Resurgent Remain and a Rebooted Revolt on the Right:

Exploring the 2019 European Parliament Elections in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) election took place against the backdrop of the Brexit vote and the failure of parliament to agree on a withdrawal agreement. Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party topped the poll and the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats, which called for a second referendum on EU membership, returned from electoral obscurity to take second place while other pro-Remain parties similarly performed well. In sharp contrast, the two main parties, Labour and the Conservatives, recorded their lowest combined vote share since they became the main representatives of the two-party system. In this article, we draw on aggregate-level data to explore what happened at the 2019 EP election in Great Britain. Our evidence suggests Labour suffered from a 'pincer movement', losing support in its mainly white, working-class 'left behind' heartlands but also in younger cosmopolitan areas where Labour had polled strongly at the 2017 general election. Support for the Brexit Party increased more significantly in 'left behind' communities, which had given strong support to Leave at the 2016 referendum, suggesting that Nigel Farage and his new party capitalised on Labour's woes. The Conservatives, meanwhile, haemorrhaged support in affluent, older retirement areas but largely at the expense of the resurgent Liberal Democrats, with the latter surging in Remain areas and places where the Conservatives are traditionally strong, though not in areas with younger electorates where the party made so much ground prior to the 2010-2015 coalition government. Lastly, turnout increased overall compared to 2014 but individuals living in Leave areas were less motivated to vote. Overall, our findings suggest that those living in Remain areas were more driven to express their discontent with the Brexit process and more inclined to support parties that offer a second referendum on Britain's EU membership.

Keywords: European Parliament, elections, Britain, voting, Brexit

Introduction

The 2019 European Parliament (EP) elections took place amid considerable political volatility. Between the 2016 vote to leave the European Union (EU) and the 2019 EP elections, observers of British politics witnessed a succession of historic events: the resignation of Prime Minister David Cameron; the arrival of Prime Minister Theresa May; the triggering of Article 50 in March 2017; a general election in June 2017, which confounded expectations by resulting in a hung parliament; parliament's refusal to endorse Prime Minister May's withdrawal agreement, including, in January, 2019, the heaviest parliamentary defeat of any British prime minister; extensions to Article 50; and then, amid the Conservative Party's infighting and disappointing local election results, Theresa May's decision to resign and make way for a new Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister. The failure of the executive and legislature to successfully withdraw Britain from the EU ensured that, in late May 2019, the country held elections to the European Parliament, an institution that it was supposed to have left.

Amid these events there has emerged a lively debate about the changing nature of British politics and the extent to which the 2016 vote for Brexit and its aftermath is paving the way for a 'realignment'. Since the referendum, some studies have suggested that the underlying social and demographic divides that contributed to the vote for Brexit have hardened, that there have emerged new divides between Remainers and Leavers, and that people's views toward Brexit have become more polarised.[1] Such changes, it is often argued, are having a strong impact upon voting behaviour, prompting Remainers and Leavers to question their traditional allegiances and reshaping patterns of support for Britain's political parties. It is still too early to ascertain the full impact of Brexit but studies of the 2017 general election have shown that whereas the Conservative Party polled much stronger in pro-Leave areas it suffered significant losses in pro-Remain areas, while Labour, though advancing more evenly across the board, made especially strong gains in areas that voted Remain.[2]

The 2019 EP election contributes directly to this debate. Taking place less than three years on from the 2016 referendum and less than two years since the 2017 general election, the EP election was widely seen as a proxy second referendum between Leave and Remain. Like the first referendum in 2016, it delivered a shock. Nigel Farage's six-week-old Brexit Party, which advocated a 'hard' Brexit on World Trade Organization (WTO) lines alongside populist attacks against 'the establishment', finished first with 30.5 per cent of the vote. The strongly pro-Remain Liberal Democrats came second with 19.6 per cent of the vote, their highest share at any EP election and the highest at any national election since 'Cleggmania' erupted in 2010. Labour, the main party of opposition, finished third with just 13.6 per cent of the vote, its lowest share at any nationwide election since 1910. The Greens finished fourth with 11.8 per cent, its best result since 1989, while the governing Conservative Party finished fifth, on just 8.8 per cent, its lowest share of the vote in its entire history.

Such a result throws up important but as yet unanswered questions. Did Britain's Leavers, frustrated at the failure to leave the EU, turn out in their droves or did they stay away due to protest and disillusionment? Did Remainers, on the other hand, use the EP election as an opportunity to voice their support for a second referendum on EU membership? Where did the Brexit Party get its votes from? Did Nigel Farage's new party depend strongly on the same types of 'left behind' voters who had previously flocked to the UK Independence Party or did the Brexit Party manage to reach out to a wider audience by downplaying more divisive issues like immigration in favour of populist attacks against 'the establishment'?[3] Was the Labour Party electorally damaged by the Brexit Party in its traditional heartlands and by pro-Remain parties such as the Liberal Democrats and the Greens in younger, more cosmopolitan areas? Did the Conservatives, who had promised to deliver Brexit but failed to do so, see their support haemorrhage to the Brexit Party or from 'One Nation' Tories switching to a resurgent Liberal

Democrats? And, overall, do strong results for the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats signals a hardening of the divides between Remainers and Leavers?

In this paper, we explore these questions by drawing on a wealth of aggregate voting data and census information at the local authority level in Great Britain.[4] In doing so, we aim to contribute to the wider debate about how Brexit is impacting upon British politics and expand our previous work in this area.[5] Taking a step back, we assess whether the results of the 2019 EP elections suggest a hardening of Britain's Brexit divides and if this electoral tremor could be the precursor to yet another major earthquake. After situating the election in wider context and providing an overview of the results, we turn to examine these deeper questions.

The 2019 EP Election: An Overview of the Results

One of the striking features of post-referendum Britain is that ever the country voted to leave the European Union its politics has increasingly looked 'European'. Like their counterparts elsewhere in Europe, in the aftermath of the 2019 EP election observers of British politics were left to reflect on their country's increasing political fragmentation, polarisation, rising volatility and a surge of support for national populists and other challengers that appeared to advance at the expense of the established parties.[6] Britain might once-upon-a-time have been known around the world for its stable and quintessential two-party system but ever since 52 per cent of voters had decided to leave the European Union its party system has come under serious strain and has perhaps never before looked so vulnerable.

At the same time, however, accounts that trace this flux solely to Brexit are both narrow and misleading. As studies have already made clear, while Britain's Brexit moment may well have exacerbated a fragmenting political landscape and increasing polarisation much of this was visible long before the country had decided to debate its EU membership.[7] These deeper currents had swirled beneath the two-party system for decades and were central to explaining

a succession of events that took place before the 2016 referendum, including but not limited to: more than one in three voters opting for parties other than Labour or the Conservatives at the 2010 general election; the rise to dominance of the Scottish National Party in Scotland; the emergence of UKIP as a serious challenger during the 2010-15 parliament; and the arrival of higher rates of volatility which arguably helped the Conservatives secure a surprise majority at the 2015 general election. This longer-term story is reflected in Figure 1, which presents the declining share of the vote going to either Labour or the Conservatives at general and European Parliament (EP) elections. At general elections, whereas until the mid-1970s nine in ten voters were effectively 'locked in' to the two-party system, routinely casting their ballots for Labour or the Conservatives, by the time of the 2005 and 2015 general elections this had fallen below seven in ten. Given this trend, the 2017 general election, which saw eight in ten endorse the two main parties, looks like something of an outlier and there were already good reasons to question whether the two-party system had really been restored.

