

**‘Left Behind, Looking Forward’: The 2019 General
Election, the Red Wall and the Labour Party**

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Abstract

In December 2019, the Labour Party suffered its worst electoral defeat since 1935. This brought about a substantial loss of seats in the North and Midlands, Labour's Red Wall, previously considered the party's loyal heartlands. In contrast, the Conservatives secured not only an 80-seat majority but more votes from working-class people than their traditional supporters, the middle-class. The question of why Labour's Red Wall collapsed in such dramatic circumstances became a key question following the 2019 election and is the topic for this thesis.

Critical to understanding the events of 2019, three key theoretical areas are examined. Firstly, who the working-class are and how societal changes caused by deindustrialisation, neoliberalism and globalisation caused their disempowerment politically, economically and in terms of identity. Next the thesis considers the impact of these changes on voting behaviour as class and party alignment declined in favour of valence issues, and the positional model, now based on cultural values. Finally, it outlines theory based on the rise of populism, in light of the disempowerment of the working-class.

Set against these theoretical contexts, the thesis links this to why the Red Wall fell using empirical data gathered from those who experienced it. Firstly, it examines the disempowerment of the working-class and Labour's perceived role in this, creating a feeling of being 'left behind'. Next it discusses how Labour failed to respond to this situation, exacerbating the sense of being 'left behind'. Lastly, it considers Jeremy Corbyn's policy offer at the 2019 general election in comparison to Boris Johnson's, giving an explanation as to why the working-class in the Red Wall voted for the now populist Conservative party under Boris Johnson, promising to re-empower the working-class.

The thesis concludes by considering the implications of the findings and 'looking forward' to Labour's possible post pandemic future. Using the theoretical themes as a focus, it firstly outlines how Labour may be able to re-empower the working-class in the Red Wall through engagement with voters. It also suggests how Labour can develop policies that respond to the changes in voting behaviour over recent years and offer unifying populist style projects in answer to the rise in populism. These suggestions are one step towards an alternative re-empowerment of the lost voters in the Red Wall for the Labour Party.

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List of Abbreviations

BAME	Black Asian and Minority Ethnic
CLP	Constituency Labour Party
CIE	Chief Income Earner
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
GBCS	Great British Class Survey
GfK	Grown from Knowledge
ILP	Independent Labour Party
LGBTQI	Lesbian Gay Bisexual Transgender Queer and Intersex
LRC	Labour Representation Committee
MP	Member of Parliament
NHS	National Health Service
NRS	National Readership Survey
NS-SEC	National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification
PLP	Parliamentary Labour Party
UK	United Kingdom
UKIP	UK Independence Party
WASPI	Women Against State Pension Inequality

List of Figures

Figure one: 2019 Red Wall Election Results	2
Figure two: Occupation grades from the NRS Class Schema	29
Figure three: Map of 'Traditional Working-Class' areas	35
Figure four: Map of 'Emergent Service Worker' areas	35
Figure five: Map of 'Precariat' areas	36
Figure six: The Seven Forms of Labour Security	39
Figure seven: Positions of voters in values space by vote in 2017 and 2019	45

Tables

Table one: Percentage of vote change between 2017 and 2019 for the Conservatives and Labour	3
Table two: Summary of classes	32

Contents

Abstract.....	i
Acknowledgements.....	ii
List of Abbreviations.....	iv
List of Figures.....	v
List of Tables.....	vi
Chapter One- Introduction: The Fall of the Red Wall.....	1
1.1 Introduction.....	1
1.2 Research Questions.....	4
1.3 Methodology and Methods.....	6
1.4 Method.....	8
1.5 Structure.....	11
Chapter Two-The Labour Party in Context.....	13
2.1 Introduction.....	13
2.2 The Origins of the Labour Party.....	14
2.3 Old Labour.....	15
2.4 New Labour, New Start.....	18
2.5 Corbynism: Between Old and New Labour.....	21
2.6 Conclusion.....	26
Chapter Three-Theoretical Framework.....	28
3.1 Introduction.....	28
3.2 The Working Class.....	29

3.3 Voting Behaviour.....	40
3.4 Populism.....	45
3.5 Conclusion.....	49
Chapter Four- ‘Left Behind’: The Disempowerment of Labour Voters.....	51
4.1 Introduction.....	51
4.2 Left Behind by Deindustrialisation.....	52
4.3 Left Behind by the Establishment.....	57
4.4 Conclusion.....	62
Chapter Five- ‘Left Behind’ by the Labour Party.....	64
5.1 Introduction.....	64
5.2 Labour’s Not Listening.....	65
5.3 Labour Transforms.....	71
5.4 Conclusion.....	73
Chapter Six- ‘Looking Forward’: Populism for the Working-Class?.....	75
6.1 Introduction.....	75
6.2 Brexit Confusion.....	76
6.3 A Lack of Economic Credibility.....	79
6.4 A Lack of Cultural Values.....	81
6.5 A Populist Leader no Longer Popular.....	84
6.6 An Ineffective Populist Campaign.....	86
6.7 Conclusion.....	89
Chapter Seven- Conclusion.....	91
7.1 Introduction.....	91

7.2 Overview and Contribution of the Thesis.....	91
7.3 Main Findings.....	94
7.4 ‘Looking Forward’: The Post Pandemic Future for Labour.....	98
7.5 Limitations and Avenues for Further Research.....	105

Chapter One

Introduction: The Fall of the Red Wall

1.1 Introduction

“As a party of working-class self-representation, Labour is already dead” (Bickerton 2019).

Jeremy Corbyn attended a dawn rally in Glasgow on the final day of campaigning in the General Election of 2019 and afterwards gathered with his family and Labour Party officials to watch the stark reality of the results unfold in the terrible exit polls (Stewart 2020). Predictions explained that “the Conservatives could win 368 seats in the House of Commons, Labour would get 191” (Sandhu 2019a). Meanwhile, Boris Johnson celebrated, as featured in many of the National newspapers over the coming days, at the realisation that the Red Wall was falling. As the results were counted it became clear that Labour faced its most devastating defeat since 1935, with a swing from Labour to the Conservatives of 4.7%, the second largest swing seen since 1997 (Denver 2020). Labour lost 60 seats, giving them just 202 MPs in Parliament. In contrast, the Conservatives had 365 MPs, gaining an extra 48 seats from 2017, gifting them an 80-seat majority. The key question that followed these terrible results was what had caused the Red Wall to fall in such a dramatic way?

The term Red Wall became salient in the days following the general election and was coined by James Kanagasooriam, a pollster, who using data from the 2017 general election outlined where the Conservative Party was underperforming in Britain and where they should do better: “a cluster of 42 constituencies in Labour’s heartlands which were likely to turn blue, either for the first time

ever, or for the first time in recent history (since the early 1990s) in 2019” (Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021:10). These seats were clustered geographically in the North and Midlands (see figure one). The term Red Wall was thus adopted by the media and those in politics and became synonymous with the previous Labour heartland seats in the North, Midlands and Wales that voted in a Conservative MP in the general election of 2019.

Figure One: 2019 Red Wall Election Results



Source: Kanagasooriam and Simon, 2021:11

The Red Wall in the North and Midlands had traditionally been Labour supporting areas since the party began at the turn of the twentieth century. Even as late as 2017 almost two thirds of Labour

MPs were elected from these areas (Trickett and Lavery 2019). In 1983, when Labour suffered a similar but less terrible defeat, the greatest losses to the party were in Eastern England and the Southeast (Datapraxis 2019). In 2019 though, compared to seats won in 2017, the most significant losses were in the Midlands and even more so the North (see table one). The extent of the loss of vote share within areas that were previously loyal Labour constituencies explains why some have described the Red Wall as crumbling (SurrIDGE 2020b).

Table one: Percentage of Vote Change Between 2017 and 2019 for the Conservatives and Labour

Region	Conservative % of Vote Change 2017-2019	Labour % of Vote Change 2017-2019
Northeast	+3.8%	-12.9%
Northwest	+1.3%	-8.4%
Yorks & Humber	+2.6%	-10.1%
East Midlands	+4.0%	-8.8%
West Midlands	4.40%	-8.60%
Eastern	+2.5%	-8.3%
London	-1.1%	-6.4%
Southeast	+0.2%	-6.5%
Southwest	+1.4%	-5.8%

Source: Own elaboration, based on Baker et al 2020

The reasons for writing this thesis are twofold. Intellectually, the conundrum exists surrounding what happened in these areas to cause the traditional Labour voters to eschew their loyalty and elect a Conservative government, unthinkable even just a decade ago. On the surface and immediately after the election in 2019, it appeared there were two short term factors that were responsible: Brexit and the unpopularity of Jeremy Corbyn. It was important, however, to truly understand what had occurred, to delve further and consider the long-term factors at play.

On a personal level, as the granddaughter of a miner from Barnsley who had grown up in the Southwest but gravitated back to my ancestors' roots in the North and Midlands in adulthood, I was keen to understand what had changed for the left-wing minded people who had welcomed me into their communities during this time. Growing up with parents who worked in the public sector, one a strong union activist, I had been submerged in the language of left-wing politics and the pride felt in the collectivism that came with it, especially when it related to my family in the North. The fall of the Red Wall therefore became a topic that I was keen to understand as it seemed so at odds with my own previous experiences of living in the area but also the family and friends that I have from these communities.

1.2 Research Questions

There has been much quantitative research into what that happened in these Red Wall areas in 2019 (Bell 2019, Curtice 2020a, Curtice 2020b, Denver 2020, SurrIDGE 2020a, SurrIDGE 2020b) but it was the 'how' and 'why' that piqued my interest. The first question raised then was why did the Red Wall fall in the general election of 2019? It became clear from initial research that the Labour Party had changed since its inception, aiming to improve the lives of working-class people, and had offered different ideological positions and policies over time that underscored the metamorphic nature of the party. A discussion of this is necessary, carried out in chapter one, to then understand why the Red Wall decided to abandon its loyalties to the party. The crux of the matter was the changing circumstances of the working-class in these areas that led to their disempowerment and a sense of being 'left behind'. Thus, the first question that is key to this thesis is:

Why did the voters in the Red Wall feel disempowered and therefore 'left behind'?

This question created multiple answers that needed to be addressed using both theoretical and empirical research. Once these had been considered, further questions then arose based on how the Labour Party had tackled the declining situation in the Red Wall. It became clear that the party had in fact exacerbated the negative feelings within these communities. Consequently, the next question was:

How did Labour 'leave behind' these voters in tackling this disempowerment?

Once again, empirical and theoretical research was called upon to unpick the problem, the theory guiding the specific aspects of the disempowerment of the working-class and the empirical explaining Labour's lack of ability to respond to it effectively.

The final question sought to answer how this culminated in the Conservative Party having such success at the general election of 2019 at the expense of Labour. The final research question was:

How did Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party answer this disempowerment in the general election of 2019 compared to that of Boris Johnson's Conservative Party?

To answer this question the theoretical framework engaged with the theories of voting behaviour and the rise of populism. Empirical data was then used to understand fully what voters' reactions were to the different offers of the parties in the general election, with a focus on the limits of the Labour Party. By considering all three of the research questions, an explanation can be given into why the Red Wall fell in the general election of 2019, which then guides suggestions around what can be done to address the situation, given in the final chapter.

1.3 Methodology and Methods

To answer the key research questions in this thesis a qualitative approach is used. The aim of the research is to provide as full a picture as possible for Labour's failures in the general election of 2019 from those who lived it, according to the 'how' and 'why'. It focuses on understanding the meaning taken from events in the North and Midlands over many years and more recently by the people there, providing qualitative evidence (Furlong and Marsh 2010). This evidence is used to answer the three key research questions of the project.

1.3.1 Ontological and Epistemological Approaches

Ontologically, this research is conducted from an anti-foundationalist position: there is no 'real' or fixed world which exists independently of meaning (Furlong and Marsh 2010). Consequently, a constructivist approach is adopted. Social constructions are made in two ways: Firstly, through socialisation with norms and beliefs becoming embedded over time; secondly, through persuasion, with entrepreneurial people bringing new ideas into the political arena and then selling them to others (Parsons 2010). Both theories are at work when considering how the working-class became disempowered and left behind as a group and were then persuaded by right-wing populism in recent years. Realities are local, specific and vary between groups and it is the actor and values they hold who decide what is rational, meaning no one is truly objective: therefore, an individual's social constructions are "shaped by social, political and cultural processes" (Furlong and Marsh, 2010:190). Regardless of how others in the country were feeling, the voters in the Red Wall constituencies formed a socially constructed reality that they felt was rational and true.

There are clear epistemological implications that stem from this ontological approach, as ontological assumptions inform epistemological ones which then inform methodological choices

(Hay 2007). Knowledge formation is based on how humans interpret their world (McGregor 2019). Hermeneutics¹ therefore, must be taken into consideration in how truth is created as they question whether an 'external' world can be accessed without the influence of "perceptions and concepts that we use as constructs" (Flick 2004). Truth is relative for different people and there are multiple realities that exist in terms of knowledge of the world, changing over time. This perspective is relevant in this thesis as it unpicks views and does not claim to be generalisable (Barbour 2019). Hermeneutics come from the context of socio historical meaning, making them relative to these factors (Soeffner 2004).

The researcher must also acknowledge that they "cannot enter the field as empty vessels, but inevitably bring with them their own cultural assumptions, and in some cases, political convictions" (Barbour, 2019:35). This is vital because research is intersubjective (McGregor 2019). Therefore, it is essential to explain that I am Labour Party member. Despite this, however, I made sure to maintain rigour throughout the research in two ways: I was conscious that the researcher must be aware of their own attitudes in gaining an understanding of the world through the actor's eyes (Hitzler and Eberle 2004) so when analysing the data, I viewed each participants contributions as their true reality and of equal value, regardless of political persuasion. In addition, reflexivity² was constantly applied during the analysis. This rigour meant I remained "open to being changed by the encounter with the text" (Willig, 2017:282) and ensured the data analysis was then valid and questioned accordingly.

¹Hermeneutics are the way the interpreter uses their given self-understandings of the world to make decisions in what they do (Given, 2021: 465).

² This is the conscious self-evaluation from the researcher on their subjectivity, backgrounds, and role in the process of research, where the researcher knows their own "values, self-identity or ideologies" (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey, 2011: 19-20).

1.4 Method

Once the ontological and epistemological foundations underpinning the research had been qualified, I decided on using qualitative methods. These actively shape knowledge production where “theory and empirics feed on and fold into each other”: by using existing theory combined with empirical research from interviews, focus groups and questionnaires, a theoretical argument could be formed that included learning with and from the participants (Kurowska and de Guevara, 2021:1215). Through a dialogue with participants based on open ended questions, I was able to make sense of the context of people’s lives which lent itself to a thematic analysis of the data (Barbour 2019).

1.4.1 Case Selection

The first step towards collecting data was deciding which areas to find participants from. This was based on constituencies in England that were classed as being in the Red Wall of the North and Midlands during the general election of 2019. It became the dependent variable in the investigation ensuring that the data collected would be comparable (Ragin et al 1996). There were no Welsh or Scottish constituencies included to avoid skewing the data with the theme of national independence. From a list of Labour MPs that lost their seat in the general election, I extrapolated those that were in the North and Midlands (Sandhu 2019b). To find seats that could be defined as the Labour heartland I then choose those areas represented by a Labour MP since 1997 using data from parliamentary results tables and the parliamentary website. I could then find a small N sample of participants from these constituencies to ask the questions that could not be answered quantitatively (Ragin et al 1996). The intention was that these participants would be either former Labour MPs, current Conservative MPs, Labour candidates and Labour or Conservative activists

that took part in the campaigns in these areas, to understand as fully as possible the realities that had been socially constructed surrounding the fall of the Red Wall.

1.4.2 Methods of Data Collection and Fieldwork

Prior to collecting my own data, substantive research was carried out into existing quantitative literature describing what happened in the fall of the Red Wall, both scholastic and in the form of reports given by political parties. Simultaneously, existing qualitative data providing details of why and how it had occurred from those within the Red Wall and other areas was analysed. Next, scholarly evidence was gathered and researched so I could understand the relevant theoretical arguments that would answer the first research question: *Why did the voters in the Red Wall feel disempowered and therefore 'left behind'?*

Interviews were then carried out with four former Labour MPs, three newly elected Conservative MPs, and one Labour candidate in order to gain a balanced view between the parties. These, combined with the existing quantitative and qualitative data researched would then answer the remaining research questions. The interviews were carried out using open ended questions and were semi-structured in order to create an equilibrium between “the researcher's agenda (in terms both of over-arching questions and specific detailed questions...) with the capacity to leave some room for the interviewee to provide her/his own insights and reflections” (Barbour 2019:121).

Despite initially deciding on focus groups for both Labour and Conservative activists, to encourage discussion from which to uncover the social features of what happened during the fall of the Red Wall and the processes behind it (Berg 2001), due to the number of participants willing to take part and practical issues around covid, these also became semi-structured interviews. They were carried out with individuals or in pairs, with six Labour activists interviewed in total.

Unfortunately, Conservative associations were unwilling to take part. Contact with participants was made through either email or social media. All interviews took place online between January and April 2021 due to Covid restrictions.

It was important to ask roughly the same questions during all the interviews in order to detect patterns and themes, asking the most important questions first, although being prepared to adapt to how the interview was proceeding in order to reveal more information (Cowley 2021). All participants involved in the study were guaranteed anonymity and identified only through their party and as an MP, former MP, candidate or activist.

1.4.3 Data Analysis

Interviews were transcribed in order to be analysed. Throughout the analysis of the data, I was mindful of subjectivity in three ways: through the participant's own interpretation of the events, their interpretation of what they reported voters on the doorstep to be saying and finally my interpretation of their thoughts. Themes were then decided, in combination with an understanding of the existing theory, by continually revisiting the transcriptions made during the analysis of the data to make sure that all themes were identified and understood correctly. The initial themes were decided by considering each sentence in turn, looking out for key words that were repeated. Initial themes were then linked with theoretical research on the working-class, voting behaviour and populism which led to a decision on the final themes in the thesis. The context of relevant quotes was checked when listing them in the excel document of theme headings to maintain rigour. Furthermore, quotes or summaries used were sent to the participants so they could verify my interpretation of their words, thus endorsing the analysis and ensuring validity.

As qualitative research is intersubjective, rigour is paramount. By using multiple facets of triangulation, validity of data is ensured as it provides different “sighting lines” of the same phenomenon (Berg, 2001:5). Triangulation was achieved in three ways: according to space, with different constituencies across the North and Midlands researched; in terms of person, with multiple participants from different parties; and in terms of theory, bringing together theories on the working-class, voting behaviour and populism as well as other empirical data.

1.5 Structure

This thesis is constructed of seven chapters. Chapter two gives a contextual account of the history of the Labour Party, essential in understanding how the party has evolved over time. Not only this but it also tracks the support of the working-class for the Labour Party plus its attempts to gain votes from the middle-class, central themes in Labour’s story that impacted on the disempowerment of the working-class in the Red Wall.

Chapter three provides the theoretical underpinnings explaining why the working-class came to feel disempowered and thus left behind. It considers who the working-class are, what caused their political disempowerment and financial insecurity plus the subsequent divisions that appeared within this group, further disempowering them as a collective entity and creating fear. These changes within the working-class have led to a decline in partisan and class alignment in favour of the valence and positional models of voting behaviour based on cultural values. Finally, all these changes means that populism and its rise is discussed.

The fourth chapter uses both the theoretical foundations and the historical context of the Labour Party to explain how the disempowerment of the working-class created a sense of being ‘left

behind', also utilising empirical data. It considers the impact of deindustrialisation on the Red Wall and how these areas were 'left behind' by the establishment, in the form of Labour councils.

In chapter five, Labour's response to this disempowerment is considered, highlighting that they created an even stronger sense of being 'left behind' caused by a lack of engagement with communities. Furthermore, the chapter examines how the party evolved so it was no longer perceived to represent working-class voters in the Red Wall.

The outcome of this disempowerment and sense of being 'left behind' is examined in chapter six through the lens of populism and the policy offers from Labour compared to the Conservatives. Labour's agenda is considered according to its muddled Brexit message, its lack of cultural values and fiscal responsibility. Corbyn's role as a credible and populist style leader is also analysed in comparison to Johnson.

Chapter seven concludes this thesis by firstly giving an overview of it and highlighting the contributions it has made to existing literature. The main findings are then given, in relation to the three research questions. It then considers how Labour can begin to look forward in order to help re-empower the working-class in the Red Wall and gain their support once again. It does this using ideas from participants and is based on the three theoretical elements of this study: the disempowerment of the working-class, changes in voting behaviour and the rise of populism. Finally, it underscores the implications from this thesis, any limitations and avenues for further research.

