

## The British general election of 2019 and the future of British politics

It is two years since the United Kingdom went to the polling stations on a cold December day, returning Boris Johnson to Number 10 Downing Street with both a clear mandate to 'Get Brexit Done' and the parliamentary majority to do so. This long read draws on material from the newly published authoritative account of that election – 'The British General Election of 2019' – the 21<sup>st</sup> volume in a series that began chronicling every British general election from 1945.

It is difficult to imagine how the fractious Parliament that was dissolved on 6 November 2019 could possibly have guided the UK through the Covid-19 crisis that has engulfed the world in the two years since the British general election. Indeed, precisely why the parties at Westminster voted to approve an early election in the first place – and whether this was really such a wise idea for all concerned – has been the subject of much [debate](#). But agree to it they did, and, by doing so, they changed the course of British politics decisively. What follows is an account of how the resulting Conservative victory came about, the issues and personalities of the campaign and the longer-term changes that lay behind the three central factors driving the outcome – Brexit, Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn.

### *Brexit and the shadow of the 2017 British general election*

In 2019, it was the spectre of the previous election that haunted the campaigns of both the main parties. The Conservatives, though they were eventually returned to government for a third successive term in 2017, were traumatised by the unexpected loss of their majority, and behaved in 2019 like someone determined to change their ways after a brush with death.

Everything the party could change, it did, whether that be its offer to the electorate, the way it constructed and sold that offer, or the way it managed the campaign – both at headquarters and on the ground. The greater urgency of the Brexit crisis in 2019, after two years of Parliamentary deadlock, helped to ensure that Johnson's relentlessly repeated 'Get Brexit Done' slogan resonated with the public and thereby reduced the appeal of Labour's 'something for everyone' compromise messaging.

The team around Jeremy Corbyn, on the other hand, saw the 2017 campaign as a historic success, where the bold radicalism that critics had attacked as electorally toxic instead delivered an unprecedented campaign surge. The validation of the 2017 campaign meant that, in contrast with the Conservatives, key weaknesses in party strategy, communications and management went unaddressed in the Parliament that followed. These weaknesses were most obvious around Brexit.

The successful trick Labour had pulled off in 2017 was to convince Labour-leaning Leave voters that the party backed Leave and Labour-leaning Remain voters that the party backed Remain. That trick proved impossible to repeat in 2019. Instead, the party achieved the opposite, with Labour Leave voters seeing Corbyn's party as obstructing Brexit, while many Remain voters saw Labour, and Corbyn in particular, as not Remain enough.

Labour was caught in a trap during the 2017-19 Parliament: it could not afford to alienate the Remain-leaning activists and voters who provided the bulk of its 2017 support, yet could not win a subsequent election without a stronger showing among Leave voters. The party had no choice but to try and bridge the Brexit divide, yet Corbyn's efforts to do so left Labour with a Frankenstein policy (a renegotiated deal followed by a referendum in which it would not pick a side) that neither side of a polarised electorate found attractive or convincing.

This failure over Brexit policy fed into a broader failure over campaign strategy as a deeply divided Leader's Office was sucked into endless arguments over whether to focus on Leave or Remain voters, crippling the Labour campaign and undermining its ability to speak persuasively to either group. This strategic dispute, in turn, stemmed from the most fundamental failure of all – the failure of Corbyn to lead.

One paradox of the 2019 'Brexit election' is that the two parties who took the most strident positions on the issue both failed to make gains. The Liberal Democrats sought to end Brexit immediately and unilaterally, while the Brexit Party (as its name suggested) wanted to enact it immediately and unilaterally, without even agreeing an exit deal with the EU.

The Liberal Democrats returned a meagre cohort of MPs to the Commons for the third successive British general election, and their leader Jo Swinson was automatically removed having lost her seat, her 144-day tenure proving the shortest in the party's history. Yet the 2019 outcome was not wholly negative for the party, as the geography of Liberal Democrat support was reorganised by Brexit in a way which may create a platform for future success.

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Two of the biggest strategic problems for the Liberal Democrats in 2019 – deciding where the party was strong and convincing local voters that it was a credible force– will be easier to solve at the next British general election. There is now a very [clear battleground for the Liberal Democrats](#) to fight on, with a swathe of target seats where it starts in a credible second place. Perhaps Swinson will be to her successor, Ed Davey, as Theresa May was to Johnson – the leader who bequeaths an electoral map which forms the basis for a breakthrough performance by their successor. Time will tell.

What of the Brexit Party? Though it failed to secure any Westminster representation at the 2017 election, its indirect impact at that poll was substantial: by splitting the Leave vote in Labour seats, Nigel Farage's latest vehicle may have cost the Conservatives as many as 25 gains from Labour.

