

What **UK**
Thinks **EU**

WAS THE 2019 GENERAL ELECTION A SUCCESS?

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INTRODUCTION

The election held on December 12th 2019 was one of the most important in British history. It was precipitated when the Liberal Democrats and the SNP agreed to support the Conservative government's call for a general election that, it was hoped, would end a parliamentary stalemate over whether and how Brexit should proceed that had dominated the business of the Commons throughout 2019. The outcome of the election – a parliamentary majority for the Conservatives of eighty seats – paved the way for Brexit to be implemented and the UK duly left the EU at the end of January 2020, a step that is widely regarded as one of the most important public policy decisions to be made by the UK since 1945.

In this paper, we assess how successful holding an election was as a way of resolving the Brexit debate. In some senses, the answer to that question is that it obviously was. A House of Commons was elected that voted to leave the EU, thereby ending the stalemate that had gridlocked the nation's politics. Meanwhile, from a partisan perspective, those who voted Leave will feel that the election was a success, although, equally, the procedure may be regarded with some regret by many who had backed Remain. However, our aim here is to ask a broader question. We wish to evaluate the election as an exercise in reaching a democratic decision about the particular policy proposal that occasioned the ballot – that is, did it succeed in ascertaining the majority view on whether and how Brexit should proceed? If the outcome did reflect the majority view we might regard the election as a success. However, if it did not, we might wish to consider what lessons should be learned for the future.

The question that was put before the electorate last December was not as straightforward as the one with which they were presented in the referendum in June 2016. Then the choice was a simple binary between staying in the EU or leaving. Now, the options were a little more nuanced. While the Conservatives were, indeed, proposing to implement the original decision to leave, they were proposing to do so on the basis of a specific Withdrawal Agreement with the EU that had been partially renegotiated by Boris Johnson after he had succeeded Theresa May as Prime Minister. Also standing on a pro-Brexit platform, however, was the Brexit Party, which, having been at one point in favour of leaving without a deal, was now campaigning for a 'clean-break Brexit' (that is, a deal that would provide for a minimal relationship with the EU) when the UK left the EU single market, an outcome that was scheduled to take place at the end of December 2020.

Meanwhile, there were a number of alternative options presented by those who were opposing the implementation of Brexit as proposed by the government. True, all of the government's opponents – Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the SNP, Plaid Cymru and the Greens – were willing to support the holding of another referendum on Brexit. However, while most of these parties indicated that they wanted to put the agreement that the government had negotiated before the electorate and invite them to reject it, Labour wanted to negotiate a new agreement and ask voters to vote for or against that. Moreover, in that ballot the party's leader at least would remain neutral. Meanwhile, although the Liberal Democrats were willing to support

another referendum, they stated that in the event that they were to win an overall majority they would take that as a mandate to cancel Brexit and would dispense with holding another referendum. In short, those voters who were unhappy with Brexit were presented with a variety of ways of expressing their point of view.

We might wonder how voters dealt with this more complex set of choices. In theory, they enabled the electorate to reflected their views more accurately in how they voted. However, they could only do this if they understood the nuances of the positions that were being put before them – and then accurately reflected their own preferred course of action in how they voted. Yet, in truth, we might wonder whether how people voted in the election reflected their views about Brexit at all, let alone the nuances about what to do next. Politicians might hope that voters will focus on a particular issue, but citizens vote in the knowledge that their choice will not simply determine how that particular issue is resolved but also decide who will govern the country for the next five years – on the basis of a manifesto that will pledge action across a wide range of policy areas. Perhaps relatively speaking at least Brexit did not matter as much to voters as it did to the politicians?

After introducing our data, we examine first of all the strength of the cues on Brexit that voters were receiving from the parties and their leaders. We then assess the extent to which people's party preferences reflected their views on the more nuanced questions of how Brexit should be implemented or how it might be stopped. Thereafter we assess the extent to which their views on the dichotomous principle of leaving or remaining in the EU was mirrored in how they voted, whether this was more so than at previous elections, and how far the extent to which this was the case disrupted some of the traditional patterns of party support. We then conclude by examining whether or not the outcome of the election in terms of parliamentary seats did reflect the majority view on the principle of Brexit – and consider whether our evidence suggests that the election was a success or a failure.

DATA

Our data come principally from two surveys conducted both before and after the 2019 election. One was conducted during the last three weeks of the election campaign itself (21 November – 11 December 2019), the other a couple of months after the election (31 January – 1 March 2020). Both surveys were conducted using NatCen's random probability mixed mode panel, which comprises people who were originally interviewed for a recent British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey and who had agreed to take part in subsequent short surveys over the internet, or, if necessary, by phone (Jessop, 2018). A total of 2,429 people were interviewed in the first wave and 2,411 in the second. Most of these interviews were provided by people who participated in both waves, and these constitute a longitudinal pre-post panel of 2,112 respondents. All three datasets have been weighted so that as far as possible they match the known demographic profile of the adult population and the attitudinal profile of the original BSA surveys.

This research design has a number of advantages. By interviewing people before the election and using their responses at this point in time to analyse how they eventually voted, we are more likely to be analysing people's vote choice by the views that they had when they entered the polling booth, uninfluenced by whatever happened after the election was over. The design also gives us some ability to look at whether people's views about Brexit before the election were associated with a decision on their part to change their mind about how to vote, thereby suggesting that those views did indeed affect how people voted rather than vice-versa. On the other hand, if we are to have some indication of how attitudes might have shifted and how their relationship with vote choice changed across the election as a whole, we also need to ascertain people's views after the election was over.