Chapter Two

The Labour Party in Context

“The Labour Party has always been about people. It was formed to give ordinary people a voice and has sought power in order to improve their lives” (Labour.org 2021).

2.1 Introduction

For the purpose of this thesis, it is important to consider the historical context of the Labour Party and how it has changed over time to understand long-term factors in its demise. This chapter considers the rich literature on the history of the Labour Party. Firstly, I examine how Labour’s base was built on a coalition of the conservative working-class and middle-class idealists, wanting to improve the lives of working people through collectivism.³ Next, I consider the Labour Party up until the 1980s, demonstrating how this balancing act of class support continued under a changing socialism, enveloping the patriotic beliefs of the working-class which then came to a halt as progressive issues such as law and order, sexuality and immigration became more important. Next, I discuss ‘New Labour’ and how the continuation of Thatcher’s neoliberalism altered its ideological direction to win votes from both the working and middle-classes. ‘Corbynism’ can then be evaluated in relation to both ‘Old Labour’ and ‘New Labour’ ideology.

³For the Labour Party, collectivism was ownership by means of production through the state for the people with a society based on this, summed up in Clause IV of Labour’s constitution of 1918 (see section 2.3 for more information).

2.2 The Origins of the Labour Party

In order to understand the role of the working-class in the story of the Labour Party, it is necessary to understand its formation and how the working-class were key. It is one that begins with the Scottish miner, Keir Hardie; widely acknowledged as the first MP to represent the working man in Parliament in 1892, who became the first official Labour leader in 1906. He contributed to the organisation of the Independent Labour Party (ILP) which became part of the Labour Representation Committee (LRC), a group formed by trade unions, socialist and cooperative societies to create Labour representation in Parliament (Thorpe 2015). From its inception, the Labour Party can be viewed as a ‘broad-church’ political organisation with supporters from the working and middle-classes through “affiliated organisations: trade unions, socialist societies, trades councils, women’s associations, professional groups and, from 1918, constituency parties... and... co-operative societies” (Worley, 2009: 1). There was an appeal to white collar workers, and non-union members of the working-class in the decades that followed with individual membership allowed from 1918, alongside the establishment of Constituency Labour Parties (CLPs) (Hayhurst 2019). The trade union movement and the LRC (primarily a trades union movement) very much aimed to improve the lives of the working-class. These groups were made up of working-class members who were conservative in political and social outlook, not interested in socialism (Pugh 2002). In contrast, the ILP and socialist societies were comprised of more middle-class members who wanted to put socialism on the agenda in Parliament. The Labour Party, from its conception then, was one of various groups with competing aims where unity in ideological stance or policy position was an intractable endeavour, caught between the competing visions of its working-class and middle-class members.

2.3 Old Labour

The establishment of the LRC, with its aim of Labour representation in parliament, saw Old Labour come to fruition for two main reasons. Firstly, in 1918 the party officially committed to socialism with two intrinsically linked key policy objectives: common ownership and social reform via the redistribution of wealth. Establishing Labour as a socialist movement through a new constitution was done to create cohesion between its different class bases: the increasingly popular working-class trade unions and affiliated members, and the middle-class educated socialist thinkers (Jones 1996). Clause IV of the constitution, written by Sidney Webb, a socialist economist and leading thinker of the Fabian Society, committed Labour to the idea of common ownership and the redistribution of wealth:

To secure for the workers by hand or by brain the full fruits of their industry and the most equitable distribution thereof that may be possible upon the basis of the common ownership of the means of production, distribution, and exchange, and the best obtainable system of popular administration and control of each industry or service (Webb, 1918a:3).

This and Webb's (1918b) *Labour and the New Social Order* committed Labour to a British socialism with a top-down approach. Labour's conservative working-class base meant this could not be socialism of the Bolshevik kind and instead built upon the trade union focus on the rights and living standards of the working people (Gaitskell 1953). This socialism would appeal to the working-class through its gradual, pragmatic nature, achieved through democratic means of legislation where the working-class would be rewarded for their labour through a fairer society (Worley 2005). It was through conservative values and a left-wing ideology that Labour secured their working-class electoral base.

It was not until the 1930s however, that Labour could implement this ideology and by the election of 1945 was offering a programme of public ownership and nationalisation (Francis 1997). Labour (led by Clement Attlee) entered power with a forceful majority, buoyed by a growing supporter base “positively attracted to the identity which Labour projected, as the only party which grounded its promises of social reform in a vision of a planned economy” (Sloman, 2010: 722). Labour captured a higher proportion of the working-class vote than before as well as some of the lower middle-classes (Thorpe 2015). Important changes to social reform such as the setting up of national insurance payments to provide welfare and the creation of the NHS ensured that Labour’s key aim of improving working-class lives was achieved.

This left-wing, collectivist ideology began to change, however, partly in answer to a drop in the support from the working-class in the 1959 general election due to continuing social inequalities (Francis 1997). Furthermore, Hugh Gaitskell (leader of the Labour party from 1955-1963) believed people were now more “individualistic” due to their rising affluence, ultimately blurring class distinctions as a determiner of voting behaviour⁴ (Drucker 1979). This individualism lessened the appeal of collectivism within the working-class so Harold Wilson (leader of the Labour party from 1963-1976) took the party in a new direction: a party no longer defined by class but for all working people regardless of their social identity (Fielding 2007). Labour’s ‘scientific revolution’, revisionist narrative was socialist, calling for a planned economy and importantly, limited nationalisation, based on a new technological age (Favretto 2000). This created a rise in middle-class votes for Labour, albeit this broad coalition of support proved fragile (Fielding 2007). In 1970, Wilson was voted out of office with a decline in working-class votes being a contributory factor (Thorpe 2015). Notably however, the party was still very much the party of the working-

⁴Class dealignment became pivotal in Labour’s decline as explored in the next chapter.

class: In the 1970 election 56% of the working-class voted Labour, while only 22% of the middle-class did so (Kellner 2011). Once again, the necessary ideological balance between appealing to both the working and middle classes that was evident at the conception of the Party and continued to 2019, remained prominent.

Common ownership became a key policy once more for Old Labour helping Wilson gain a slim majority in February 1974 which was then made more secure in an election 6 months later (Jones 1996). A lack of the promised left-wing ideology, on account of global financial issues, disappointed Labour members. Furthermore, other issues such as race relations and law and order became salient in the election of 1979 and Labour lost to the Conservatives (McAllister and Mughan 1985). Progressive values⁵ that had begun to emerge in society regarding law and order, sexuality and immigration, caused cultural cleavages in the 1980s to become even more important (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). The socialist ideology of collectivisation, nationalisation and social reform through welfare was no longer enough to secure the working-class vote.

Tellingly, as later developed in this thesis, a strong sense of national pride has been a consistent theme in Labour's capturing of the working-class vote, which a lack thereof was cited as a contributing factor in Labour's 2019 electoral defeat. Old Labour was a patriotic party appealing to their socially conservative working-class base. During World War I, as part of the government, Labour supported the war, combining their socialism with patriotism and nationalism (Pugh 2002). In the inter-war years, Labour moved from a position of peace promotion to that of anti-

⁵For its first 60 years, the Labour party was culturally conservative, but this changed in 1965 with a demarcation between conservative and liberal policy making which moved to a Cultural Marxist Worldview (a freedom from the subjugation of cultural tradition) (Beech and Hickson 2020). By 1978 the cultural issue of immigration was large enough to see a change in the voting behaviour of the electorate with Labour losing votes not on ideological grounds but those based on cultural values (McAllister and Mughan 1985).

appeasement and by 1940 were part of Churchill's government (Worley 2005). Labour could take the patriotic high ground with Hugh Dalton (a leading Labour MP at the time and chairman from 1936) shifting the pacifism of the 1920s to the "patriotic interventionism in 1935 that characterized the party's foreign and defense policy throughout the 1940s and 1950s", pushed into the public sphere via support from *The Daily Mirror* (Pugh, 2002:534). This was a paper targeted at the working-class, thus making Labour more appealing to those of a more conservative nature. This ability to combine socialism with patriotism and national pride was integral to keeping Labour's working-class support but, as we shall see, had evaporated by the general election of 2019.

2.4 New Labour, New Start

While Old Labour was focused on creating a socialist society based on common ownership and social reform, New Labour's socialism was via the neoliberalist state brought about under Margaret Thatcher: common ownership was replaced by an acceptance of the capitalist state and the embracing of globalisation, with social reform achieved through a stakeholder society.⁶ This represented a clear divergence of ideology and was to have far reaching implications for the working-class going forward, as is further developed in chapter four. Collective ownership - in the form of Clause IV - was removed from the Labour party constitution, only brought about by giving members more power within the party as opposed to the unions and activists. This was achieved through work done by Labour leaders Neil Kinnock and John Smith. Tony Blair, who became leader of the Labour Party in 1994, also wanted this rebalancing of influence within the membership in order to appeal to a broader voter base which included a move away from Labour of the past (Kavanagh 1997). Cowley and Kavanagh (2018:71) state that this was perceived to be

⁶The 1997 Labour manifesto, *New Labour: because Britain deserves better* (1997: 1,19) best describes what a stakeholder society entails: "a Britain which we all feel part of, in whose future we all have a stake" and an economy "where everyone has a stake in society and owes responsibility to it."

“a symbolic break with Old Labour” with a continuation of an economy controlled by market forces (akin to the Conservatives) and emphasis on improved public services through economic growth (Kavanagh 1997).

Through this ideological repositioning, New Labour sought to create an image of economic competence. This important aspect of the valence model of voting, detailed in the next chapter, was key to Labour’s success in 1997. A 5-year pledge not to raise income taxes reassured voters that there would be no return to the old economic policies as well as the business sector, who remained supportive of New Labour for the first 10 years of office due to the growth in the economy and public spending (Gamble 2010).

Integral to New Labour’s neoliberal ideology, was Blair’s belief that Britain had to be an important player in the global world to create economic success (Blair 1998). This indicated another ideological shift which was to prove relevant in the general election of 2019. New Labour (1997:11) declared that globalisation would be encouraged through “strengthening our wealth creating base”. This would give a “growing freedom with which labour, capital and goods could cross borders” (Kavanagh, 1997:537). The freedom of movement and rising immigration⁷ that came with this neoliberalist global outlook had implications in the move to voting according to cultural values for the working-class and by 2019 was to hugely undermine Labour’s voter base.⁸

⁷New Labour wanted an enlargement of the EU whilst retaining a veto over key matters (Blair 1998). This it got, but not in the case of asylum and immigration (Bulmer 2008).

⁸As their time in government went on, New Labour faced and an increasingly Eurosceptic section of the Conservatives in parliament and the press. The ratification of the Lisbon Treaty on further EU integration and a lack of a referendum on it, despite it being promised by Labour, meant that it strengthened the argument for the referendum on EU membership led by UKIP. This culminated in the Brexit result of 2016 which was to have devastating effects on Labour’s support in 2019 (Corbett 2016).

New Labour believed the strong economy created by neoliberalism and globalisation was the vehicle by which social reform could take place, achieved through the stakeholder society (New Labour 1997) but with a clear determination to bring down the number of people claiming welfare benefits. There was an expectation that those who could work, should (Brivati 2010). Labour implemented wide-ranging reforms of the tax and benefit system ‘to make work pay’ and to tackle the unemployment and poverty traps of the low-paid, with guaranteed minimum incomes for working families (Meredith 2006). This employed the neoliberalist tactic of creating groups of abjection, such as immigrants and the unemployed, in order to legitimise policy, which had implications for Labour in 2019. The policy of ‘making work pay’ won votes from the “aspirational working-class” who were now able to view Labour as a party of hope, rather than one which would only help poor at the expense of those who had ambition (Kavanagh, 1997:533).⁹ This aspiration, or lack thereof, discussed in chapter five, lost support from Red Wall voters in 2019. Importantly, this stakeholder society also gave more people access to education and there was a large rise of those with educational qualifications under New Labour (Ford and Goodwin 2014) altering society interminably for the working-class; it ultimately created greater divisions between the more educated, professional, socially liberal middle-class and the socially conservative working-class in society.¹⁰

⁹Eventually however, New Labour was viewed by a number of the working-class as a liberal elite, creating debt in order to fund the welfare benefits of those deemed to be part of the underclass, whilst the Conservatives were viewed as being on the side of the hard workers who would have to sort out the financial mess (Bolton and Pitts 2018).

¹⁰New Labour did attempt to address the balance of this authoritarian and liberal divide with a narrative around crime which became a big focus in its 1997 manifesto, but the party was viewed as being focused on socio-cultural matters with a rising significance placed on the politics of identity: “equality and diversity, patriarchy, multiculturalism and LGBTQI rights” (Beech and Hickson, 2020:14).

The win of 1997 for Labour was a watershed moment, gaining more middle-class voters than the Conservative party yet still retaining the support of eight million working-class voters.¹¹ By 2010 however, New Labour had lost five million of those voters during their time in power, and were “at risk of losing England, [losing] the ability to renew its political hegemony within the class which gave it life” (Rutherford, 2011:88). The middle-classes remained more supportive of New Labour’s policies whilst in power with the percentage of group AB reducing by 8% and C1 by 9% whereas, the working-class vote declined far more: group C2 by 17% and DE by 14% (Ipsos MORI 1997, Ipsos MORI 2010).¹² New Labour’s move to a neoliberal and globalist party had succeeded in capturing both middle-class and working-class voters. Yet the changes this made to society and the makeup of the party base led to a fracturing of their working-class support.

2.5 Corbynism: Between Old and New Labour

This section considers how the ideologically different strands of Old and New Labour led to the rise of Corbynism. After Labour’s defeat in 2010, Ed Miliband was elected as the new leader of the Labour party and took the party in a more left ward direction, believing it would secure votes in the era of austerity as imposed by the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition (Goes 2016). In terms of the role of the state, Miliband favoured many of the policies of Robert Glasman, one of the key leaders of the Blue Labour movement¹³. Miliband’s social democracy in the form of the One Nation approach wished to pass power back to local communities (Cruddas and Rutherford

¹¹New Labour won five point five million more middle-class votes than the Conservatives (Kellner 2011).

¹²See chapter three, section 3.11 for a further explanation of these groups.

¹³The Blue Labour Movement is based on the idea that the statist nature of government has led to people becoming economically dependent on it, with communities no longer working together in association because of this reliance on the state. It also underlines how a move to a socially liberal outlook in society has happened at the expense of the part played in the past by family, faith and patriotism. It is based on a historical notion of a community-minded and patriotic socialism (see Glasman et al, 2011).

2014).¹⁴ It was a move away from New Labour's preference for the state as a manager towards one which was less centralised, though still transformative, and included a narrative around patriotism based on Labour's past, which hoped to tackle the social uncertainties brought about by globalisation (Goes 2016). Despite this policy differentiation from Labour, voters still viewed the party negatively over their economic credibility due to the 2008 financial crash (Bolton and Pitts 2018). Furthermore, the decline in the numbers of trade union members, working-class voters and public sector employees meant that the traditional working-class voter base was fracturing further with most support for Labour now coming from the under 29s and ethnic minorities (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018).

Unable to gain any more of the popular vote between 2010 and 2015, despite the coalition's austerity agenda (Goes 2018), Miliband resigned, and a leadership election was set in motion. Jeremy Corbyn was viewed as an outsider to win (Wainwright 2018). Other candidates in the race were all deemed to be centrists or candidates from the New Labour era, but it was Corbyn that won a clear majority of votes with 59.5% (Arias 2018). His unexpected victory was put down to the perception that he offered hope to people after a period of political apathy between 2010 and 2015 (Richards 2016). For some, Corbyn was deemed to be a populist leader (Martell 2018). Both these elements of his leadership are vital in the analysis of Labour's demise in 2019 as is further explored in later chapters.

On Corbyn's success, Edwards and Beech (2016:495) explain "the result is that Labour elected its most left-wing Leader in the post-war era, overwhelmingly chosen by the majority of card-carrying

¹⁴The One Nation approach is based on the idea that the British are patriotic and proud of their nations, value family and tolerance as well as fairness, responsibility to others and democracy. At the centre of politics should be "individuals, their families, the work that they do and the places they belong" as sources of reciprocity and wellbeing (Cruddas and Rutherford, 2014: 16).

activists, newly registered supporters and affiliated members from the trade unions and allied socialist organisations”. This was down to a change in voting rules which led the membership to reach its highest level in 2017 with 564,443 members (Audickas et al 2019). New members joined specifically because they wanted Jeremy Corbyn as leader, not to become party activists (Manwaring and Beech 2017).

Much like the origins of the Labour Party, Corbynism was more than just a parliamentary phenomenon, inspiring voters who had not necessarily been politically active before. A proportion of new members were less educated, in low status jobs and were less well off than existing members and felt relatively more deprived compared to existing or returning members (Whitely et al 2018). This proved integral to the general election results of 2019 in the Red Wall. It also supports the fact that subjective vulnerability provides the pull to populism, with Corbynism being viewed as having populist traits (Jeffery 2021). Important to note too, is that Corbyn, like those leaders before him, was still having to balance a mixed class coalition base leading to different priorities within the party.

These priorities were also widened due to the community movement support within the party. Bassett (2019) compares Corbynism to the ‘people power’ narrative of the Bennite Left (those supportive of the more radical Labour MP, Tony Benn, in the 1970s) which called on grass roots support and activism to be part of the implementation of socialism. Momentum¹⁵ used a community and social media base to campaign, creating power for members from the bottom up, exhibiting populist traits, and was the legacy of the leadership campaign. Much of this new membership was formed by young people who felt excited about Corbynism (Gamble 2018).

¹⁵Momentum was formed as a catch all organisation in order to support Jeremy Corbyn as leader. They campaign separately to the official Labour Party and are made up of grass roots campaigners.

Under Corbyn, three quarters of the membership were now middle-class and over a half were university graduates. It was now a cross-class coalition rather than class based and sectional (Martell 2018). The membership included those returning after leaving during the New Labour era: they were pro-immigration, pro-redistribution, pro-environmental safeguards, hostile to big business but, unlike Corbyn, were pro-EU membership¹⁶ (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). This more progressive membership was to have huge implications for the party going forward.¹⁷

Corbyn was able to appeal to a wide voter base partly due to a feeling of affectiveness that existed at the time, characterised by negative feelings such as disenfranchisement, frustration and despair, creating the conditions of possibility for the Corbyn phenomenon to emerge (Airas 2018). He was viewed as “anti-war, anti-austerity and anti-inequality” which combined with the leadership campaign slogan of ‘straight talking, honest politics’ (Gamble, 2018:3-4). This again suggests his populist appeal. In 2017 his policy agenda, on the surface, appeared to be a more radical offer which identified practical solutions to end austerity with a commitment to renationalisation of certain sectors; a strengthening of the position of trade unions; a furthering of workers’ rights and conditions plus the creation of a National Investment Bank (The Labour Party 2017). There were, however, some elements that represented the New Labour policies of economic credibility: a promise to only raise corporation tax and for those earning over £80,000; a target of eliminating the deficit over 5 years so national debt would be lowered by the next term and a Fiscal Credibility Rule put in place making future growth dependent on investment (Ibid). This offer was more post-neoliberal than radical as at no point did Corbyn’s manifesto aim to end private ownership or

¹⁶Corbyn voted against joining the EEC in 1975 and against the Maastricht treaty, and despite being in favour of the social contract, was anti-membership (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018).

¹⁷Corbyn was viewed as London Labour, with a “worldview of ardent social liberalism... [meaning] the problem of the *values gap*” became a real issue for the party (Manwaring and Beech, 2017:12). It led to “a loss of blue-collar voters who are socially conservative” (Edwards and Beech, 2016:495). Yet without these liberal views, Labour risked losing the progressive coalition that formed a huge part of its membership (Worth 2019).

competition and there was no desire to bring back the collectivist Clause IV of the constitution.

Goes (2018:11) also explains:

Corbyn's proposals on macroeconomic policy, industrial policy, welfare, devolution of power to the English cities and towns, immigration and even foreign and defense policies mirrored those of Miliband's manifesto. Even Corbyn's fiscal rule and commitment to keep the cap on welfare spending were an adaptation of Labour's 2015 light austerian promise of a "triple lock of responsibility" to tackle the public deficit.

