'Get Brexit Done': The New Political Divides of England and Wales at the 2019 Election

LUKE COOPER AND CHRISTABEL COOPER

Abstract

This article analyses the successful Conservative election campaign of 2019 and how it took advantage of a fractured political and economic landscape. It reviews the unique circumstances around the 2019 election and the 'surprising death' of a no-deal Brexit. We then analyse the divergent political communication strategies in the 2017 and 2019 Conservative campaigns showing how the latter was much more coherent and politically unorthodox. Drawing on socioeconomic, demographic and British Election Study data, we argue that Boris Johnson's messaging was carefully tailored towards the demands of voters in the 'red wall' seats. Conservative success was built around an appeal to voters in these economically depressed 'geographies of discontent'. But while tremendously successful, the coalition this created is potentially fragile. An unconventional, 'leftish' Conservative campaign built a new, diverse bloc of voters. It includes a number of left-wingers expecting change alongside traditional Conservative supporters, and will be hard to keep together given the economic turbulence ahead.

Keywords: Conservative, Labour, politics, general election 2019, British Election Study, geographies of discontent

Introduction

BRITAIN'S 2019 general election broke the war of attrition that had existed between the executive and opposition parties since the election two years previously. In a country highly polarised by the Brexit debate, with a Parliament that had been unable to resolve the issue decisively in either direction, the Conservative Party skilfully took advantage of public weariness. Boris Johnson's simple message, 'Get Brexit Done', came to encapsulate the election itself. In the Lord Ashcroft election day poll 72 per cent of Conservative Party voters listed 'getting Brexit done' in the top three reasons for why they backed the party.[1] Public fatigue with Brexit was, of course, assisted by Brexiters in the parliamentary Conservative Party voting against Theresa May's Brexit deal on three separate occasions in 2019 (15 January, 12 March and 29 March). Nonetheless, this group of pro-Brexit Conservative MPs made a series of high-risk moves that ultimately paid off. Firstly, with Johnson installed as leader they

re-orientated the Conservative Party towards a harder form of Brexit in exchange for accepting the special status for Northern Ireland, disregarding opposition from the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in spite of the confidence and supply arrangement their party had previously agreed. Furthermore, under Johnson, they also carried through a purge of MPs, achieving a Conservative Party that was much more closely aligned with pro-Brexit populism. This was carried through under the guise of the prorogation crisis, which was a largely manufactured showdown between the government and the British courts. Secondly, they gave greater emphasis to the idea of a 'no-deal' exit and reframed the ensuing parliamentary opposition to it as a resistance to Brexit *tout court*. Under Johnson's leadership they were able to turn a crisis manufactured by their own gesture towards a supposed *no-deal* exit into support for their final Brexit *deal* with the EU.

Theresa May's EU deal became deeply unpopular with Brexit voters and Conservative

politicians in 2019. However, during the 2017 general election campaign she had actually anticipated the opposition that would later face her. The description she offered of the parliamentary opposition to Brexit was, at the time, largely a hypothetical possibility, rather than a tangible reality. However, it had significant parallels with how Johnson would frame the 2019 election. When May announced her intention to seek a general election in April 2017 she justified it on the grounds of parliamentary opposition to Brexit. Anticipating the 'people versus Parliament' election Johnson would push for in the autumn of 2019, May argued that 'the country is coming together but Westminster is not'. 'Our opponents believe because the government's majority is so small our resolve will weaken and we will change course', but 'they underestimate our determination to *get the job done'*, she insisted with words closely resembling Johnson's 2019 slogan.[2] Both May and Johnson sought to use the Brexit cleavage in British politics to create a much wider Conservative electoral coalition. They were actually *both* successful. For while May failed to deliver the landslide she hoped for, it created the basis for Johnson's success.

