UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

BREXIT AND BEYOND:

PUBLIC OPINION

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PUBLIC OPINION

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LIST OF CONTRIBUTORS

Neema Begum is a Research Associate at the Centre on the Dynamics of Ethnicity at the University of Manchester.

John Curtice is Professor of Practice at the University of Strathclyde and Senior Fellow at the UK in a Changing Europe.

Bobby Duffy is Professor of Public Policy and Director of the Policy Institute at King's College London.

Matthew Goodwin is Professor of Politics and International Relations at the University of Kent.

Ailsa Henderson is Professor of Political Science at the University of Edinburgh.

Sara Hobolt is Sutherland Chair in European Institutions at the London School of Economics.

Will Jennings is Professor of Political Science and Public Policy at the University of Southampton.

Nicole Martin is a Lecturer in Politics at the University of Manchester.

Lauren McLaren is Professor of Politics at the University of Leicester.

Paula Surridge is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Bristol and Deputy Director of the UK in a Changing Europe.

James Tilley is Professor of Politics at the University of Oxford.

BREXIT

Sara B. Hobolt & James Tilley

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

Few would disagree that the 2016 EU referendum left the country deeply divided. The four years of domestic political wrangling that followed — which resulted in two general elections and two new Conservative prime ministers — has done little to heal those divisions and bring people together. If anything, research has shown that the rift between 'Leavers' and 'Remainers' has solidified as new political identities have formed. These Brexit identities have been shown to be more strongly held than traditional party identities. As Remainers and Leavers divide the world into 'us' and 'them', viewing each other with suspicion and dislike, this has led to so-called 'affective polarization' along Brexit lines.

By the time of the 2019 General Election, over half the electorate still saw Brexit as one of the two 'most important issues' facing the nation, and there was little sign of the fervour of the Brexit debate abating. Indeed, part of the reason for the Conservatives' victory was Boris Johnson's promise to 'get Brexit done and bring the country together'. What no one could have predicted then was that it was a global pandemic that would take Brexit off the front pages and, for a while at least, bring the nation together.

As the coronavirus spread across Europe last February, Brexit declined in salience. When the magnitude of the public health crisis became apparent, the population rallied behind the Government. Government approval rates reached 52% in March 2020, up from just 10% in June 2019. Yet this popularity was short-lived: by September, disapproval rates were about 50%, with approval below 30%. Much of this decline was driven by the Government's perceived poor handling of the coronavirus pandemic. But the delay in getting a trade deal with the EU also left its mark. By November, more than half of those asked said that the Government's handling of the Brexit negotiations was going badly.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The news of a Brexit deal on Christmas Eve led to a rise in the number of people who think the Government has handled Brexit well (from 24% to 37%), yet a majority still think Brexit has been handled badly. When it comes to the trade deal itself, most people are still largely undecided, with 17% thinking it is a good deal, 21% that it is a bad deal and the rest expressing no firm opinion. A majority, however, supported MPs passing the deal, with just 15% thinking they should have voted against. This may be due to the public's aversion to a 'no deal' outcome: just before the deal was agreed, 48% thought leaving the transition period without a deal would be 'bad' for Britain, against just 15% who thought it would be 'good' for the country.

Despite the deal, the basic divisions over Brexit are still with us. The country continues to be fairly evenly split over the question of EU membership. The proportion of people who think it was wrong for Britain to vote to leave has grown again in recent months, however, reaching a record-high Remain lead of 11% towards the end of the year. Yet while this suggests that Remainers are unconvinced that

Brexit will be a success, it does not necessarily illustrate any lessening of conviction on the other side. The majority of changes in sentiment on this question are driven by those who did not, or were not able to, vote in 2016.

More people now think Brexit was a mistake

"In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?"