The 'Alternative Methods of Production' (Labour.org 2017), which included "participatory forms of control" was nationalisation but based on involving the people who work in the industries every day (McDonnell and Wainwright 2018). This could be viewed as a modern-day version of the collectivism of Clause IV, favourable to many within the working-class who were left-wing economically but happened to also be authoritarian in values position (SurrIDGE 2018).¹⁸

This group of voters proved difficult to maintain under Corbyn. Unlike the patriotic nature of Old Labour, Corbyn held an internationalist and peace maintenance approach to politics which did not sit well with the nationalistic nature of much of the working-class (Lilleker 2019). The 2017 manifesto reflected Corbyn's approach to foreign policy stating that "Labour believes Britain's foreign policy should be guided by the values of peace, universal rights and international law", even promising to introduce a Minister for Peace and Disarmament (The Labour Party 2017). Akin to New Labour, Corbyn was keen for Britain to play its part in the global world.¹⁹

Corbyn's policies, however, caused problems within the party. Under Corbyn, factionalism grew and had devastating effects as the leadership dealt with intraparty fighting. Not only was there a

¹⁸The values position will be discussed in more detail in the next chapter.

¹⁹This part in the global world included a commitment from Labour to take a fair share of refugees in its 2017 manifesto (The Labour Party 2017). Labour was still seen as a soft touch on the issue of immigration in 2015 (Bale 2016).

wide class base of voters there was a left and right ideological cleavage that existed within the party (Edwards and Beech 2016) as well as splits between the party machine and Southside (the Labour Party Headquarters), plus the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and the shadow cabinet, who showed little support for Corbyn's decisions during his leadership (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). These divisions were often well publicised, including the leadership challenge in 2016 which followed a flurry of resignations from front bench shadow ministers after Brexit. There was further division over Corbyn's handling of antisemitism within the party (Wainwright, 2018). This factionalism came to a head in 2019 when seven MPs left the party to form a coalition of independent MPs (Pogrud and Maguire 2020).

Corbynism was a mixture of the Labour movement gone by: Old Labour in its desire for nationalisation and collectivism; New Labour in its fiscal policies and global approach; Miliband's Labour, in terms of the 'One Nation' and Blue Labour vision of a more local and community minded approach. Leading a united party became difficult for Corbyn and Labour's voter base was now fully stretched. Finding policies that would satisfy the more conservative and patriotic working-class, whilst also pleasing the more progressive middle-class and well-educated membership became difficult. So too did maintaining party unity. These were to become problems that could not be solved and blew the voter coalition apart by 2019.

2.6 Conclusion

This chapter has demonstrated that the Labour party's long and turbulent past combined to create the problems it encountered in 2019. Built on a broad church of groups, from both the working and middle-class, it pursued policies of nationalisation and social reform in order to bring about equality whilst still being perceived as patriotic. It kept its working-class voter base overall, whilst attempting to attract middle-class voters.

With New Labour came an ideological change: a continuation of Thatcher's neoliberalism but based on globalisation, with the easing of inequality through a stakeholder society. Whilst at first boosting its working-class and middle-class electoral base, it began to lose working-class voters who felt that the party was no longer representing them or their more conservative values.

Corbynism then built upon both these elements of Labour's history by incorporating new ideas on nationalisation and collectivism, yet still based on a neoliberal economy. It broadened Labour's voter base further, creating a party not only focused on politics but 'people power' through social movements, demonstrating populist traits. It, however, became tainted for its lack of patriotism by the right-wing press and politicians. Its membership was now far more middle-class than working-class, based on the progressive identity politics begun under New Labour, but still maintained some working-class voters with its more left-wing economic policies.

The next chapter presents the theoretical framework and draws upon existing research into who the working-class are, how voting behaviour has changed in recent years and how this is set against the rise of populism in Western democracies and in the UK.

Chapter Three

Theoretical Framework

“Classes are not just abstract sociological classifications; but, if they matter, they do so because they shape history through the political contestation that they give rise to” (Savage et al, 2015:391).

3.1 Introduction

Class is believed to have played an important role in the political contest of 2019 (Ashcroft 2020, McIvor 2020, Kellner and Loughran 2019, Mattinson 2020, Sowemimo 2020, Surridge 2020a). Research has shown that the Conservatives have become more popular among working-class voters than those of the middle-class (Curtice 2020a). This chapter will give a substantive theoretical underpinning of why Labour lost its working-class voter base in 2019. The chapter is split into three key sections, focusing on the causes and effects of working-class disempowerment. The first section discusses who the working-class are, which then explains how deindustrialisation and neoliberalism brought an end to their collective identity, causing their disempowerment. Furthermore, it will demonstrate division and abjection within this group which has heightened the appeal of populism. The second section highlights the effects of this disempowerment: changes in voting behaviour which have been detrimental to Labour Party support, including class and party dealignment, with the valence and positional models of voting behaviour becoming increasingly salient. The final section highlights the importance of the effect of this positional politics based on cultural values, as populism gained traction across Western democracies, with Brexit providing the perfect vehicle for its success in the UK.

3.2 The Working-Class

There have been several attempts to organise society according to neat distinctions of social class (Savage 2000). Some are based on the professional status of members of society such as the Registrar General's Class Schema, used from 1911 until the 1980s (Savage et al 2013). Critiqued by sociologists for not being sufficiently rigorous enough, it was the work of Goldthorpe and his associates at Nuffield College in the 1970s that became highly influential. It was used to create the National Statistics Socio-Economic Classification (NS-SEC), the official UK class schema (Rose and O'Reilly 1998). It is an occupationally based classification built upon details of employment status. So too is the National Readership Survey (NRS). It necessitates mention as it is used by psephologists and will be referred to in the main body of this thesis. This too is based on the social grades formulated through occupation with a household (see figure one). Yet none of these schemes bring into the debate the role of exploitation or 'capital' within the working-class, salient in explaining the disempowerment of this group.

Figure two: Occupation grades from the NRS Class schema



Source: Own elaboration, based on the NRS 2021 Schema.

3.2.1 The Disempowered Working-Class

An important theoretical position regarding exploitation and the disempowerment of the working-class is offered by Wright (1997). The Marxist theory of class has been pivotal in underpinning his work as “to be in a ‘location’ within class structure is to have one’s material interests shaped by one’s relationship to the process of exploitation” (Ibid: 23). By using the idea of exploitation by the capitalist class of the proletariat, Wright explains that workers must labour for capitalists to acquire a livelihood and thus form the working-class: they are employees, have no authority and do not hire labour (Wright 1997). Wright’s focus on exploitation and power, as opposed to class dictated by privilege, suggests that the working-class are or at least feel powerless.

Another influential theorist on social class is the French Sociologist, Bourdieu, who conducted the research relevant to this thesis in France during the 1960s and 1970s (Bennett et al 2010). Here he considered the social position of French university students. Bourdieu believes that the organisation of society is dependent on the ‘capital’ held by individuals, with a perpetuating dominant privileged class which is borne out of an arbitrariness of the transmission of capital through the generations (Bourdieu 1986).²⁰ His work was intended to show an inexorable link between social and cultural differences in people (Bourdieu 1984, see also Robbins 2005). With Bourdieu believing capital is the crux of societal order; those of the lower classes were seen to have less capital to exchange.

The question arises of how relevant Bourdieu’s views are on the construction of class considering his research is limited to France and was carried out in the 1960s and 1970s? Other academics

²⁰This capital is constructed of 3 elements- economic, cultural and social: economic which can be directly converted into money but can also be held as property; cultural which is an appreciation of ‘high’ or ‘legitimate’ culture and qualifications gained through educational institutions and finally social, that of connections, sometimes familial, and associations with clubs, societies etc.

have also raised this. Gunn (2005), for example, states that these studies are not viewed as relevant to English society. Gunn's (Ibid) research focuses on cultural capital and how it aided the construction of the middle classes over history; it is useful in expounding that the middle-class have gained cultural capital which suggests by omission that the working-classes have not. Bennett et al (2010:52) compared Bourdieu's ideas on cultural capital with that of contemporary Britain and found that it was "the highly educated, who occupy higher occupational class positions, and who have backgrounds within higher social classes" and thus gain advantage due to their participation in cultural activities. What was also apparent was that the working-class section of the sample (categorized as lower supervisory, technical, semi-routine and routine workers, making up 45% of the sample) made a definitive decision not to participate in the 'high' cultural activities, some even viewing it with hostility. This was not, therefore, out of the Kantian theory of the working-class choice of the necessary as Bourdieu believed (Bennett et al 2010). Similarly, Le Roux et al (2008:1064) found "striking evidence of powerful class divisions in cultural practices" demonstrating that cultural capital is a way of measuring and differentiating class. It seems then, that Bourdieu's theories can be applied to contemporary Britain in terms of the translation of the dominant class being more culturally rich however not in the sense that the working-class in Britain have necessarily had the situation forced upon them.

This idea that the working-class have less capital is backed up by the Great British Class Survey findings from 2011-2013. In this study, the working-class (Labour's historical voter base) named 'the traditional working-class', were low on nearly every type of capital (economic, social and cultural), with very few graduates. So too was the precariat group, represented in old industrial areas of the Red Wall, comprising those of the working-class whose employment position had become precarious after deindustrialisation (see table two).

Table two: Summary of Classes

	% GfK	% GBCS	Description
Elite	6	22	Very high economic capital (especially savings), high social capital, very high highbrow cultural capital
Established middle class	25	43	High economic capital, high status of mean contacts, high highbrow and emerging cultural capital
Technical middle class	6	10	High economic capital, very high mean social contacts, but relatively few contacts reported, moderate cultural capital
New affluent workers	15	6	Moderately good economic capital, moderately poor mean score of social contacts, though high range, moderate highbrow but good emerging cultural capital
Traditional working class	14	2	Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable house price, few social contacts, low highbrow and emerging cultural capital
Emergent service workers	19	17	Moderately poor economic capital, though with reasonable household income, moderate social contacts, high emerging (but low highbrow) cultural capital
Precariat	15	<1	Poor economic capital, and the lowest scores on every other criterion

Source: Savage et al, 2013: 230. Percentage of each group shown are from either the GfK survey or the Great British Class Survey (GBCS).

The working-class were represented in the old industrial areas outside the Southeast, including the Red Wall areas, with the ‘traditional working-class’ “a ‘throwback’ to an earlier phase in Britain’s social history, as part of an older generational formation” (Savage et al, 2013:240). Importantly, the lack of cultural capital within these groups, plus the older generation composition of the ‘traditional working-class’ has implications for the political situation in 2019 and defines who the working-class are.

This is because Bourdieu (1984) believes that taking part in culture also has political consequences. Important too is the correlation of cultural capital to activism and engagement in politics as Savage (2004) demonstrates. Political participation relies on having economic or cultural capital due to its

link to social capital: these are necessary to feel comfortable participating in the political field. Thus, older forms of political activism evident in the twentieth century (for example union membership, political club membership), which gave entry into the political field for the working-class and brought individuals together collectively, have declined or become dominated by the middle-classes. This was highlighted in the previous chapter with a rise in middle-class membership of the Labour Party under Corbyn. Furthermore, as the Labour party base became more middle-class, so too did their MPs. From the 1980s onwards and particularly under New Labour, the representation of working-class MPs compared to middle-class dropped significantly: from 70% in the 1920s to only 8% between 2010 and 2015. Not only this, the rise of career politicians during this time meant that working-class interests were represented less as Labour MPs focused on furthering their careers, thus under-representing the working-class in parliament (O'Grady 2019). Therefore, politics is no longer the field of the working-class but the middle-classes (Savage 2000). This, combined with Wright's theory that class relations are about power, shows the political disempowerment of the working-class: through exploitation in the workplace and an inability to change this due to a decline in the means of political activism over time and a lack of representation.

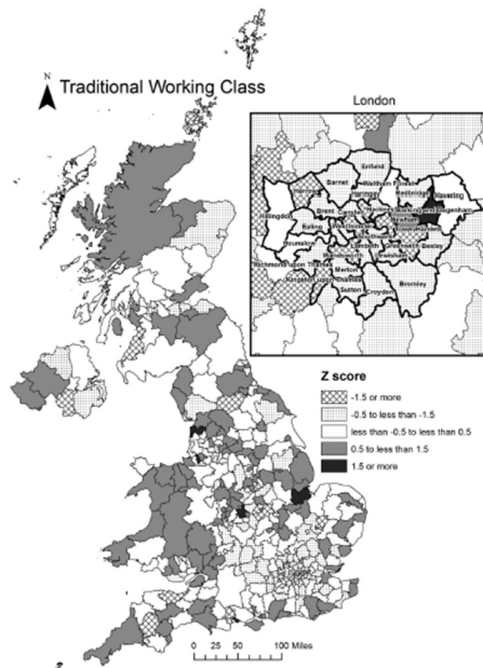
As the working-class felt more disempowered in the political field, Savage et al (2013) argue they became 'left behind' in society with a growth in inequality between those at the top of society - the elite - and those at the bottom - the precariat. In the findings from the Great British Class Survey, the 'traditional working-class', 'emergent service workers' and 'precariat' who are within the bottom three divisions of the class scheme are prevalent in the former Labour heartlands (see figures two, three and four). Savage et al (2015) demonstrate how this inequality happened on a geographical scale, and in two ways. Firstly, through elite, segregated urban areas being created

within cities and secondly, the dominance of London which overrides the North-South divide. These are relevant when you consider how the core of Labour voters in the general election of 2019 came from large metropolitan cities and London. As the distance a location from London grows, the number of people identifying as middle-class decreases and working-class increases. Thus, London and its role is pivotal in class:

London's dominance can be seen in multiple dimensions. London is where all 3 capitals [economic, cultural and social] converge and intersect. And London also defines other places in its shadow, in a kind of relational embrace in which other places gain their identity in terms of their difference from, or more occasionally the way they may ape, the English capital (Savage et al, 2015:297).

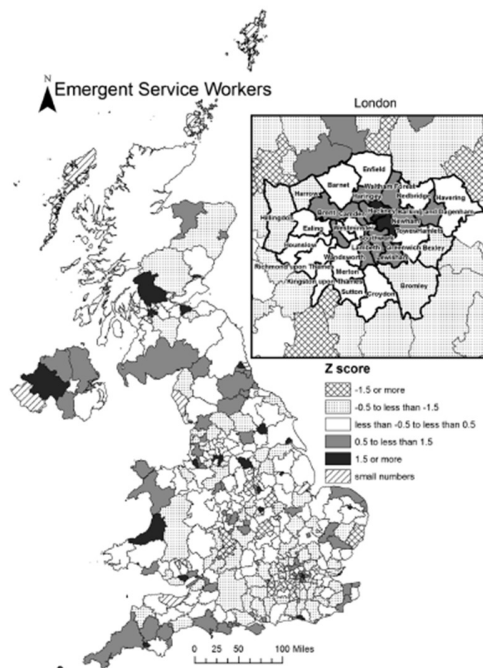
The dominance of London also leads to a moralisation of other places (Ibid). This links to the Brexit debate during the election. Red Wall areas felt very strongly about Brexit but some of the liberal elites (who Red Wall voters saw as Southerners, city dwellers, the well-educated and those embracing multiculturalism) had an ideological abjection to it, and to those who voted for it (Bates 2019). Those identifying as working-class in the North and Midlands, already feeling that they had no or little voice in politics, felt even more silenced as the Brexit deliberations dragged on between 2016 and 2019 in London and even further 'left behind' perceiving their areas to be disadvantaged compared to both London and other cities.

Figure three: Map of Traditional Working-Class Areas



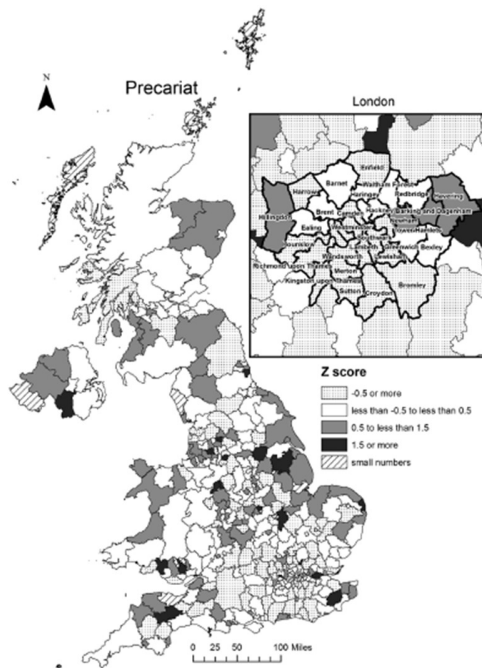
Source: Savage et al, 2013:241

Figure four: Map of Emergent Service Worker Areas



Source: Savage et al, 2013:242

Figure five: Map of Precariat areas



Source: Savage et al, 2013:244

3.2.2 The Divided Working-Class

The case of division within the working-class must also be considered in understanding their disempowerment as it brought about an end to their collective identity in several ways. One example of this is racial division. Savage (2000:135) explains that manual work became over-represented by ethnic minorities due to immigration from the 1950s onwards which made race “a key cultural divide [and] changes the symbolic importance of traditional class divisions.” In contrast to this, Miles (1989) believes that the concerns from the post-war government over the potential for racial tensions in the electorate, due to immigration from Commonwealth countries, led to a rise in European immigrants but explains however, that all immigrants over this time were racialised and treated with hostility. This growing racial division within the working-class which changed historical class divisions and identities is relevant when considered against the Brexit debate and the role that immigration played for many white working-class people.

There have also been individualistic divisions between the working-class,²¹ with class now used by people to differentiate themselves from other social groups rather than creating a collective identity (Savage 2000). It is perhaps the lack of exploitation within Savage's class theory that means there is no longer the need for collectivism against the exploiters. Savage et al (2015:385) develop this individualism further by explaining the closer the respondents were to the bottom of the class structure, "the more explicit they became in their judgements about those who they saw as beneath them". The anxieties about people's positions in the social order, created by their disempowerment, bred a resentment towards an 'underclass' from those in the working-class.²² When linked to theories of populism later in this chapter, this is relevant in the rise of UKIP and the Brexit debate.

This notion is furthered by Tyler (2013) in her research into abjection. She believes that neoliberal states need abjection to legitimise their policies and gain consent from the public. Thus, 'national abjects'²³ are formed as part of this societal set up. Immigrants have become abject since the time of Thatcher onward, which has created an 'invasion complex', a narrative of fear over the numbers of immigrants entering the country and claiming rights in Britain (Ibid). New Labour were blamed for this over time and then the fear was utilised by the populist right and was key in the Brexit debate and the Labour losses in 2019. Another group was that of the workless. Tyler (2013) explains that it was actually under New Labour that poverty was no longer presented as an

²¹Between those who are self-reliant and can look after themselves and those who are not able to do this.

²² The underclass is a section of society that is separate from the working class and as a concept links to Marx's (1852) group of the 'lumpenproletariat'. It can be defined as part of popular culture at the time: the underserving poor.

²³These are various groups within the 'underclass', who at different times, have been made into an abject group across the nation "to incite and legitimise 'tough' economic measures and punitive governmental responses, even when these policies frequently curtail the freedoms of all citizens and further impoverish democracy" (Tyler, 2013: 10).

economic issue but a cultural one which allowed New Labour to champion ‘hard working families’ rather than the ‘chav’ and anything council. This historical story of the abject explains how it became easy for the working-class to abject an ‘underclass’, be it immigrants or the workless, which then divided the working-class and created a fear that led to a rise in populism, with cultural issues taking precedent over economic or political ones, as is developed further in this chapter.

When considering the divisions and fear caused by the disempowerment of the working-class, it is also important to examine the research by Standing (2011) who explains that the growth of a global precariat is another result of neoliberalism. For Standing, these are the people who lack the seven forms of labour security (see figure five). Linked in with the arguments of Wright (1997), without the seven forms of labour security, the working-class are disempowered in their work life. The precariat are the poorest households with low culture scores and educational attainment but made up a large proportion of the population at 15% (Savage 2013). They were largely located in the previous Labour heartlands of the North and Midlands and are comprised of what would be deemed working-class people and even some in the intermediate class (Bennet et al 2010).²⁴ Often dependent on temporary labour contracts, they are in a vulnerable position economically and their position is worsened due to a lack of community or state support and work-based identity (Standing 2011). All these sentiments are inherent in the empirical analysis of the data in Chapter four.

²⁴In Bennet et al’s (2010:55) class schema, the intermediate class is comprised of “lower managers”, which does not include managers of large establishments, who are placed in their smaller professional executive class.

Figure six: The Seven Forms of Labour Security



Source: Own elaboration, based on Standing, 2011:10.

