

Brexit, British politics and values

In the four years since the 2016 EU referendum, the old rules of British politics have been ripped up. For decades, it was assumed that Labour could count on the support of the working class while the Conservatives could rely on the backing of more affluent voters. These rules no longer seem to apply.

At the 2017 election, Labour won Canterbury, a seat held by the Conservatives since 1931. Then, in 2019 the Conservatives won Bassetlaw, a Labour bastion since 1935 and one of a swathe of seats captured from Labour to seal Boris Johnson's majority.

As they try to work out what has changed, political analysts and academics have focussed on the idea of voters' values. Before the 2016 referendum, the study of voting patterns in the UK had largely turned away from values and identity-based models of voting and focussed on based on the 'valence' effects of party identity, the appeal of party leaders, and competence. This model of voting behaviour became almost '[universally accepted](#)'. While the period since the EU Referendum has seen renewed interest in values and identity as influences on political behaviour, it is a mistake to think of values divides as 'new' or as created by the EU referendum. These divides were evident in 2015, and [before](#), as well as in the two elections since the referendum.

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Think pieces now abound, discussing how [Labour can win back the Red Wall](#), how the [Conservatives can hold on to it](#), how Britain navigates its '[culture wars](#)' and how Brexit has divided us. But what exactly are social and political values? How are they measured and how are they distinct from attitudes,

opinions and party preferences? This piece addresses these questions, in the context of the political behaviour of the British electorate.

There and back again

Expecting the [unexpected](#) had become the new norm in British electoral politics. At the 2015 election, the Conservatives gained an unexpected Commons majority, the Liberal Democrats collapsed, the SNP swept to an unprecedented victory in Scotland and UKIP won 12.6% of the vote (but not a parliamentary foothold). This seemed to herald a fragmentation of British politics, as commentators pointed to ‘revolts’ on both the [left](#) and [right](#) threatening the dominance of the two-party system.

The result of the 2016 EU referendum also confounded (most) expectations, and just 12 months later commentators and political scientists were again caught off balance as the Conservatives lost their majority, Labour witnessed a dramatic increase in support over the short campaign, and the two-party share of the vote returned to its highest level since 1970. None of this seemed to fit the prevailing narrative of a fragmenting party system or models which put [leadership](#) and competence in the foreground.

As the 2019 election approached, psephologists [could be forgiven for exercising caution](#): despite the clear Conservative lead in the polls, most were keen not to take a Tory victory for granted. This time there was to be no last-minute shock, though the result was equally dramatic as Labour lost seat after seat in what became known as the ‘[Red Wall](#)’. The 2019 result was a tantalising mix of fragmentation on the one hand and a return to one half of the two-party politics of old on the other.

How do we begin to grasp these changes? Since the EU referendum, two groups of voters have dominated political narratives. These are the ‘[Labour Leave](#)’ voters, who were at the heart of so many arguments within Labour over [the second referendum policy](#), and ‘[Tory Remain](#)’ voters, who were expected to be uncomfortable with the newest iteration of their party led by Boris Johnson.

In the end, it was the [Labour Leavers](#), particularly those in what came to be called the ‘[Red Wall](#)’ seats which spanned the North of England and North

Wales, who made the headlines at the 2019 election, as seat after seat fell to the Conservatives. But the failure of the [Conservative Remain](#) vote to move *en masse* to the Liberal Democrats was also an important element in securing the 80-seat majority.

Together the behaviour of these two groups proved devastating for the Labour party, which lost votes on both sides, while the Conservatives balanced their moderate losses to the Liberal Democrats with gains from Labour.

What do the ‘Labour Leavers’ and ‘Conservative Remainers’ have in common? In both these groups there is a tension between their economic preferences and social values. The ‘Labour Leave’ voters tend to be towards the ‘left’ on economics (in favour, for example, of redistribution and nationalisation) but ‘conservative’ on social issues such as bringing back the death penalty and respect for traditional values.

In contrast, Conservative Remain voters are more likely to lean to the ‘right’ on economics (favouring the free market) but be more liberal on social issues (such as rejecting the death penalty). Because economic preferences are most commonly seen as an expression of self-interest, they are rarely labelled as ‘values’ and are contrasted with the ‘social’ values that were much more closely associated with [the referendum vote](#).