Although May's campaign is inevitably recalled negatively, given the loss of the Conservatives' parliamentary majority, the number of votes she won (13,636,684) was higher than the number Blair received in 1997 (13,518,167) and not far short of John Major's postwar record in 1992 (14,093,007). While Johnson did improve further on May's number of votes (13,966,451), more significant in Britain's first past the post electoral system is the geographical distribution of the votes across constituencies and direct switchers from Labour. Johnson lost 7 per cent of Conservative 2017 voters to the Liberal Democrats and 4 per cent to Labour. But he crucially made up for this with 11 per cent of Labour 2017 voters switching directly to the Tories, concentrated in leave-voting seats previously held by Labour, some with large majorities.[3] The geographical location of these voters, combined with Labour's further loss of voters to the Liberal Democrats and other parties, allowed Johnson to break the so-called 'red wall'. The new electoral coalition that the Conservatives built is impossible to disaggregate from the Brexit vote and the socioeconomic and cultural factors underlying it. Consequently, the issue of analysing and explaining the new Conservative electoral coalition strongly overlaps with the UK-wide referendum decision to leave the EU.

This article investigates the new political divides of England and Wales which were evident in the 2019 general election. We argue that both local socioeconomic geography and political values played a role in the Conservative victory. We uncover clear differences between local socioeconomic conditions in seats the Conservatives won in 2017 and 2019 and their traditionally held seats. These findings support the claim that towns and small cities with low levels of economic dynamism have been an important factor in driving support for Brexit and the 2019 Conservative election victory. However, focussing too extensively on these divergences can be misleading. Small groups of potential swing voters, concentrated in key constituencies, play a fundamental role in the first past the post electoral system. Importantly, the Conservative campaign message was tailored towards winning the support of a relatively small number of Labour voters prepared to switch. The 'Get Brexit Done' slogan appealed to the partisan interests of these voters in a heavily polarised electoral climate, which had previously seen significant levels of support for a no-deal exit.

The research and analysis presented here consciously focusses on England and Wales. The political divides in Scotland are highly significant for British politics, but also distinctive to those found south of the border. They require special, focussed investigation, which is beyond the scope of this article.

Background to the 2019 general election, the strange death of 'no deal'

Johnson took over the Conservative Party following the failure of May to pass her deal through Parliament and in the context of a surge in support for the Brexit Party. His election as leader was always very likely given the strongly eurosceptic nature of the grassroots membership and his position as

the highest profile supporter of leave. [4] This was a political conjuncture that appeared to show there was no practical form of Brexit that would satisfy the supporters of Brexit, either in Parliament or in the electorate. Support for a no-deal exit from the EU was remarkably high amongst Conservative members and voters. The ESRC Party Members Project produced polling of Conservative Party members vis-à-vis voters in January 2019. We reproduce this polling in Table 1 to illustrate the political challenge that May and Johnson faced.

Drawing on this data we can outline three heuristic groups that Johnson successfully consolidated in his 2019 coalition. First, the *Brexit hardliners*: this group supported 'no deal' and wanted the sharpest possible break with the EU. In January 2019, they were around 25 per cent of the public but a striking 57 per cent of Conservative Party members. Second, the *Brexit compromisers*: this group was willing to support May's deal and, we can reasonably infer, most deals with the EU. They were 13 per cent of the public and 23 per cent of Conservative Party members. Third, out of the remain supporters (42 per cent of voters and 23 per cent of Conservative voters) Johnson had to carve a further group, *remain compromisers*, comprising voters who were prepared to accept his Brexit. Johnson employed a high-risk strategy to balance these groups' demands, which paid off. He appealed to the Brexit hardliners both through the course of the leadership campaign and upon becoming PM. To the surprise of many he carried through on his threat to prorogue Parliament to avoid parliamentary scrutiny, leading to a

conflict between the government and the courts.

This had two important effects. First, this highly performative gesture and populist language shored up Johnson's support amongst Brexit hardliners without ever taking the country close to an actual no-deal exit. This was followed up by a purge of twenty-one Conservative MPs who voted with the opposition to stop no deal, leading to the loss of Johnson's parliamentary majority. Crucially, Johnson did not need to carry through a no-deal exit to satisfy the hardliners: he simply needed to appear to push for one. Secondly, these actions convinced opposition parties that Johnson was actually serious about a no-deal exit. On 4 September 2019, and again two days later, they decided to oppose an early election until such time as an extension had been secured with the EU. If they had provided the parliamentary majority necessary for it, Johnson would have been forced to campaign electorally on the basis of a no-deal exit. While John Curtice noted in early September 2019 that polls at that date put support for no deal at around 38 per cent, the opposition to it was still 44 per cent. [5] This made a 'no-deal election' a major political risk.