The precariat is “a group that sees no future of security or identity, will feel fear and frustration that could lead to it lashing out at identifiable or imagined causes of its lot” (Ibid: 25). Thus, they identify with those ‘who we are’ through defining ‘who we are not’ and are proud of their communities and families, enduring their hardship as an achievement (Savage et al 2015). Linking with the work of Tyler, this leads to the working-class creating conflict within their own group, for example with immigrants, which can lead to them becoming attracted to far-right populism and a “dangerous class” (Standing, 2011: 25).²⁵ With the rise of the British National Party in the early 2000s, then UKIP and the populist nature of mainstream politics over the last five years, this does appear to have happened. Class, therefore, has re-entered political rhetoric in recent years and was pivotal to some of the messaging in the 2019 general election. It was the abjection by the working class of this ‘underclass’ that was in part necessary in the win of the Conservative party as part of

²⁵For Standing (2013: 25), the precariat is deemed dangerous because the fear that they feel due to their work insecurities and lack of collective identity may lead them to blame others for their situation, creating intolerance. It therefore then makes them more likely drawn to the appeal of far-right groups.

their populist appeal. Before coming to this though, the changes in voting behaviour that contributed to the traction of populism need to be considered.

3.3 Voting Behaviour

The disempowerment of the working-class means it has changed radically since it took a pivotal role in the development of the Labour Party during the early and middle sections of the twentieth century. This has caused changes in the way that the working-class make decisions on how to vote and so relevant theories on voting behaviour must be considered in order to provide a lens through which to interpret the loss of the Labour heartlands in the general election of 2019. There are those that are identity based and I shall consider how class dealignment has decreased along with party alignment, causing Labour to lose its usually loyal working-class voter base who have become more politically disengaged, leaving a vacuum for a rise in the populist right such as UKIP and the Conservative Party. With these traditional theories of voting behaviour diminishing, attitudinal voting theories such as the valence model and positional voting have become salient. This has added to Labour's difficulties and lost them their working-class voter base, which then, as will be discussed in the final section of the chapter, became integral to the rise of populist parties.

3.3.1 Class and Dealignment

During the 1950s and 1960s there existed political alignment in two ways: class alignment and partisan alignment (Denver 1994). This meant that the class you belonged to, overall, determined who you voted for. From the late 1960s, however, these alliances were deemed to be breaking down for various reasons, based on either societal changes or changes within the parties themselves and were to have an impact on the Labour Party support from working-class voters (Denver 2007). Pattie and Johnston (2008) explain that the coincidence of voting dealignment occurring at the at

the same time as the rise of the ‘affluent worker’²⁶ signaled an end-to-class alignment as a factor in voting behaviour. The political choice thesis is also relevant here, espousing an ideological convergence between the two main parties, as demonstrated in chapter two, and adds to the decline in association between class and party choice (Heath 2018). During the 2005-2010 electoral period, this convergence led to a restriction in economic policy choice between the parties, meaning voters had to use other factors to make their judgements about the parties (Johnston and Pattie 2011). This led to lower educated voters, who are generally found to be working-class, to consider party political stances on immigration in deciding who to vote for (Evans and Chzhen 2013). This issue was also key in the Brexit vote, as discussed in chapter four, and had repercussions for the 2019 general election. It is individual influences rather than class alignment which are now much more salient in voting behaviour (Garzia 2013). As will be evidenced in chapter five, the Labour Party was wrong to assume that the working-class would naturally vote for them in recent years.

3.3.2 Partisan Dealignment

Class dealignment thus had consequences in terms of voters’ continuing loyalty to one party over time. Those with very strong partisan alignment declined by 31% from the 1960s to 2005 (Denver 2007:74). The impact of class dealignment is apparent when viewed through the lens of The Michigan Model of partisan identification as “new voters were socialised into support for particular parties, learning their party allegiance from their parents and from others in their residential and work communities” (Pattie and Johnston, 2008:106). With the decline of working-class industries and communities, which we will see in the empirical analysis are important factors in understanding Labour’s demise in 2019, this socialisation could not continue. Furthermore, this

²⁶This group were the children of manual workers who had been through the inter war depression and would vote Labour if they delivered prosperity but, if this did not occur, would vote for another party, unlike their parents.

combination of class and partisan dealignment led to abstentions in voting with the working-class less likely to vote or be politically active (Goldberg 2020). This lack of party alignment leading to disengagement from the working-class and the rise of third parties had repercussions that were felt in the 2019 general election.

3.3.3 The Valence Model: Leadership and the Economy

Partisan dealignment prompted researchers to look at short term factors on voting behaviour such as issue and leader effects (McAllister 2007). Key to this is the ‘valence model’ of voting. Valence theories “explain the voting decision in terms of (usually) short-term judgements of government competence and performance” (Pattie and Johnston, 2008:105). In the context of this thesis, the valence model needs to be considered in two ways: leadership and economic competency. Stokes (1992:158) explains that “the trend towards valence politics is plainly correlated with the weakening of the old-time party loyalties, which were rooted in positional issues.” In valence politics it is not the ‘what’ but ‘who and how’ of sound economic and political management that is important, with party leader images and party identification offering cues that voters use to make their choices (Clarke et al 2011). These cues can be attributed to an evaluation of ‘macro-competence’ (Green and Jennings 2012). It has led to a ‘personalisation hypothesis’ with party leaders becoming the key driver of partisanship (Garzia 2013). This was key in decisions made by the Labour heartland voters who switched to the Conservatives in the 2019 election. The party leader becomes a heuristic that voters can use to judge the overall competency of the party (Clarke et al 2009) and then decide which party leader will be the “safest pair of hands” in terms of leading the country (Clarke et al, 2004:327). A rise in the use of electronic media has helped to personalise party leaders, with the leader becoming the marketing mechanism for the party (McAllister 2007). It is not just the idea of competence however, that is important to voters but the emotional and

non-political trait of warmth (Costa and De Silva 2015) as well as energy and friendliness, with voters' perceived traits of politicians having primacy over their perceived values (Caprara 2007). This worked to Boris Johnson's advantage during the 2019 general election.

Although Heffernan and Webb (2007) found that leader effects were modest but significant, they also believe that an aggregate level effect on the electorate could be much larger, particularly if there was an asymmetrical condition. This is demonstrated in the way that negative perceptions of a party leader tend to be more powerful than positive ones (Mortimore et al 2014). This is important in considering the differing voter perceptions of both Boris Johnson and Jeremy Corbyn at a later stage in this thesis. It becomes even more significant with the idea of 'affective' assessments being taken into consideration which have moved voters from making decisions based on heuristics and dispositions to that of rational choice, a critical examination of the specifics of that election, which can bring about defection from a party usually voted for (Marcus et al 2007). Considering the salience of Brexit in the Red Wall and the heightened emotions attached to it after the 2016 referendum, affective reasoning caused some working-class voters to defect from Labour. This was salient because "when deciding who to vote for, electors support governments and leaders that are seen to be delivering on the relevant public policies" (Johnston and Pattie, 2011:284).

The other relevant aspect of the valence model that warrants discussion is the economy, viewed as a typical valence issue on which the electorate are agreed upon in terms of the outcome of prosperity. Clarke et al (2004) explain that cognitive and emotional reactions to national and personal economic situations are key in voting behaviour. There is a propensity for voters to concentrate on the accomplishments of the governing party, punishing one who has performed badly and rewarding one who has done well (Denver 1994). With New Labour being blamed for

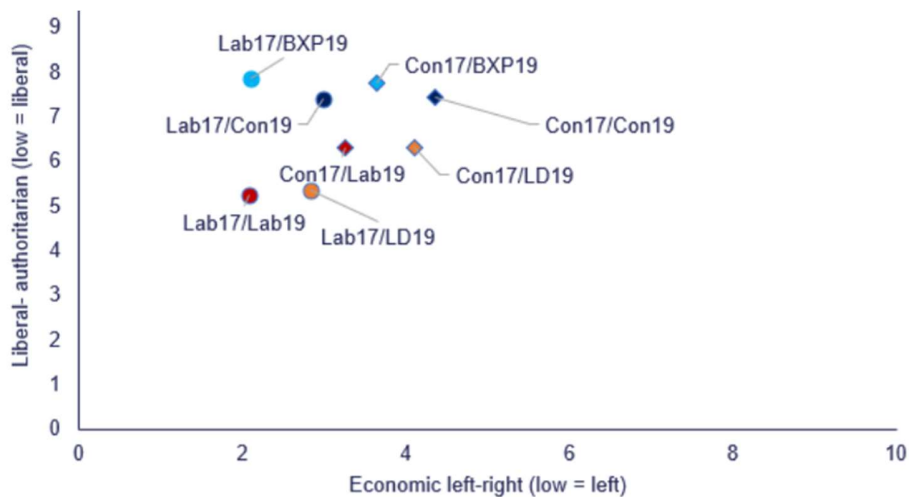
the financial crash of 2008, voters thus found it hard to trust Labour on economic matters worsened by their disingenuously perceived policy offer in the 2019 general election.

3.3.4 The New Positional Model: Cultural Values

The positional model of voting behaviour is a key consideration when analysing how the disempowerment of the working-class was answered by both Labour and the Conservatives in 2019. Positional theories “emphasise voters’ social locations, long-term ideologies and loyalties” (Pattie and Johnston, 2008:105). This model turns, however, from one based on ideology to cultural values by 2019. Hay and Benoit (2020:390) make the claim that during the 2016 EU referendum, “positional politics... trumped valence politics”: the Remain side fought the campaign on valence issues due to the economic consequences of Brexit being uncertain; the Leave side framed their arguments on cultural values, identity being key. This led Hay (2020) to the conclusion that the valence model is decreasing in voting behaviour and the cultural values focus has led to increased turnout from disengaged voters. One key cultural value is immigration. The effects of hyper-globalisation, including a rise in immigration, meant that political parties changed policies accordingly, fracturing class and partisan alignment (Goes 2020). Surridge (2018, 2020b) has shown that those voters on the left, many from the working-class, are now cross pressured: ideologically left wing on economics but authoritarian on cultural values, with immigration featuring highly (see figure 6). This liberal/authoritarian cleavage within the economic left, in which the authoritarian section correlates with the Leave vote in the EU referendum, has been a key factor in the rise of right-wing populism (Hay and Benoit, 2020). The positional issue of Brexit, based on cultural values, was prominent for the electorate in deciding who to vote for in 2019 due to several reasons: the election itself was called to sort out the Brexit impasse in

parliament; the main Conservative election message was “Get Brexit Done” and there was constant coverage around Brexit in the media.

Figure seven: Position of Voters in Value Space, by Vote in 2017 and 2019



Source: Surridge, 2020b

3.4 Populism

With positional issues based on cultural values becoming prominent in the mind of the electorate, the role of populism provides an answer as to how the disempowerment of the working-class was reversed. It is this theoretical link that explains how the working-class were able to elect Boris Johnson as Prime Minister in December 2019 after rejecting their traditional loyalties of voting Labour.

3.4.1 ‘The People’ v ‘The Elite’

There has been much academic focus on populism in recent years due to its rise in Western democracies with much debate around its key components. Canovan (1999) explains that populism cannot be classed as an ideology from the ideal typical view but can be placed into its own

framework due to the structural similarities that exist between populist movements, all set against formations of power. There are two relevant elements of Canovan's theory on populist discourse which prove salient in the general election of 2019; a divisive appeal to 'our people', demarcating 'them' and 'us'; and an appeal to 'ordinary people' who are striving against a corrupt and decision-making dominant elite. The 'people' are the 'silent majority' who are framed as 'good', whereas the corrupt elite are 'evil' (Mudde 2004). Hence populism can be used by political actors to frame their own agendas (Wood and Ausserladscheider 2020).

Mudde (2004) describes populism as a 'thin ideology'²⁷ which must be hitched to a thick ideology to mobilise the people (Stanley 2008). This means that populism on the right is usually based on ethnic identity and populism on the left on socio-economic issues (March 2017). This becomes relevant in chapter five when considering the Conservative campaign of 2019 based on an end to freedom of movement via leaving the EU. Stanley (2008) extends the definition of populism beyond the antagonistic relationship between 'the people' and 'the elite' to that of popular sovereignty, also relevant in understanding Labour's defeat in 2019.

Also pertinent is the work by Taggart (2004: 279) who places emphasis on 'the people' and their relationship with 'the heartland':

The heartland is a construction of the good life derived retrospectively from a romanticized conception of life as it has been lived... key to understanding the heartland is that it is, for populists, a description of a reality—and one that has been experienced.

²⁷A thin ideology is moralistic in nature and does not have the programmatic character of thick ideologies such as socialism, liberalism or conservatism (Mudde 2004).

This links to working-class disempowerment due to the changes in society brought about by deindustrialisation, globalisation and neoliberalism and as a throwback to times gone by.

Taggart (2004) also explains that populism is a reaction to a time of great change, couched in a feeling of crisis, based around a charismatic leader. The crisis aspect of populism not only gives an urgency to the appeals of the populist leader but also encourages voter action. This can be applied going forward to the disengaged working-class considered earlier in this chapter when voting Conservative in 2019. So too can the fact that this disengaged 'heartland' of voters wants their leader, who must be anti-establishment but does not have to be part of the heartland, to know what they want and to make it happen (Mudde 2004). Often, the populist leaders chosen are "obscure and ill prepared" thus lacking experience which means the party structure is weakened (Murphy, 2019:753). It was this part of populism that had implications for Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party as his leadership credentials were called into question regularly by both the public and members of the PLP, and the party failed to formulate an appropriate campaign strategy. It is the combination of charismatic leadership and direct communication with the people that facilitate populism (Mudde 2004). These elements then mobilise the people through "ad hoc electoral vehicles" (Mudde and Kaltwasser, 2017: 55). In the case of Labour this was done through Momentum. In recent years, social media has provided a way to control messaging and bring about a neutralisation of opponents, motivating a voting base and spreading key ideas (Devinney and Hartwell 2020). This aspect proved pivotal in the general election of 2019, combined with the valence factor of leadership in voting behaviour.

3.4.2 The Rise in Populism

Populism then, is a thin ideology without a specific programme where charismatic leadership and direct communication appear key. What then has caused this phenomenon to expand over the last

few decades to a point where it has been described as ‘the Populist Zeitgeist’? (Mudde 2004) The answer to this lies in the explanation of the disempowerment of the working-class. Spruyt et al (2016) believe that hyper-globalisation has led to a feeling that life is moving too fast for some sections of society, creating the feelings of being ‘left behind’ and a sense of unfair, economic deprivation. The move to neoliberalism under Thatcher and then New Labour, plus the financial crash, have spread discontent, with mainstream parties being blamed for not doing more to prevent it (Slocum 2017). Consequently, ‘local’ has become important in recent political dialogue, particularly as an anti-globalisation narrative (Devinney and Hartwell 2020). This discontentment breeds feelings of resentment from populist supporters, caused by the dominance of technocratic politics and a neoliberal consensus which leaves no space for democratic conflict, where antagonistic populist demands are seen as unreasonable (Hensmans and van Bommel 2020). This then creates a “more toxic form of populism, centered on xenophobia, nationalism and nativism” (Ibid: 374).

Also relevant in the rise of populism is the cultural backlash thesis which sees older, less educated, white men being part of the ‘silent revolution’ against the progressive society of the liberal young and more educated, who grew up living in more secure circumstances. “Thus, populist support was strengthened by anti-immigrant attitudes, mistrust of global and national governance, support for authoritarian values, and a left-right ideological self-placement” (Inglehart and Norris, 2016:5). These reasons are key in Labour’s inability to appeal to their heartland voters in 2019. Spruyt et al (2016) also found it was the less educated who supported populism plus those who had lost their collective identity of class, as has been outlined earlier in the section. For them, populism provides a way to recreate a positive social identity and creates a coping mechanism against the changes in society by forming a ‘stigma consciousness’ as opposed to a class consciousness. This ‘cultural

backlash' has been operationalised by populists across Western democracies in the form of anti-EU sentiment because the EU has begun to appear as a state institution; therefore, populists are not only unhappy with another layer of representative government having power but also the complexities that this governance brings (Taggart 2004). In Britain, the EU was also perceived by populists as the instrument that allowed a rise in immigration and therefore a cultural threat. This working-class resentment and disempowerment were answered by UKIP and their call for a Brexit vote, and then the Conservatives with a promise to deliver the 'heartland' once again, both offering re-empowerment to Labour heartland voters.

3.5 Conclusion

Using Bourdieu's theory as a cornerstone for a definition of the working-class, this chapter has shown that the working-class have lower levels of all three of Bourdieu's capitals: economic, social and cultural. The effect of this is that they have felt unable to participate in the political field, creating a sense of political disempowerment, further strengthened by divisions within the working-class, created by the effects of neoliberalism and deindustrialisation. A lack of insecurity for this group has culminated in the creation of the precariat, a 'dangerous class' who are more likely to be drawn to right-wing populism. Each of these factors are causations for the disempowerment of the working-class, politically, economically, and socially.

An effect of this disempowerment has led to key changes in voting behaviour that were to have devastating effects on the general election of 2019 for Labour. With the fracturing of the working-class identity came a class dealignment effect in voting behaviour. This caused a move to a valence model of politics, with its focus on leadership and economic competence followed by a new kind of positional voting behaviour based on cultural values. Populism spread across Western democracies in answer to the disempowerment many were feeling. 'The people' could rise up

against the corruption of 'the elite' and in protection of their heartland. With the right-wing populists focusing on ethnicity and cultural values, they inevitably turned to the EU, questioning its sovereignty and facilitating role in the freedom of movement.

In the next two chapters, empirical analysis explains how the disempowerment of the working-class created the perception of them being 'left behind', and how Labour failed to respond to this. Finally, chapter six will demonstrate how the working-class, newly empowered by right-wing populism, reacted to the offer from Labour.

Chapter Four

Left Behind: The Disempowerment of Labour Voters

“These big, sort of monolithic industries, that are no longer there where everybody....and the families as well, would have the same work experiences, would have the same kind of leisure experiences.... that’s all gone....and that sense of community isn’t what it used to be” (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

4.1 Introduction

Having previously considered the theoretical context of the working-class as one that had been disempowered and divided, this chapter turns to the examination of how this culminated in a sense of being ‘left behind’ due to the impacts of deindustrialisation and the actions of the establishment. This chapter focuses on how these sentiments manifested themselves from the perception of Red Wall voters. This led to the subsequent throwing aside of traditional ideological loyalties in voting behaviour which meant a right-wing populist offer eventually became an irresistible voting option for many in the Red Wall, offering a way to remedy the ‘left behind’ sentiments they were feeling. In order to comprehend how the disempowerment of the working-class led to the feeling of being ‘left behind’, this chapter analyses four key causal factors. Firstly, it considers the historical impact of deindustrialisation in Red Wall constituencies in the North and Midlands leading to a loss of jobs, economic security and class identity, plus how it resulted in a diminished perception of collectiveness within working-class communities. The second section considers how ‘the establishment’ had been perceived to leave voters behind through a lack of prosperity in Red Wall towns, blamed on Labour councils. Furthermore, it explores how these Labour heartlands also felt

disempowered by the decision-making capabilities of the EU. Labour heartland voters felt they had no voice left in the decision making of their own country, proving them to be utterly 'left behind' politically as well as economically and socially.

4.2 'Left Behind' by Deindustrialisation

Deindustrialisation occurred from 1960 onwards. It saw the breakdown of working-class communities and the “defusing of a distinctively working-class politics which fostered alternative and oppositional values that overflowed into the cultural realm” (Bennet et al, 2010:212). Deindustrialisation also brought about the defusing of a working-class identity. As already established in chapter two, Thatcherite policies, particularly related to control of the economy and market forces, were not abandoned but continued under New Labour in the late 1990s. This neoliberalist stance, combined with embracing a global market economy, widening the UK's labour market whilst reducing the manufacturing sector, meant the industries of the North and Midlands went further into decline after the Thatcher years. There was a belief that working-class voters had nowhere else to go in terms of their vote and this move in ideology led to this group feeling they had been abandoned by Labour (Trickett and Lavery 2019). Not only this, but they believed “some of these towns and places were either forgotten or taken advantage of because they voted Labour for so long” (Interview with Conservative MP 3). Deindustrialisation therefore changed society completely as “the whole culture was completely different to what it is now” whereby gone were the days of a “strong sense of community” with “everybody... in the same boat together” (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

The loss of industry in the Red Wall areas had several pivotal consequences for its inhabitants which furthered their sense of disempowerment in terms of their relative economic prosperity and

their political efficacy. Firstly, the loss of employment had economic implications for families in these areas who now found themselves financially insecure:

Everybody who lived around here... a lot of them would never have worked [in the local industry]... but mum, dad, uncle, aunt, brother, sister, somebody or a neighbour will have had some link with it. So that when that... collapsed, it shattered... so many certainties that had been weakened for some time about income levels in the area (Interview with former Labour MP 4).

