, out-of-the-blue shifts that the aggregate results might suggest. They were the culmination of a fifty-year increase in vote-switching in British elections. The 2015 and 2017 elections were important—not only because of how much switching there was—but also the directions of that switching. Unlike many elections when vote flows favouring one party are compensated by counter-flows favouring another, voters in 2015 and 2017 moved systematically, first away from, and then towards the two major parties. The 2017 election saw record numbers of voters moving between the two largest parties.

The 2017 General Election is the endpoint of our analysis in this particular book, but it was only the beginning of another turbulent period of British politics. The period between 2010 and 2017 was extraordinary in many ways, as we highlighted in this chapter. The last few years have not just *felt* like a more tumultuous period in British politics than usual; this really *has* been an exceptionally volatile period in British political history.

Judged by our metrics, the elections of 2015 and 2017 are historically volatile. Both elections were remarkable in different ways, and each raises important questions about the instability in the British party system. They represent an intriguing puzzle: what can both account for dramatic gains for minor parties and nationalists in one election, and also the collapse of Britain's third party, but also account for the highest two-party vote share in almost forty years? What were the common factors and themes that led voters to reject the mainstream parties in 2015, only to subsequently be willing to vote for them again in large numbers only

two years later? In short, we need to address the following question: what explains this instability in the British party system and in the British electorate? To answer that we need to pay attention to both the long-term trends that produced volatility in the system, and the electoral shocks that were able to have such a large impact in that volatile environment.