Once Johnson secured an agreement in October 2019 the dynamic changed. Pushing ahead with a deal the DUP opposed was a high stakes gamble, and Johnson rode his luck. But his core calculation that he had sufficient standing amongst Brexit supporters to popularise his deal proved correct. This changed the subsequent election from a 'no deal' to a 'deliver the deal' one. Indeed, it is revealing that 'no deal' disappeared from post-election polling questions and subsequent analyses. There is not, for example, a single reference to it in the thirty-six page data-based report on Labour's defeat put together by Michael Ashcroft, whereas there are fifty-nine references to Brexit and four to 'get Brexit done'. [6] Johnson's implied gesture towards a no-deal exit allowed him to appease the Brexit hardliners group. His subsequent shift towards a deal gave the 'get Brexit done' a more tangible and pragmatic sensibility, appealing to the remain and Brexit compromisers. Notably, the coalition Johnson brought together around this slogan combined voters who were enthusiastic

Table 1: January 2019: Support for no-deal exit*

	Remain	May's deal	No deal
All voters	42%	13%	25%
Conservative voters	23%	27%	43%
Conservative members	15%	23%	57%

Source: ESRC Party Members Project
*The others to 100% either don't know, wouldn't vote or refusing to answer

about Brexit and those who accepted it should happen. As Table 2 shows, nearly one in five 2019 Conservative voters in the election described themselves as having voted remain but believed the referendum 'should be honoured' and 'we should get on with it'. This allowed Johnson to augment his Brexit enthusiast support with a further layer that reluctantly believed Britain should leave. This strategy helped Johnson to keep hold of May's 2017 voters (85 per cent of whom stuck with the Conservatives and expanded the coalition with voters switching from Labour).

There are two other factors that contributed to this success. First, Jeremy Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party was very unpopular, making it easier for remain compromisers to justify voting Conservative. Second, Nigel Farage's Brexit Party stood down hundreds of candidates, despite formally opposing Johnson's deal—a decision that effectively took 'no deal' off the table as an electoral choice for voters.

Comparing Johnson 2019 to May 2017

We investigated the change in Conservative Party messaging between 2017 and 2019 using content analysis.[7] We put together a summary description of key messages and points used in eighteen (nine each from the two campaigns) different speeches and videos.[8] These broke down into six campaign videos and three campaign speeches: (a) an early campaign speech; (b) their respective manifesto launches; and (c) their final campaign speech of the election. In Table 3, we contrast the two campaign messages, revealing a clear difference. We can see that May ran a much more conventional Conservative Party campaign, focussed on the idea of stability, strength, and control of immigration. Johnson adopted a much more populist repertoire of messages, which focussed on the failure of Parliament to deliver Brexit and the need for greater investment to level up left-behind regions in the UK. Johnson's messages promised change, whereas May focussed on protecting the status quo (stability) and making the nation more powerful and better protected (strength). Johnson's campaign made a series of appeals to traditionally Labour voting leave areas that were repeated relentlessly throughout the campaign. On the one hand, a tidal wave of investment would be unleashed once Brexit was out of the way. On the other, the government would take

Table 2: Johnson's coalition of Brexit enthusiasts and Brexit accepters in the electorate

Which of the following statements comes closest to your view, even if you do not agree with any of them entirely?	Total % of all voters	% of Cons. voters	% of Lab. voters	% of Lib Dem voters
I voted for Britain to leave the EU at the referendum and I now want Brexit to happen as soon as possible	41	73	13	4
I voted for Britain to leave the EU at the referendum, but now I think we should remain	5	2	9	6
I voted for Britain to remain in the EU at the referendum, but the result to leave the EU must be honoured and we need to get on with it	13	18	9	9
I voted for Britain to remain in the EU at the referendum and would still like to prevent Brexit from happening if at all possible	35	4	61	76
I did not vote in the EU referendum	5	3	7	5
Prefer not to say	0	0	1	0