Figure 1: Combined Vote Share for Labour and the Conservatives (GB)
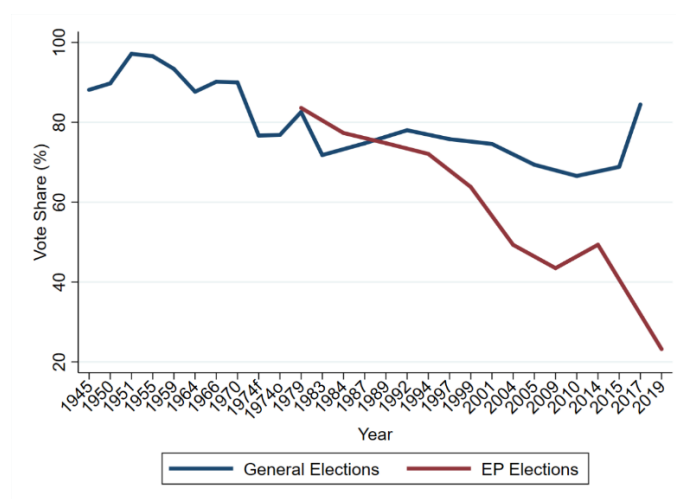
Source: UK Election Statistics: 1918-2018 - 100 Years of Elections, House of Commons Library Research Paper

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The two main parties have seen a far more dramatic and consistent decline in public support at EP elections. During the first round of EP elections in 1979, support for Labour and the Conservatives was on par with their support in the general election that occurred the same year. But, over time, their combined support at EP elections declined markedly, and the gap between general and EP elections increased. When the electoral system for EP elections was changed in 1999, from first-past-the-post to proportional representation, combined support for the main parties dropped far more rapidly, such that by 2004 fewer than half of all voters were voting for one of the two main parties.

Britain's party system, therefore, had already been experiencing deep and profound change before it even reached the 2019 EP elections. Nonetheless, this election appeared to strengthen the pressure on the main parties in a number of ways. Even accounting for the longer-term decline in combined public support for Labour and the Conservatives, the 2019 EP election delivered an exceptional outcome: support for the two main parties plummeted to just 23 per cent, their lowest combined share since they became the main representatives of Britain's two-party system. The EP elections also saw the continuing fragmentation of British politics with the emergence of two entirely new political parties -the strongly pro-Leave Brexit Party and the strongly pro-Remain Change UK -as well as the electoral resurgence of the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats and the Greens.

The Brexit Party, which would go on to finish first at the election was the result of two inter-related developments. One had been Nigel Farage's growing disillusionment with the UK Independence Party (UKIP), in which he had been active since the early 1990s and led on two separate occasions. Farage had decided to resign as the UKIP leader one month after the 2016 referendum and the vote for Brexit, although he remained a party member. The next year, UKIP was confronted with Theresa May and a Conservative Party promising 'Brexit means Brexit'. The Eurosceptic party promptly collapsed, receiving only 1.8 per cent of the national vote. In

the spring of 2018, UKIP was passed to Gerard Batten who was more interested in opposing Islam and developing relationships with controversial right-wing figures, including Tommy Robinson, former leader of the English Defence League.

The second key factor was the emergence of Leave Means Leave, a grassroots pro-Brexit network that had been co-founded in 2016 by the businessmen Richard Tice and John Longworth. Both were then joined by Farage in August 2017, who became Vice Chairman. Throughout 2018 and early 2019, Leave Means Leave organized 'Save Brexit' and 'Let's Go WTO' events in areas that had voted to leave the EU like Birmingham, Torquay, Bournemouth, Gateshead, Harrogate, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Pontefract and Mansfield. Leave Means Leave also bridged the worlds of UKIP and the Conservative Party, with speakers including not only Farage but senior Conservatives such as Jacob Rees-Mogg, Iain Duncan Smith, Esther McVey and David Davies, Labour MPs such as Kate Hoey and prominent business leaders.

The Brexit Party was formally founded in November 2018. Farage officially left UKIP the next month and was appointed leader of the Brexit Party on March 22 2019, seven days before Britain was supposed to be officially leaving the EU under Article 50. Farage launched the Brexit Party in Coventry on April 12, 2019, while arguing that Leavers had been "betrayed" by the political classes and talking in vague terms about wanting a "democratic revolution" and to "change politics for good". The Brexit Party's 2019 EP election campaign was overseen by some of the same figures who had orchestrated the rise of UKIP, including the party's victories at parliamentary by-elections in Clacton and also Rochester and Strood in 2014. The Brexit Party soon claimed to have recruited more than 100,000 registered supporters.

During the EP election campaign Farage and the Brexit Party pursued a 'core vote' strategy, focusing heavily on areas that had previously given strong support to UKIP and Brexit. There were notable exceptions such as Manchester, Edinburgh, Hammersmith and Fulham, where support for UKIP had been below average in 2014 and most people had voted

to remain in the EU. But of the Brexit Party's twenty-three rallies that were held in the final weeks of the campaign only three took place in areas where a majority had not supported Brexit in 2016, and only nine were held in areas that had given UKIP below average support in 2014. In the polls, support for the Brexit Party increased quickly. Between Farage's appointment as leader and the party's launch it averaged 12.3 per cent of the vote; in the second half of April 25 per cent; and then across all polls in May 32 per cent.

Figure 2: The Parties in the Polls, March 29-May 22 2019

Source: https://whatukthinks.org
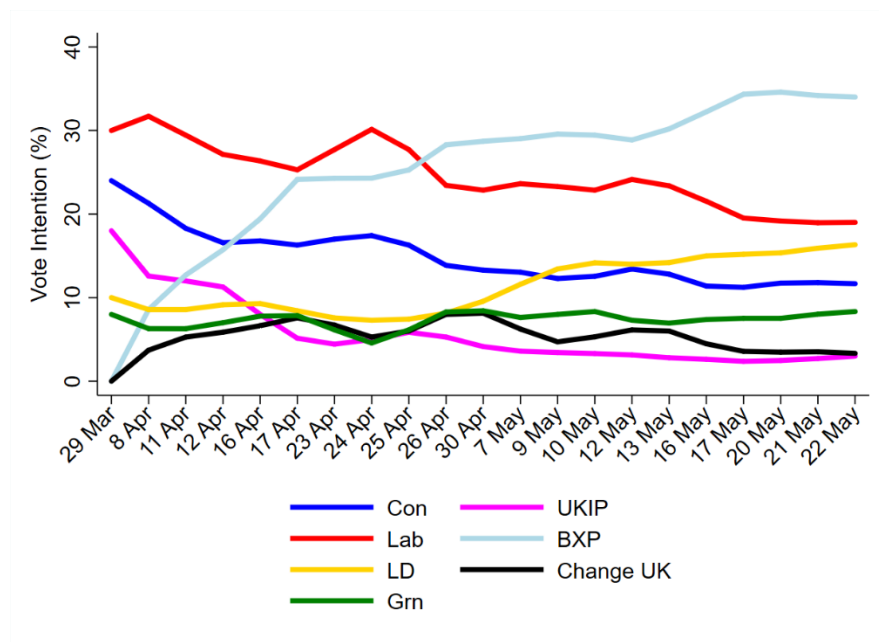
The Liberal Democrats, who campaigned under the slogan 'Bollocks to Brexit' and asserted in their European Election manifesto that "We can stop Brexit through a People's Vote" also saw a growth in support, albeit more modest. In April, the Liberal Democrats had averaged 8 per cent of the vote, but by May, after strong local election results, their support nearly doubled to 15 per cent. The Greens and the newly-founded Change UK maintained relatively steady support throughout April and May, but the support of the two main parties

suffered significantly during this period. The Conservatives lost roughly half of their supporters – dropping from 24 per cent at the start of April to 12 per cent in the final days of the campaign. The picture for Labour was only marginally more positive; while it was initially poised to come first in the European elections, averaging more 30 per cent of the vote in late March/early April, by the end of the campaign support for Labour declined to less than 20 per cent, putting it ahead of the Conservatives, but well behind the Brexit Party.