The combination of their values (both economic and social) is crucial for understanding these groups (and others in the electorate). For these groups in particular the choice of party at the ballot box is more difficult as they are not fully in step with the positions of any of the [party choices on offer](#). To put it another way they are ‘[cross-pressured](#)’, since their value positions push and pull them towards different parties among the relatively limited choices available.

What are values?

How do we define values? At a general level, values represent ‘[core conceptions of the desirable](#)’. They are not beliefs about *what is* but rather desires about *what ought to be* – not a diagnosis of society’s ills but rather a picture of what a healthy society should look like. Values are ‘enduring’: they are more permanent than attitudes, more akin to broad musical tastes than to a

like or dislike of a particular piece of music; they are ‘latent’, they cannot be directly measured by simply asking people what values they hold.

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Three [further characteristics](#) of values are especially relevant for understanding their influence on political behaviour. First, an individual’s values transcend the specific situation or moment: our idea of what is a desirable goal does not depend on current circumstances. In the political sphere this means that the kind of society we want to see does not change in response to the particular context in a given election, and whether we value tolerance of the unconventional or the protection of traditional ways of life doesn’t change when a new party leader is elected.

Second, values ‘guide the selection or evaluation of behaviour and events’. This is an important feature of values in the political sphere as it [highlights](#) that ‘in lieu of ideology ... values function as general standards for evaluating candidates, policies and other objects in the political universe’ .

Finally, values are ordered according to relative importance – what in the study of public opinion might be termed ‘salience’. Though all values represent desirable outcomes, they are not all equally important to a person. How these values are ordered, which values, or end states, are most important may change over time, even if the values themselves are stable and enduring. In the context of the 2019 election, for instance, ‘getting Brexit done’ might be more important than restoring state ownership of the railways.

Beyond left and right

Until recently it remained commonplace to [talk](#) of the left and right of British politics as if this were a single dimension along which voters and parties could be aligned, and which broadly reflected the politics of economic redistribution and social class. However, the EU referendum vote was largely unrelated to this ‘old’ politics of [left and right](#). The [multi-dimensionality](#) of the political positions of voters had been recognised for some time, with an emergent

consensus that (at least) [two dimensions](#) are needed to capture the political values of the electorates of western democracies – one which captures the orientation of the electorate to issues around state intervention in the economic sphere and another which is related to ‘social’ issues. In the UK, the connection of the referendum vote with social rather than economic values pushed this ‘social values’ dimension into the political spotlight.

The social values divide is often contrasted with the ‘old’ politics of class, with the ‘new’ dimension variously framed as [‘liberal-authoritarian’](#), [‘post-materialist’](#), [‘Gal-Tan’](#), and [‘cultural’](#); this ‘new’ politics dimension is also often further associated with [xenophobic and nativist positions](#).

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Newly salient issues of immigration, sovereignty and political trust are all elements which connect to this social values dimension. Nonetheless, economic divides did not simply disappear, and continued to structure voting behaviour alongside these new issue divides. While many commentators have suggested that the post-referendum period has seen the demise of the [‘left-right’ divide](#), it continues to correlate with party choice: voters choosing the Labour party in 2019 were on average more economically left-wing than voters choosing the Conservative party. But this was also the first election where the difference between the average Labour and Conservative voter on economics was smaller than the difference between them on social issues.

Rather than trying to adjudicate between the economic and the social, we need to understand that it is the way in which they combine that creates the tension recognised in the ‘Labour Leaver’ and ‘Tory Remainder’ groups. A person who holds broadly left-wing views on economic issues but is toward the ‘authoritarian’ end of the ‘new’ politics scale may well feel they lack representation in the party space. But this cannot be explained by reference to either one of their sets of core values – there are parties which represent left-wing stances on the economy and there are parties which represent the more ‘authoritarian’ end of the social values dimension. However, right now at least, there is arguably no party of any size which represents both positions, and it is the location of the voter in the value space defined by *both* old and

new politics which leads to this disconnect.