Source: Lord Ashcroft, 'On the day' election poll, 13 December 2019

Table 3: Content analysis of May and Johnson's campaign messages

Johnson 2019		May 2017	
Campaign message / issue	Frequency (out of 9)	Campaign message	Frequency (out of 9)
'Get Brexit done'	x9	'Strong and stable'	x6
Levelling up / level up Britain	x3	'A stronger, fairer more prosperous Britain'	x2
Hung parliament / broken parliament / deadlocked Parliament / or similar	x7	Stronger Britain	x2
'Unleash Britain's potential'	x3	Strong economy	x2
NHS	x2	NHS	x2
Education	x2	Control of borders, laws, money	x5
'Tidal wave of investment'	x2		
20k more police	x3	Immigration	x2
'Infrastructure revolution' / new and better technology	x2	'Get the best deal for Britain'	x3
Australian points-based immigration system	x1	'New trade deals'	x2

proactive action to level up the UK with an 'infrastructure revolution' and more investment in education and the NHS.

This led into a key distinction in their respective economic offers. May and her team had consciously used the adage there is 'no magic money tree' to criticise Jeremy Corbyn's rejection of austerity.[9] Johnson would tack in the opposite direction. He claimed in one interview to have argued 'with colleagues in the government' when the Tories returned to power that 'austerity was just not the right way forward', and even made a link between the EU and increased levels of regional inequality across the UK.[10] On Brexit, their arguments had some similarities, but the circumstances had changed and Johnson communicated his case much more clearly. May justified calling an election on the basis that Parliament was likely to oppose her deal. However, at the time this was a merely hypothetical possibility. Johnson, by contrast, successfully used the crisis in Parliament, to which hard Brexiters had contributed by opposing May's deal, to present his opponents as frustrating the referendum and holding the country back.

Johnson's superior communication used a linear argument, that is, each stage in the explanation followed from the previous one. This was evident from a second piece of content analysis, which reviewed two short videos, both around a minute long and based on a pre-prepared script. Figure 1 presents this data. A dotted line indicates a weak logical connection and a continuous line an argument that follows from the previous statement. Whereas Johnson's argument was linear, May's was disordered. She offered a series of pledges, as part of a 'plan for a stronger Britain', which she suggested was conditional on giving her party the majority it needed to get a deal with the EU. However, the pledges were presented as a list and were not framed as part of a broader philosophy for governing Britain. Consequently, it was not clear how they followed from one another or what their underlying vision and purpose was. In addition to his superior messaging, Johnson's argument was also assisted by the fortune of circumstances. He faced a public exhausted with the occupation of the news agenda by Brexit. This allowed him confidently to present his promise to protect the NHS and raise the cost of living as an outcome of delivering his deal, and politics could return to 'normal'. Although pre-scripted, it avoided the repetition of disconnected sound bites and instead held together as an argument that enthused voters about the good Brexit could do.

Johnson's message successfully appealed to Brexit voters who wanted to see the referendum decision implemented. He largely manufactured the prorogation crisis of 2019

Theresa May: 'My Plan for A Stronger Britain'

Whether we move forward together depends on getting the Brexit deal right
A deal that takes back control of our borders, laws and money and respects the will of the British people

Break in argument

And I'll deliver on my play for a stronger Britain
New trade deals for our goods and services
The chance to own a home and more affordable housing
A good school place for every child
Protection from unfair energy price rises
A more secure and united Britain. Vote for me and my team. Let's move forward together

LIST OF PLEDGES

Boris Johnson: 'Our choice is very simple'