When the results were declared it was revealed that the Brexit Party had finished first. Nigel Farage thus became the first party leader in Britain's entire history to win two nationwide elections with two different parties (after winning the 2014 EP elections with UKIP). With just over 30 per cent of the vote nationally, the Brexit Party received its strongest support in the two Midlands regions and the North East, in all three averaging more than 40 per cent of the vote. Whereas in 2014 UKIP had only achieved an outright majority in the district of Boston, on the east coast, five years later the Brexit Party won an outright majority in nearly 20 districts. The party's strongest results arrived in Eastern England (Castle Point) and the East Midlands (Boston and South Holland) although it won significant support in areas across England. In Wales, dominated by Labour since the 1920s, the Brexit Party finished ahead of Labour in every district and topped the poll in 19 of the 22 authorities. Only in London and the North West did the Brexit Party fail to secure an outright majority in a least one area. Unsurprisingly, Farage and his party were weakest in London and Scotland where they averaged less than 20 per cent of the vote. They failed to reach 10 per cent of the vote in eight areas, with its worst results in Clackmannanshire in Scotland and London's districts of Hackney and Haringey.

The Liberal Democrats were the other big winners of the night, gaining more than 13 points on their 2014 result. The party received its strongest support in London and the South East, where they averaged more than 25 per cent of the vote. They won more than 40 per cent of the vote in eight areas – a feat they had failed to achieve anywhere in 2014. In Richmond-

upon-Thames, where nearly 70 per cent of voters had voted to remain in the EU, the party won an outright majority. The pro-Remain parties fared poorly in Scotland and Wales, where nationalist parties provided a credible alternative to voters who opposed Brexit. Outside of the Liberal Democrat heartlands of the Orkney and Shetland Islands, the SNP topped the poll in every district, increasing its vote by 8 percentage points as Labour slumped to fourth losing more than 15 percentage points. The Liberal Democrats saw their vote rise by nearly 10 percentage points in Wales but struggled to be the main recipient of the Remain vote. Welsh nationalists Plaid Cymru not only recorded a strong second place but beat Labour for the first time in a Wales wide election. Within England, the Liberal Democrats saw their worst results in stanchly pro-Brexit areas in the West Midlands, such as Walsall and Sandwell, and Boston in the East Midlands, where three in four voters supported Brexit in 2016.

The Greens also made significant gains in Remain heartlands. They averaged more than 17 per cent of the vote in the South West, where they polled particularly strongly in Bristol, Stroud, and Exeter. In Brighton and Hove, and Bristol, where more than 60 per cent of people had voted Remain, the Greens won more than a third of votes cast. Like the Liberal Democrats, however, they fared poorly in in heavily pro-Leave areas, such as Boston and Hartlepool. The night, however, was particularly disappointing for the newly-founded Change UK, who failed to win any seats. Even in London, where the anti-Brexit Party made its strongest gains, it averaged just 5 per cent of the vote. Change UK's support did not exceed 10 per cent in any area, though they came closest in Lambeth where they won more than 8 per cent of the vote.

Figure 3 presents a graphical summary of the gains and losses in vote share that each of the parties received across different authorities since 2014. The box plots provide an indication of how much the vote share for each party changed on average across local authorities and how much this change varied between local authorities. The horizontal line in the middle of each box indicates the median change in the vote share for each party across the

local authorities in which they contested. The box indicates the interquartile range (IQR). The whiskers are drawn to contain all the local authorities that are within 1.5 IQR of the box. The points outside the whiskers indicate outliers, where the change in the vote share for a party in a local authority was either particularly high or particularly low. Challenger parties that adopted a clear and consistent position on Brexit, whether Leave or Remain, gained votes, whereas the Conservatives and Labour lost votes. Parties that unambiguously backed a second referendum (LD, Green, SNP, PC and Change), the so-called 'Remain Alliance', gained an average of 21 percentage points in each authority. By contrast, the parties that unambiguously backed a No Deal Brexit (Brexit Party and UKIP; BXP+) gained an average of just over 8 points.[8]

Figure 3: Change in the Vote 2014-2019, boxplots
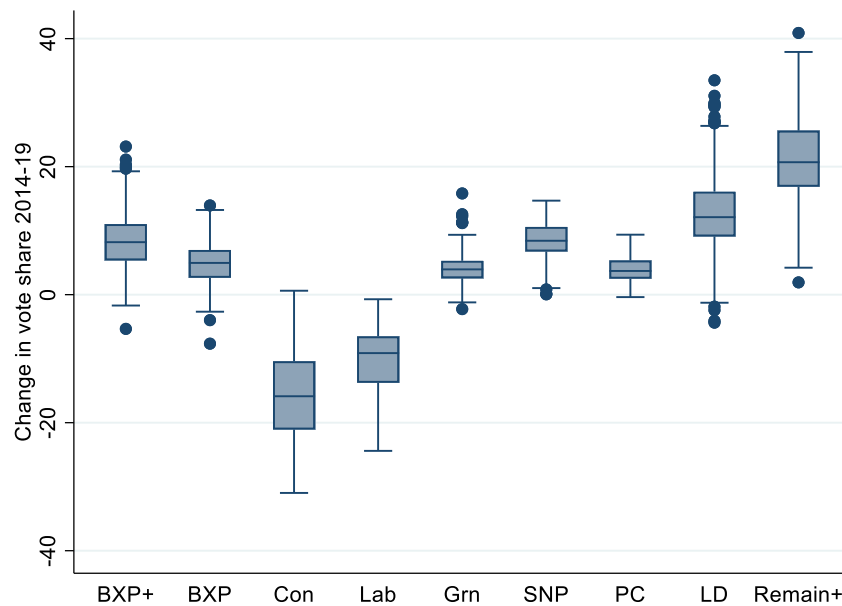
The big losers were the two main parties. But the Conservatives (-15.6) lost much more than the Brexit Party (+8.5) gained (even when combined with UKIP), to the tune of around 7 percentage points. Similarly, the Liberal Democrats (+12.8) and Greens (+4.0) combined gained much more than Labour lost (-10.3), to the tune of around 6 percentage points. It is,

therefore, far too simplistic to say that voters abandoned the Conservatives to vote for a 'harder' Brexit option or that voters abandoned Labour to vote for an unambiguous pro-Remain party. Rather, these results underline the important role of deeper divides in British society and so we need to explore some of these relationships in more depth. Because the analysis that follows is based on aggregate-level data we need to be cautious about drawing inferences about the attitudes and voting behaviour of individuals. Nonetheless, these data and the analysis offer a useful insight into the geographical divides that are shaping British politics and the factors that influenced the latest election as the country negotiates and navigates Brexit. But before we look at where the votes went, let's first examine how the Brexit divide affected who voted or not.

The 2019 EP Election: Exploring Turnout

We can start our analysis by investigating turnout. One big unknown of the 2019 EP elections was the extent to which citizens would participate. Would Leavers, fed up with Parliament's failure to deliver Brexit, turn out in their droves or would they stay away in protest? Would Remainers use the election to express support for a second referendum, or a 'People's Vote'? Past work on the 2017 general election has already suggested a backlash among Remainers, with turnout at that contest being significantly higher in areas of the country that, at the 2016 referendum, had voted Remain and/or which had high concentrations of young people, ethnic minorities and degree-holders.[9] But to what extent was this also true at the 2019 EP elections?