Measuring political values in the British electorate

Since the 2016 Referendum, the most used source of data for understanding the values of the British public is the [British Election Study Internet Panel \(BESIP\)](#). Starting in 2014, this study has followed a panel of the British electorate at regular intervals and provides valuable core data for understanding voting dynamics across three general elections and two referenda. The study includes questions designed to measure the value dimensions described above: an 'old' politics dimension concerned with economic justice, the distribution of resources and economic power (which is commonly called the 'left-right' dimension) and a dimension concerned with 'personal and political freedom...equality, tolerance of minorities...' and criminal justice (most commonly been labelled the 'libertarian-authoritarian' dimension). Exactly how the latter dimension should be labelled is a source of lively debate, but since the measures included in the BESIP scale definitely capture elements of attitudes to authority and liberty rather than issues relating to the environment, personal morality, or the tolerance of particular groups, the label 'liberal-authoritarian' is used here.

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These two value dimensions are thought of in theoretical terms as being uncorrelated with each other. This means that it is not possible to predict where a voter is positioned on the 'liberal-authoritarian' dimension by knowing their position on the 'left-right' dimension; more simply just because someone supports renationalising the railways does not necessarily mean they will also be against the reintroduction of the death penalty.

The two value scales are each measured using five statements, and the respondents are asked whether they agree or disagree with each item on a five-point scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree.'

Attitudinal items for the left-right scale are:

- Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off
- Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers
- Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth
- There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
- Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance

Attitudinal items for the liberal-authoritarian scale are:

- Young people don't have enough respect for traditional values
- Censorship is necessary to uphold moral values
- For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence
- Schools should teach children to obey authority
- People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

For the purposes of analyses presented below the scales are created so that low values represent the 'left' and 'liberal' ends of the scales, respectively.

A long-standing feature of the British electorate is that, using these measures of values, the average voter is located to the 'left' on the economic dimension and to the 'authoritarian' end of the social dimension, or as many commentators now put it 'left on economics, right on culture'. While a focus on the absolute position is helpful for assessing how the average voter has changed over time, it is important not to get too hung up on these absolute measures as the precise items used in the scales can change these positions. However, considering the relative positions of different groups within a 'value space' defined by these two dimensions is a simple but powerful way of thinking about British political divides.

Value spaces

Positioning different groups of voters within this value space not only allows us to understand the impact of values on political preferences but also the

structural relationships between values and socio-demographics. For example, if we look at the position of groups defined by their educational levels in this value space, we see that there are virtually no differences between education groups in their economic values (as represented by the distance between them on the horizontal axis) but **large differences** on the liberal-authoritarian dimension (the vertical axis), with those with higher level qualifications being more liberal than those with lower level qualifications. In sharp contrast, comparing groups defined by household income we see the differences between groups are primarily along the economic value dimension (these groups spread out along the horizontal axis but are in broadly the same position on the vertical axis).

Using the same value space to understand political preferences from the 2015 election, we can see that the values divide revealed by the EU referendum predated the vote – though it was thrust into the spotlight by it. In 2015, the key divide between the two major parties lay along the economic dimension. Nonetheless voters differed on the social dimension in 2015, but this difference was smaller than it was for economic values.

The positions of voters for the minor parties in England (UKIP and Liberal Democrats) lay between the two major parties on this economic dimension, but were each further towards the ends of the social values scale, with UKIP voters the most socially authoritarian and the Liberal Democrat voters the most socially liberal. Voting in the EU referendum bisected the space between Labour and the Conservatives with Leave and Remain voters virtually identical in their economic values but in similar positions to UKIP and the Liberal Democrats respectively on social values.

Comparing with the previous chart, the EU referendum vote was related strongly to values that vary significantly according to education levels and not to values that vary significantly with income levels. The referendum politicised a divide which had previously been most **closely related** to ‘third party’ voting in general elections, and one that was strongly correlated with education level.

The effect of this movement of voters between parties at subsequent general elections can be seen by looking at how the average positions of different voters had changed by 2019. While the move of some Labour Leave voters to the Conservatives dragged the average position of the Conservatives to the

left, the Labour (and SNP) vote moved to a more liberal position overall, so that by 2019 the difference between the average Conservative and the average Labour voter was larger on the liberal-authoritarian dimension than it was on the economic dimension.