However, our survey design also has its limitations, only some of which we are able (partially) to overcome. First, because our first round of data collection was undertaken in the latter weeks of the election campaign, we may not have captured all of whatever impact the campaign may have had on people's views and how they chose to express them in the ballot box. Fortunately, however, we also conducted a survey using the NatCen panel in September 2019 (5 September – 6 October 2019), just weeks before the election was called, and we are able to make use of that survey in making our assessment of how public attitudes and their relationship to vote choice evolved in the period before polling day. Second, because Christmas occurred shortly after polling day it was impossible to undertake our second round of interviewing immediately after the election, and indeed in the event it took place after Britain's withdrawal from the EU on 31 January. It is, of course, possible that some people's views may have been affected by that event.

Meanwhile, if the 2019 election was indeed the single-issue ballot that it was intended to be, we might anticipate that the pattern of voting behaviour was discernibly different from that at other recent elections. After all, how people voted in the 2016 referendum cut across party lines (Curtice, 2017). Consequently, if how they voted in the 2019 election reflected their views about Brexit, voters could well have been backing a different party than they had done in the past. Previous patterns of electoral choice would have been disturbed. In order to address this question, we are able to compare our findings with those provided by British Social Attitudes surveys undertaken in the weeks and months after previous elections (Curtice and Simpson, 2018).

PERCEPTIONS OF THE PARTIES

If voters were to use the election to express their views about how the Brexit stalemate should be resolved then they needed to have some understanding of where the parties stood on the issue, and to feel that there was some discernible difference between them. Our survey attempted to identify how far this was the case by presenting respondents with a list of the political parties and asking:

For each party, please say if you think they are in favour of a close or distant relationship with the EU - or if you think that it is impossible to tell whether they want a close or a distant relationship?

Table 1 shows the distribution of the responses to this question for the four parties that had been most popular across Britain as a whole in the run-up to the election.¹ They would appear to correspond reasonably well to the pattern that one might anticipate if voters did have some appreciation of where the parties stood on the issue of Brexit. Just over half of voters (52%) reckoned that the Liberal Democrats, who were proposing to cancel Brexit forthwith, wanted a 'very' or 'fairly' close relationship with the EU. Rather fewer (42%) said the same of the Labour party, which, while backing a second referendum was not committed to recommending at such a ballot a vote in favour of staying in the EU. In contrast, only around a quarter (26%) believed that the Conservatives were in favour of a very or fairly close relationship, while only around one in ten (9%) said the same of the Brexit Party.

¹ Respondents in Scotland and Wales were also asked about the SNP and Plaid Cymru respectively. Inevitably, given they comprise a relatively small proportion of the GB population, we had relatively few respondents in either country. Still, we might note that among the 169 people in Scotland who answered the question, 55% said they thought the SNP wanted a 'very close' relationship with the EU, while another 20% reckoned the SNP wanted a 'fairly close' relationship. Only 13% said that it was impossible to tell where the SNP stood or that they did not know the party's policy stance. Meanwhile, among 99 respondents in Wales, 41% thought that Plaid Cymru wanted a 'very' or 'fairly' close relationship, while one in three (33%) said that it was impossible to tell or they could not choose.

Table 1: Perceptions of the Positions of The Parties on How Close or Distant a Relationship with the EU the UK Should Have

Party thinks relationship between UK and EU should be:	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal Democrats	Brexit Party
	%	%	%	%
Very close	7	16	41	4
Fairly close	19	25	11	5
Neither close nor distant	14	14	10	8
Fairly distant	23	7	5	13
Very distant	14	4	3	50
Impossible to tell	12	22	13	9
Can't choose	11	11	16	11

However, in each case there was a substantial minority of voters who either said that it was impossible to tell how close or distant a relationship a party wanted, or that they did not know where the party stood on this spectrum. This was the case, above all, for the Labour Party, where one in three (33%) were unable to say where the party stood – closely followed by the Liberal Democrats for whom around three in ten (29%) gave the same response. In contrast, only 23% felt unable to say where the Conservatives stood, and just 20% the Brexit Party. In short, voters were more likely to have an impression of where the two pro-Brexit parties stood than they were those on the pro-second referendum side of the argument.

Moreover, not all voters held the same point of view. Those who voted Remain in 2016 were more likely than those who voted Leave to think that the Conservatives and the Brexit Party wanted a distant relationship. For example, as many as 55% of Remain voters believed that the Conservatives wanted a very or fairly distant relationship. As a result, Remain voters were more likely than Leave supporters to draw a sharp distinction between the parties on how close or distant a relationship they wanted the UK to have with the EU. In part this seems to have reflected the fact that Leave voters themselves did not necessarily want (what they at least perceived to be) a distant relationship with the EU. As many as 58% of Leave voters indicated in our post-election survey that they themselves wanted a very or fairly close relationship with the EU – and thus the fact that 39% of Leave voters believed that the Conservatives were also of this view was not necessarily a disincentive to them backing the party. It appears that to some degree at least Leave voters were looking at the UK's future relationship with the EU through a different lens than their Remain counterparts.²

Many voters did then perceive some difference between the parties on what kind of relationship they wanted the UK to have with the EU in future. But the parties' stances on this issue were far from clear to all, while it looks as though Remain and Leave voters might have had a somewhat different perspective on what was meant by a close relationship with the EU. The signals being received by voters on the nuances of the Brexit debate were evidently somewhat mixed.