Farage's decision to stand down candidates in Conservative seats at the 2019 British general election may therefore rank as one of the most consequential campaign decisions taken by any politician in recent years. Johnson's path to a majority would have been much rockier had Farage continued to press his case in Conservative constituencies.

### *'New' divides in the electorate*

Brexit did not just influence party strategy; it was also a clear influence on the choices that voters made. As the chart below shows, the Conservatives (in part due to the Brexit Party standing down in Conservative-held seats) were able to consolidate the Leave vote, with three in four Leave voters voting Conservative. In contrast, Labour managed to secure only half of the Remain vote.

It is noteworthy that even in this 'Brexit' election the Conservatives won one in votes among Remainers. For many of these 'softer' Tory Remainers, fear of a Corbyn led government trumped opposition to Brexit.

### **The Conservatives secured the support of far more Leavers than Labour did with Remainers**

The consolidation of Leave support powered many of the Conservative victories in the **'red wall'** which grabbed post-British general election headlines and has continued to loom large in the **political narrative** since 2019. These were indeed striking successes, with Conservative MPs returned from constituencies which had rejected the party for two generations or more.

Yet the story here was not a simple one of Johnson's unique appeal overcoming decades of anti-Conservative sentiment. The Conservatives' 2019 vote gains were relatively modest in many of these seats, and the party's breakthroughs often owed much to larger advances made by Theresa May in 2017. Meanwhile, Labour's **decline** in many 'red wall' seats was a **story which ran back decades** as disaffection with the party, and in particular the feeling that it no longer represented them, increased in small-town communities that felt increasingly left behind economically and were uncomfortable with the socially-liberal stances advocated by Labour activists and MPs.

The overwhelming focus on Conservative breakthroughs in the Leave-voting, historically Labour 'red wall' also risks distorting our understanding of an election result which depended on swings to the Conservatives in more traditional marginals, and on limited swings against the party in the traditionally blue parts of the country which were less enamoured of Johnson or Brexit. In many of England's wealthier and more Remain-leaning seats, the

Conservatives benefitted from the same forces which, until 2019, cushioned Labour's decline in the 'red wall' – strong starting positions and large initial majorities.

The Conservative vote declined sharply in most of the seats in Berkshire, Buckinghamshire, Cambridgeshire, Oxfordshire and Surrey, yet in most cases large majorities and a split opposition vote still left the party comfortably ahead, and intense opposition to Corbyn may have softened the swings against Johnson. The Home Counties may not be so easy to defend against less polarising opposition in future, although, just as the Red Wall began to crack in 2017 before it finally collapsed in 2019, it may well take more than one electoral cycle before significant numbers of Tory MPs lose their seats.

The influx of Leave voters powered increases in the Conservatives' national vote share in both 2017 and 2019 – a remarkable achievement for an incumbent government. The result is an unusually broad electoral coalition, which may be hard to hold together if the issues that forged it – first immigration, then Brexit – are no longer at the top of the political agenda.

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With Corbyn gone and Brexit done, it is not clear what can hold together the new and old wings of the Tory party in Parliament or the country in the next British general election. The return of [economic arguments may pull it apart](#). Johnson's '[levelling up](#)' economic agenda, for example, requires old Tory voters to pay for investment in new Tory seats, while Rishi Sunak's desire for traditional fiscal discipline will mean keeping down costs in the red wall to placate the taxpayers of the blue wall.

While the Conservatives struggle to hold together a [broad coalition](#), Labour faces the opposite problem of trying to rebuild one. Labour's share of the vote has not fallen as far as it did in 1983 or 2010. However, the party's drastically reduced cohort of MPs (the smallest since 1935) reflects the problems posed by growing social and geographical concentration of support. Most Labour MPs are now returned in constituencies which are, in important respects, poles apart from the large majority of seats which rejected the party in 2019, and

where it must renew its appeal if it is to govern again. Labour is now, more than ever, the party of the young, graduates, and ethnic minorities. It is dominant where such groups are concentrated – London, the other big cities, university towns – and weak where they are thin on the ground.

The political distance between these groups and the voters whom Labour needs to attract back from the Conservatives can be illustrated by considering the [political values](#) of the ‘average’ Labour and Conservative voter and how this has changed over the period since 1992.

### **Labour’s vote has become more socially liberal – and far more so than the Conservatives’**

The average position of Labour voters has moved into the most liberal and economically left-wing terrain. This has not (primarily) been driven by a change in the values of individual voters (though on aggregate the electorate have become a little more liberal as more highly educated generations enter the voting register) but rather by the departure of more ‘moderate’ voters from the party.