As discussed in chapter three, economic capital is key in political empowerment due to its links with social capital. Therefore, in a weakened economic position, the working-class was beginning to feel left behind in terms of their political efficacy. Moreover, under New Labour, poverty became labelled a cultural issue rather than an economic one which created a stigmatisation of those who were out of work or the working poor (Tyler 2013). Voters facing economic hardship were feeling less politically empowered, but were also now potentially viewed as part of the ‘underclass’ who relied on welfare benefits, stigmatised in society for bringing poverty upon themselves:

[People] suffer their poverty in isolation...they don’t want to talk about it... and it’s become your like ashamed of it and you shouldn’t be, you should be looking for a way out of it because it’s not your fault nine times out of ten (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

Finding work during this time of declining industry necessitated many skilled workers to take jobs that lacked the identity and pride that they had previously felt in the old industries. Many of these were in the gig economy and thus skilled workers entered the realm of the precariat - they no longer had the prospect of job security or career progression. Deindustrialisation therefore caused apprehension “about opportunities, about security of employment” (Interview with former Labour MP 4). As highlighted in chapter two, New Labour’s embrace of globalisation led to competition

for these jobs from others in the local area as well as labour sourced from other countries. This meant that people had to travel to industries outside their local community (Interview with former Labour MP 1) and made finding secure jobs even more difficult. As chapter three established, the neoliberalist state produces a global precariat who feel they have no status professionally and are at risk of becoming a ‘dangerous class’ drawn to populism. The anxiety caused by deindustrialisation ultimately caused this to happen in the Red Wall constituencies with “[Voters] more likely to listen to Nigel Farage” (Interview with former Labour MP 1). Between 2010 and 2015, UKIP increased their vote share by 14% in the Northeast, 13.2% in Yorkshire and the Humber and 12.5% in the East Midlands, higher than in other areas in the country (Hawkins et al 2015). With decades of a lack of secure work, an end to a professional identity and prolonged economic anxiety, those in the Labour heartlands saw “the world passing people by” (Interview with former Labour MP 4).

The loss of these industries ended the means through which these Red Wall voters could engage politically. Key in this political disempowerment was the role of the working-class in the trade unions. As outlined in chapter two, Neil Kinnock, John Smith and Tony Blair sought to reduce the power of the trade unions within the Labour Party, giving them less sway on party decision making. For those in the Red Wall who were still working in these industries and were part of affiliated trade unions, their voice had seemingly become less powerful. Deindustrialisation added to this further as along with the loss of industry came a subsequent reduction in trade union membership:

There is a breakdown of some of the traditional union loyalties... my seat was the heart of the miner’s strike... but as time moved on, the unions, there’s no miners left, there’s no collieries left, so those kinds of links have broken down (Interview with Conservative MP 1).

Another link in the collective identity of the working-class, and with the Labour Party, was broken. Labour and the unions failed to respond to this, and Labour's protection of the precariat was limited due to focus "on the public sector, on organized Labour in some big industries" rather than "the gig economy" or "the self-employed" (Interview with former Labour MP 1). This has recently been acknowledged by the party in the *Labour Together 2019 Election Review* (2020) with trade unions identified as the link between working people and Labour however the decline in membership has weakened this. The working-class members of these constituencies, already 'left behind' in their political engagement due to a lack of capital, were now finding that they were no longer part of a political collective identity. Sowemimo (2020) explains that English towns in the main have low levels of unionisation with the situation continually worsening for Labour. A further consequence of this evidence is that there are no longer the spaces for political engagement to take place, either through union meetings or other social situations (Interview with Labour activist 3). One of these was the working men's clubs associated with industries which have declined with deindustrialisation, with those left struggling to stay open.

Without these spaces there was not the opportunity to engage in cultural, social or political activities. As lower amounts of cultural and social capital influence the perception of political efficacy negatively (Bourdieu 1984) a lack of ability to engage culturally and socially then further barred many of the working-class from the political field, fuelling disengagement and giving Red Wall voters the sense that they were 'left behind' as a political movement. This combination of deindustrialisation, globalisation and disengagement made many feel that "the world changes too fast so that they lose track"; it is these voters who are increasingly attracted to more populist politics (Spruyt et al, 2016: 342).

There was also a social impact of deindustrialisation: it detrimentally affected collective community feeling within these areas, thus influencing voting behaviour to the disadvantage of Labour. Unlike the times where everyone was working in the same industries, “now you don’t know who your next-door neighbour works for” (Interview with former Labour MP 1) highlighting an individual outlook in communities. This led to “quite anatomised communities... the bonds that had linked them together... back in the day of working men’s clubs around this big employment base had gone” (Interview with former Labour MP 4). Without this, as shown in chapter three, changes occurred in voting behaviour in terms of class and party dealignment, the influence of residential and work communities proving less significant in party alignment due to deindustrialisation and the loss of community that came with it. This then led to a rise in cultural values becoming prominent in voting behaviour in recent years. Voters in the Red Wall could no longer be relied upon to vote for Labour without question based on community and class. Despite the rise of a community approach to activism during the Corbyn era (Wainwright 2018) this did not transfer to the working-class section of the communities who felt ostracised from it (Bennet et al 2010). This was due to the lack of capital that led working-class voters to feel that they had been ‘left behind’ in political debate, as discussed in the previous chapter. This combination of an end to collective identity and rise in individualism, creates a ‘stigma consciousness’ as opposed to a class one (Spruyt et al 2016).

The effects of the rise in immigration on communities in these Red Wall areas also became salient. Under New Labour, immigration became an issue for working-class voters who felt uncomfortable with its rise due to globalisation. Furthermore, this created a further dealignment in class voting in response to political parties' adaptation to this cultural values-based matter. The deterioration of a collective community deepened as voters in England became disconcerted by mass immigration

in their areas, with a population rise of seven million people between 2001- 2018, largely due to migration (The English Labour Network 2020). This was despite minimal levels of immigration in many Red Wall areas compared to other areas in the country: “you get this completely mad, ironic thing where the people, the communities with the lowest levels of immigration are the most anxious about it” (Interview with former Labour MP 3). For the voters in these areas, this anxiety was borne from a previous historical lack of international migration and internal migration which then reversed rapidly. The relative growth rate in the proportion of the population born abroad rose quickly in these areas, doubling between 2004 to 2018, making up 9.2 per cent of the UK population (McCurdy et al 2020). This rise in immigration played a key part in the policy formation of neoliberal states, starting under Thatcher and continuing under New Labour, with governments using voters’ abjection of first immigrants and then asylum seekers to legitimise their agendas, particularly with reference to cuts in welfare spending (Tyler 2013). This went on to translate into support for anti-immigration and Eurosceptic platforms such as UKIP, as the theoretical framework explains (Ford and Goodwin 2014). Voters in these areas wanted the parties to “be tough on immigration” (Interview with Conservative MP 3). Based on the right-wing populist strategy of playing on the fears of a ‘dangerous other’, leaving the EU was partly sold as a form of border control for immigration (March 2017). The Conservative guarantee of “ending free movement” and the “firm pledge to finally leave the European Union” (Interview with Conservative MP 2) meant this breakdown of the communities and the fear that immigration brought with it, could be potentially remedied.

4.3 ‘Left Behind’ by the Establishment

The communities in these Red Wall areas placed significance on the position of their towns’ prosperity in relation to other areas as part of their assessment in being ‘left behind’. The Labour

Party had been in control of many of the local councils in the Red Wall historically. Even as late as 2015 when Labour had begun to lose votes to other parties such as UKIP, they held 50% of council seats in Yorkshire and the Humber, almost 60% in the Northwest and almost 80% in the Northeast (Ayres 2015). Ten years of austerity under the coalition and Conservative governments however, had brought about a reduction in council spending over time. In Red Wall constituencies there was a perception that the towns in the North and Midlands were no longer prosperous, not least in comparison to places elsewhere, specifically London and the Southeast (Mattinson 2020). Part of the blame for this was put upon the local Labour councils which were perceived not to have fulfilled their duties in securing necessary funding for the area: “There is certainly an exasperation [from]... particular towns [that] have been forgotten and overlooked for the funding bids. They seem to bear the brunt of all the bad decisions, with nothing there to show for it” (Interview with Conservative MP 3). The consequence of this was that towns were perceived to be enervated and neglected (Ibid) and it was the Labour controlled councils that were to blame:

Our council, like a lot of these... councils have had big cuts... I think they've handled the big cuts quite well... They've protected vulnerable groups, not cocked up too much which is the number one way to lose voters, but...they got into an industrial dispute ...and... to be fair the legal aspect of it was a bit tricky but the spinning of it was just like hopeless. So, they lost a lot of people's sympathy (Interview with former Labour MP 3).

This represents an erosion of trust in the local Labour Party which has taken place over several years. Labour's reputation became so bad in some areas that there was “a hatred, for [the] metropolitan borough council, there's very much anger against the council, [for] things like neglect, let down, not doing anything” (Interview with Conservative MP 1). The consequence for the Labour Party was that “in the local elections in May 2019, we got a hammering... the writing was on the wall then” (Interview with Labour Activist 1). Of the Red Wall councils that had local

elections in 2019, 70% lost Labour councillors ranging from two in Dudley North to 18 in Ashfield (Uberoi 2019) providing a warning signal for the disconnection with the Labour Party in these areas and the devastating results that were to come in the 2019 general election (Beech and Hickson 2020). Compounding this was the fact that Labour was being blamed even for decisions taken after its control of the council had ended:

When [the council] was Labour controlled, they were going to build a new stadium for the football and rugby club and make it hub for the NHS, doctors' surgeries and business... and generate jobs... Then when they had the local election, and they lost the majority, and it went to the independents.... they basically said we're not going to have it. So that created a lot of disappointment... and of course they saw Labour as failing to do it (Interview with Labour Activist 2).

As chapter three elucidated, the working-class are negatively affected by wealth inequality due to their low economic capital. With their towns also being deemed to be disadvantaged, the Labour Party could therefore be blamed for it. This was even more relevant when some Labour councillors were viewed as taking advantage of their situation financially even though the council itself was not fulfilling its role in improving the town:

The public aren't stupid... They know that Mr and Mrs Smith are always re-elected as our councillors, and they only show up to a meeting once a month and then they see Mr and Mrs Smith buying a little boat on their driveway and going off on holiday (Interview with Labour activist 3).

The domination by Labour in these areas gave the impression that they were the 'political establishment', as opposed to the Conservative government in London, which then also had implications for its support in these areas as key to the argument of the populist right was the people against the establishment elite. With this and subjective vulnerability being key in the rise of populism, the Labour Party as the establishment were blamed for the areas decline. Local Labour

leaders were unpopular, giving the populist parties the support and space to enter the local political arena. Some of these were also smaller independent parties promising local representation (Interview with Labour activist 4). This too reflects the populist response to globalisation with its focus on local which appealed to this 'left behind' group, reducing Labour's voter base further.

These Red Wall communities also found another group to blame for the disadvantages in their towns: the cities. There has been a geographical imbalance between the wealth in these towns and that of the cities, with their segregated urban areas of the wealthy 'elite'. With the Labour Party embracing capitalism under New Labour, creating a reliance on financial and the continued growth of the service sectors as a result of deindustrialisation (Johnston 2011, Rutherford 2011) these once prosperous industrial Red Wall towns saw the cities thriving at their expense: "Manchester city itself is booming.... as the city has boomed, it feels like it's at the expense of towns like Bolton and Rochdale and Oldham who feel like they've been left out" (Interview with Labour Activist 4). The Labour Party were also beginning to be viewed as the party of the city: "the nature of the people who are supporting Labour has changed and it's to do with cities, it's to do with BAME communities, it's to do with people who live and work in university places, that's where our heartland is" (Interview with former Labour MP 2). In the election of 2019, Labour won more than half the votes in university cities and big towns but were beaten in rural or mixed areas (Denver 2020) and continued to be the party that gained most support from BAME communities (SurrIDGE 2020a). With this perception, it is easy to comprehend that voters in these towns saw the Labour Party as being responsible for the way cities were thriving, whilst not providing in their communities. This sense of being 'left behind' also extends to London, with its dominance being illustrated earlier in relation to its accumulation of economic, cultural and social capital which dwindles with the distance travelled away from it. Mattinson (2020) found the Red Wall voters

expressed anger at London, believing money had been stolen from the North and given to the capital. London not only holds the wealth of the country but also the decision-making power of which the working-class felt they had no voice in any longer. With the Labour Party gaining support in London and the cities over recent years, “Labour to [Red Wall voters] are the intelligentsia... we’re the middle-class liberals who look down their noses at them” (Interview with Labour Activist 3).

In the Labour heartlands, there was also another ‘elite’ that appeared key to the disempowerment of the working-class: the EU. Membership of the EU had been a fractious issue historically within the UK, gaining prominence during 2015 with Prime Minister Cameron offering the country a referendum on the issue if a Conservative government was elected to power (The Conservatives 2015). Under New Labour, Blair sought to make the UK a powerful voice within the EU. As discussed in the previous section however, the rising levels of immigration that membership of the EU brought with it became salient and policies around it were quickly adopted by mainstream parties, beginning the move to a more values-based method of voting for the working-class (Goes 2020). It was not just the issue of immigration that was important for the voters in the Red Wall though; the perceived lack of sovereignty of the UK was also deemed to be a problem. Voters steadfastly believed the EU was “this liberal elite, unelected, essentially a European House of Parliament that decides and dictates our laws” (Interview with Labour activist 5). The EU was just another part of the political elite that the working-class felt they had no power over, adding to their feeling of disempowerment. This lack of sovereignty emboldened the perception that the UK was ‘left behind’ in making important domestic decisions:

It came up a lot because they were saying...let’s get the EU out of the country... and let’s just carry on dealing with domestic issues. And let’s start targeting these other things that apparently have been neglected, but I think

they thought that all the four odd million children in poverty or the families in poverty using the food bank, that was all the EU's fault (Interview with Labour activist 5).

As highlighted by this quote, a sense of 'them' and 'us' between the Red Wall voters and the EU was growing. As theorised in the earlier discussion on populism, the notion of the people positioned against the establishment is paramount; in this case it was people against the EU establishment, with blame apportioned for misfortune on the 'other'. This rhetoric of blame was one that was highly successful in Red Wall areas as there were misconceptions that existed in terms of what the EU was responsible for. This ranged from "old ladies saying things like, well, we used to have lots of factories around here and now we don't and it's because we're in Europe" (Interview with former Labour MP 3) to "it was the Europeans; it was the EU that made us close our mines around here" (Interview with Labour activist 6). The working-class voters in the Labour heartlands felt not only that they had lost their political voice by being members of the EU, but the UK had lost its sovereignty, meaning the EU became another establishment figure upon which blame could be partly apportioned for the negatives of deindustrialisation as discussed at the beginning of this chapter.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has discussed how the disempowerment of the working-class caused the perception that Red Wall voters had been 'left behind' on a variety of levels. The deindustrialisation that started under Thatcher and was given longevity under Blair and New Labour had caused the Labour heartland voters to find themselves disadvantaged in their communities. Economically, they believed they had been 'left behind' compared to other areas of the country, evidenced by the increase in precarious employment. Tied with this is the loss of a professional identity. The lack

of skilled occupations added to the demise of political voice for the working-class as the decline of trade unions and social clubs led to a lack of space to become politically engaged.

Furthermore, the role of Labour councils in the reduction of prosperity in Red Wall towns, and in contrast, successes in thriving cities, added to the feeling of being 'left behind'. Labour was no longer seen to be promoting the past industrial areas that they were formed to protect. With London being viewed as the heart of this wealth and power inequality, Labour was viewed as part of this establishment elite. It is no surprise then, with Britain's membership of the EU being pushed to the fore of the political agenda, that these Red Wall voters felt they had been abandoned on yet another front, in their eyes, rendering their political voice almost silent. New Labour's goal of using the EU to strengthen the position of the UK in its global positioning was a dichotomy for these voters. For them, the EU was responsible for holding back the UK in the policies they felt could make a difference to their lives and towns, in the form of new domestic agendas that might come full circle and reverse the negative impacts of deindustrialisation. It is the next chapter that considers how the Labour Party responded to this and whether they were able to remedy the situation of these Red Wall voters in any way.

Chapter Five

Left Behind by the Labour Party

"You cannot get a more sort of a symbol of Labour ignoring the wills, wishes and views of the electorate than Brexit. It just brought it home to people...that Labour just ignored people's views" (Interview with Conservative MP 1).

5.1 Introduction

In the preceding chapter, the examination of how previous Labour voters had become 'left behind' scrutinised the role the Labour Party played. This chapter moves on to explain how the response of the Labour Party was to exacerbate this dissatisfaction and, as demonstrated in the previous chapter, the pull of populism became stronger, with class and party alignment disintegrating.

This chapter focuses on three key reasons for the Labour Party leaving behind their core voter base in the North and Midlands, furthering their sense of disempowerment. In the first place, Labour was viewed to have stopped listening to their working-class voters. Brexit became the core issue in this as the Leave voting areas felt they were being ignored. With some Labour Party members becoming complacent in engaging with voters, key changes in the values that were now salient to working-class voters were overlooked. Furthermore, the party missed important demographic changes that were occurring within the Red Wall following years of deindustrialisation; Labour failed to appeal to these voters by ignoring these crucial adaptations in their traditional demographics.

Importantly, and analysed in the next section, the Labour Party was also changing, leaving behind the working-class of the Red Wall. This was partly in terms of its grass roots membership. It

became a party for the middle classes, graduates and the BAME population, centered around cities and much more activist based, leaving little appeal for the already disaffected working-class in the towns. Further up the political hierarchy, the party's representation within parliament also transformed with most Labour MPs no longer considered working-class, but rather middle-class career politicians. As a result of this membership metamorphosis, the subsequent effects of the move to a more socially liberal outlook from the Labour Party on these Red Wall voters is analysed, leaving the working-class feeling further 'left behind' by the party that had traditionally represented them.

5.2 Labour's Not Listening

As already mentioned in the previous chapter, the EU referendum was key for voters in the Red Wall areas; by voting Leave, they hoped to regain the sovereignty of the UK as well as bring an end to freedom of movement that was encouraged under New Labour. In the general election of 2017, Jeremy Corbyn promised that "Labour accepts the referendum result, and a Labour government will put the national interest first" (The Labour Party, 2017:24). Despite this promise, Brexit created a real dilemma for Labour: 63% of the party were Remain voters whilst 60% of Labour held seats were estimated to have voted Leave, meaning that Corbyn had to take the position of opposing the Brexit deal the government were suggesting, deemed to be harmful to British jobs and living standards by Corbyn, whilst still upholding the result to appease the divided party (Cowley and Kavanagh 2018). In 2017, this proved a successful enough policy to retain some of the Leave voters in the Red Wall areas, especially combined with Corbyn's appeal in comparison to Theresa May. The better-than-expected results created confidence within Labour which increasingly saw itself as a government in waiting (Goes 2020).

What this also did though, was give Labour a false sense of security over their position with these voters. As time went on, Labour began to be viewed differently by Red Wall voters: they became part of the ‘elite’ that was no longer listening to the will of the people on leaving the EU. This was due to the uncertainty of Labour’s Brexit policy once the details began to be debated in parliament. Even within the leadership of the party there was confusion over the policy before and during the election of 2019 (Pogrud and Maguire 2020). Over time, the Leave voters in these constituencies became muddled as to what Labour’s position was on the matter: "Labour's policy on Brexit was insane... What [voters] would not accept was a policy that wasn't even a policy and not even people like me on the doorstep really understood it" (Interview with former Labour MP 2). This confusion led many Red Wall voters to believe that Labour would not abide by the referendum result; Labour “had not been clear in relation to our Brexit messaging. So,... we tended to sort of lose out on both directions there. To Remainers we weren't Remain enough and to Brexiteers, we were Remainers” (Interview with former Labour MP 4). Thus, Leave voters felt they had been ignored and had been ‘left behind’ by Labour who were more interested in representing other sections of the party.

Furthermore, by spending time debating the bill in Parliament, rather than voting to pass ‘the will of the people’, the Labour Party was viewed as the establishment and elite in populist terms. As underlined in chapter three, the working-class had felt politically empowered by the Brexit vote for the first time in many years, giving them the opportunity to become politically engaged again through the populist appeal of UKIP. The delay in bringing about Brexit however, seen as essential by many parliamentarians, had an impact for these voters. Brexit became “an important metaphor and cipher for the lack of trust and disengagement with politics. And what people saw was what appeared to be politicians playing endless political games rather than getting on with what they had been told to do” (Interview with previous Labour MP 4). Viewed through the theoretical lens

of populism, this demonstrated ‘the elite’ willingly ignoring and intentionally thwarting the will of ‘the people’.

The delay to Brexit also meant that voters were increasingly weary of hearing about the issue (Interview with Labour Activist 4). Red Wall voters, much like voters elsewhere in the country, wanted the parliamentary paralysis on the matter to come to an end (YouGov 2019):

Whether you were Leave or Remain you were sick of it. I mean, even myself who is politically engaged, I was bored of Brexit....So, there was a lot of that.... when it was the two, three years before, the paralysis of so many debates and questions just on Brexit, next to nothing was achieved because of it (Interview with Conservative MP 3).