² This comment also seems to be supported by the fact that in our pre-election survey as many as 50% of Leave voters felt that the UK would emerge with a close relationship with the EU, compared with just 28% of Remain supporters.

PERCEPTIONS OF THE LEADERS

Given that the ballot in December 2019 was an election, not a referendum, voters might not unreasonably have been inclined to consider not only the stance that a party was taking on Brexit but also how much confidence they had in the ability of each party's leader to make the right decisions about Britain's future relationship with the EU. In our survey, we also invited our respondents to answer the following question about each of the party leaders:

For each leader, please say to what extent do you trust them to make the right decisions about the future of Britain's relationship with the EU.

Remain and Leave voters had very different views about the party leaders (see Table 2). Very few Remain voters (just 3%) said that they trusted Nigel Farage, the leader of the Brexit Party a 'great deal' or 'quite a lot', while Boris Johnson fared only marginally better, with only 14% trusting him 'a great deal' or quite a lot'. Meanwhile, few Leave voters trusted either the Liberal Democrat leader, Jo Swinson (7%), or her Labour counterpart, Jeremy Corbyn (9%). In short both Remain voters and Leave supporters had little confidence in those party leaders that had been on the opposite side of the argument from them in the 2016 referendum. Perhaps of particular note is the apparent failure of Jeremy Corbyn to secure the trust of Leave voters even though he had indicated that he would take a neutral stance in any referendum that Labour might organise.

Table 2: Trust in Party Leaders to Make Right Decisions about Britain's Future Relationship with the EU by EU Referendum Vote, 2016

2016 Vote	Johnson		Farage		Corbyn		Swinson	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
Trust...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
A great deal	2	18	0	12	11	4	11	1
Quite a lot	12	39	3	25	25	5	31	5
Not very much	25	23	17	28	31	20	35	32
Not at all	61	19	79	35	33	71	21	59

On the other hand, this did not mean that Leave voters necessarily trusted Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage, while, equally, Remain supporters were not necessarily enamoured of Jeremy Corbyn and Jo Swinson. That said, Boris Johnson was rather more popular among Leave voters than either Jo Swinson or Jeremy Corbyn was among Remain supporters. Indeed, well over half of Leave voters (57%) said that they trusted Boris Johnson 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot'. In contrast, over half of Remain voters (56%) said that they did not trust Jo Swinson at all or at least not very much, while in the case of Jeremy Corbyn as many as 64% took that view. Given also that he was more popular than Nigel Farage among Leave voters, Boris Johnson's appeal to Leave voters provided his party with a potentially important advantage in its attempt to secure their support, whereas, in contrast, neither Jo Swinson nor Jeremy Corbyn appear to have had the breadth of appeal that might have enabled them to bring most of the Remain vote behind them.

A MULTIPLE CHOICE QUESTION?

So, having examined some of the cues that voters appear to have had as to how they might best reflect their views about Brexit in their vote choice, to what extent did the choice that they made reflect their views about the multiple options that were put before them by the parties? To ascertain where voters stood on these options we asked respondents in our post-election survey:

If you had to choose between the following four options, which would be your first choice?

1. Remaining in the EU without holding another referendum
2. Remaining in the EU but only after holding another referendum
3. Leaving the EU with the deal negotiated so far
4. Leaving the EU without any deal

The single most popular option was to leave on the basis of the deal that had been negotiated so far. This was supported by 32% and was the course of action that the government had just taken. The least popular was to leave without a deal (18%). In contrast, the two ‘remain’ options were almost exactly equally popular with 25% saying that the UK should remain in the EU but only after a referendum had been held, and 24% favouring remaining without another ballot.

Table 3: Vote Choice, 2019 Election, by Attitude towards how Brexit should be resolved.

Vote, 2019	Remain no referendum	Remain after referendum	Leave with deal	Leave without deal
	%	%	%	%
Conservative	13	10	66	76
Brexit/UKIP	0	0	2	5
Labour	52	53	18	12
Liberal Democrat	21	26	4	1
SNP/PC	8	7	4	1
Green	5	3	2	4
Other	1	2	1	1

For many of those in favour of leaving, the choice with which they were presented was simplified when early on in the election campaign the Brexit Party announced that it would not contest any of the constituencies being defended by the Conservatives. That decision, together with the fact that the party was no longer simply calling for a ‘no deal Brexit’ meant that those who would prefer the UK to leave without a deal no longer had a way – or at least not a clear one – of expressing that point of view. It thus, perhaps, should not come as a surprise that the pattern of party support among those who would prefer to leave without a deal was little different from that among those who wanted to leave with a deal. True, those who wanted to leave without a deal were somewhat more likely (5%) than those who did want a deal (2%) to have voted for the Brexit Party – but they were also more likely to have voted for the Conservatives too (by 76% to 66%). In short, even though a potential advantage of holding an election rather than a referendum to resolve the Brexit stalemate was that it might have allowed Leave

supporters to signal what kind of Brexit they would prefer, in the event it did not prove to be an opportunity for them to do so.³

But what about the differences of strategy that were being offered on the Remain side of the Brexit debate? The Liberal Democrats were proposing to cancel Brexit without holding another referendum – a stance that proved controversial at the time and one on which after the election the party itself largely blamed its disappointing haul of just 11 seats (Thornhill, 2020). Labour in contrast wanted a second referendum, albeit one on which the party leader proposed to remain neutral. There would appear to have been plenty of opportunity for Remain supporters to indicate (by voting either Labour or Liberal Democrat) whether or not they thought holding a second referendum was the best way of resolving the Brexit stalemate.