In contrast, the average Conservative voter, while still to the right of the average Labour voter on economic values, now occupies a position close to the average Labour voter in the period 1992 – 2010. To build an election-winning voter coalition Labour needs to reach out across the divides on both economic and social values and recover these centre ground voters from the Conservatives.

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#### *Leadership and vote switching*

The Labour party was, in the end, caught in a pincer movement in 2019. Losing votes directly to the Conservatives was especially costly, but losses to other Remain parties were also important.

Leadership played an important role in this British general election, but the impact on Leave and Remain voters was different. Boris Johnson was not an especially popular leader. Indeed, comparison of British Election Study data from both campaigns reveals Johnson was less popular throughout the 2019 campaign than Theresa May was in the 2017 campaign. Johnson was also less popular on polling day 2019 than Jeremy Corbyn had been on polling day 2017. But in 2019 Johnson had two crucial advantages. First, Corbyn's ratings had fallen so far that even Johnson's lacklustre ratings gave him a large overall lead.

### **Johnson wasn't more popular than Theresa May – but a lot more popular than Corbyn**

Second, while Johnson was not a uniquely popular figure among the public as a whole, he was nonetheless a key 'pull' factor for the overwhelmingly Leave voters who switched directly from Labour to the Conservatives in 2019. This appeal was itself intertwined with Brexit. Johnson's iconic status as a Leave campaigner and supporter made him more appealing to Leave voters and made his 'Get Brexit Done' slogan more credible and resonant. While Johnson's own ratings appear to be a more important factor in pulling voters from Labour to the Conservatives than Brexit alignments, these ratings themselves were driven by his status as a true Brexiteer.

### **More than anything else, liking Boris Johnson (and being a Leaver) made people much more likely to vote Conservative**

Leadership also mattered for the voters who switched from Labour to another Remain party. While Jo Swinson's positive ratings were a significant pull factor here, larger still was the 'push' factor of disliking Jeremy Corbyn. As with Johnson's appeal to Leave voters, Corbyn's toxicity to strong Remain supporters was bound up with his reputation on Brexit. Corbyn's compromises over Brexit and efforts to keep options appealing to Leave voters on the table had damaged his credibility with strong Remain supporters, who did not trust him to deliver their preferred outcome of a second referendum.

However, this Brexit-driven distrust was intertwined with other concerns about the Labour leader, not least the reputational damage done by repeated controversies over anti-semitism and foreign policy throughout the 2017-19

Parliament. Labour also paid a price for its economic radicalism, as more right-wing (or, at least, less intensely left-wing) voters were more likely to switch from Labour to other Remain parties – suggesting such ‘centrist’ voters were put off by the Corbynites’ vast and expensive economic transformation agenda.

While both party leaders influenced voters’ choices, both were in turn only at the helm because of earlier shifts in the electorate. The collapse of the Conservative vote in the first part of 2019, in part driven by the emergence of the Brexit Party, certainly helped to secure Johnson’s victory in his party’s leadership contest. The shift in the Labour party’s membership and voter-base to substantively more liberal and left-wing positions from 2015 in part explains how Corbyn came to be elected leader of his party. Corbyn’s campaign surge in 2017 in turn secured his position throughout the subsequent Parliament – despite falling ratings and rising discontent.

### **Jo Swinson did pull towards the Lib Dems but dislike of Jeremy Corbyn was probably more important**

#### *Changing parties and changing parliament*

Labour’s dramatic loss of seats in 2019 had implications for the leadership contest triggered by Jeremy Corbyn’s decision to announce he was stepping down – Laura Pidcock, for instance, would probably have been his fans’ first choice to carry on his work, but she lost her previously rock-solid North West Durham seat on a 10-point swing to the Tories.

Overall, however, defeat did little to change the demographics of the Parliamentary Labour Party. In contrast, the Conservative party’s success in previously ‘safe’ Labour seats did lead to an intake of demographically (if not necessarily ideologically) different Conservative MPs, many of whom were local politicians rather than working in commerce or the City before their election to Parliament.

More generally, across the Commons as a whole, the long running trends towards increased representation of women and ethnic minorities continued. A record 220 female MPs were returned in 2019, with women forming a majority of the MPs elected by both Labour and the Liberal Democrats – even if, at 34%



of the total, women are still well short of equal representation in the Commons. The 2019 Commons also features a record 65 MPs from Britain's black, Asian and minority communities (10% of the total).