The overall rate of turnout was 37 per cent, 1.4 percentage points higher than in 2014 and the second highest rate since the first EP election in 1979. turnout was still well below the average across EU member states (see Figure 4). While Northern Ireland recorded a drop of more than six percentage points, across the other eleven regions, turnout increased in seven including Wales, Scotland, the south east and south west of England. Outside of Northern Ireland, London recorded the highest turnout (41.03%) and the West Midlands the lowest

(31.1%). London, the south east and the south west recorded their highest regional turnout since 1999 when the D'Hondt method of party list proportional representation was introduced.

Beneath the regional level, there was significant variation in turnout across authorities as a whole and even between local authorities within the same region. Across the UK, 265 local authorities recorded increases in turnout. In London, large increases in Haringey, Islington and Wandsworth were counteracted by sharp reductions in Newham and Tower Hamlets. In the West Midlands, sizeable declines in Dudley, Sandwell, Walsall and Wolverhampton contrasted with notable increases in Malvern Hills and Warwick both of which recorded local turnouts of more than ten percentage points above the regional average. Only in Scotland and Wales did all councils (32 and 22 respectively) see local increases in turnout when compared to 2014.

Figure 4: Comparing UK Turnout with Average Turnout in the EU, 1979-2019
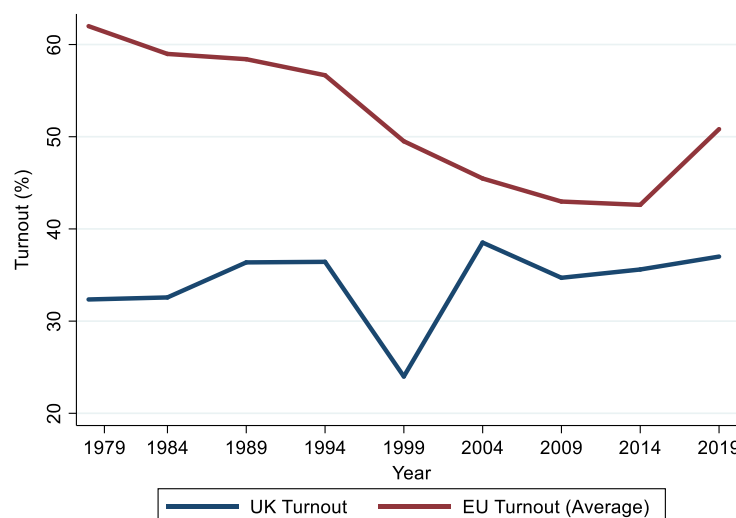

Part of the explanation for the variation in turnout may reflect the fact that 162 councils held local and European elections on the same day in 2014, which had the effect of increasing local turnout in these places when compared against councils which did not have local elections.[10] This is borne out by the results. Turnout increased, on average, by 3.6 percentage points in

councils that did not have 2014 local elections compared to 0.25 percentage points in places where they did. The pattern is similar for those local councils which had elections three weeks prior to European election-day. In these places, turnout increased, on average, by 1.2 percentage points compared to 4.2 percentage points where no elections took place. As Curtice et al. (2019) state, to get a more accurate measure of engagement in the 2019 European Elections the focus should be specifically on places where there was neither an election in 2014 nor in 2019. In these areas, turnout increased by 5.7 percentage points confirming that Britain was far more engaged in these elections than the overall reported turnout figures suggest.[11]

Another source of variation is how turnout varied in places that backed Remain and Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum. Turnout in Remain areas increased, on average, by 4.6 percentage points and by 5.2 percentage points in Remain areas that did not have local elections in 2014 or 2019. This compares to just over 1 percentage point in Leave areas, although this increases to 2.2 percentage points for those Leave areas where local elections did not take place. Simply put, for both Leave and Remain areas, these figures are around 3 percentage points higher than in those places that did have local elections in 2014 and 2019 reiterating the impact of local elections on the accuracy of engagement in these European elections.

Figure 5: Turnout Change 2014-19 by % Leave at 2016 EU Referendum
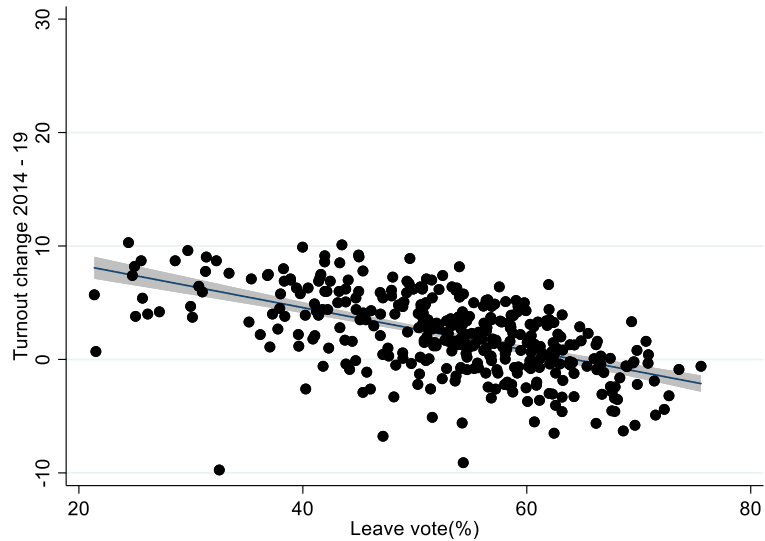
But the picture is more nuanced. Figure 5 shows 2014-2019 turnout change for each local council area by the percentage who voted Leave at the Referendum in 2016. Generally speaking, there is a relatively strong ($R^2 = 0.30$) and negative relationship (b=-0.19*) between the change in turnout and the Leave vote: turnout change decreased more in local areas which had voted more heavily for Leave. In places where the 2016 Leave vote was between 50-60 per cent, turnout increased by around 2 percentage points. However, in strong Leave areas (where the 2016 Leave vote was above 60 per cent), turnout fell by around half a percentage point. The fall is far more dramatic at -2.4 percentage points where local elections took place in both 2014 and 2019. By contrast, in strong Remain areas, turnout increased by 5.5 percentage points compared to 4.1 in more moderate Remain places, although the latter figure drops to just over 2 percentage points in councils which had local elections in 2014 and 2019.

This evidence suggests there may have been a counter mobilisation against Brexit in places where support for leaving the EU was low. Closer examination of the data bears this out. Table 1 reports two OLS regression models of turnout change from 2014-19. The first model includes the Leave vote in each local authority from the 2016 EU referendum along with social and economic factors. The second model includes an additional control for whether there was no local election in 2014 and 2019 or on both occasions. People living in places which had

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given strong support to leaving the EU in 2016 were less likely to vote at the 2019 EP election than they had been at past elections, even when controlling for socio-demographic factors.

Turnout also fell most in more economically deprived areas, where larger numbers of people rent their homes from the local council and/or have low levels of education. Turnout also declined further in more ethnically diverse areas. As noted earlier, turnout was significantly higher in places where local elections did not take place in 2014 or 2019. Yet, even after controlling for this, people living in Leave areas were less motivated to vote at the 2019 EP elections, suggesting that it was those living in Remain places who used the election to express their discontent with Brexit and voice their support for a second referendum.