In practice, however, it seems to have made little difference to how people voted. Support for the Liberal Democrats was, if anything higher among those who preferred to hold a second referendum (26%) than it was among those who simply wanted to cancel Brexit (21%). At the same time, Labour did not do significantly better among those who wanted a second referendum (53%) than it did among those who were happy for Brexit to be cancelled forthwith (52%). It appears to have been the SNP and the Greens who were a little more successful among those who would cancel Brexit, even though neither party backed that stance.

There is also further evidence that the issue of how Brexit might be stopped had little impact on the choice that voters made at the polling station. This comes from analysis of the relationship between how people voted in 2019 and their response to a question that simply asked respondents whether they were for or against holding a second referendum in which the choice would be between leaving on the basis of the terms negotiated so far or remaining in the EU.

As we might anticipate, this proposal was much more popular among those who voted Remain in 2016 than it was among those who voted Leave. In our pre-polling day survey, for example, as many as 75% of Remain voters said they supported such a ballot, compared with just 19% of those who had voted Leave. Yet despite the party's stance, the Liberal Democrats were much more successful in the election in securing the support of those Remain voters who supported a second referendum (24%) than they were among those who did not (14%). True, Labour were also much more successful among supporters of a second ballot (52%) than they were among those who were not (24%). However, this simply means that both parties were roughly twice as popular among those Remain voters who backed a second ballot as they were among those who were not. In short, it is not clear that the Liberal Democrats had particular difficulty in

³ We should also note that the attitudes of Leave voters towards whether Northern Ireland should leave the EU on the same terms as the rest of the UK made little difference to their propensity to vote Conservative, even though that was not what was being proposed following the Prime Minister's renegotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement in October 2019. While 66% of those Leave voters who said in their pre-election interview that Northern Ireland should not leave on the same terms voted Conservative, this was less than the equivalent proportions among those who felt that it 'definitely' (80%), or 'probably' (70%), should. Meanwhile as many as 36% of Leave supporters said they did not care either way whether Northern Ireland left on the same terms or not – of whom 76% voted for the Conservatives.

At the same time, among those whose current preference was to leave the EU and who voted Conservative in 2017, as many as 92% of those who thought the deal that had been negotiated was a bad one voted Conservative, little different from the equivalent figure of 97% among those who felt the deal was a good one.

securing the votes of those Remain voters who supported the idea of a second ballot.⁴

Our analysis suggests that even though holding an election might have afforded voters the opportunity to exercise a more nuanced choice than simply whether they were for or against Brexit, in practice the December 2019 ballot failed to provide that opportunity. On the Leave side of the debate the choice that might have been available to voters was largely removed by the decision of the Brexit Party to withdraw their candidates from Conservative-held constituencies and to signal a willingness to back the deal that the Prime Minister had negotiated. On the Remain side, in contrast, voters were presented with a choice as to how Brexit might be stopped, but in practice this choice made little difference to how people voted. In many respects, the election seems to have been a missed opportunity.

A BINARY CHOICE?

However, this still leaves open the possibility that the election was an effective means of registering voters' attitudes towards the binary point of principle in the Brexit debate – whether the UK should leave the EU or whether the decision to do so might be reversed. Or did the many considerations other than Brexit that voters might legitimately have brought to their choice mean that this was not the case either?

Table 4: Vote, 2017 and 2019 Elections by EU Referendum Vote 2016

2016 Vote	2017		2019	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
Vote, 2019	%	%	%	%
Conservative	29	58	20	75
Brexit/UKIP	0	5	0	3
Labour	52	30	45	15
Liberal Democrat	13	3	22	2
SNP/PC	4	2	7	2
Green	3	2	4	2
Other	1	1	2	1

Source 2017: British Social Attitudes

Table 4 provides us with an initial answer by showing how those who voted Remain and those who backed Leave in 2016 voted at the 2019 election, and compares their behaviour on that occasion with how they voted at the previous election in 2017. Over three-quarters of Remain voters (78%) backed one of the parties that were willing to support a second referendum, while

⁴ There is also no evidence that those voters whose first preference was a second referendum were significantly more likely than those who were willing to cancel Brexit without another ballot to have withdrawn their support from the Liberal Democrats during the campaign. Between their pre-election interview and polling day, support for the party fell by three points among those of our respondents who preferred another ballot and by two points among those who were willing to cancel Brexit forthwith. It should also be noted that among those whose first preference was another referendum, as many as 58% said that their second preference was to leave without a referendum, while as many as 80% of those who preferred to cancel Brexit without another ballot said that holding a ballot was their second choice. In short, for most of those who were opposed to Brexit, the means of stopping it were less important than the objective of doing so.

the same proportion of Leave voters (78%) supported one of the parties that wanted Brexit to proceed. So, the 2019 election came close to being a quasi-referendum on Brexit, and, moreover, this was equally the case for both Remain and Leave voters.