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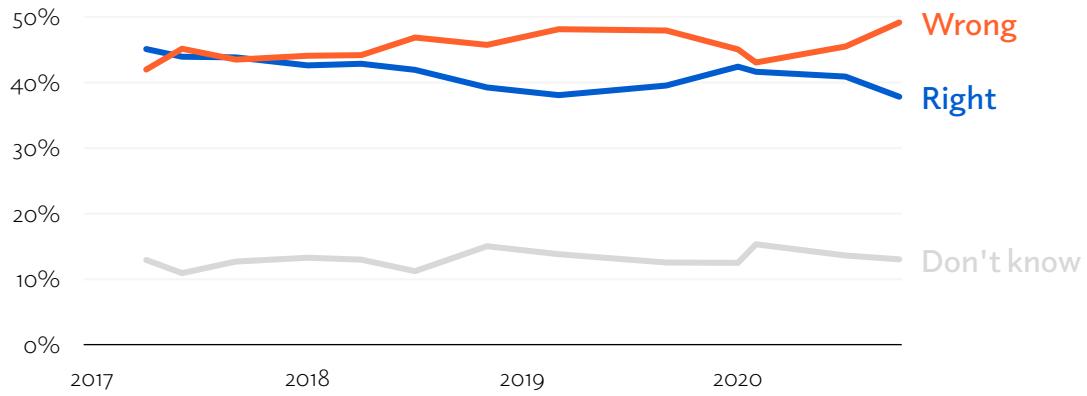

Source: YouGov tracker survey (Hobolt and Tilley).

Crucially, the identities that were formed in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the Brexit referendum have yet to dissipate. As figure below shows, over two-thirds of people still identify as either a Leaver or a Remainer. While the number of non-identifiers rose a little in 2020, large numbers of people are still happy to call themselves a Remainer or Leaver. Measures of identity strength also show very little decline, especially for those who voted in 2016.

'Leaver' and 'Remainer' identities remain strong

"Do you think of yourself as a Leaver or a Remainer, or neither?"

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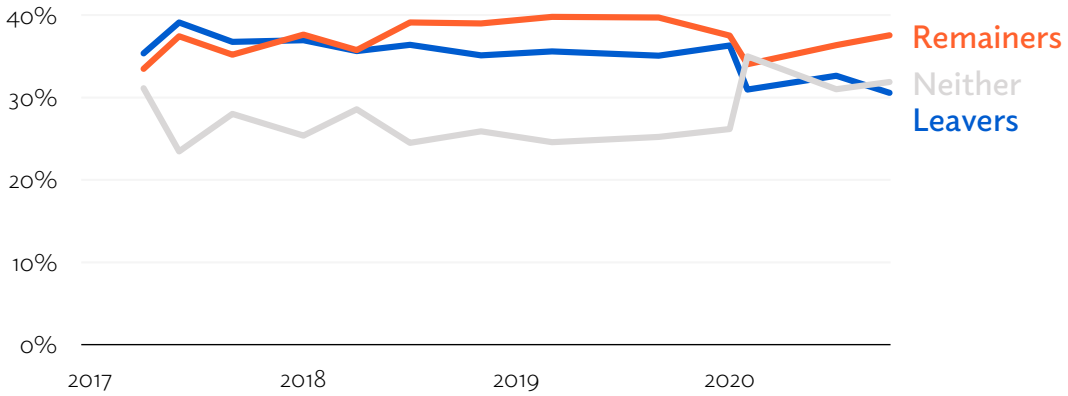

Source: YouGov tracker survey (Hobolt and Tilley).

Brexit identities have thus remained remarkably resilient. One reason for this is that the current Brexit divide has deep roots, probably emanating from decades of educational expansion and rising ethnic heterogeneity. This has led to a values gap between relatively well defined social groups over Europe, immigration, national identity and multiculturalism. The referendum itself polarised opinion

further and these new political identities remain at the heart of actual, and potential, mobilisation strategies by the political parties.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Survey data suggest that a majority of people still care about Brexit. Indeed, during the second half of 2020, its salience increased to levels last seen in 2019. By October, almost half the population mentioned Brexit as among the top two issues facing the nation (the top issue still being the pandemic). Now that the transition period has ended and the reality of the new UK-EU relationship becomes more evident, the issue of Brexit will once again hit the headlines. Nor, we would assume, will the consequences for industry, farming, fishing and travel go unnoticed.

Cabinet Minister Michael Gove has stated that the Brexit deal will end the 'ugly' politics over Brexit. Yet, if Brexit identities persist, we may continue to see people perceiving events, whether the acquisition and distribution of vaccines or erratic and low economic growth, through their Brexit-tinted spectacles. This is especially the case when it comes to who is held responsible for any negative outcomes. While this may have limited electoral consequences in the short-term, the realignment of party politics around these new identities may be the defining legacy of this government. Importantly, it may also shape the discussions on the future of the Union that will be so central to the Scottish Parliament elections in May 2021. While Brexit may be done, it is far from over.