During the debate on Brexit, the Labour Party was seen to be compounding the Brexit fatigue felt by voters in Red Wall seats and once again perceived to be not listening to what their voters wanted. In addition, as highlighted earlier in this thesis, there was an abjection of the Leave voting working-class by middle-class Remainers, who were now seen as being largely representative of the Labour Party, creating another layer in the ‘them’ and ‘us’ appeal of populism. With immigration intrinsically linked to the Leave campaign and UKIP’s policy agenda, there was an assumption by some Remainers that those who wanted to leave the EU in these Northern heartlands were racist and were thus held in contempt (Bates 2019).

This lack of acknowledgement of what was important to voters in the Labour heartlands was in part because voters had been taken for granted by New Labour as discussed in chapter two. Besides this, it was also because the Labour Party had failed to physically engage with voters over the years: “it’s been a gradual process where I think Labour has distanced itself from ordinary grass roots politics” (Interview with Labour activist 4). This further nullified their ability to listen. Additionally, the Labour Party’s presence in the community was not uniform across the Red Wall,

which added to the feelings of not being listened to. This was despite an increase in activism under Corbyn's leadership (Basset 2019). Yet, given three quarters of Labour's membership after 2015 was middle-class and over half university graduates, this activism was not taking place in working-class towns in the main. During the general election of 2019, this meant there were not enough activists in the North and Midlands, with only a small pool of party members being willing to help (Goes 2020). In these areas, activism was only happening "in pockets" (Interview with Labour activist 6), meaning in some areas, the assumption was "I'm afraid [with] Labour... you could stick a red rosette on a pig, and it would win around here" (Interview with Labour activist 3). This was to have implications for the party:

One of the problems...for Labour, from my point of view is that instead of being vibrant wards that are busy... you get these wards that just fall away to nothingness, there's no reason for them to meet... [The Constituency Labour Party] was demoralised, people were very set in their ways, the vote had been going down, ... [the CLP] was really detached from the electorate (Interview with Labour candidate 1).

Community links diminished because CLPs "weren't really knitted in the community because we almost took the votes for granted" (Interview with Labour activist 5). With values becoming key in the voting behaviour of the working-class electorate, as discussed earlier, by failing to have a regular narrative with voters, the Labour Party missed the chance to recognise this and adapt to it. Furthermore, the issue of community engagement has been highlighted by the Labour Party going forward as necessary in empowering the working-class (Trickett and Lavery 2019). By failing to be embedded in the community in some areas, the Labour Party prevented voters from having one avenue of political engagement, hindering their political efficacy further.

This lack of engagement with voters was to have further consequences: the Labour Party failed to recognise the demographic changes that had occurred in the Red Wall. In some places "the

constituency has changed quite a lot in the last 20 years. It feels different now from when I arrived” (Interview with former Labour MP 3). Firstly, there was a rise in aging population. Despite the Red Wall having an average age of 41, McCurdy et al (2020) found that there had been a shift to an older age structure between 2002 and 2018 which thus changed the age profile of these areas, with more people moving into retirement. Although this is not dissimilar to the country overall, it does have implications for voting behaviour as with “people getting older, as they retired, there’s a general tendency... for people to... vote Tory and people were just getting angrier at Labour” (Interview with Labour Candidate 1). With Labour losing more voters over 65 from 2010-2019 than they gained (SurrIDGE 2020a), losing votes in older places to the Brexit Party, plus the Conservatives winning 14 out of 23 seats in the top 30% of oldest constituencies (Bell 2019), it seems clear the party did not acknowledge this change in their constituencies over time. Not only this, constituencies with a higher number of older voters were more prone to vote Leave (Cooper and Cooper 2020) and older Leave voters were more values focused in outlook than other Leave voters (SurrIDGE 2021). Labour failed to adapt to this.

Demographically, the Red Wall seats also had below average pay (McCurdy et al 2020). This was to have implications for Labour as low-income voters were much more likely to vote Conservative (Goodwin and Heath 2020). In addition, as already discussed, those who are more economically vulnerable are more likely drawn towards populist rhetoric. These voters, who were cross pressured, left-wing on economic policy but right-wing on values, voted for Labour in 2017 due to their Brexit position that promised to leave the EU. As Labour’s Brexit policies became more muddled however, and they stopped listening to their heartland voters on the matter, this changed. A cultural values focus on political matters from this group made the fact that Labour did not acknowledge these demographics even more salient: they failed to react to the rise in votes for

UKIP in previous years due to a lack of understanding of how these changes in society created a desire for right-wing populism as was happening across Western democracies.

Even though these areas had voters of a lower income, what had also changed was that they were now constituencies of homeowners, with levels being 1% above national average, due to lower house prices and less pressure on the housing system (McCurdy et al 2020). What is key here is that areas with above average levels of home ownership are historically more likely to vote Conservative (Barton 2020). The Red Wall constituencies, therefore, with their older age category and high levels of home ownership presented themselves like Conservative seats in these ways. In some areas, the Labour Party did not respond to this and failed to acknowledge that these levels of new house ownership were from the traditional Labour supporters that had lived in the constituency for years:

Some of my party members said to me, “Those people in those houses, they can’t be local people. Local people couldn’t afford to buy those houses”... We did a survey... with people on new housing estates and as part of the survey we asked people what their previous postcode was before they moved on to the new estate... We found that 40% of people had either been in the same postcode or a neighbouring one, 40% had previously been, I can’t remember what it was, within 50 miles say and so only 20% of people were outsiders (Interview with former Labour MP 3).

What is also relevant here on both these counts is that for those Red Wall voters on low incomes and those owning houses, economic credibility was salient in the way they made decisions about how to vote (Ashcroft 2020). As noted in chapter three, personal economic situations are used in making evaluations on political parties regarding their economic competency and the Labour Party had struggled with this aspect of their policy offer since the financial crash of 2008, for which they shouldered the blame. It was clear that voters in the Red Wall believed that if Labour got into power “they couldn’t trust us with their money” (Interview with Labour activist 1). By failing to

acknowledge these key changes in the demographics within the Red Wall and providing an agenda the voters wanted to address them, again, Labour was perceived to have left these heartland voters behind.

5.3 Labour Transforms

As the Labour Party failed to recognise the important changes happening in their heartland seats, they also began to diverge further in their representation of the Red Wall electorate. They transformed into a party which was in many ways the antithesis of the working-class voter: this was partly due to their attempts to gain more middle-class support and that they went on to be viewed as the party of the cities and BAME communities. This is important for two reasons. Firstly, the Red Wall seats are largely white working-class areas. Savage et al (2013) found that the ‘traditional working-class’ and ‘precariat’ group were strongly represented in the old industrial areas outside of the Southeast. In addition, only 9% of the population in the Red Wall was born in another country, lower than other areas in the country and more in line with Conservative than Labour seats, which have considerably higher levels (McCurdy et al 2020). White British voters have been lost by the Labour Party in much higher numbers since 2010 than supported by them (SurrIDGE, 2020a). Labour’s supporters were no longer the traditional white working-class that they had been when the party was formed.

Secondly, the growth of support in university towns and cities represented the Labour Party becoming one for graduates. In terms of the North and Midlands, it was these sorts of places that managed to maintain seats well (Interview with previous Labour MP 1). Sowemimo (2020) explains that it was a high turnout in the graduate vote supporting Labour that helped countervail the loss of the working-class vote to the Conservatives in 2017, diminishing the effects of this long-term phenomenon. On average, since 2010, in the seats that Labour have gained, more than

one quarter of the electorate have a degree or higher qualification, whilst in the seats that have been lost by the party, the figure is just over one tenth (SurrIDGE 2020a). The higher number of lower educated voters in the Red Wall meant that Labour was no longer seen to be representative of them, and as chapter three established, it is these voters who are attracted to populism and began to give their votes firstly to UKIP and then the Conservatives.

This lack of representation of the working-class, because of the changes in the Labour Party composition, was also worsened at a parliamentary level. Labour lost working-class voters between 1997 and 2010 partly due to fewer working-class MPs in parliament (Trickett and Lavery 2019). As discussed in chapter two, it is the middle class, metropolitan elite, career politicians who are the majority in the PLP (Heath 2018). This lack of representation also applied to those who were school leavers rather than graduates. In 1992, 30% of Labour MPs were school leavers. Now this share is just 10%, a far reach from being representative of the ‘identity conservative’, white, school leavers voters, prominent in the Red Wall areas (Ford and Sobolewska 2021).

Coupled with this change in the membership of the Labour Party came the move to a more socially liberal outlook in policy. As outlined in chapter two, up until the 1960s, the Labour Party had retained a culturally conservative position, reflecting that of their working-class voters. In 1965, this changed, and the party adopted a Cultural Marxist Worldview, rejecting a reliance on cultural tradition. It is from this point on there was a growing social liberalism from the party. Nonetheless, what the Labour Party failed to “realise [was] that the traditional view of the people that live in my area was very different from the view of the Labour party, and we see that from the election results, frankly from the 90’s, early 2000’s, it’s getting chipped away slowly, slowly, slowly” (Interview with Conservative MP 1). This social liberalism became more problematic for Labour in recent years, as cultural values positioning in voting behaviour became more salient:

The sort of war on woke and all that stuff, I think, every time the Labour party comes up with an idea, whether it's... about the deportation of murderers and rapists to Jamaica or when Keir Starmer kneels for Black Lives Matter, that turns off the traditional Labour voter (Interview with Conservative MP 1).

From a Conservative perspective, the Labour Party had failed to appreciate that “working-class voters who should be traditional Labour voters are socially conservative by nature... they always have been” (Interview with Conservative MP 2). This was also discovered in the *Labour Together 2019 Election Review* (2020) which found that there was a long-term change in the relationship with Labour and this element of their voter coalition based on a cultural shift; this meant that Labour was losing their more socially conservative voters for a long time. As discussed earlier in the chapter, the lack of engagement with the working-class voters from Labour in these areas and the inability to listen caused this to happen because “one of the issues as a party we’ve got is that we’ve become a little bit too liberal, in a way... we need to get back in touch with the actual working-class” (Interview with Labour activist 5). The transformation within the party had impacted on the issues that it felt were important, leaving the Red Wall, culturally conservative, working-class voters behind. The disengagement from politics associated with this was then reversed with the rise of right-wing populism presenting a political offer that did represent them.

5.4 Conclusion

In this chapter there has been an analysis of how the Labour Party not only failed to recognise that their core voters in the North and Midlands had been ‘left behind’ but actively accelerated this. After an initial commitment to delivering Brexit in the 2017 general election, the party then became muddled in their decision making over the best way to move forward. What had been the key issue for Red Wall voters and given them some semblance of political efficacy was now seemingly

ignored by the Labour Party. Moreover, the actions of the PLP within Parliament were deemed to be hindering the process further, illuminating the Labour Party as the establishment elite actively going against the will of the people. A lack of engagement with voters in these heartlands in the North and Midlands meant that Labour had failed to listen to the voters on the importance of Brexit for them. Coupled with this was a lack of recognition from the party that these constituencies had changed over time in terms of their demographics. With an aging population and higher than average home ownership, constituencies had these factors in common with traditional Conservative seats.

Running in concurrence with these factors was a transformation in the Labour Party that furthered the gap in its representation of the working-class voters in its heartlands. The party was perceived to be one for those living in the cities and graduates. In addition, Labour was regarded as the party for BAME communities, with the Red Wall areas being predominantly white. This change in membership created a more socially liberal agenda from the party, divergent from the conservative social values of the working-class. The Labour Party failed to notice these important changes and the lack of being listened to or represented left a void for the rise of populism in these areas with its more conservative and values-based policies. What was to happen next was a filling of this political vacuum with a populist offer from the Conservatives that sealed Labour's fate in 2019. Labour's position in comparison to this will be discussed in the next chapter as it left Labour in its worst parliamentary position since 1935.

Chapter Six

‘Looking Forward’: Populism for the Working-Class?

*“How many Prime Ministers do you call by their first name? I can’t think of one. It’s Boris. It’s not Boris Johnson, it’s Boris. He goes down really well, people like him”
(Interview with Conservative MP 2).*

*“In my view it was the choice between a shameless chancer, who was Boris Johnson or Jeremy Corbyn, who was a kind of incompetent narcissist really”
(Interview with former Labour MP 1).*

6.1 Introduction

After considering how the working-class had become disempowered, the foregoing chapter argued that the Labour Party was unable to remedy this, therefore creating the perception that the party had left them behind, furthering their disempowerment. Consequently, this chapter focuses on what occurred during the general election of 2019 set against this context. It will be approached by considering the Labour offer through the lens of class, voting behaviour and populism, as theorised in chapter three, as these aspects reveal why the working-class in these previously loyal Labour heartlands finally came to vote for the Conservative Party in large numbers.

Jeremy Corbyn, viewed by some as a populist or showing populist traits (Arias 2018, Flinders 2019, Jeffery 2021, Martell 2018) became synonymous with ‘the elite’ by 2019, whilst Boris Johnson was perceived to be the representative of ‘the people’ against ‘the elite’ (Flinders 2019, Flinders 2020). With the perception that Labour had taken a Remain position in the Brexit debate and were thus part of the Europhile establishment, their policy on it lacked appeal for the working-

class 'heartland'. The lack of cultural values narrative in both Brexit policy and manifesto pledges were unable to appeal to the cultural values of the patriotic working-class. It is here also that we see the valence model of voting behaviour come into play as Labour's economic credibility was once again called into question. Finally, Corbyn was not perceived to be a credible future Prime Minister for those in the Red Wall. Instead, he was viewed as part of the establishment elite that had helped to disempower the working-class throughout the years. All these factors, when compared to Borisian populism, meant that Labour was no longer perceived to be a populist party representing the working-class electorate in the Red Wall.

6.2 Brexit Confusion

Corbynism presented an economic form of populism "in which the age of austerity was replaced with a new age of financial exuberance" (Flinders, 2019:18). Yet the Labour Party was nonetheless unable to use their brand of populism to win over the working-class in Red Wall areas. Its wide coalition of supporters, the majority with a socially liberal outlook, detailed in chapter two, made a focus on cultural values impossible. Its Brexit policy is evidence of this and shows how Labour left behind its voters in the Red Wall. In the run up to the general election there was confusion over the policy on Brexit and Labour settled on one that "will give the people the final say on Brexit. Within three months of coming to power, a Labour government will secure a sensible deal. And within six months, we will put that deal to a public vote alongside the option to remain" (The Labour Party, 2019:89). This was a complicated policy in comparison to "Get Brexit Done" which meant voters were "prepared to back the Conservatives because it was a clear message [on Brexit]" (Interview with Conservative MP 3). It was viewed as "a really good communication message and people like that sort of energy and movement" (Interview with former Labour MP 2). For Labour, this made campaigning on the doorstep very difficult:

It was just rubbish. By the time you'd explained that if we were in power, we were going to Europe and then renegotiate the deal, but the Prime Minister at the time which would be Jeremy Corbyn couldn't tell you whether he supported it or not... we would have to stand at the doorstep and... you just couldn't do it really (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

This Brexit position was not reflective of what the majority of the working-class voters in the Red Wall wanted, thus Labour was not reflecting the will of the people in 'the heartland': "if you look at the referendum result in 2016, compare that constituency by constituency to the general election 2019, it pretty much mirrors the vote" (Interview with Conservative MP 2) between those that voted Leave in 2016 and those that elected a Conservative MP in the Red Wall in 2019. With 80% of Leave voters giving the Conservative's their vote in 2019 (Ashcroft 2019) and all the areas in the Red Wall, as defined in this thesis, voting to leave with a majority of 54.1% or over (Dempsey 2017), the importance of Brexit in their decision making is clear. This was shown in conversations with voters as when discussing "Brexit and get Brexit done... some people were actually quite aggressive about it" (Interview with Labour activist 6). Labour's move away from supporting the antagonistic call for Brexit meant the party became even less populist and more institutional in nature (Meadway 2021:277). Anger, however, had increased among those with low political efficacy which pushed their support towards right-wing populist actors which in 2017 was UKIP (Magni 2017) but by 2019 was the Conservatives.

The suggestion of a second referendum with an option to Remain meant Labour was saying not only that the Brexit fatigue discussed in the last chapter would continue, but 'the elite', be it parliamentarians, the middle-class elite or those in the cities and London, could potentially overturn the Leave result. This had huge implications in the Red Wall which were demonstrated on the doorstep during campaigning:

I went out... and the first person I spoke to, first door I knocked on was a care worker who'd just come off a night shift, her husband was an ex-miner, both furious with the Labour Party, weren't voting Labour for the first time in their lives because of Brexit. And that was repeated again and again and again, everywhere we went (Interview with Labour candidate 1).

With leaving the EU sold as the vehicle for creating restrictions on immigration by right-wing populists (Morillas 2017), Labour's policy concerning this cultural value was in stark contrast to the Conservatives who promised "a firmer and fairer Australian-style points-based immigration system [where] migrants will contribute to the NHS - and pay in before they can receive benefits" (The Conservative Party 2019). The Conservatives were able to provide supply side populism which captured the resentment shown in the cultural trends occurring in the country caused by deindustrialisation and membership of the EU: the cultural backlash theory (Inglehart and Norris 2016). These policies exemplify the Conservative Party's transition to populism as an adaptation to culture and national identity becoming central to politics (Power et al 2020).

Labour, however promised a human rights approach to immigration, giving more help to immigrants with legal matters, an end to the indefinite detention of immigrants and a resumption of rescue missions for refugees. Labour would then give refugees rights once in the UK. Finally, there was a commitment to keep freedom of movement if the second referendum voted to remain in the EU. For Labour it was about the economics of immigration: the undercutting of pay and protection of workers' rights, including that of immigrant workers (The Labour Party 2019). This demonstrates the difference between populism on the left and right: populism of the right is exclusionary with groups identified as outsiders, whilst of the left it is inclusionary based on the politics of economics and equality (March 2017).

6.3 A Lack of Economic Credibility

As Corbyn's populist approach promoted a left-wing economic ideology, Labour rejected campaigning on cultural values during the general election which had become so prominent for working-class voters in the Red Wall. This purely economic approach was to be ineffective as problems arose for Labour due to the valence issue of fiscal credibility. Unlike Johnson's brand of populism which promised "a simple clear message of economic stability" (Interview with Conservative MP 3), the lack of economic credibility surrounding Corbyn, and the Labour Party made it unpopular, and concerns over the spending of public money by the party were highlighted at the leadership debates (Flinders 2019). The economy came third in issues reported in the press and at times moved up into the top two issues, consistent in both TV and newspaper reports (Deacon et al 2019). It meant that Labour's advent calendar style campaign, which had daily policy announcements, created doubts in voters' minds over financial competency (Goes 2020): "to just have this plethora of policy announcements coming out, wasn't actually convincing many people" (Interview with former Labour MP 4) and "it was just a shopping list that was going to cost billions of pounds... it was a wish list. And they didn't think we were competent enough to implement everything we were saying we were going to do... people just didn't trust us with the economy" (Interview with former Labour MP 1). Specific economic issues were mentioned during the interviews, even from voters who would have benefited from the policy promises:

I had a group of Waspi women, the 1950's born women who were particularly badly affected in terms of their pension deal, who had been very supportive, and I'd been very supportive of them but also very realistic with them all the time. I kept saying to them, well you won't get everything... there are certain things that can happen to improve your lot... which are doable... And after Labour had put out the manifesto, about two weeks later we basically said we'll sign a blank check for the Waspi women. Not even the Waspi women believed them... several of them said, well I can't vote Labour and I said... we're the only ones who'll do anything on this issue

you've been obsessing about but they said yes, but it's not believable (Interview with former Labour MP 2).

Other policies were also ridiculed by voters: "Free Broadband was met with derision. Where did Corbyn think we were going to get the money from? Did he want to bankrupt the country? There was a disbelief that the manifesto had been costed out" (Interview with Labour activist 6). The belief existed that Labour could not be trusted fiscally: both in the amounts they wanted to spend and the things they wanted to spend money on. 60% of Labour defectors after 2017 perceived that the Labour Party would need to spend significantly more money than the UK had witnessed in a lifetime due to their policy proposals. Not only this, but that they would spend unwisely (Kellner et al 2019).