Meanwhile, the Brexit divide was reflected more sharply in how people voted than it had been in 2017 – when Theresa May invited voters to give her a mandate to negotiate the vision of Brexit that she had outlined some months earlier. This is especially true of those who had voted Leave, less than two-thirds of whom voted in 2017 for one of the two parties, the Conservatives and UKIP, that were advocating a relatively ‘hard’ Brexit. In the case of Remain voters as many as three-quarters had already voted in 2017 for one of the parties that by 2019 were in favour of another referendum, just three points lower than the figure for 2019. Indeed, they did so even though in 2017 neither Labour nor the SNP were in favour of a second referendum (and, indeed, Labour were still backing a soft Brexit).

The somewhat closer alignment in 2019 between people’s views on Brexit and how they voted appears, though, to have had little to do with the election campaign itself. Much of the alignment was already in place before the election was called, stimulated by the intense political debate of the 2017-19 parliament. In Table 5 we compare how Remain and Leave supporters voted in the 2019 election (see the two far right-hand columns) with their vote intentions in (a) September 2019 and (b) in our pre-election survey conducted in November and December 2019. In September Leave supporters were a little less likely to say they would vote for one of the two pro-Brexit parties (76%) than Remain voters were to say that they would vote for one of the pro-second referendum parties (82%), but the proportion of Leave voters backing a pro-Brexit party was well up on 2017. Meanwhile, by the time of our pre-election survey in November/December 2019, the equivalent figures had converged at the mid-point between them (79%), a figure little different from the one we have seen eventually pertained in the ballot box.

Table 5: Vote intention, September and November/December 2019, and Vote Choice, December 2019, by EU Referendum Vote, 2016.

	Vote Intention				Vote	
	Sept. 2019		Nov/Dec. 2019		Dec. 2019	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
2016 Vote						
Vote, 2019	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	17	48	19	64	20	75
Brexit/UKIP	1	28	0	15	0	3
Labour	33	13	40	14	45	15
Liberal Democrat	35	5	25	3	22	2
SNP/PC	6	2	7	1	7	2
Green	8	4	7	3	4	2
Other	1	1	0	0	2	1

Not, however, that voters did not change their minds during this period. There was a substantial and significant change in the relative strength of the pro-Brexit parties, while a similar development occurred among those parties supporting a second referendum. In September 2019, both Remain and Leave voters were heavily split in their loyalties. Indeed, at 35%, support for the Liberal Democrats among Remain supporters matched that being pledged at the time to Labour (33%). Meanwhile over a quarter of Leave voters (28%) were backing the

Brexit Party (or in a few instances, UKIP), though nearly a half (48%) were supporting the Conservatives. However, by polling day Labour had gained considerable ground among Remain supporters at the expense of the Liberal Democrats (but made little discernible progress among Leave voters), while the Conservatives eventually garnered under their wing as much as three-quarters of the Leave vote (but made minimal progress among Remain supporters).⁵

How do we account for this movement? On the Leave side, of course, the decision was effectively made for many voters by Nigel Farage's decision to stand down Brexit Party candidates in seats being defended by the Conservatives. It thus, perhaps, should not come as much of a surprise that an analysis of the eventual vote choice made by those who said in our pre-election survey that they would vote for the Brexit Party suggests that whether they still voted for the party or switched to the Conservatives was largely unrelated to their preference for a deal rather than no deal, to their views on how close or distant a relationship with the EU that they thought the two parties wanted, or to how much they trusted Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage. The one hint that exists is that those who indicated that they thought of themselves (i.e. identified) as a Conservative were more likely to have switched to the Conservatives than those who said they identified with the Brexit Party or not with any party at all – in short, some voters may have been pulled back into the Conservative fold by the ties of party loyalty.⁶

However, those who had been minded to support the Liberal Democrats were for the most part still able to do so – the party fought 611 of the 632 seats in Great Britain, simply standing down in a few places to give a clear run to either the Greens or Plaid Cymru. Yet here too there seems to be little difference between those who in our pre-election survey said they would vote Liberal Democrat and did so and those who eventually switched to Labour in their views of the parties, the leaders or the various options on Brexit.⁷ Where they did differ was in their party identification and voting history. Among those who said they thought of themselves as a Labour supporter, as many as 43% switched to Labour, whereas only 8% of those who identified as a Liberal Democrat did so. Similarly, as many as 47% of those who had backed Labour in 2017 switched back to the party between our pre-polling day survey and polling day, compared with just 9% of those who had voted Liberal Democrat before and 11% of those who backed the Conservatives.

In short, our analysis suggests that the gains made by both the Conservatives among Leave voters and (especially) Labour among Remain supporters in the weeks before polling day owed much more to the tug of party loyalties than voters' views about how Brexit should be pursued or might be stopped, or their perceptions of the parties and the leaders on Brexit. Britain's traditional two-party system reasserted itself against the challenges posed by both the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats, thereby ensuring that while the election might have registered people's views about the principle of Brexit it was not very successful in reflecting voters' views about how Brexit should or should not be pursued.

5 Even between our pre-election survey, by which time much of the movement had already happened, and polling day nearly two in three of those who had intended to vote for the Brexit Party or UKIP switched their support in favour of the Conservatives, while nearly one in five (18%) of those who were still supporting the Liberal Democrats eventually voted Labour.

6 While 94% of those who identified as a Conservative eventually voted for the party, only 63% of those who identified as a Brexit Party supporter or who did not identify with any party switched to the Conservatives. Note, however, that this observation is based on only 69 respondents.