Table 1: OLS Regressions - Turnout change in EP 2014-2019

	Model 1	Model 2
% non-white	-0.149***	-0.131***
	(0.014)	(0.013)
% secondary quals or below	-0.085**	-0.214***
	(0.038)	(0.038)
% age18-29	0.007	0.003
	(0.049)	(0.044)
% council rent	-0.056**	-0.080**
	(0.026)	(0.024)
% Leave	-0.245***	-0.193***
	(0.014)	(0.014)
No Locals 14 & 19	-	3.063***
		(0.359)
Cons	19.934***	20.740***
	(1.485)	(1.359)
N	366	366
R^2	0.552	0.628

Standard errors in parentheses
$^* p < 0.05$, $^{**} p < 0.01$, $^{***} p < 0.001$

Brexit and the EP Election Result

We now turn our attention to exploring how the result of the 2019 EP election was influenced by divides between Remainers and Leavers over Brexit. At first glance, the big winner was the Brexit Party which attracted nearly one in three voters despite only being launched six weeks before the election. As we have already noted, the Brexit Party performed especially well in strong Leave areas while its weakest results came in districts that had given strong support to Remain, much like UKIP in 2014. Indeed, Figure 6 reveals how there is a very strong ($R^2 = 0.96$) and positive relationship (b=1.12*) between support for the Brexit Party in 2019 and support for UKIP in 2014. Farage effectively cannibalised the UKIP vote, drawing much of his support in areas that had previously given strong support to his former party. This is not surprising given that the Brexit Party had targeted these areas during its EP campaign and that Brexit Party organizers made a deliberate choice, early on in the campaign, to appeal direct to UKIP voters. Individual-level data from Lord Ashcroft adds to this picture of a strong overlap between the two parties; more than two-thirds of people who had stayed loyal to UKIP at the 2017 general election voted for the Brexit Party two years later.[12] Such data reflect how the Brexit Party benefitted from pre-existing divides in British society and much of its support was 'baked in' before the 2019 EP election had even commenced.

Figure 6: Support for UKIP in 2014 and the Brexit Party in 2019
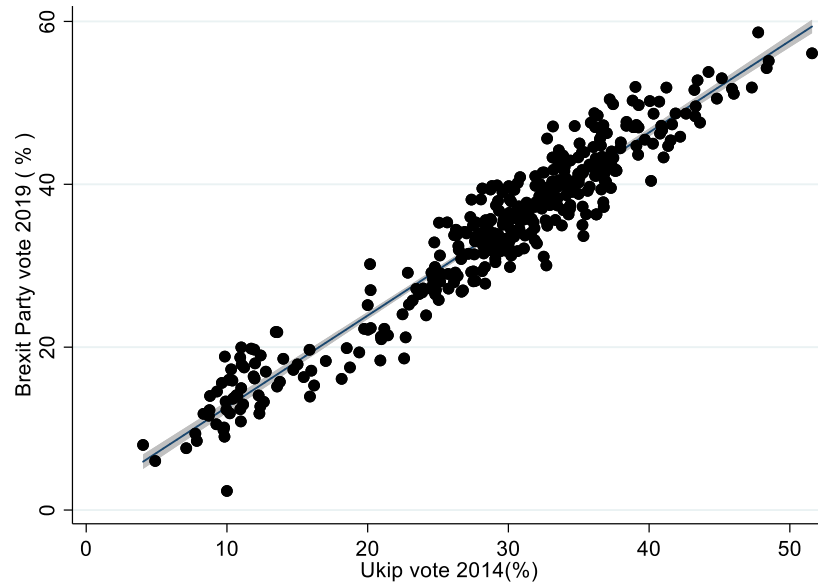
Nonetheless, in a number of places the Brexit Party did manage to improve slightly on UKIP's vote share in 2014. Figure 7 shows the change in vote share between UKIP in 2014 and the Brexit Party in 2019 for each council area by the percentage who had voted Leave in these places in 2016. Generally speaking, there is a moderate ($R^2 = 0.34$) and positive relationship (b=0.18*) between the advance of the Brexit Party and the percentage who had voted Leave: the Brexit Party in 2019 outperformed UKIP in 2014 to a greater extent in council areas which given strong support to Brexit, suggesting a hardening of the relationship between Nigel Farage and Britain's Leave voters. For instance, in places where the Leave vote in 2016 had been 50 percent the Brexit Party gained just over 4 percentage points on UKIP; but in places where the Leave vote was 60 percent they gained just over 6 percentage points. The correlation between support for the Brexit Party and support for Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum was therefore somewhat stronger than the correlation between support for UKIP in the 2014 EP elections and support for Leave in 2016 ($R^2 = 0.84$ versus 0.75).

Figure 7: Vote change (2014-2019) and support for Leave in Britain
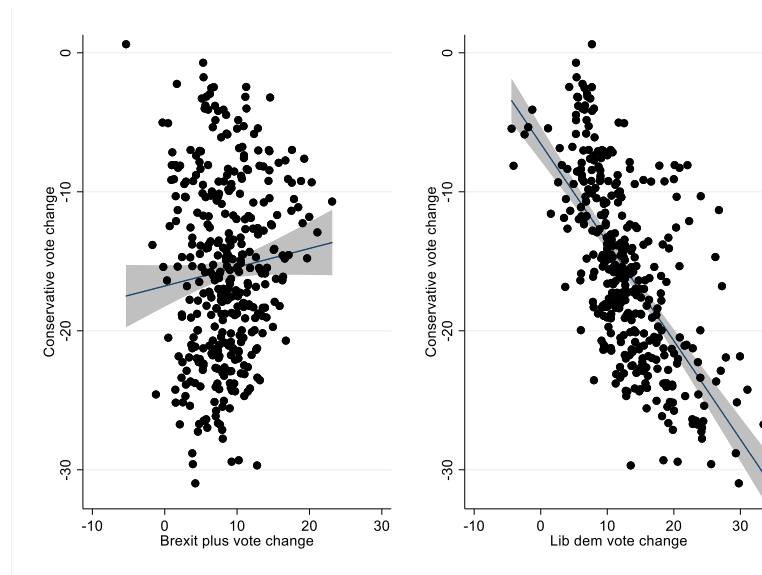
Brexit Party   Liberal Democrats
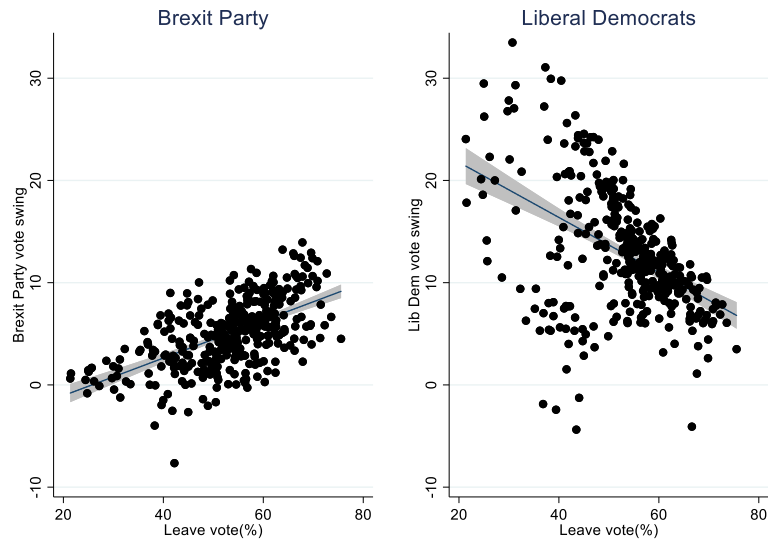
By contrast, the right-hand panel of Figure 7 reveals a swing to the Liberal Democrats in places that voted Remain ($R^2 = 0.22$). Although the relationship is not particularly strong across the country as a whole, the relationship between Leave and the change in vote share for the Lib Dems is much stronger in England ($R^2 = 0.61$) than it is in Scotland and Wales ($R^2 = 0.001$) where the presence of the nationalist parties (SNP and PC) as a viable vehicle for Remain split the anti-Brexit vote. Figure 7 also shows that across the country as a whole, in places where the Leave vote was 50 percent the Liberal Democrats gained on average nearly 14 percentage points; but in places where the Leave vote was only 40 percent they gained on average of just over 16 points. These differences are relatively modest. And even if there is some evidence that people in more Remain areas are switching towards the Liberal Democrats, the overall association between support for the Liberal Democrats and support for Remain is much weaker than the association between support for the Brexit Party and support for Leave (R^2=0.33 versus 0.84), suggesting that there are probably many other reasons besides Brexit for why people voted Liberal Democrat or not, such as the party's long tradition of appealing to voters worried about local issues or who want 'none of the above'. In short, we should be sceptical about the claim that the resurgence of the Liberal Democrats was driven exclusively by a backlash among Remainers.