In contrast, The Conservatives managed to combine a more left-wing economic policy with a right-wing cultural offer, appealing to the lower educated, lower income and older voters in the Red Wall who are on the left economically, but socially conservative (SurrIDGE 2018). The Conservative manifesto, for example, committed to "give the public services the resources they need" promising not to "borrow to fund day-to-day spending but will invest thoughtfully and responsibly in infrastructure" and that "debt will be lower at the end of the Parliament - rather than spiraling out of control under Labour. And we will use this investment prudently and strategically to level up every part of the United Kingdom" (The Conservative Party 2019). This promise to 'level up' appealed because the Conservatives promised to fix the 'left behind' communities within the Red Wall, demonstrating another element of populism: "people who believe that they live in a world that is unfair and where they do not get what they deserve... support populism" (Spruyt et al 2016). Crucially, it also convinced voters it would do it with fiscal care.

6.4 A Lack of Cultural Values

The left-wing economic populism of Corbyn, lacking the exclusion of outsiders found in right-wing populism, meant that like New Labour, there was an internationalist approach to foreign affairs. This meant that the cultural value of patriotism, so important to Red Wall voters was seen to be lacking from the Labour Party offer. This was in sharp contrast to the Conservatives, with Johnson presenting himself as an optimistic and patriotic leader, viewed, “as loving his country, trying to do the best for his country and being... a positivist. He’s always talking things up... he’s not seen as doom and gloom” (Interview with Conservative MP 1). In contrast, Labour and Corbyn were viewed as more concerned with helping other countries than focusing on and tackling issues and problems in Britain:

There was a Labour conference where the... conference delegates had to vote on what is going to be the issue that we debate and discuss at conference and they could have chosen the NHS or Brexit, which are two big issues to the British public. But they choose Palestine. And the Labour conference hall [was] filled with Palestinian flags... these sort of images were in voters’ minds (Interview with Labour activist 3).

This perception that other countries were prioritised over Britain by the Labour Party was evidenced through situations like this. Voters were not only aware of these images but sharing them on social media, which was key in discussion of what mattered to people. For example, one Conservative MP drew attention to how previous perceptions of Labour as unpatriotic had been formed due to the actions of Labour politicians:

You see people like Emily Thornberry, sneering at white working-class blokes, flying the flag outside their house... people pick up on this. They see things, they see the Labour party conference when everyone is waving their flag, a Palestinian flag, but not a union jack in sight, people aren’t stupid, with social media everywhere, things are shared (Interview with Conservative MP 2).

These images, which gave the perception that Labour was unpatriotic, were salient for former Labour voters when considering how the Labour Party might appeal to them again in the future (Ashcroft 2020).

This globalist approach also lacked appeal for the disempowered working-class because it caused a credibility issue for Labour over defence and security issues. Jeremy Corbyn, as a populist leader, was therefore deemed to be too radical on several matters. Corbyn found himself in an ideologically difficult position. As a leader who had always been on the back benches and acted according to his personal convictions in terms of foreign policy, he now needed to appear as though he could make the UK secure if he became Prime Minister, something that his past associations and present views were making difficult (Richards 2016). Corbyn as a leader was rejected by some of the working-class due to images on social media portraying him as ‘a traitor’ and ‘threat to national security’ or ‘most dangerous man in Britain’ because of his connections when trying to broker peace in Northern Ireland and the Middle East, whilst his questioning of foreign policy by the government gave the impression he was anti-the national interest (Lilleker 2019). The Skripal poisonings were one example of this where Corbyn questioned the intelligence stating Russia was behind the attack, giving the impression that he did not stand up for Britain (Interview with Labour activist 3). Corbyn’s popularity fell markedly after this episode going from a 12-point lead over Theresa May to 10 points behind (Rayson 2020). Corbyn did not put forward his side of the story and so was unable to redress the balance that was happening in the media that Red Wall voters were exposed to:

In the very working-class areas, there was an animosity towards Jeremy Corbyn... It was security... it was the attack lines from things like the Daily Mail [that] were being spouted back to us word for word... It was that he

didn't love the country, he wasn't patriotic, he wouldn't defend the country (Interview with Labour candidate 1).

The attacks on Corbyn from the Conservatives via social media and in the press meant that “that people had got messages, very simple messages lodged in their head that kept being played back to us. Not only the content of the messages but also the phraseology involved” (Interview with former Labour MP 4)

There appeared to be a lack of understanding of the values that were salient to Red Wall voters, demonstrating the leadership's inability to acknowledge how voting behaviour had changed over the years, particularly after the Brexit vote in 2016; this created huge negative implications for Labour when coupled with the voters' perception of Corbyn as an unpatriotic threat to the country which was not countered effectively. Labour had not understood the Red Wall voters of the 'heartland' who “love their country, they love their Queen, they sing the national anthem” (Interview with Conservative MP 2) and “care about their country, their family, their community, their faith as well, in a very small way” (Interview with Conservative MP 1). The people of 'the heartland' felt they wanted to make Britain great again through leaving the EU:

You have a kind of nostalgic and to my mind, falsely based patriotism. I... remember being shouted at by some bloke on his drive, I want to make Britain great again and you don't and that's why I'm not voting for you. And what that does is it encapsulates buying into a picture of the country and of the future for the country, which is literally impossible (Interview with former Labour MP 3).

Johnson, though, had understood the importance of patriotism to the 'heartland' demonstrating the nostalgic image of a past world, including the anti-globalisation and immigration sentiments often present (Taggart 2004). Fear was also brought into the argument via immigration in the emotive argument that voting Leave was the only way to do your patriotic duty and restore 'Great' Britain

(Murphy 2019). Labour however, was still relying on economic and ideological cleavages rather than addressing the cultural cleavages that were now pivotal in the voting behaviour of the working-class in the Red Wall.

6.5 A Populist Leader no Longer Popular

The left-wing ideological focus from Corbyn, important in the populist offer from Labour, was overwhelmingly viewed as too radical by voters in the Red Wall and was thus unpopular. For Corbyn, it was the membership that were ‘the heartland’ and he and his allies were determined to represent them against the elite of the more centrist PLP. They promised to respect the mandate that the members had given him concerning a more left political agenda (Watts and Bale 2019). This did not win support from Red Wall voters, some of whom believed the Labour leader to be a communist (Interview with former Labour MP 1). Corbyn’s experiences in parliament meant that “he was used to the echo chamber of radical politics” (Interview with former Labour MP 4) and this had implications in terms of his understanding of what many working-class voters desired.

The fact that Corbyn was viewed as a radical, was unpatriotic, and a threat to the defence of Britain, ran alongside the economic doubt that had dogged Labour since the financial crash of 2008 and the factionalism that had worsened when he became leader. The result was a Labour Party that was now operationally disorganised and divided, with a leader who was deemed to be incompetent by voters, pockets of party members and many of the PLP (Ashcroft 2020, McIvor 2020). Part of the Conservative’s social media campaign focused on Jeremy Corbyn’s lack of credibility in becoming the next Prime Minister, based around “don’t vote for Corbyn, you can’t trust him... that message was actually more disastrous for us because that was more in line with what people thought” (Interview with former Labour MP 2). Populist parties often choose “obscure and ill prepared leaders” who lack experience, meaning the party structure is weakened just at the time when its

populism becomes mainstream (Murphy, 2019:753). Corbyn's political career largely on the back benches meant that in terms of being leader "frankly, he wasn't equipped ever, and his team never equipped themselves to be able to respond to that" (Interview with former Labour MP 4). In 2017, this was not as significant as although "the mountain was pretty steep in 2015 and 2017...to be fair to Jeremy Corbyn, in 2017, against expectations, he made a little bit of movement up the mountain" (Interview with former Labour MP 2) and some of this was with working-class voters. Labour was able to increase their vote within the C1, C2 and DE demographic of voters substantially from 2015 (ranging from 30% to 37%) to 2017 (ranging from 40% to 44%) with their Leave vote going up by between 4% and 5% between 2015 and 2017 (Curtice 2020b). This was largely down to Corbyn's style of populism being more appealing when compared to Theresa May as leader:

Theresa May lost... her majority, and the Tory campaign was absolutely dire, and they absolutely came over as the establishment party, the party that wasn't in touch with ordinary people. And her wooden approach to things and her wooden style just added to that... Now in 2017, Jeremy Corbyn, even though... there were attacks on him... he was able to again come over as the non-politician politician (Interview with former Labour MP 4).

By 2019, though, the weakness of Corbyn as a populist leader, especially when set against Johnson as an alternative one, was evident and although negativity around Corbyn "did come up in 2017 [it was] nothing at the level as it did in 2019" (Interview with former Labour MP 4).

This was because in 2019 Johnson, "in the working-class areas... went down an absolute bomb and was actually a huge, huge vote winner and without him we wouldn't have been able to win" (Interview with Conservative MP 1). Voters saw Johnson as "someone, especially the men... he was a laugh, you could have a drink with him" (Interview with former Labour MP 1) or "funny, he's a joker...he's a good bloke" (Interview with former Labour MP 3). Ultimately it was felt that

“he’s one of them”, that is, a man of the people (Interview with Labour activist 3). This was shown in the way that Johnson was perceived not to be like other politicians:

“‘Bumbling buffoon’, that’s what people were saying about Boris Johnson... He was like a loveable comedian. And that also fed into the issue of not being the politician’s politician. So that was a reaction against what people saw as being a... political class that was too far up itself (Interview with former Labour MP 4).

Even though “he may be seen as making a few mistakes, not always saying the right thing... people like that in politics, they like that in politicians. He’s a larger-than-life character, he’s different” (Interview with Conservative MP 2). This made him appear to be unlike other politicians and thus not part of the current establishment. His actions whilst Prime Minister also added to this populist appeal as he attempted to take away some of the checks and balances of power to push his political agenda through parliament, another trait of populist leaders (Devinney and Hartwell 2020). His proroguing of parliament during the Brexit debates and the expulsion of MPs from the party who did not toe the line all point to this. This notion that Johnson was not part of the establishment was despite the previous years he had been involved in politics. The juxtaposition in views of both Johnson and Corbyn was to prove disastrous for Labour, especially as party leaders are a heuristic in voting behaviour, as discussed in chapter three.

6.6 An Ineffective Populist Campaign

The negativity towards Corbyn and his lack of leadership competency had dire implications for the Labour campaign. Some of the membership believed the timing of the election was misjudged by the leadership:

Only an insane person would have agreed to an election at that time. We had the votes to prevent an election and... we’d beaten off the election right until the last time when Jeremy Corbyn’s office decided they wanted an

election for reasons, it's difficult even now to understand (Interview with previous Labour MP 2).

This was also backed up by the Kerslake report which investigated the restructuring of the Leader of the Opposition's office and suggested an election should be delayed, if possible, with many MPs calling on Corbyn to do this (Pogrund and Maguire 2020). Corbyn had agreed to an election at the worst time, his popularity with voters at a low and Labour trailing the Conservatives in the polls (Goes 2020). The campaign itself was also ill-run, as discussed previously, with MPs and activists on the ground fighting against an onslaught of policy announcements, plus a paucity of support from the national party, reflecting a skills deficit in this area from the Labour leadership. The *Labour Together 2019 Election Review* (2020) has highlighted this lack of leadership and accountability in the campaign, alongside issues with staffing. Leaflets were sent out to inappropriate locations where MPs did not have prior knowledge of them (Interview with former Labour MP 3). There were also issues with "Contact Creator...the database for keeping information...it was crashing all the time...We had a telephone canvassing app that didn't work called Dialogue....which was basically completely ineffective" (Interview with former Labour MP 2). For others, the problems in the campaign strategy came down to funding from the leader's office: "it wasn't until the weekend before the election that we started getting any kind of financial support that we required" (Interview with former Labour MP 1) or receiving support when it was requested from the general secretary where "it took... six months to get a meeting with her" (Interview with former Labour MP 3).

Also key to Labour's losses in the election was its failure to run an effective online campaign via the favoured tool of the populists, social media. In 2017 social media replaced traditional media as the more influential medium affecting the success of the parties, highlighting its importance in

modern campaigning (Margetts 2017). In 2017 Labour had been highly effective in comparison to the Conservative Party: The Conservatives social media campaign was only run during the election campaign and was centered mainly on Facebook and Twitter; Labour, however, since the win of Corbyn in the leadership election of 2015, had been campaigning relentlessly on other platforms and were endorsed by social media icons such as Stormzy, winning over the youth vote (Ibid). This situation was reversed in 2019 however, with the Conservatives understanding the importance of a targeted social media campaign in the Red Wall. This was exemplified in the anti-Corbyn feeling that was present on social media due the carefully targeted campaign run by the Conservatives, again highlighting their populist tendencies. For Leave voters in a constituency, adverts featured Boris Johnson, for Remain voters the adverts focused on the negative traits of the opposition (Power et al 2020). As party leaders and the associations with them became a key element in voting behaviour in recent years (Garzia 2013) and negative campaigning deemed to be effective against your opponent (Mortimore 2014), this proved successful. This micro targeting meant that “the Conservative’s social media operation was very, very good...it was very, very effective and very well targeted. So, people on Facebook around here were getting very targeted messages that were targeted at them personally... you can’t compete with that.” (Interview with former Labour MP 2).

For Labour, this element of their campaign has been evaluated in the *Labour Together 2019 Election Review* (2020:13) and the conclusion is that “whilst the Tories learnt from their failure online in 2017, Labour did not invest and strengthen its online capacity, making use of the brightest and the best available.” This was because “the social media operation in 2017 was very good, and better than the Conservative social media campaign... by 2019... it hadn’t come on, it was still... left 2 years ago” (Interview with former Labour MP 2). Social media is key in campaigning in the

modern world due to the “relentless drumbeat of sensational and misleading tabloid news stories [which have] been taken to a new level, [and the] rise of social media as a vector for disintermediated communications in which “filter bubble” effects can lead to fake news and sentiment spreading like wildfire” (Datapraxis 2019). Yet the Labour Party was unable to give an effective retort to it. What should have continued to be a vital tool for Corbyn as a populist leader in promoting himself and neutralising his opponents, after the successes of 2017, was under utilised due to ineffective leadership coordination, leaving the Conservatives to spread their appeal to the Red Wall voters even further.

6.7 Conclusion

This chapter has analysed how the Labour Party approached the general election of 2019 according to its populist offer, in comparison to the Conservatives. Labour’s offer was a populism that appeared to be misdirected and a step too far under the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn, despite managing to win support from some of the working-class in 2017. Importantly, by 2019 Labour’s campaign position on Brexit was muddled, now giving the impression in the Red Wall that they were a Remain party and therefore part of the establishment ‘elite’ trying to prevent the will of the people. This was in comparison to the Conservatives whose populism was aimed at capturing the working-class vote and achieving the will of ‘the people’, giving voters in the Red Wall hope that Brexit would be done, and the UK would finally leave the EU. This would fulfil their wishes to gain UK sovereignty once again and lower immigration levels.

The patriotism that was so embedded in this group was missing from Labour’s policy offer, as too was any agenda on the cultural values that were important to those in the North and Midlands. In fact, its foreign and immigration policies appeared to be the antithesis of this. The Conservatives in contrast created a narrative around patriotism and cultural values which provided them with a

way to recreate a 'heartland' for Red Wall voters from years gone by, based on social conservatism and pride in their country.

With Corbyn as leader, the party was now labelled as too radical, partly a consequence of its populist focus on left wing economics. As a populist leader Corbyn was ill-received whereas Johnson in comparison was perceived to be charismatic and optimistic, the new face of right-wing populism, both anti-establishment and a man of 'the people'. Corbyn lacked the required competency to lead a divided party delivering a poorly led campaign, particularly when compared to the Conservative's highly effective use of social media.

It is all these factors that led the working-class in the Red Wall to vote Conservative in such large numbers. It now became the party of the working-class in terms of its popularity compared to middle-class voters. The Conservatives had managed to persuade this disempowered class that they were the party to empower them once again by delivering Brexit and improving their communities, giving them the hope to look forward and end the feelings of being left behind. This story appears to be one that is almost impossible for Labour to come back from, however there are several things that could be done in order to make their journey less difficult. These are also based around who the working-class are, voting behaviour and populism, and will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter Seven

Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

This thesis has examined why the Red Wall in the North and Midlands fell during the general election of 2019. The conclusion of this study has four purposes: firstly, it provides an overview of the study and its contributions to academia. Next, it returns to the three main research questions and gives a summary of the findings. Thirdly, I give recommendations for Labour's post-pandemic future based on these findings. Finally, I pinpoint the implications and limitations of the research as well as providing future research possibilities.

7.2 Overview and Contribution of this Thesis

The fall of the Red Wall and the Labour Party's catastrophic results in the election of 2019 have been at the fore of political discussion and the media since it occurred. There have been both quantitative studies (Bell 2019, Curtice 2020a, Curtice 2020b, Denver 2020, SurrIDGE 2020a, SurrIDGE 2020b) as well as qualitative projects (Ashcroft 2019, Ashcroft 2020, Mattinson 2020, Rayson 2020) that seek to explain what happened and why. This thesis, having considered why the Red Wall fell from a qualitative perspective, contributes to this currently salient topic. It builds upon the existing literature and adds new dimensions of knowledge to it with a focus on the disempowerment of the working class and the implications this had for voting behaviour and the rise in populism.

This study has firstly considered the evolutionary changes within Labour in order to set its metamorphic relationship with the working-class in context, from an ideological perspective. Through its theoretical examination of whom the working-class are it has demonstrated those in

the Red Wall to be a group who have been disempowered economically, socially and culturally, underpinned by the theories of Bourdieu (1984, 1986) as well as Wright (1997). This has then led to a lack of political efficacy which has impacted on the loyalty the working-class in the North and Midlands had to the Labour Party. The thesis has shown that they are now making voting decisions according to the positional model of voting behaviour based on cultural values which has led to the working-class in the Red Wall favouring right-wing exclusionary populism as compared to the socio-economic populism offered by Labour in 2019. It has done this through both theoretical and empirical research based on interviews with the actors who experienced the fall of the Red Wall for themselves.

After considering why the Red Wall fell in such catastrophic terms for the Labour Party, this thesis makes contributions by adding to the existing literature in several ways. Firstly, it contributes to the understanding of why the Red Wall fell as it adds a theoretical account of class to debates on partisan dealignment and the rise of populism. At the heart of this is the theory that the accumulation of capital by the working-class is key to who they are and explains their disempowerment. The fact they lack forms of capital which gain advantage when exchanged in the 'field', have led to a decline in political efficacy and collective identity due to a lack of opportunity for political engagement. The further loss of economic and social capital due to deindustrialisation and globalization also added to this disempowerment.

A further contribution is made by bridging the theories of Bourdieu, Wright and Savage on class with that of abjection from Tyler which explains how the disempowered working-class became a divided one in neoliberal Britain. The abjection of an 'underclass' was relevant to the fall of the Red Wall in two ways: firstly, the racialisation of class and abjection of immigrants was key to the 'working-class' voting Leave in the EU referendum in 2016, a salient factor in Labour's downfall

in 2019; secondly, this abjection bred division which added to the lack of collectivity in the working-class. The work of Standing is also then linked to these theories as the fear created by economic insecurity, a lack of collective identity and abjection brought about a precarious group within the Red-Wall who were drawn to right-wing populism.

This thesis also contributes by then linking these theories with those on changes in voting behaviour in recent years. The lack of capital of the working-class, political efficacy and collective identity meant that the traditional socialisation that had happened in communities in creating party loyalty no longer occurred. Therefore, the working-class used other methods in deciding how to vote: the valence model, with a focus on party leaders and economic credibility and then, importantly a new positional model based on cultural values. Here I have demonstrated the theoretical link between division within the working-class based on abjection and how this reflected the salience of cultural values in voting behaviour, with Brexit as the vehicle.

Finally, each of these theories is then linked to the theoretical discussion on the rise of populism and thus this also contributes to extant literature. By demonstrating how populism succeeds through fear of 'the other' and intends to bring together disaffected groups through a chain of equivalence, in this instance Euroscepticism and the Brexit debate, the disempowerment of the working-class caused by a lack of capital and political efficacy was offered a remedy. Furthermore, clear links are shown between the move to cultural values in voting behaviour and the success of right-wing populism as the voters in the Red Wall found the Conservative Party offer one that fitted their socially conservative image of the 'heartland'.

7.3 Main Findings

This thesis has considered why the Red Wall fell in the general election in 2019 from the perspective of those who experienced it and three theoretical lenses: who the working-class are and why they are disempowered, changes in voting behaviour and the rise of populism. I have then analysed how this caused the disempowered working-class to feel ‘left behind’, Labour’s failed response to this and why the right-wing exclusionary populism of the Conservative Party proved more appealing than Labour’s socio-economic offer in the election of 2019.

This section summarises the findings of this thesis by reviewing the three research questions. The first question, *why did the voters in the Red Wall feel disempowered and therefore ‘left behind’?* was examined by considering what the changing circumstances of the working-class were based on both theory and empirical data. This explained what had led to their disempowerment and a sense of being ‘left behind’.