For some, this represents the starting point of a [lasting realignment](#) of British politics along 'Brexit' lines, as voters became even more likely to support a party which shared their Brexit preferences than they had been in 2017. But even in the 'Brexit' election of 2019, voters are also divided on economic lines. Differences in economic values persist among different income groups, and with Brexit, at last, 'done', there is potential for these economic values to reassert themselves.

Return of the (economic) king?

The Covid-19 crisis has seen the emergence of 'lockdown scepticism' as a political position (though only among a [small section of the public](#)) and some have suggested that this follows the Brexit divide. But drawing on data from the BESIP collected in June 2020, there is little evidence to suggest that lockdown scepticism among voters (as [distinct from Conservative MPs](#)) is related to Brexit identities, or more broadly to the liberal-authoritarian values dimension.

The key difference between those who support or oppose lockdowns to control the pandemic lies on the economic dimension: those who are to the right on economics (favouring a smaller state and against redistribution of incomes) are more likely to be lockdown sceptics than those who are on the left. In other words, the Covid-19 crisis itself has laid bare economic divisions: the debate on lockdowns ("Should we prioritise saving lives or the economy? Should personal freedoms be sacrificed to protect the NHS?") is more closely related to the 'old' politics of economics than to the 'new' divides captured in the culture wars. In the months and years ahead, it seems likely that it will be the distinct combinations of positions in the value space that dominate British politics rather than any simple binary divides. We have an electorate that is fragmented rather than polarised.

Moreover, as the health crisis abates and the economy reopens, we are likely to see the politics of economics, taxation, social security and how to rebuild businesses and public services taking centre-stage in political debate. This

rebuilding may be far from the minds of voters while we are still in the midst of the pandemic, but it could easily undermine a Conservative coalition of voters otherwise united by different concerns. Conservative voters in 2019 who had also voted Conservative in 2017 are identical in their social values to those who had voted Labour in 2017 then switched to the Conservatives in 2019; however, these two groups are a considerable distance apart on economic values. Given this, the Conservative coalition may indeed come under increasing pressure if economic issues come to dominate the political landscape.

Values and post-Brexit politics

The 2019 General Election demonstrated both the challenges and opportunities for political parties faced with an electorate fragmented into distinct value groups. For the Labour party this was seen in a crumbling of their support: the party lost support across all types of constituency – rural and urban, Leave and Remain, the well-educated and diverse city seats and the old industrial seats. But this lost support did not all flow in one direction, and no single party was the beneficiary. This is the result of fragmentation within the values of the electorate: significant numbers of previous Labour voters went to all parties, or did not vote at all.

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On the other hand, the Conservative party was able to build a new electoral coalition from the fragments of voters available, drawing together those on the right (and centre) economically with those on the left who were less ‘liberal’ in their political outlook. The difficulty in reassembling fragments is that the fault lines remain, weaknesses along which splits can reopen. Understanding these fragments and where the fault lines lie is critical to the success of political parties over the next five years. Conservative efforts to keep ‘culture war’ issues in the limelight are a symptom of an economic divide among their voters that is not easily bridged. Likewise, the Labour party’s desire to move on from Brexit to focus on the economic costs of the Covid-19 crisis for families speaks to trying to unite a coalition on the left that was split apart along a divide in social values in 2019.

All eyes are now on how every twist and turn of political debate is received in the Red Wall, a further subset of the Leave-voting areas that have been the focus of so much political journalism since 2016. Voters in these areas who switched from Labour to Conservative are sought out for their views on everything from ‘[vaccine nationalism](#)’ to [food standards](#). That these voters had been leaving Labour for some time is well-established, but these voters are different from the rest of the Conservative coalition as they do not share a desire to roll back the state, [remove workers’ rights](#) or deregulate markets. A shared identity around a vote cast (by the time of the next election) eight years previously may not be enough to bind them together.

That voters have distinct value positions on both economic and social issues is key to understanding how to unite the voters of Bassetlaw and Canterbury. While commentators continue to think in binary oppositions, to see an electorate divided along a single axis, the new coalitions that can be forged from electoral fragments defined by economic and social values and not rooted in ‘old’ loyalties of class or party risk being overlooked. It is a long road to the 2024 election – one full of as yet unknown twists and turns. But understanding the value orientations and value priorities of voters may help all parties to navigate the bends more easily.