Linear argument

Disordered / non-linear

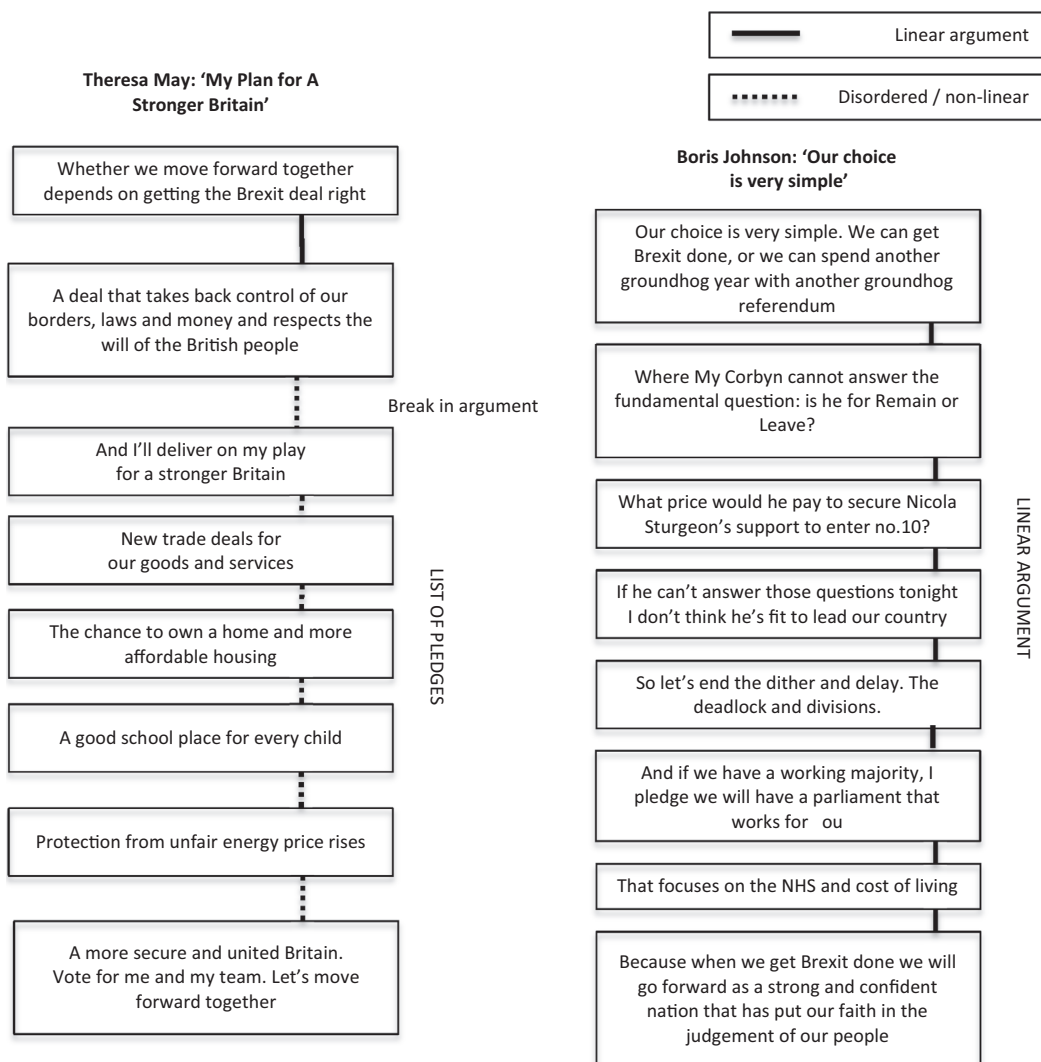| |
|---|
| Our choice is very simple. We can get Brexit done, or we can spend another groundhog year with another groundhog referendum |
| Where My Corbyn cannot answer the fundamental question: is he for Remain or Leave? |
| What price would he pay to secure Nicola Sturgeon's support to enter no.10? |
| If he can't answer those questions tonight I don't think he's fit to lead our country |
| So let's end the dither and delay. The deadlock and divisions. |
| And if we have a working majority, I pledge we will have a parliament that works for ou |
| That focuses on the NHS and cost of living |
| Because when we get Brexit done we will go forward as a strong and confident nation that has put our faith in the judgement of our people |

LINEAR ARGUMENT

Figure 1: Johnson's linear argument vs May's disordered one
Sources: Theresa May: 'My plan for a stronger Britain' and Boris Johnson: 'Our choice is very simple'[12]

to shore up support from Brexit hardliners and squeeze the Brexit Party vote, culminating in its mass withdrawal of candidates. As such, his approach to constitutional norms fits closely with the research of Milan W. Svolik, who has shown that voters who otherwise support democracy are willing to accept the violation of norms and rules if they perceive it as aligning with their partisan interests.[11] But Johnson also identified the need to adjust Conservative messaging on the traditional left/right scale to maximise his switchers from Labour. Campaign messages that promised to 'level up Britain', to 'unleash Britain's potential' and break with austerity ('a tidal wave of investment') all formed part of an unconventional, 'leftist' Tory campaign strategy.