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Where did Conservative and Labour votes go? To what extent did the advance of the challengers, the Brexit Party and Liberal Democrats, come at the expense of support for the two main parties, which both suffered historic set-backs? In the shadow of the EP election there was a great deal of soul-searching by the two main parties about what the results mean for their respective positions on Brexit. Some Conservatives urged their colleagues and candidates for the party leadership to embrace a harder 'No Deal' Brexit, which they argued would fend off the threat from Nigel Farage and the Brexit Party. Meanwhile, some within Labour urged their party to shift to offering a second referendum if not an openly pro-Remain position, which they argued would fend off the threat from the clearly pro-Remain Liberal Democrats.

Our analysis reveals that neither of these knee-jerk, Brexit-led reactions are based on much empirical scrutiny of which parties prospered at the expense of the two main parties. Figure 8 reveals that there is not much evidence that the Brexit Party gained at the expense of the Conservatives. Even in places where the combined force of UKIP and the Brexit Party improved substantially on UKIP's performance in 2014, the Conservative vote share was hardly any different to where it was in places where the Brexit Party did not make any gains at all. This suggests that the Conservatives who were going to defect to Nigel Farage had already done so in 2014, and so his latest insurrection did not make much difference to their vote share.

By contrast there is much stronger evidence that it was in fact the Liberal Democrat surge that inflicted most damage on the Conservatives. We find a strong relationship (R^2 = 0.42). In places where the Lib Dems increased their share of the vote, the Tories suffered major setbacks. The same is true, to a lesser extent, with the Greens (R^2 = 0.11). These findings stress the importance of sequencing in order to understand how Brexit is impacting the main parties.

Figure 8: Conservatives losses and Brexit Party gains and Lib Dem gains

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Our findings suggest that at the 2019 EP elections the Conservatives lost a lot of ground in areas where the Liberal Democrats or Greens made their strongest advance. In contrast, the Conservative Party was less directly impacted by Nigel Farage and the Brexit Party, most likely because the latter had already won over much of the pro-Brexit Conservative vote at the earlier EP elections in 2014. Farage, in this sense, was recruiting votes in areas that he had already cultivated five years ago. Our findings suggest that most Tories who had left for UKIP in 2014 simply crossed over to the Brexit Party in 2019. Meanwhile, amid the fallout of Brexit, the Conservatives appear to have simultaneously alienated another group of their own voters who, in 2019, decamped to the pro-Remain Liberal Democrats. The centre-right thus finds itself attacked on two-fronts; while Farage's new vehicle allowed him to retain a tight grip on Eurosceptic conservatives in Brexit Land, the Liberal Democrats are now eating into Conservative votes in Remainia.

The story with respect to Labour is not so clear cut, which given their ambiguity on Brexit perhaps comes as no surprise. Although Labour suffered a historically bad election result, there are no easy lessons to be drawn from which party benefitted at their expense. There is no significant relationship between Brexit Party gains and Labour losses, either across the

country or in England. In some places where the Brexit Party made substantial gains Labour

suffered big losses, but in other places where the Brexit Party prospered Labour's vote share

held up reasonably well. Similarly, there is only a very weak relationship between Liberal

Democrat gains and Labour losses, and if anything, the relationship is positive, which implies

that on average Labour's vote held up slightly better in places where the Lib Dems surged than

in places where they did not perform so strongly.

Figure 9: Labour losses and Brexit Party gains and Lib Dem gains
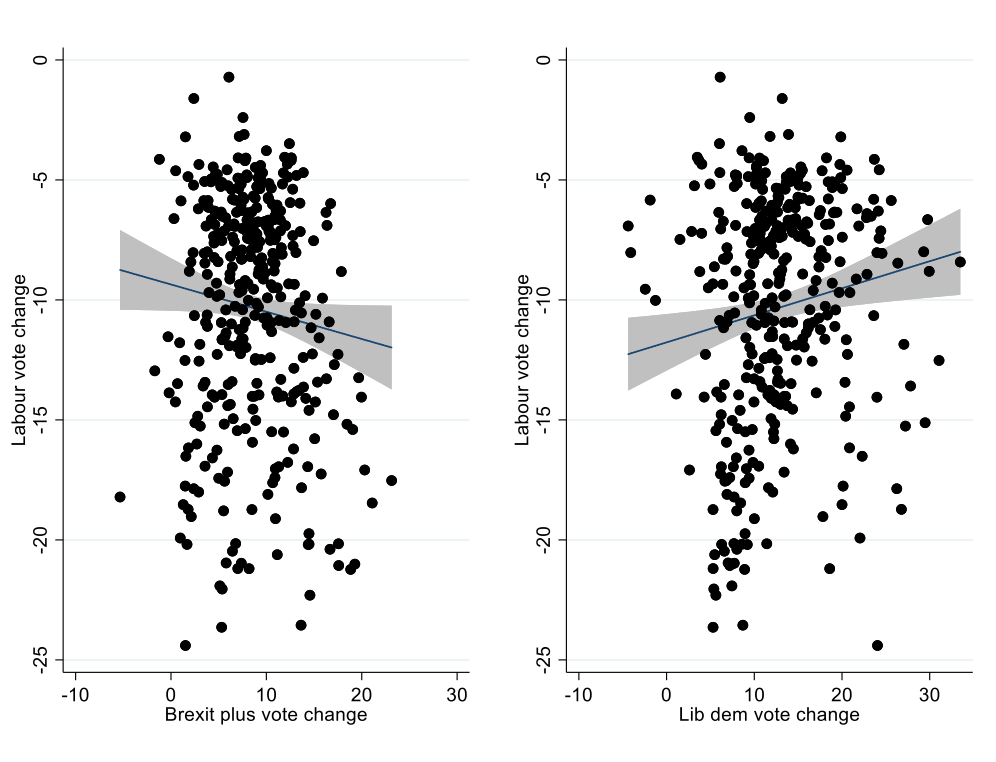
There are a number of possibilities that may explain why there is no obvious answer to the

question of which party prospered from Labour's decline. One possibility is that different

parties benefitted in different places. For example, perhaps the Liberal Democrats benefitted

in certain areas (potentially areas that backed Remain) whereas the Brexit Party benefitted in

other places (potentially areas that backed Leave). If this is the case then Labour faces very

different strategic pressures in different parts of the country, and has to potentially deal with a

Brexit threat in some places but a Remain threat in others. Another possibility is perhaps even

more difficult to deal with. Put simply, that the lack of an overall pattern is because Labour lost votes to *both* the Liberal Democrats and the Brexit Party at the same time in the same places. Even in the most heavily pro-Brexit communities there are still close to 30 percent who backed Remain (and vice versa). If strategic ambiguity alienates both Leavers and Remainers then Labour may be losing Leave voters in Remain areas to the Brexit Party as well as Remain voters in Leave areas to the Liberal Democrats. The difficulty with this possibility is that it does not even provide an opportunity to tailor the message that the party wishes to communicate in different parts of the country.