7 For example, among those who switched to Labour, 35% said that they thought Labour wanted a 'very' or 'fairly' close relationship with the EU, only slightly above the equivalent figure among those who stuck with the Liberal Democrats of 29%. Just 25% of those who eventually voted Labour said that they trusted Jeremy Corbyn to make the right decisions about Brexit 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot', only a little above the 19% figure among those who voted Liberal Democrat. Meanwhile, those whose first preference was to stop Brexit after a referendum had been held were no less loyal to the Liberal Democrats than were those whose first preference was to stop Brexit without a referendum – in both cases around four in five stayed with the party.

That said, the extent to which how people voted registered their views on the principle of Brexit is underestimated by our analysis so far. Although at the time of the 2019 election most people said that they would vote the same way as they had done in the 2016 referendum (Curtice, 2020), 14% had either changed their mind or were no longer sure what they would do, while nearly three-quarters (73%) of those who did not vote in the 2016 referendum were willing to indicate how they would vote now. And if, as in Table 6, we analyse people’s party choice by their current view on the principle of Brexit we discover that the link between the two was even stronger than reported in Table 5.

Table 6: Vote intention, September and November/December 2019, and Vote Choice, December 2019, by Current EU Referendum Vote Intention

	Vote Intention				Vote	
	Sept. 2019		Nov/Dec. 2019		Dec. 2019	
	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave	Remain	Leave
2016 Vote						
Vote, 2019	%	%	%	%	%	%
Conservative	14	53	15	68	15	79
Brexit/UKIP	1	29	1	15	0	4
Labour	37	9	46	11	49	12
Liberal Democrat	34	3	24	2	22	2
SNP/PC	6	1	6	1	8	1
Green	8	3	8	2	4	2
Other	1	0	0	0	1	1

Now we discover that as many as 83% of current Remain supporters voted for one of the pro-second referendum parties, while 83% of their Leave counterparts backed a party that favoured Brexit. Both figures are five points up on those we obtained when, in the two previous tables, we analysed people’s behaviour by how they voted in the 2016 referendum. Again, however, this was a pattern that was in place well before the election was called – in September 2019, 85% of current Remain supporters and 82% of their Leave counterparts were proposing to vote in a way that might be regarded as consistent with their views on Brexit. Meanwhile, we now discover in particular that just 15% of Remain supporters voted for the Conservatives (five points lower than the equivalent figure in Table 5) and just 12% of Leave supporters backed Labour (three points lower). These differences arise because those who voted Remain in 2016 and Conservative in 2019 were especially likely to have switched in favour of Leave, while those who voted Leave in 2016 and Labour in 2019 were especially likely now to back Remain.⁸ Indeed, it looks as though some of those voters whose Conservative or Labour party preference was at odds with their views on Brexit were persuaded during the course of the Brexit debate to change their views on whether or not Britain should leave the EU so that they were consistent with the views of their preferred party – indeed, perhaps for some their party preference had come to determine their view about Brexit rather than vice-versa.

⁸ Whereas 88% of all Remain voters said on our post-election survey that they would vote the same way again, just two-thirds (67%) of those who voted Conservative in 2019 were still loyal to Remain, while as many as 28% now stated that they backed Leave. Similarly, whereas among Leave voters as a whole as many as 84% said in our post-election survey that they would vote Leave again, among those Leave supporters who voted Labour in 2019 the figure was just 68%, while around a quarter (24%) now said that they backed Remain.

CONSEQUENCES

We have established then that the 2019 election was largely a single-issue ballot at which voters' views on the principle of Brexit, if not necessarily their views about the details of implementation, were reflected in how they voted. But to what extent did this mean that the traditional patterns of party support were disrupted?

There was certainly plenty of potential for it to do so. Previous research has demonstrated that those with few, if any, educational qualification were more likely to have voted Leave in the 2016 referendum (Curtice, 2018). Such voters are also more likely to be in working-class occupations, and long been more likely to support the Labour party, which was founded to promote working class representation, than the Conservative Party. The strong propensity for Leave voters to support the Conservatives would seem likely to have disrupted that traditional pattern.

Table 7: Vote choice among managerial and professional workers, and semi-routine/routine workers, 2015-2019.

General election vote	2015	2017	2019	Change 2015-2019
Managerial & professional occupations	%	%	%	
Conservative	44	41	38	-6
Labour	30	42	35	+5
Liberal Democrat	11	10	18	+7
Brexit/UKIP	6	1	1	-5
Other	10	7	9	-1
Semi-routine & routine occupations	%	%	%	
Conservative	28	36	44	+16
Labour	45	50	35	-10
Liberal Democrat	4	5	5	+1
Brexit/UKIP	12	3	3	-9
Other	11	6	13	+2

Occupational class is as measured by the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification.
Source: 2015 and 2017: British Social Attitudes

Table 7 reveals that this is indeed what has happened over the course of the two elections since 2015. In 2015 support for the Conservatives among those in managerial and professional occupations was, at 44%, sixteen points above that registered among those in semi-routine and routine (working class) occupations. However, support for the party among working class voters was as much as 16 points higher in 2019 than it had been in 2015 – the result of increases registered in 2017 and 2019 - while it was six points lower among those in managerial and professional occupations (among whom support for the party fell in both 2017 and 2019). As a result, in 2019 the Conservatives were six points more popular among those in working class jobs than they were among those in managerial and professional ones.