The experience of MPs prior to entering Parliament is also changing. For the first time in post-war political history, there are currently no MPs who were employed in a manual occupation immediately prior to entering Parliament, and there are no longer any former miners on the Labour benches for the first time in the Parliamentary history of the party. It is perhaps no wonder that those employed in manual occupations have turned their back on politics, with more staying home than voting for any party, [when so few](#) who share their background and experiences walk the corridors of power. Clearly, however, not every working-class voter was put off: after all, many joined their more affluent counterparts in voting for Boris Johnson – the twentieth prime minister to have attended Eton College and the twenty-eighth to attend Oxford University.

### *Crisis, and what comes next?*

While no election turns on a single slogan, there is no doubting the magnetic appeal of 'Get Brexit Done', the three-word message which defined the 2019 contest, just as 'Take Back Control' had done in the 2016 referendum. It struck a chord with Leave voters wearied and frustrated by two years of political deadlock and, by mobilising and unifying them, helped to secure the decisive victory necessary to turn the slogan into reality.

Johnson duly passed his 'oven ready' deal as promised, his Withdrawal Agreement sailing through the Commons with a majority of 99 on 9 January 2020, less than a month after polling day. Yet despite Johnson's promises, the deal did not [put an end to all that nonsense](#) over Brexit – wrangling and spats with the EU have continued ever since, even as a wholly new issue has come to dominate the political agenda.

Within weeks of polling day, and before the Labour leadership contest was really underway, the first cases of Coronavirus were reported in Europe. By the spring of 2020, Britain was living through its first Covid-19 lockdown. The government imposed the most sweeping restrictions applied to citizens since the Second World War in a bid to stem the spread of a disease which ended up putting the Prime Minister himself into intensive care, and threatened to

overwhelm the nation's health care services.

'Normal service' in British politics ended when the Covid-19 lockdowns began. Labour's Keir Starmer had to wait more than 12 months to give his first speech as party leader to a live audience, and almost 18 months to address the Labour faithful in person. The riotous assembly of MPs was silenced as Parliament itself was largely moved online. The normal rhythms of government and opposition came to a halt, overridden by the imperatives of a once-in-a-century health crisis.

The early weeks of the pandemic saw most incumbent governments around the world benefiting from a crisis-driven 'rally round the flag' effect. Management of the pandemic appears to have been crucial to the Johnson government's ratings – so much so that even the fraught, sometimes chaotic process of negotiating the UK's future relationship with the EU, which ended in a last-minute deal just before Christmas 2020, seemed to have little impact on the government's standing.

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That said, as the continued, often ill-tempered wrangling over the thorny issues of [Northern Ireland](#), fishing and migration illustrate, Brexit is by no means 'over'. Indeed, the combined impacts of Brexit and the pandemic have themselves become a central political issue. They have squeezed many household budgets and driven growing concern among voters about the cost of living and how the interventions made necessary by the pandemic will be paid for. There appear to be troubled economic waters ahead, and difficult decisions for ministers to take on taxation and public services. These are issues likely to set the different wings of the broad Conservative coalition at odds with each other.

There are already signs that the 2019 Conservative vote may be softening – the party's vote fell sharply in Remain leaning areas of Southern England in the local elections this May, though the lost votes scattered in several directions. The shock June by-election defeat in Remain-voting Chesham and Amersham, with a 25-point swing to the Liberal Democrats, gave a warning of

what could happen if disaffected traditional Tories coalesce around a single competitor.

Yet Labour's ability to capitalise on such discontent is still unproven – the opposition's performance in the 2021 local elections was mediocre at best, and the ratings of the party and its leader do not yet demonstrate the kind of popular enthusiasm that Labour needs to overturn Johnson's majority. The shine may have come off Johnson's Brexit flavoured government, but at present voters **don't have much interest** in his main opponent either.

The other parties each face challenges of one kind or another that may prove tricky to resolve. The SNP continues to dominate polling in Scotland, yet the path to a new independence referendum remains unclear. The Liberal Democrats are now better placed to argue they are the most serious challengers in a raft of seats, and the dramatic result in Chesham and Amersham has given a taste of what might be possible.

However, they struggle for political airtime and did not make the sorts of advance they had hoped for in the 2021 local elections. They are troubled by the tension between their 'new' support base, concentrated in relatively affluent Remain voting seats, and their old areas of strength, where their local campaigning is most developed. The Green Party has seen recent increases in its polling, driven by defections from the Labour party. But this vote appears vulnerable to a squeeze in the first past the post electoral system.

Finally, what of the Brexit Party whose influence in 2019 was substantial but whose *raison d'être* disappeared once Brexit was done? Reborn as Reform UK, and under the new leadership of Richard Tice, the party has struggled to make waves during the last two years. It has adopted a more stringent anti-lockdown stance than either the electorate or any other party in the UK, which has not so far paid dividends, but it will hope that the tensions in the Conservative Party provide more fertile ground for an attack on its right in the future.