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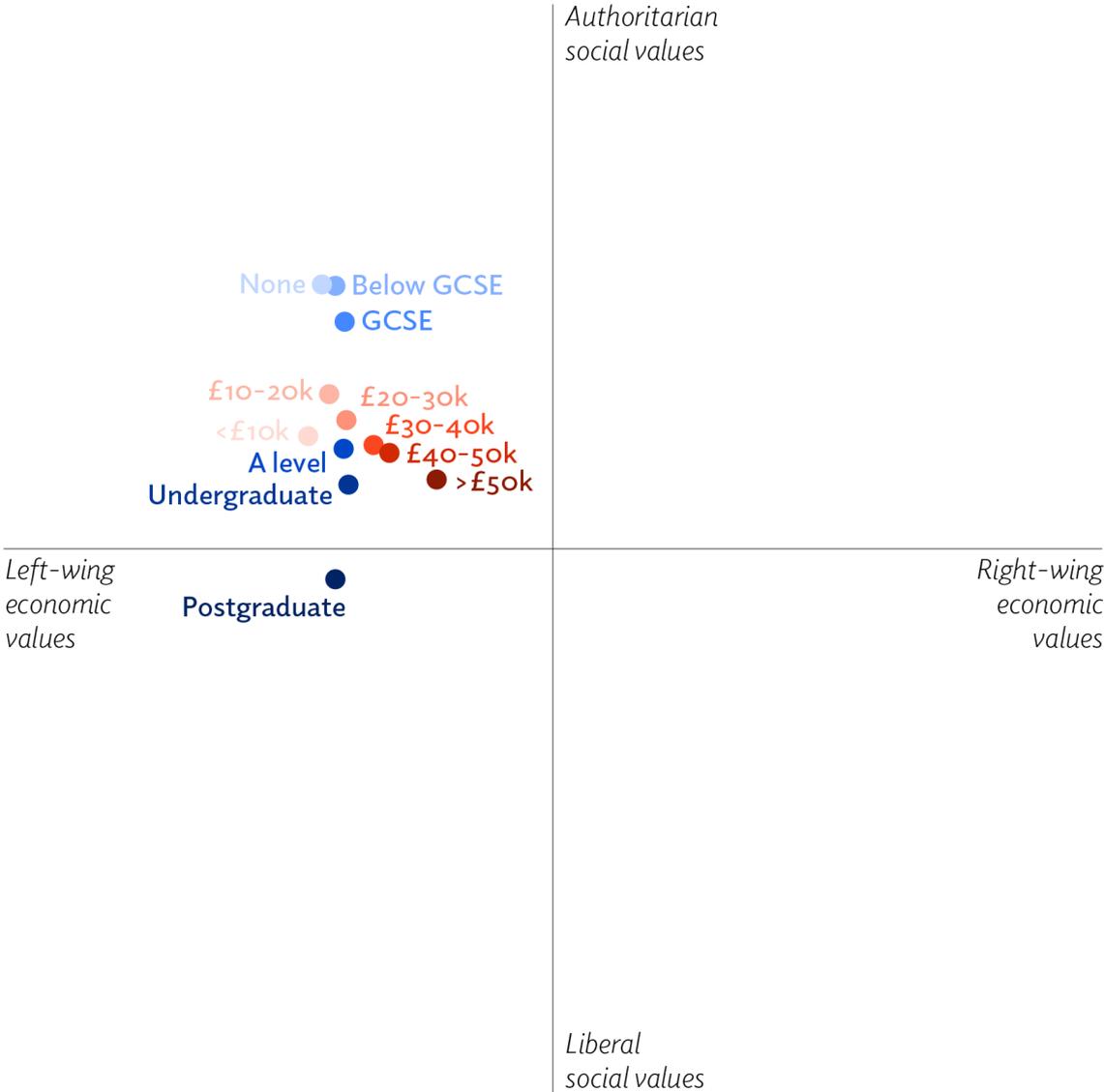




Source: Creative Commons
Credit: Colin Doctarow

Education has a large impact on social values, while income levels have a greater impact on economic values