Analysing the fractured politics of England and Wales

A number of accounts of the contemporary political landscape have linked adverse local socioeconomic circumstances ('geographies

of discontent') to the presence of socially conservative cultural values, which, in turn, correlate closely with support for Brexit.[13] These studies show that towns and small cities, particularly in postindustrial settings, have struggled to carve out a position for themselves in an economic model which favours large urban areas embedded within networks of commuter towns. Their local economic development feeds into differences of demographic profile. Young people and graduates will be drawn to areas with a greater range of economic opportunities. Cities also combine this labour market 'pull effect' with access to a host of cultural activities, which small towns are unable to match. Commuter belts linked to big cities similarly benefit from their proximity to these cultural and economic opportunities. These trends have created a cycle of uneven economic development. This compounds the long-term, historic tendency for London and the South East to dominate the British economy.[14]

The existing scholarship has identified a cultural backlash in disadvantaged towns and small cities, which is associated with a rise in anti-immigrant feeling, nativist political sentiment and identity, and the internalisation of elite rhetoric and media frames in light of depressed local economic circumstances.[15] Accordingly, Brexit has been cast as 'a revenge of the places that don't matter', not 'the people that don't matter', because it is often the relatively comfortable in areas experiencing decline that have responded most enthusiastically to its range of ideological messages.[16] Nonetheless, the spatial basis of the Brexit vote is closely intertwined with its demographics. The two most important predictors of Brexit support—age and educational level—foster changes in the overall profile of local areas. If a town or region has reduced opportunities for graduates and young people, they will see a drain of these groups to other areas. Their destinations then become centres of anti-Brexit conviction with large levels of remain support.

These patterns can be seen clearly in the fractured economic geographies, which Boris Johnson capitalised on to win his landslide general election victory. We compiled data on a range of demographic and economic measurements for four groups of seats: seats

Table 4: Socioeconomic and demographic characteristics of Labour and Conservative seats, 2015–2019*

	Labour consistently held seats	Labour gained from Con in GE2017 or GE2019	Con gained from Labour in GE2017 or GE2019	Conservative consistently held seats
Deprivation (median rank out of 533, where 1 is most deprived)	108	233	133	375
% Outright ownership (mean)	25%	30%	32%	35%
% Private renters (mean)	19%	20%	13%	14%
% Social housing (mean)	24%	17%	20%	13%
% Ownership with mortgage (mean)	30%	32%	34%	35%
Median house price	£160,000	£200,000	£143,000	£265,000
Median weekly wage	£550	£580	£520	£600
% working age population (mean)	63%	62%	59%	58%
% Pensioners (mean)	15%	17%	20%	21%
% White (mean)	76%	86%	92%	93%
% Graduates (mean)	26%	31%	20%	28%

Source: Compiled by authors from House of Commons Library and Office for National Statistics.
*Labour 'gains' in 2017 or 2019 include seats won in 2017 that were lost again in 2019. The Conservative 'gains' from 2017 or 2019 exclude those lost in 2017 and won back in 2019.

held by Labour and the Conservatives in 2015, 2017 and 2019 ('Labour consistently held', 'Conservative consistently held'); those gained by the Conservatives from Labour in 2017 or 2019; and those gained by Labour in 2017 or 2019 (see Table 4). While the category of 'Labour gain' includes seats that were won in 2017 only to be lost again in 2019 (and the category of 'Conservative gain' does not include these seats), the figures nonetheless give an indication of how the political divides of England and Wales map onto different socioeconomic and demographical profiles. Our findings illustrate clear patterns in relation to all seats, but especially the 'Conservative gains'. Conservative gains from Labour in 2017 and 2019 tend to have:

- high rates of deprivation, but not as high as consistently held Labour seats;
- above average rates of home ownership, but low house prices;
- relatively high pensioner population and relatively low numbers of graduates;
- much higher levels of social housing than traditional Conservative seats;
- low levels of ethnic diversity, almost identical to the consistently held Conservative seats;
- the lowest median wage of all four seats in our analysis.