Meanwhile, a reverse, if somewhat less dramatic pattern was evident in the evolution of Labour's support. In 2015 the party was fifteen points less popular among those in managerial

and professional occupations than it was among those in working class jobs. In 2019, the party was equally (un)popular in both groups. Although support for the party rose in both in 2017 and then fell back again in both in 2019, the increase in 2017 was greater among those in professional and managerial occupations while the fall in 2019 was more pronounced among those in working class jobs. As a result, in 2019 a party that was founded to provide working class representation was no longer the most popular party among those in the working class, outpolled among the group by the Conservatives by 44% to 35%.

As well as reflecting differences by social class, the debate between the Conservatives and the Labour Party has also traditionally been one between 'right' and 'left' (Heath et al., 1985). Those on the right, to whom the Conservatives tend to appeal, are inclined to the view that government should focus on creating the conditions under which entrepreneurs will take risks and business prosper and thereby ensure that economic growth is created from which all can benefit. In contrast, those on the left, whose concerns tend to be shared by Labour, argue that society is too unequal and that government should be trying to reduce that inequality. Using their responses to a suite of questions that are designed to tap where voters stand on this spectrum (NatCen, 2019). Table 8 shows the level of support given to the parties by the one-third most 'left-wing', the one-third most 'right-wing' and the one-third in between.

Table 8: Vote choice, by left-right position, 2015-2017

General election vote	2015	2017	2019	Change 2015-2019
Left-wing voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	17	20	31	+14
Labour	51	60	45	-6
Liberal Democrat	7	10	10	+3
Brexit/UKIP	10	3	2	-8
Other	15	8	12	-3
Centre voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	36	39	43	+7
Labour	33	45	35	-2
Liberal Democrat	9	7	12	+3
Brexit/UKIP	11	2	1	-9
Other	11	6	8	-3
Right-wing voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	66	64	56	-10
Labour	15	23	17	+2
Liberal Democrat	7	8	17	+10
Brexit/UKIP	6	1	2	-4
Other	5	4	9	+4

Source: 2015 and 2017: British Social Attitudes

In 2015 we observe a familiar pattern (see also Curtice and Simpson, 2018). No less than two-thirds (66%) of those on the right voted for the Conservatives, compared with just over a third of those in the centre (36%) and only around one in six of those on the left (17%). In contrast, Labour won around half the vote (51%) among those on the left, secured the support of a third of those in the centre (33%), and just 15% of those on the right.

However, Brexit cut across the left-right divide (see also Sobolewska and Ford, 2020). According to the 2016 British Social Attitudes survey, there was only a seven-point difference between the proportion of left-wing voters that backed Leave and the proportion of right-wing voters that did so. So, the fact that many voters were voting in 2019 in line with their views about Brexit might have been expected to have reduced the extent to which those on the left chose Labour and those on the right were inclined to back the Conservatives.

This certainly seems to be what happened, and especially so in the case of the Conservatives. Support for the party among those on the right was ten points lower in 2019 than it had been in 2015, while the party's popularity on the left was 14 points higher. What in 2015 had been a 49-point difference in its level of popularity in the two groups was now more or less halved to a 25-point one. Meanwhile, Labour's support was six points lower than it had been in 2015 among left-wing voters (and as much as 15 points down on 2017), while it was a couple of points up among those on the right.

Instead of simply reflecting where people stand on the debate between left and right, voters' choices were now shaped to an unprecedented degree by where they were positioned on a different dimension, that between libertarians and authoritarians. Libertarians emphasise the freedom of the individual to choose their own moral code and lifestyle, and are inclined to value social diversity, while authoritarians believe that a degree of social and cultural homogeneity across society are necessary to the maintenance of social cohesion. Some of the central issues in the EU referendum, such as immigration and sovereignty, touched upon this value division, and libertarians for the most part voted to Remain in the EU while authoritarians were more likely to back Leave (Curtice, 2017).

Table 9: Vote choice, by Liberal-Authoritarian Position, 2015-17

General election vote	2015	2017	2019	Change 2015-2019
Liberal voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	33	22	23	-10
Labour	37	55	43	+6
Liberal Democrat	12	14	19	+7
Brexit/UKIP	3	1	1	-2
Other	16	7	13	-3
Centre voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	45	49	49	+4
Labour	31	37	28	-3
Liberal Democrat	6	5	11	+5
Brexit/UKIP	12	1	2	-10
Other	7	7	10	+3

Table 9 (continued)

Authoritarian voters	%	%	%	
Conservative	48	56	64	+16
Labour	28	33	23	-5
Liberal Democrat	3	3	5	+2
Brexit/UKIP	15	4	2	-13
Other	6	4	5	-1

How people vote has long been related in part to where they stand on this divide. Authoritarians have been somewhat more likely to vote Conservative while libertarians have been more inclined to back Labour (and the Liberal Democrats) (Heath et al., 1985). This can be seen in Table 9, which uses another suite of survey questions (NatCen, 2019) to divide people into the one-third most libertarian, the one-third most authoritarian, and the one-third that lie in between. Thus, in 2015, the Conservatives were backed by 48% of authoritarian voters, while their tally was a more modest 33% among libertarians. In Labour's case the equivalent figures were 28% and 37% respectively. However, these differences are much smaller than those we observed in Table 8 in respect of the voting preferences of those on the left and those on the right. The libertarian/authoritarian divide has traditionally largely played second fiddle to the left/right divide in Britain's electoral politics.