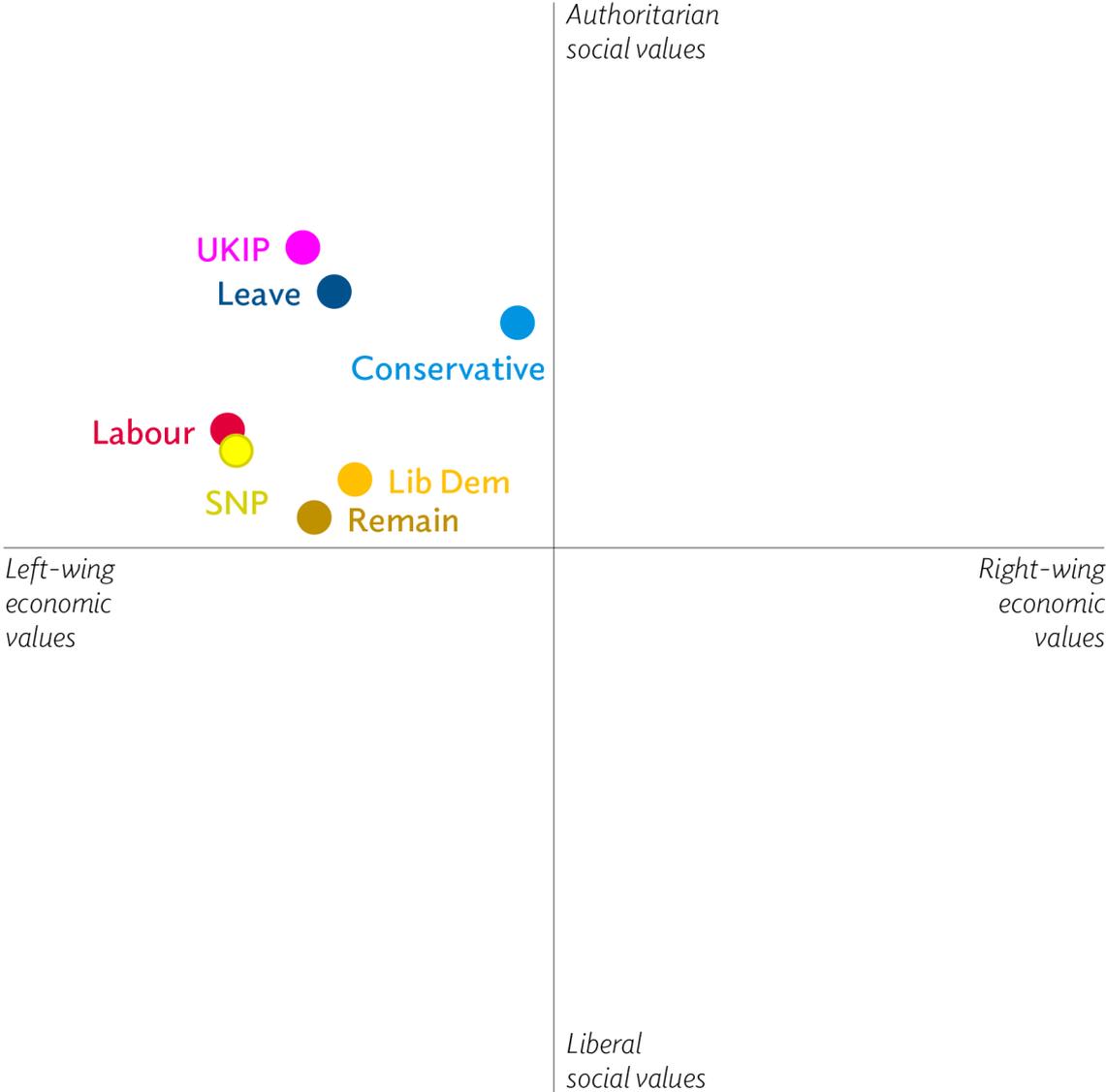
Mean position in the value space, by highest education level and by income band, 2020.



Source: British Election Study Internet Panel.

The values of leave and remain voters differ more for social issues than economic ones

Position of the average voter in the value space, by political party in 2015 and referendum vote in 2016.