House prices are a proxy for the extent of the demand for homes in a particular location, so a low level indicates depressed levels of cultural and economic capital. Indeed, this is borne out by analysis of per capita GDP data. Although this is not available on a constituency level, taking the local authority district data and weighting by population size gives an average GDP per capita in 'Conservative gain' seats of £23,055 in 2018—nearly a third lower than the £32,090 found in consistently held Conservative seats (authors' analysis of Office for National Statistics data). Similarly, the strikingly low wages available in these former 'red wall' seats implies the over-representation of a group of voters which has long been of interest to the major parties. From Ed Miliband's 'the squeezed middle', to George Osborne's 'hard working families' and Theresa May's 'just about managing', the middle of the road, below median income voter

has for some time fascinated Britain's political elite. Boris Johnson's argumentation in the general election departed from these labels, however, through its embrace of *place* over *person*. He directly addressed the real economic need to 'level up' these discontented economic geographies with a 'tidal wave of investment', cleverly linking this to the need to draw a line under Brexit by nominally completing the process of leaving the EU with his exit agreement. We believe this shift is important. Whereas the three other descriptions could all be interpreted as an elite *talking down* to voters, local people are likely to take pride in their towns and want them to be given a greater chance to succeed economically.

Johnson rendered politically salient an analysis of the disadvantaged localities of England and Wales that has been observed and measured in the academic scholarship. Qualitative analysis has also found residents in these areas tend to internalise wider media discourses around the 'left behind'.[17] An identity of being part of a left-behind community can form as a result. Johnson's messaging was highly attuned to these 'common sense' registers that form in such communities. He now faces a challenge of keeping together an electoral coalition comprised of voters who have potentially divergent economic interests: a traditional Conservative vote concerned with lower taxes and maintaining existing pockets of economic affluence, and a 'new' layer of communities demanding that the Johnson government fulfil its electoral promises.

An analysis of geography has to be integrated, however, with a recognition of the stark demographic differences in the Conservative vote. For every over sixty-five year-old voter who backed Labour in the general election, for example, more than three voted Conservative.[18] In addition, even small swings in certain demographic groups can be highly significant in a first past the past system, depending on how they are spread across constituencies.

Reviewing British Election Study data across these four different categories of seats in England and Wales illustrates this.[19] We find a significantly stronger level of support for leaving the EU in the 'Conservative gain' seat category (see Figure 2). Similarly, the Labour gain seat category is distinctive as

Leave vote

Labour gain	48%
Con gain	63%
Lab hold	50%
Con hold	56%

Figure 2: Strength of 2016 leave vote by constituency group
Source: British Election Study. Original question: 'In the referendum in 2016 on whether Britain should remain in or leave the European Union, which way did you vote, or did you not vote?'

being the only one with a leave minority. Notably, a clear majority for leave also exists in the affluent, consistently held Conservative seats in our analysis. This provides an important caveat of the 'geographies of discontent' analysis, which serves as a reminder that Brexit represented an economically and geographically *diverse* coalition united around a populist message.

However, when we turn to cultural and economic values, a more even picture exists across all four categories of seat (see Figure 3). The British Election Study distinguishes between left/right views and authoritarian/socially liberal ones. The former are defined by four attitudinal measures including 'there is one rule for the rich, another for the poor' and 'there is no need for strong trade unions to protect workers rights'. The authoritarian/socially liberal cleavage is defined by five prompts including 'for some crimes the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence' and 'young people don't have enough respect for traditional values'. A score of one to ten is generated where ten is the most authoritarian or most right-wing, respectively. As Figure 3 shows, there is little difference in the average score

Values by Constituency Type

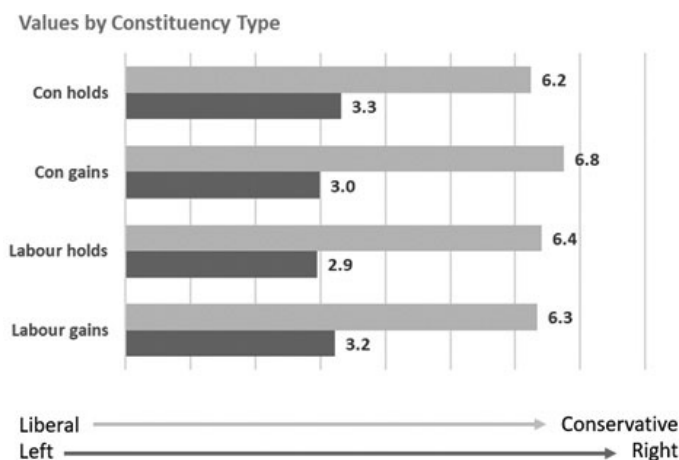|		
Con holds	6.2	3.3
Con gains	6.8	3.0
Labour holds	6.4	2.9
Labour gains	6.3	3.2