The 2019 EP Elections: Analysis of the Results

Closer inspection of the data provides support for a number of these narratives but not all. Table 2 reports seven OLS regression models of party change from 2014-19 using the same socio-demographic controls as previously and the Leave vote in each local authority from the 2016 EU referendum. For the Conservatives and Labour, there is evidence that both parties lost ground in their traditional heartlands. The Conservative vote held up in more deprived areas and places with more young people while it haemorrhaged in affluent, older retirement areas. Labour did better in more diverse places but suffered from a 'pincer movement', losing ground amongst its traditional white working class left behind heartlands while support also waned where Labour did well in 2017, particularly in places where there are lots of young people. Labour's support also held up more in Leave areas after accounting for socio-demographics. Simply put, Labour's Brexit stance did not pay off among the electorate it had won over in 2017 and in those Remain areas where it had made so much electoral ground just two years previously. By contrast, the Brexit Party saw their vote increase more in white, older, more deprived areas and in those places that had given strong support to leaving the EU. This

demographic profile more closely fits the profile of Labour's traditional base than it does the Conservatives base.

The Liberal Democrats were one of the other parties to prosper from the collapse in support for the two main parties. Our model results suggest that support for the Liberal Democrats increased more sharply in affluent areas and among those with higher educational qualifications. Interestingly, they failed to make ground in more diverse areas and particularly places with lots of young voters. While, as expected, the party saw their vote rise more in Remain areas, it is noticeable that their socio-demographic profile is far closer to places where the Conservatives are traditionally strong – mainly white, affluent old/retirement areas - and not places with younger electorates where the Liberal Democrats made so much ground prior to entering coalition government in 2010.

Likewise, the Greens saw their support increase in more affluent areas but the results suggest their vote held up more in those areas which voted Leave in the 2016 EU Referendum. At first glance, this seems an anomaly however closer inspection of the data indicates that this is a consequence of their poor performance in Wales and particularly Scotland. If we re-run the model for England only we find that the coefficient for the Leave variable is negative (b= -0.12***) confirming that Green support as expected increased more in Remain areas. The SNP saw their support increase in more economically deprived places as Labour's vote collapsed and unsurprisingly given their anti-Brexit stance in strong Remain areas.

Table 2: OLS Regressions - Vote change for selected parties in Britain, EP 2014-2019

	(1) Con	(2) Labour	(3) Lib Dem	(4) Green	(5) BXP plus	(6) SNP	(7) Plaid
% non-white	0.037	0.133***	0.032	-0.014	-0.097***	-0.052	0.181
	(0.024)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.012)	(0.017)	(0.391)	(0.176)
% secondary quals or below	0.772***	-0.007	-0.776***	-0.159***	-0.102*	0.013	0.288
	(0.064)	(0.057)	(0.063)	(0.033)	(0.045)	(0.250)	(0.419)
% age18-29	0.559***	-0.173**	-0.297***	0.014	-0.095	-0.376	0.065
	(0.084)	(0.074)	(0.082)	(0.044)	(0.059)	(0.266)	(0.204)
% rent council	0.470***	-0.453***	-0.178***	-0.048**	0.143***	0.475***	0.283*

	(0.044)	(0.040)	(0.044)	(0.023)	(0.031)	(0.086)	(0.142)
% Leave	0.044	0.061**	-0.203***	0.051***	0.294***	-0.554***	-0.267
	(0.023)	(0.021)	(0.023)	(0.012)	(0.016)	(0.101)	(0.152)
Cons	-57.801***	-4.465	54.049	6.725***	-4.062**	24.016***	3.435
	(2.487)	(2.213)	(2.438)	(1.295)	(1.743)	(9.110)	(10.727)
N	366	366	366	366	366	32	22
R^2	0.624	0.451	0.572	0.129	0.584	0.698	0.525

Standard errors in parentheses $^*\ p < 0.05$, $^{**}\ p < 0.01$, $^{***}\ p < 0.001$

But can we provide any further evidence that the surge in support for the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats came at the expense of Labour and the Conservatives? To address this, we re-run the regressions on Labour and Conservative vote change from 2014-19 in England only. Alongside the same socio-demographics, we remove the Leave percentage term and replace it with the Brexit Party vote change and Liberal Democrat vote change variables (in separate models) and then interact these with secondary level and below education. The results of the eight regression models run are reported in Table 3.

For Labour there are two key findings. First, there is a significant interaction between Brexit Party vote change and education. Simply put, in places containing people with higher educational qualifications, any increases in Brexit Party support do not hurt Labour. However, in places where there are more people with secondary or lower educational qualifications Labour suffers from the Brexit Party's advance. Figure 10 illustrates the average marginal effect of the change in the Brexit Party's share of the vote on the change in Labour's share of the vote in different types of local authority according to its educational profile (measured as the percentage of the population in the local authority with up to secondary level education – e.g. GCSEs or below). As we can see, in places where there are lots of school-leavers gains made by the Brexit Party really hurt Labour. By contrast, where there are relatively few school leavers, and more people carry on with further education, the Labour party does not suffer so much if the Brexit party increases its share of the vote. This suggests that the Brexit party represents more of a threat to Labour in traditional Labour heartlands.[13]

Second, after controlling for socio-demographics (this holds in a bivariate model), there is little evidence that the Liberal Democrats benefited from Labour's woes. Not only is there no significant effect of Liberal Democrat vote change on Labour's change in vote share but no interaction between Liberal Democrat vote change and education. At first glance this may add weight to Jeremy Corbyn's reluctance to go all in on a second referendum. However, it should be remembered that we are comparing Labour's results against what they achieved in 2014, before Corbyn became leader and before the gains they made at the 2017 general election. It may be then that it is the newer 2017 Labour voters who are most at risk to the Liberal Democrats, and this scenario could play out very differently at the next general election.

Table 3: OLS Regressions - Drivers of Labour & Conservative Vote change (England only), EP 2014-2019

|	(1) Lab	(2) Lab	(3) Lab	(4) Lab	(5) Con	(6) Con	(7) Con	(8) Con
% non-white	0.077***	0.076***	0.117***	0.112***	0.109***	0.109***	0.080***	0.082***
	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.020)	(0.021)	(0.022)	(0.022)	(0.016)	(0.017)
% secondary qual of below	0.322***	0.536***	0.237**	-0.036	0.610***	0.678***	0.113	0.237
	(0.061)	(0.093)	(0.080)	(0.160)	(0.067)	(0.104)	(0.063)	(0.127)
% age18-29	-0.205**	-0.168*	-0.159*	-0.154*	0.568***	0.580***	0.361***	0.359***
	(0.072)	(0.072)	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.079)	(0.080)	(0.062)	(0.062)
% rent council	-0.345***	-0.336***	-0.390***	-0.382***	0.364***	0.367***	0.333***	0.329***
	(0.040)	(0.039)	(0.043)	(0.043)	(0.044)	(0.044)	(0.034)	(0.034)
BXP change	-0.370***	0.801*			0.366***	0.736		
	(0.049)	(0.391)			(0.054)	(0.434)		
BXP#secondary		-0.039**				-0.012		
		(0.013)				(0.014)		
LD change			0.067	-0.335			-0.600***	-0.418*
			(0.046)	(0.209)			(0.036)	(0.166)
LD#secondary				0.014				-0.007
				(0.007)				(0.006)
_cons	-8.000***	-14.918***	-10.045**	-2.287	-53.667***	-55.854***	-23.717***	-27.230***
	(2.182)	(3.147)	(3.371)	(5.175)	(2.393)	(3.497)	(2.662)	(4.103)
N	313	313	313	313	313	313	313	313
R^2	0.491	0.505	0.401	0.408	0.641	0.642	0.781	0.782

Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

For the Conservatives there is a significant negative effect for Liberal Democrat vote change on Conservative vote change suggesting that the Conservative Party's support held up better where the Liberal Democrats did not make as much ground. Conversely, the Brexit Party

vote change has a significant positive effect on changes in Conservative support inferring that its vote held up more in areas where the Brexit Party performed well. The Brexit Party did not make gains at the expense of the Conservatives but from other parties, in particular Labour. Both interactions with education though show no effects, suggesting that Liberal Democrat gains at the expense of the Conservatives were not especially higher in those places containing more people with degrees than anywhere else.