However, that was no longer clearly the case in 2019. For the Conservatives at least, whether someone was a libertarian or an authoritarian was more strongly related to whether they voted for the party than whether they were on the left or the right. The Conservatives won the support of 64% of authoritarians but only 23% of libertarians – a 41-point gap that dwarfed the 25-point difference in the level of support for the party between those on the left and those on the right. In Labour's case the party obtained the support of 43% of libertarians (among whom it faced considerable competition from the Liberal Democrats) and just 23% of authoritarians – a 20-point difference that is twice the gap that was in evidence in 2015 and was only a little less than the 28-point gap in 2019 between those on the left and those on the right.

So, the decision of most voters in 2019 to back whichever party reflected their view on the principle of Brexit, an issue that cut across the traditional lines of party division in Britain, resulted in a substantial reshaping of the contours of party support. The traditional class division disappeared while the parties found themselves reflecting divisions between libertarians and authoritarians at least as much as the traditional left-right divide. Brexit was apparently of sufficient importance to voters that they were willing to depart markedly from how they had traditionally voted.

A SUCCESS?

We have established that most voters did express their views about the principle of remaining or leaving the EU in how they voted – indeed to such an extent that some of the traditional patterns of electoral politics were upended – albeit that the election was less successful at registering people's views about how Brexit should proceed or might perhaps be stopped. But does the fact that the choice made by individual voters reflected their views on the principle of Brexit mean that the Conservatives' success in winning an overall majority was therefore clear confirmation that, four years on, a majority of voters did still wish to leave the EU?

One immediate reason for wondering whether that was indeed the case comes from tallying the total share of the vote won by those parties campaigning for Brexit and totalling the votes won by those parties willing to back a second referendum. After all, given that we have seen that Remain voters and Leave supporters were equally – and highly – likely to have voted in line with their current views on the principle of Brexit, tallying the votes in this way should provide a good indication of the balance of opinion among those who made it to the polling station. And this calculation reveals that the parties in favour of a second referendum outpolled those who were in favour of Brexit by 52% to 47%.

This tally is also consistent with the evidence of opinion polls at the time. These not only suggest that a small majority were in favour of Remain at the time of the election, but also that there was no discernible movement in favour of Leave (or Remain) during the election campaign. The last half-dozen polls to be conducted shortly before polling day on average found that 53% said that they would vote Remain while 47% would back Leave – just as the polls that were conducted at the beginning of the campaign had done (whatukthinks.org, nd). Meanwhile, our own surveys pointed to 54% in favour of Remain in September 2019, 55% during the election campaign and 53% afterwards (Curtice, 2020). The outcome of the election in terms of votes for pro-Brexit and pro-second referendum parties appears to have reflected a balance of opinion on the principle of Brexit that had been in evidence well before the election was called.

But if Remain voters and Leave supporters were equally likely to reflect their views on Brexit in how they voted, the manner in which they distributed their support was – as Table 6 above revealed – very different. Remain supporters divided their support between Labour and the Liberal Democrats, with some backing the Greens or one of the nationalist parties – a division that reflected the pull of past party loyalties and the inability of either party leader to unify Remain supporters. In contrast, their Leave counterparts voted heavily for just one party, the Conservatives. It is the division among Remain voters and the relative unity of Leave supporters that was the principal foundation behind the Conservatives' success. It was enough to deliver the party a twelve-point lead over their principal opponents, Labour, a lead that under the single member plurality system was translated into an overall parliamentary majority of eighty. As a result, Brexit was implemented, even though the votes cast in the election did not affirm the continued existence of the pro-Leave majority that was in evidence in the 2016 referendum.

CONCLUSION

The introduction of referendums as part of Britain's democratic life has proven controversial. Questions have been raised about both their desirability and their effectiveness (Independent Commission on Referendums, 2018; Le Duc 2003; Qvortup, 2006; Setälä, 2006). Does it make sense to simplify potentially complex public policy choices into two alternative options? Do voters have the capacity make an informed decision about the choices between them? Indeed, are voters and the political system generally well served by the hyperbole and rhetoric that can surround a referendum campaign (Marshall and Drieschova, 2020)?

Yet perhaps a similarly critical eye should be cast over the use of elections as a means of resolving public policy issues. Political parties on both sides of the Brexit debate eventually agreed with each other that the issue of whether and how Brexit should be implemented or stopped should be put to voters in an election. One potential advantage of this approach was that voters could be presented with more than a dichotomous choice, and enable them to express their views on alternative ways of implementing Brexit and on alternative ways of (perhaps) stopping it. Yet in practice that advantage was not realised.

Rather, what most voters did do was to reflect their views on the dichotomous choice between Remain and Leave in how they voted, thereby (ironically) turning the ballot into a quasi-referendum. In so doing many proved willing to leave aside the traditional loyalties and motivations that had influenced them in the past. Yet despite the willingness of voters to heed the politicians' call to use the election as a way of resolving the Brexit, it is far from clear that the outcome of the election reflected the majority view on the principle of Brexit. The choice that voters made on their ballot paper was refracted by a party system and an electoral system that proved more advantageous to one side in the Brexit debate than the other. Perhaps if binary choices are to be put to voters, perhaps dichotomous referendums rather than multiple-choice elections are not necessarily such a bad mechanism after all?

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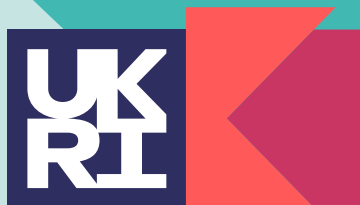
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