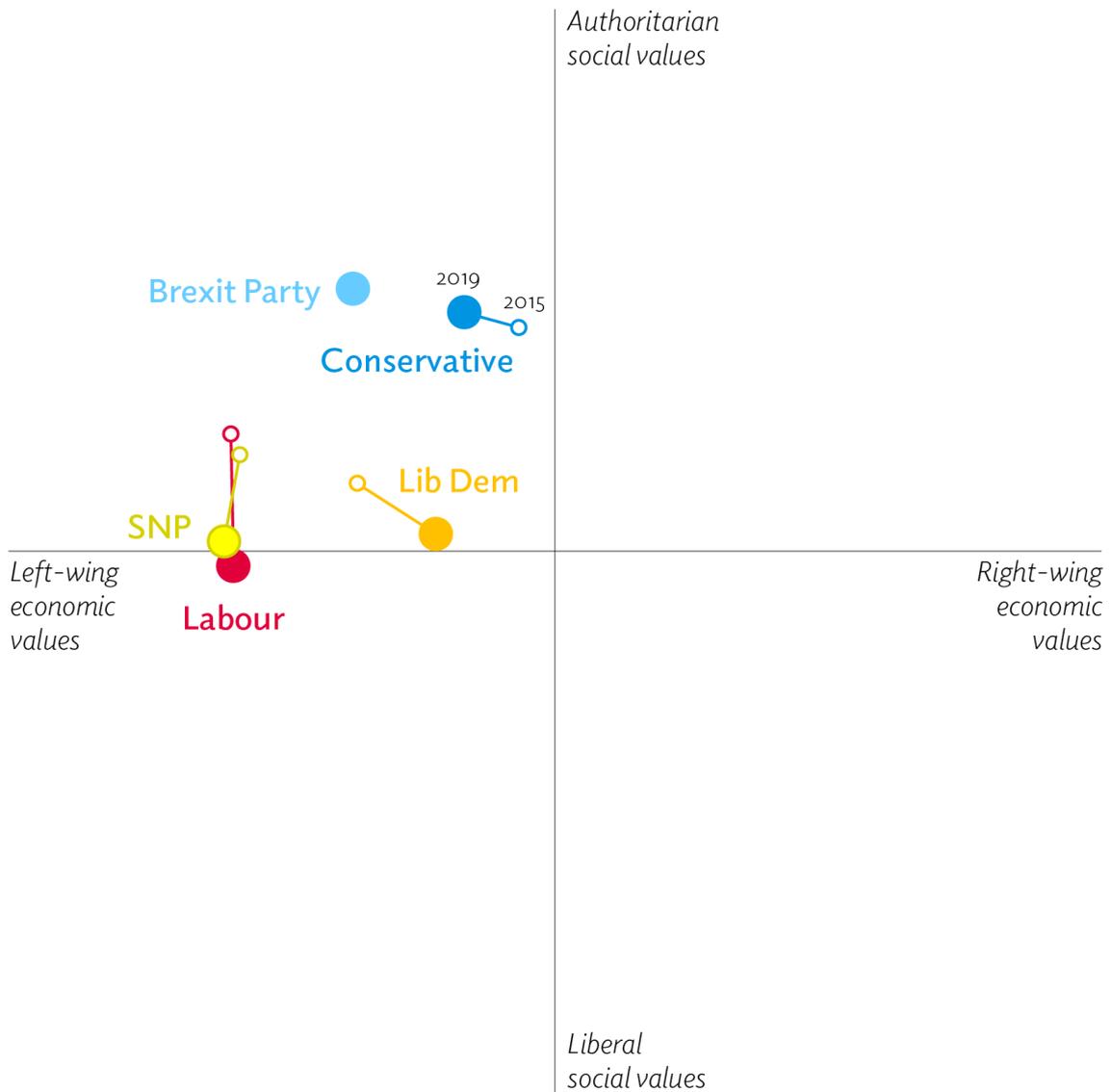


Source: British Election Study Internet Panel.

Conservative voters have moved to the left economically, while Labour voters have become more socially liberal

Position of the average voter in the value space, by political party in 2015 and 2019.

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Source: British Election Study Internet Panel.



Credit: Matthew Horwood / Contributor / Getty Images