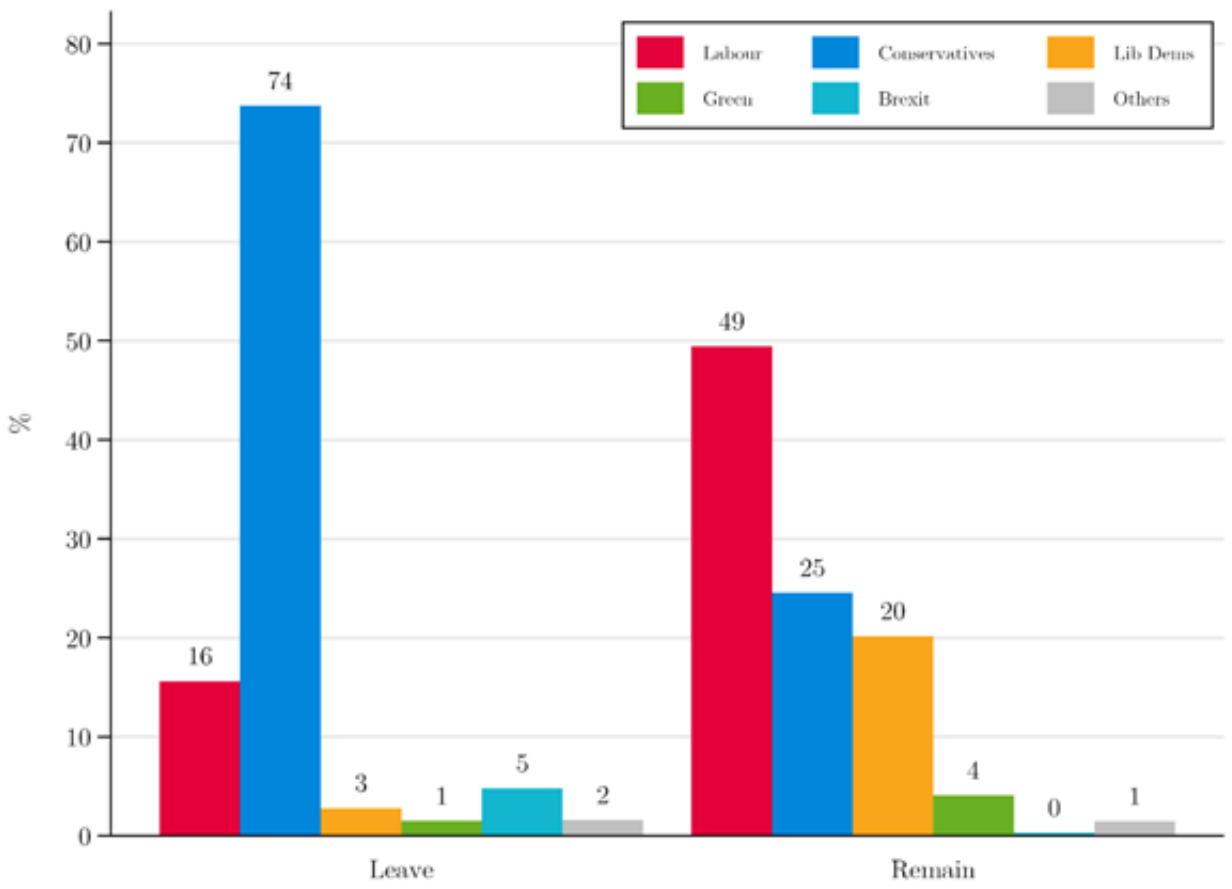
These are still early days. The present Parliament can run for another two years or more. And while the 2019 British general election has left Labour with a mountain to climb to achieve a majority of its own, a Labour minority administration is more within reach, as the Conservatives find themselves

bereft of any conceivable allies in the current Commons. It is hard to imagine the SNP or the Liberal Democrats propping up a minority fourth term Conservative government. And while Labour have a massive task ahead, they operate in an unusually volatile political environment, where large swings have become the norm.

The main parties remain divided within themselves, and the conflicts generated by Brexit abroad and at home remain unresolved. The last two years may come to be seen as a pandemic-driven interlude, with the political class holding its collective breath while the world navigates an unparalleled crisis. If and when that crisis fades, politics may recover its capacity to surprise us.

**By Rob Ford, Tim Bale, Will Jennings and Paula Surridge, authors of *The British General Election of 2019*.**







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