The working-class in the Red Wall have become disempowered over time due to a lack of economic, social and cultural capital which had led to a decline in their political efficacy and a perception that they were ‘left behind’. Deindustrialisation added to this disempowerment as it caused economic insecurity for the working-class as well as a decline in the notion of class identity, a sense of collectivism and the opportunity for political engagement. Voters in these areas therefore felt a lack of political efficacy. Added to this, divisions within the working-class, fueled by fears over economic and social insecurity, led to an abjection of certain groups. Socially, communities began to fracture, again adding to a loss of collectivity, furthering the disempowerment of the working-class.

The sense of being 'left behind' caused by disempowerment was exacerbated by the Labour Party. Labour councils were blamed for the lack of prosperity within Red Wall areas, especially when compared to cities and London in particular. Thus, Labour was perceived to represent voters in these areas who were more prosperous compared to those in the declining Red Wall towns, with London viewed as the political decision makers compared to the rest of the country. Therefore, voters in the Red Wall felt they lacked a political voice in terms of decision making in the country. All these reasons contributed to why they felt disempowered and thus 'left behind'.

This then raised the second research question of *how did Labour 'leave behind' these voters in tackling this disempowerment?* This was analysed again through theoretical and empirical data with the theory underlining the particular facets of the disempowerment of the working-class, and the empirical explaining why Labour did not respond to this effectively.

An important aspect identified in how Labour 'left behind' their voters was that they had stopped listening to them. Already feeling like they had no voice, furthering their disempowerment, Labour worsened this situation for the working-class in the Red Wall. Key to this was Brexit which gave this group the chance to feel like their voice counted. Despite promising to stand by the referendum result in 2017, by 2019 Labour's policy was muddled on the matter. This gave the impression to Leave voters in the Red Wall that Labour was in favour of remaining. Importantly, it was perceived that Labour were not going to fulfil the will of the people that had been encapsulated in the Brexit vote. In addition, some Labour Party members became complacent in going out to meet and engage with voters. In the 2019 election, this had two important consequences: firstly, by not engaging with voters, Labour was not listening to the importance that cultural values had in terms of their voting behaviour; secondly, demographic adaptations that had been happening in the Red Wall

since deindustrialisation were missed, meaning Labour no longer understood what was important to voters or who their voters were.

Combined with this failure to listen and understand voters, the Labour Party itself changed over time and was no longer one that appealed to the socially conservative working-class. Most of the grass roots membership of the party was middle-class, graduates or from BAME populations. The Party's support was now much more centered around cities and was activist based. The working-class, already lacking confidence participating in the political field, were further ostracised from it because of this. In addition, they no longer felt they were represented by the party at a parliamentary level as most Labour MPs are now middle-class or career politicians. Finally, this changing membership had consequences for the party as they moved towards policies reflecting a socially liberal outlook. This was the antithesis of what Red Wall voters wanted: a return to more socially conservative values based on the past. Thus, not only had these Red Wall voters been disempowered and left behind in their communities, but they also found the party that had promised to represent them no longer did.

The last question, *how did Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party answer this disempowerment in the general election of 2019 compared to that of Boris Johnson's Conservative Party?* considered the demise of Labour in the 2019 election, compared to the success of the Conservative Party. Theories on voting behaviour and the rise of populism were drawn upon, as well as empirical data which demonstrated the reactions of the Red Wall voters to both parties.

The working-class voters in the Red Wall now felt disempowered and left behind, not only in terms of their own communities and situations but also by the Labour Party. The analysis of the data reflected why the previously loyal Labour heartlands in the North and Midlands elected Conservative MPs to represent them in Parliament. Firstly, Labour's Brexit position during the

campaign, culminating in the promise of a second referendum to vote on a Brexit deal with an option to Remain, meant that voters in the Red Wall felt Corbynism no longer represented the will of the people but were part of 'the elite'. This policy went against the wishes of the 'heartland' who turned to Johnsonian populism, promising to "Get Brexit Done", the clearest message that 'the people' would now get what they wanted.

Furthermore, Labour based their policy offers on socio-economic policies used by the populist left rather than the cultural ones that the Red Wall voters wanted. In contrast, the Conservatives right-wing exclusionary populist offer typified a policy agenda built around cultural values. The valence model of voting behaviour became highly important here as the economic credibility of the Labour Party was called into question due to multiple policies which were perceived to be unaffordable. The promise made by the Conservatives to be fiscally responsible whilst 'levelling up' the Red Wall areas, bringing back the lost prosperity there, was well received by the working-class. Credibility was shown to be an issue in terms of the valence issue of leadership also. Red Wall voters no longer liked Corbyn and believed he was ill-equipped to be leader of the Labour Party, let alone Prime Minister of the country. He was considered part of the establishment elite which were perceived to have disempowered the working-class and left them behind. Alternatively, Johnson was perceived to be a man of the people and an anti-establishment figure, prepared to do whatever was necessary to bring about the will of the people. Their differences in leadership were highlighted via the populist tool of social media: the Conservative Party were highly effective in its use in comparison to Labour who had not improved in this area since the last election. It was for all these reasons that the disempowered and left behind working-class began to hope they would be re-empowered once again and could now look forward to a brighter future promised by the Conservative populist offer.

7.4 ‘Looking Forward’: The Post Pandemic Future for Labour

The main findings of this study, in combination with ideas from the participants, inform what Labour could do in order to re-empower the working-class and thus gain their support once again. They are outlined in this section based on the three theoretical elements underpinning the research: the first section will tackle how Labour can begin to re-empower the Red Wall voters they have lost. The second will suggest ways they can respond to the changes in voting behaviour that have occurred over the years and the final section will provide suggestions as to how they can answer the right-wing populism of Boris Johnson.

7.4.1 Re-empowerment of the Working-Class

It is essential that Labour starts to address the disempowerment of the working-class in these Red Wall areas with an offer that represents their intrinsic values. This means Labour should engage with communities to find out what they want. Communication must be started again as by doing “an hour or a couple of hours every week, knocking on doors, talking to people, asking if there’s an issue” (Interview with Labour candidate 1). Focus group sessions or street stalls could also be held to find out exactly what matters to these voters. One possible area to tackle is that of the decline in the Red Wall towns felt after deindustrialisation, at the expense of investment in the cities. A rise in independent local parties on councils reflected this with a focus on local issues and it “seems like it’s a new phenomenon... people do want that smallness” (Interview with Labour activist 4). It is therefore imperative that Labour campaign on the relevant issues in each constituency. This is vital considering the Conservative government's ‘levelling up’ agenda in these areas which aims to give the voters in these communities a sense that they are no longer neglected compared to London, the Southeast or cities (Goodwin and Heath 2020, Savage et al

2015). The Labour Party must be able to compete with this and show they also believe it to be important.

‘Levelling up’ does not necessarily have to be achieved through huge projects: “We’re talking about investment... I don’t think that should be misconstrued as a big capital project... it just means improving everybody’s lives” (Interview with Conservative MP 1). Levelling up may come in the form of status and recognition, the rhetoric of success, based around a few infrastructure projects in the form of ‘spectacle politics’.²⁸ Therefore, the Labour Party has a chance to ‘level up’ in these areas using the community-based approach. This could be achieved without the huge funding capabilities of government, by “trying to deal with people’s issues, trying to support families that are really struggling” (Interview with Labour activist 5). The CLPs need to be able to target the issues of prime concern in their area and become a community-based platform to help with those, with funding given from the national party. This should be combined with a narrative of success, demonstrating to the working-class that Labour is pivotal in improving their areas. Labour would need to ensure they were seen to be helping working people, as well as those who are likely to be viewed through the lens of social abjection in the neoliberalist state (Tyler 2013) who have created moral outrage from some of the working-class (Savage 2015). By considering its original aims and the practical nature of its formation, the Labour Party can now help people improve their situation and the local area. This could be the Labour Party’s version of ‘levelling up’ and a way to empower the working-class in the Red Wall in terms of their communities.

Labour can also help to empower these areas in terms of their political efficacy, helping to lessen the attraction of right-wing populism. Deindustrialisation caused a reduction in trade union

²⁸This entails “governing through political spectacle [which] encourages a focus on symbolic acts and projects, rather than the more difficult business of constructing a levelling up agenda” (Jennings, McKay and Stoker, 2021: 309).

membership and collective political identity for the working-class as industries closed. Whilst Labour needs to recognise the importance of trade unions, their role must be re-evaluated to include: “the gig economy” and “the self-employed” (Interview with former Labour MP 1). If Labour, or the party through the trade union movement, focuses on better working conditions for these groups, this would potentially win them support from these voters. Moreover, this would then give security and identity to these workers, diminishing their fear which creates divisions between societal groups and is used by right-wing populists to gain support.

This new version of trade unionism could create a vision of ‘modern collectivism’ “for the general good, for society and therefore for the world” (Interview with former Labour MP 1). Modern collectivism could also provide locations for people to meet, giving voters in the Red Wall a place to become politically, culturally and socially involved again. This would entail the “political party being a community resource” (Interview with former Labour MP 4). Labour Community Centres would be one way of doing this (McIvor 2020). The Labour Party would then be for all parts of the community, as opposed to being viewed as representing just the middle-classes (Heath 2018). Moreover, political elites can then be recruited from the Red Wall from working-class backgrounds, proving that Labour has listened to those ‘left behind’ communities and now represents them again. This proved successful for the party in the 2021 by-election in Batley and Spenningsdale where Kim Leadbetter (sister of previous MP, Jo Cox) was elected. Leadbetter had grown up and worked in the constituency all her life and was described by one activist as “as a close to a ‘normal person’ as has been elected” (Halliday 2021). This would be a return to the Labour Party’s original aim of “independent political representation on the part of the working-class” (Worley 2009:3). The working-class could once again feel like their voices mattered both locally and nationally on a political level.

7.4.2 Focus on Values

Labour must also now adapt to changes in voting behaviour, with the focus of those in the Red Wall now on cultural values. In the election of 2019, the move to a values-based mode of voting was not responded to by the Labour Party as the leadership failed to recognise it. The incumbent Labour leader, Keir Starmer, has begun to redress this in some ways: there have been moves to embrace the cultural value of patriotism by the party with the wider use of the Union Jack and support of the armed services and veterans “to give voters a sense of authentic values alignment.” (Chakraborty and Elgot 2021). It is important for Labour to now be seen as, “respectable, people thinking - they don’t mind the army... security, all that kind of stuff” (Interview with former Labour MP 3). However, the party needs to go further than this. As one Labour candidate explained, questions over values in policy formation need to be asked: “how does [the policy] connect to my value? How does this connect to my value where I live?” (Interview with Labour candidate 1). Values-led policies, relevant to Red Wall voters must be underscored. This is dangerous territory as Labour, by moving towards more authoritarian values, risk losing their socially liberal base (Cooper and Cooper 2020). ‘Identity conservatives’ (white school leavers with strong ethnocentric tendencies) are declining in number however, whereas their opposite number, ‘identity liberals’ are growing (Ford and Sobolewska 2021). Therefore, it is vital that the Labour Party still appeals to this section of voters. The historical issue of how to maintain Labour’s broad-church voter coalition persists in the modern day based on the authoritarian/liberal axis (SurrIDGE 2020a). Simply telling these more culturally conservative but economically left-wing voters that their values are wrong, however, has not been successful for Labour and was key in their lack of success in election in 2019 and is thus a lesson learnt for the party.

One cultural value that Labour could embrace is progressive patriotism. This could be achieved through pride in the country based on equality and acceptance, creating pride in local areas through engagement in the community and then a celebration of both. A pride in local identity and place could restore contentment in the Red Wall, reversing the negativity and blame for the decline of industries towards groups such as immigrants or the very poor, who are deemed responsible for their own “misfortune” (Rutherford, 2011:93). Pride in both nation and locality would then also create the optimistic outlook that many Red Wall voters felt the Conservatives had but Labour lacked. Voters “do want this optimism, this vision, this sense of the country will be better with you” (Interview with former Labour MP 2). An optimistic vision should be core to any policy decisions and values statements from the Labour Party. This is especially important post-Covid, as one former Labour MP recognised: “will people start losing their jobs? And if they lose their jobs, who will they blame and who will they look to for recovering the future?... I think Labour needs to have a clear vision for that” (Interview with former Labour MP 2).

7.4.3 Unifying Populist Style Projects

Labour must also find a way to answer the populist offer of the Conservatives in order to appeal to these voters again. Brexit demonstrated how many of the working-class came together to support a unifying populist project. Labour can offer unifying projects, particularly when the inequalities created by the Covid pandemic are considered. There are many groups who have been affected: “families [who] have just completely had their family finances smashed up by the pandemic... there are lots of groups to care about, but self-employed people... the 3 million excluded from all Rishi’s schemes” (Interview with former Labour MP 3).

This is particularly relevant considering the future cuts to Universal Credit that the Conservatives are planning, the rise in National Insurance Contributions which will negatively affect lower

income working families and an expected increase in energy bills. The public perception of key workers has also changed during this time, as the electorate realise how essential they are to society. A unifying project of improving the working conditions of this group, could be a winning policy for Labour because “society can’t function without them” (Interview with former Labour MP 1). Key workers are some of the many voters in the Red Wall who switched to the Conservatives in the election of 2019 and had been doing so since 2010 (Surrige 2020a). The Labour Party could gain their support as well as keeping more liberal supporters who acknowledged key workers’ indispensability during the pandemic.

The unification of disaffected groups through projects necessitates a modernisation of ideology for Labour. Many previous Labour voters in the North and Midlands felt that Labour under Corbyn had become too left wing. Red Wall voters are not opposed to more left-wing economic policies, but new policies must be presented carefully. They cannot be linked to the radical left, which the right-wing dominated press would likely suggest as they did in 2019 (Goes 2020). This would mark an end to Corbynism, which one former Labour MP felt was vital as “if people believe that we’re still under the shadow of Jeremy Corbyn and Momentum and the hard left they won’t vote, they won’t listen” (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

This means that policies must be framed incredibly carefully in terms of a left-wing, post-pandemic Labour offer by “getting the balance right... between saying... we don’t want insecurity and zero hours contracts and exploitation but... if people do run risks to try and set up businesses, we do want to help them... this really is a case where the detail matters (Interview with former Labour MP 3). Crucially they would also need to be thoroughly costed to ensure economic credibility is maintained. This would emulate the more popular 2017 Labour manifesto, which was deemed fiscally responsible (Bolton and Pitts 2018).

This means that Labour and its members must employ pragmatism to win power, as did successful leaders like Tony Blair and Harold Wilson (Meredith 2006). Keir Starmer is demonstrating that he is a pragmatic socialist as leader which is a good first step (Goes 2021) and particularly important considering the chameleon like Conservative party:

The difference between the Tory party and the Labour party is that the Tory party is the party of power... And we're the party of principle... If they've to do... something else to bring in more voters, they'll do it to get power... we shouldn't desert our principles. We need to make them relevant (Interview with former Labour MP 1).

The ability and acceptance of change embodies a more modern approach to winning power, essential against the populist leadership of Boris Johnson. This pragmatic approach also means that Labour could entertain progressive alliances, creating a new kind of politics based on “building progressive coalitions within constituencies... you generate support for your party through your activity and your practice and that practice has to be inclusive beyond the party” (Interview with former Labour MP 4). By working with other groups in the community, not all political, Labour can create coalitions that work towards gaining power. It must be done from the bottom up so disaffected voters see that what is happening is wholly for their benefit, not for political or individual gain.

As part of this answer to right-wing populism, Labour's digital campaigning must improve to compete with the Conservative's strong narrative through social media. This includes the national party making better use of social media data to inform campaigning so that social media adverts can be targeted to groups of voters more successfully, a winning strategy for the Conservatives in 2019. It also needs the creation of a central digital team and revamp of the digital instruments available to campaigners (McIvor 2020). This must be extended to the local level too: “we're going

to have to use more and be more social media savvy” (Interview with Labour activist 2). It is vital that Labour has a targeted social media campaign which focuses on issues that the public are engaged in which create emotional responses. It is this content that did best during the 2019 general election and, at times, even set the political agenda (Holroyd and The Cube 2019). If Labour can begin to address the disempowerment of the working-class, their changed focus in voting behaviour and give a credible response to the Conservative’s populism, they may be able to re-empower them once again.

7.5 Implications, Limitations and Avenues for Future Research

The final section of this thesis discusses the implications of the main findings as well as the limitations of the study and potential avenues for further research.

There are several implications within this research that can be identified which centre around the question of *why* Labour came to lose their Red Wall. The first is the importance of who the working-class are from a perspective of their economic, social and cultural capital: this study has shown that not only do the working-class of Britain lack capital in all areas which gain advantage when exchanged, but the negative implications this has for their political efficacy and involvement in the political field; it also demonstrates that those working-class communities within the Red Wall lack capital because of their distance from London. This has led to the disempowerment of the working-class because it has created a lack of collective identity, furthering a decline in political efficacy. The analysis in this thesis links the accumulation of capital in the working-class of the Red Wall to their disempowerment and a key reason for them no longer voting for Labour.

A further implication is an identification of why this lack of capital has affected voting behaviour in the Red Wall, again explaining why Labour lost votes from their traditional supporters. The

capital accumulated by the working-class created a disaffection with politics as they no longer felt part of the political field. For voters in the Red Wall, social changes brought about by deindustrialisation ended the notion of class identity and collectivism, an entry point into political engagement. Consequently, these link to changes in class and party alignment in voting behaviour. Valence issues such as the economy and leadership became more relevant in decision making over time because working-class voters no longer felt part of the collective group that traditionally voted Labour. Crucially, the positional model of voting behaviour based on cultural values became salient as the fear created by the disempowerment of the working-class, and the economic and social insecurities they felt, could be answered by policies based on these. It was this mode of decision making that caused the Red Wall voters begin to feel empowered again through their vote to leave the EU, as right-wing populism came to the fore in British politics in the form of Euroscepticism based on lowering immigration and regaining UK sovereignty.

The third and final implication, therefore, is why populism was fundamental in the fall of the Red wall, intrinsically linked to the disempowerment of the working-class in this area, combined with cultural values becoming integral in voting behaviour. By comparing the offers of both the Conservative and Labour parties in 2019, this thesis identified that it was right-wing exclusionary populism supplied by the Conservative Party, as opposed to the socio-economic favoured by Labour, that ultimately helped to bring about a re-empowerment of the working-class. This was because of the promise that the will of the people in the form of Brexit would finally be carried out and there would be a return to the positive and nostalgic notion of the 'heartland', bringing prosperity and a sense of pride back to the Red Wall. It also served as a remedy to the fear and division that had been created in the working-class as part of their disempowerment. All three of

these implications underpin the important question of *why* previously loyal Labour voters in the North and Midlands choose to eschew their traditional party loyalties.

There were limitations within the research, however, which must also be highlighted. Access to participants could have been wider had it been possible to include voters. The time limits set for this work meant that this could not be followed up further due to problems in recruitment via social media. The data was collected during the Covid pandemic, so it was not possible to go and meet voters in person as was originally planned in the research proposal. The pandemic also meant that many Conservative MPs were busy working on issues related to this so were unable to take part in the research. I believe though, that despite these limitations, due to the rigour undertaken in the data analysis, attempts to ensure validity and the implications identified, this piece of research adds a new dimension to that already available on how the Labour Party came to lose in such catastrophic terms in the general election of 2019.

These limitations nonetheless help to inform further avenues for research. This research provides evidence from only a small number of people who experienced the fall of the Red Wall in the general election of 2019. It would be useful to extend it to voters in order to clarify whether the political elites and activists interpreted their thoughts correctly. It would also be useful to hear the perspective of more Conservative activists.

Extending the research so it includes Scotland and Wales would mean that any other factors responsible for Labour's decline could also be analysed. It would underline how the subject of independence affected Labour's performance during the election of 2019. Furthermore, it would highlight the issue of nationalism within the demise of the Labour Party. This would be particularly valuable considering the threat to the union that Brexit has brought about in recent years, with Scotland voting to remain in contrast to England and Wales. It would also highlight further the

reasons behind the demise of Scottish Labour whilst explaining why Labour has been successful in Wales.

Finally, the issue of patriotism within the UK, linked to nationalism, warrants further research. The study does not explain in any detail whether the patriotism felt by Red Wall voters was that for Britain or England. A Red Wall perspective would add to other literature on this. Nationalism plays a large role in the appeal of right-wing populism so research into this would identify what type it was in order find answers in how to tackle it. It would also offer answers to questions that have been raised in recent years over further devolution and whether a separate English parliament is needed. The existing research as well as any new avenues followed up will have implications for understanding how the political landscape in Britain has changed for all parties, and importantly for the Labour Party. It will give them an added understanding of how they can 'look forward' in rebuilding the fractured voter base they are perceived to have 'left behind'.

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