Liberal ⟶ Conservative
Left ⟶ Right

Figure 3: Average authoritarian/socially liberal score and average left/right score for respondents in each category of seat.
Source: British Election Study.

across the four categories of constituencies we have analysed. The data underline how, in attitudinal terms, the average voter in England and Wales is fairly socially conservative and fairly left-wing.

Importantly, these are average scores across each category of constituency. They do not refute the wider evidence we have regarding the demographic profiles of Brexit and Remain voters *per se*. Indeed, it is easy to assume that because a constituency has relatively fewer graduates it has *no* graduates, whereas in reality, our Conservative gain seat category still has an average graduate population of 20 per cent. A similar error can occur in relation to the Brexit vote itself. An area that voted heavily to remain in the EU will still have a small and possibly vocal level of Brexit support. Moreover, while the average leave voter is more 'right-wing, authoritarian, ethnocentric, populist . . . and less tolerant' than the average remain voter, this can disguise variation on both sides, as well as the mutability and complexity of attitudes.[20]

In this sense, Johnson's strategy in the election was carefully calibrated to a small but electorally significant group of potential swing voters within the former 'red wall' seats—rather than the 'totality' of the electorate. His messaging resonated with the economic geographies of these areas and built on their strong levels of Brexit support. Unlike Theresa May's campaign, he presented a clear and easily comprehended case for voting Conservative that optimised his success of striking a deal with the EU.

Conclusion

Viewed in retrospect, it is easy to read the course of historical events as inevitable. This is, of course, not the case. Nonetheless, the sociological and cultural base for a greatly expanded Conservative electoral coalition was put in place by the 2016 Brexit referendum. The polarisation it produced between leavers and remainers was distributed geographically across constituencies in a manner that favoured a Conservative side which championed Brexit. One 2019 counter-factual possibility that might be plausible could, however, run as follows. If Labour had changed its leader after the European elections (and in parallel to the Conservative leadership contest) to someone with greater public favourability, it would have removed what was for many a big barrier to voting Labour. If the new leader enjoyed a honeymoon in support, they may have had the confidence to push Johnson into a September election that forced the Conservatives to run on a platform of 'no deal', a position which lacked majority support. Conservative remainers may have felt more comfortable voting Liberal Democrat in Labour–Tory marginals if they had more confidence in the Labour leadership. But few in Labour politics countenanced a leadership challenge to Corbyn. Fewer still were willing to take up the challenge of a September 2019 general election. A second referendum would always have been a tough sell in the leave voting seats, but may have had some resonance if it was presented as the alternative to a no-deal exit from the EU. But even in these circumstances, defeating Johnson would have been a formidable challenge.

Looking forward, however, the Conservative vote is potentially fragile. The 'median voter' has attitudinal views well to the left of traditional Conservative politics. Delivering Brexit will not have the same partisan appeal at the next general election. These factors could have both proven decisive prior to the economic collapse brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. In this context, the Conservatives will struggle to deliver the big promise of 'levelling up' they made to the voters of the red wall.

A future Labour campaign confronting these likely failures could do worse than learn from the clarity of messaging and argumentation that Johnson achieved in 2019. There was no ambiguity about his goals. The voter was left with a clear understanding of what he wanted to achieve and how this related to his underlying values. He took a decisive position on a polarising issue, made a persistent case and capitalised on his opponents' divisions and weakness. These seem like important ingredients for effective political communication and electoral success.

Luke Cooper is a consultant researcher in the Conflict and Civil Society Research Unit at the London School of Economics. *Christabel Cooper* is a professional data analyst, Director

of Sensible Analytics Ltd. and a Labour Councillor in Hammersmith and Fulham.

Notes

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