Figure 10: Average marginal effect (AME) of Brexit+ change in vote share on Labour vote change
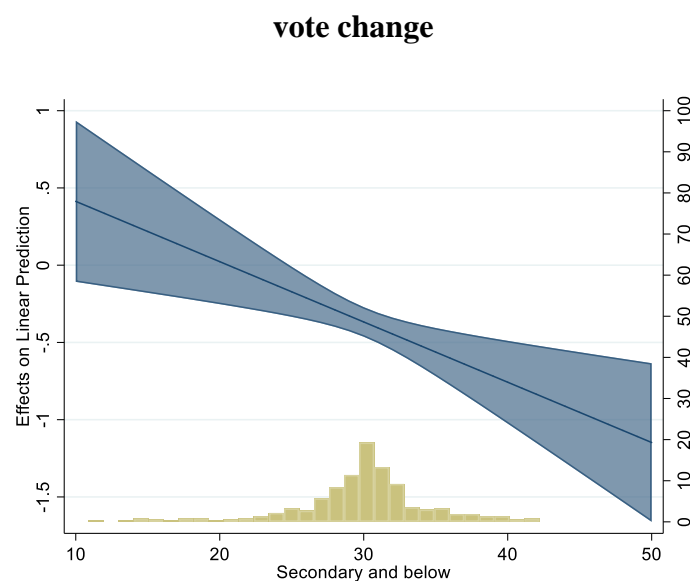
Discussion: Implications of the Result

A lot has happened in British politics since the last time the country went to the polls for a European election in 2014, though at the same time some things have barely changed at all. In 2014, Nigel Farage led an insurgent UKIP to first place. The threat that Farage and UKIP posed to the Conservative Party was at least partly responsible for David Cameron's fateful decision to offer and hold a referendum on Britain's EU membership. But if that decision had been made in the hope of putting the question of Europe to rest for a generation, unifying the Conservative party, and winning back Eurosceptic conservatives who had defected to UKIP then it is safe to

say that this has not happened. Indeed, the lesson to draw from the 2019 EP elections is that both the Conservatives and Labour are under palpable electoral pressure to solve the Brexit issue and that any 'end game' could break the coalition of ideas and shared purpose that have been central to their longevity and electoral dominance.

Fast forward five years and Farage still dominates the polls, albeit with a different party. Rather than the Conservative Party winning back Eurosceptic voters, many of whom appear to have simply swapped their allegiance to UKIP for the Brexit Party, all the centre-right has succeeded in doing is alienating another group of voters in its affluent heartlands who in 2019 switched in large numbers to the Liberal Democrats. With the Conservative parliamentary party more divided than ever, and a leadership election in full throw, the centre-right's decision to double down on Brexit may end up further alienating these voters. The Conservative Party is now under attack from both sides and there will be no easy way out.

The long-term winners could yet be an electorally resurgent Liberal Democrats. The Conservative Party's 'decapitation strategy' of the Liberal Democrats in 2015 proved crucial for David Cameron in securing an overall majority at Westminster. Fast forward today and our results underline how the Conservative Party either crashing out with a 'no deal Brexit' or dithering on the terms of a 'Brexit deal' could further alienate traditional 'One Nation Tories' who may well conclude that the Liberal Democrats are their only viable alternative. The Liberal Democrats could potentially capture or recapture seats at the expense of the Conservative Party, thereby seriously damage the party's prospects of winning outright or being the largest party.

Labour also faces its own dilemma. Although strategic ambiguity on Brexit arguably served Labour well at the 2017 General Election, bringing the party its highest share of the vote since Tony Blair's second landslide, there is now a question mark about how viable the strategy of ambiguity is over the longer-term. Indeed, there is some evidence that voter's patience may be running out and if the party is not careful it risks being on the receiving end

of a pincer movement, coming under much greater threat from the Brexit Party in its white working-class, less well educated, left behind heartlands while also losing its new support in places with lots of young people to the Liberal Democrats, a party that is offering an unambiguously pro-Remain position. At the 2017 general election Labour benefitted from an uneasy coalition between these different groups, managing to hold Hartlepool while making big advances in Hampstead and Kilburn, alongside the consolidation of votes from challengers like the Greens and Liberal Democrats. But whether this coalition holds, or whether voters decide to back a party which more closely represents their views on Brexit – or perhaps even abstain, is now highly uncertain. Whereas a clear move in either direction – be it getting behind a second referendum or getting on with Brexit - may stand to alienate one group of the voters, doing nothing and staying silent could end up alienating both.

Notes

[1] John Curtice and Sarah Tipping (2019) 'Europe', British Social Attitudes 35. National Centre for Social Research; Goodwin, Matthew Goodwin and Robert Ford (2017) 'Britain after Brexit: A Nation Divided', *Journal of Democracy*, 28(1), pp. 17-30; Sara B. Hobolt (2018) "Brexit and the 2017 UK General Election, *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 56, pp. 39-50

[2] On the 2017 general election see Oliver Heath and Matthew Goodwin (2017) 'The 2017 General Election, Brexit and the Return to Two-Party Politics: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly*, 88(3), pp. 345-358; John Curtice and Ian Simpson (2017) The 2017 Election: New Divides in British Politics? In: Daniel Phillips, John Curtice, Miranda Phillips and Jane Perry (eds.) *British Social Attitudes 35*, London: The National Centre for Social Research; Jonathan Mellon, Geoffrey Evans, Edward Fieldhouse, Jane Green and Christopher Prosser (2018) 'Brexit or Corbyn? Campaign and Inter-Election Vote Switching in the 2017 UK General Election*, Parliamentary Affairs*, 71, pp.719-737

[3] Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin (2014) *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Public Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, Routledge

[4] We exclude Northern Ireland from our analysis.

[5] Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo (2016) *UKIP: Inside the Campaign to Redraw the Map of British Politics*, Oxford University Press; Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath (2016) 'The 2016 Referendum, Brexit and the Left Behind: An Aggregate-level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly*, 87(3), pp.323-332; Oliver Heath and Matthew Goodwin (2017) 'The 2017 General Election, Brexit and the Return to Two-Party Politics: An Aggregate-Level Analysis of the Result', *The Political Quarterly*, 88(3), pp. 345-358

[6] Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*, Penguin

[7] David Sanders (2017) 'The UK's Changing Party System'. British Academy Lecture in Politics and Government, July 4 2017; Jonathan Mellon (2016) "Party Attachment in Great Britain: Five Decades of Dealignment." *Available at SSRN 2745654*.

[8] For the Brexit Party, we take UKIP's vote share in 2014 as the reference point. For 'Brexit Party plus' we combine the Brexit Party and UKIP vote share in 2019.

[9] Goodwin and Heath (2017)

[10] John Curtice, Patrick English, Stephen Fisher and Eilidh Macfarlane (2019) Two notes on the psephology of the Euro-Elections, https://electionsetc.com/

[11] This calculation includes the Isles of Scilly. If this is removed then the increase is 5.4 percentage points.

[12] See Lord Ashcroft polling data https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/05/my-euro-election-post-vote-poll-most-tory-switchers-say-they-will-stay-with-their-new-party/#more-15953

[13] Matthew Goodwin (2019) 'The strange death of Labour Britain', The Sunday Times June 2 2019. Available online: https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/the-strange-death-of-labour-britain-8npfmgqnn (accessed June 18 2019).