POLARISATION AND VOTER VOLATILITY

Ed Fieldhouse

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

In the years leading up to the 2016 referendum, British electoral politics went through a number of important long-term, gradual changes, not least a weakening of identification with political parties and a fall in the share of the electorate voting Conservative or Labour. These trends were punctuated by disruptive political events, or shocks, leading to voter volatility — or vote switching — which rose steadily since the 1960s and peaked in 2015. By 2015, commentators were regularly talking about the fragmentation of the British party system. Together with rising distrust of politics, increasing concerns about immigration, and a growing divide between social groups — typified by young educated Metropolitan and older less educated voters in rural and declining areas — these long-term changes contributed to the conditions in which the EU referendum would have a dramatic impact on the electoral landscape.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Perhaps the most obvious electoral consequences of Brexit are the 2017 and 2019 election results, but there are other important developments which might have long-term implications.

First, it is widely perceived that Brexit has caused people on opposing sides of the debate to drift apart politically, often disagreeing vehemently with family and friends and becoming more extreme in their political views. Brexit, it is said, has been the source of polarisation in Britain mirroring the so-called 'culture wars' in the US. Yet, while data from the British Election Study (BES) suggest that people in the Leave and Remain camps have become more distinctive in their attitudes, there is little evidence that their attitudes have grown more extreme. Instead, what we have seen is the sorting of like-minded voters into two distinct camps.

People with positive views about Europe and immigration have gradually become more likely to identify as Remainers and vote for Remain-leaning parties, while those with concerns about immigration and negative views about the EU have become much more likely to vote Conservative and identify as Leavers. What really drives the sense that the country has become more polarised, however, is not just this sorting, but the tendency of people to see the world through a Brexit lens.

Figure 1 shows how both Leave and Remain identities became stronger immediately after the referendum, and have continued to remain so, despite a dip after the 2019 election. Over the same period the proportion of people identifying as Remain and Leave followed a similar trajectory. Similarly, since the referendum, BES respondents have consistently said they have more in common with members of their own side (apart from just Brexit), giving their own side a score of around seven (on a zero to ten scale) compared to a score of less than four for the other side.

Brexit identities became stronger after the referendum

Average strength of Leave and Remain identities among those identifying as Leavers and Remainers

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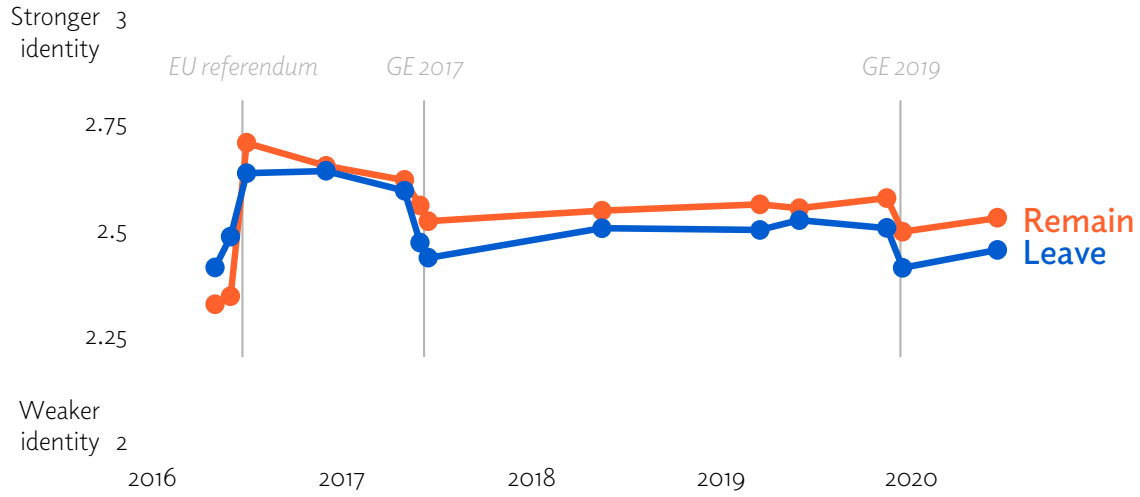

Source: British Election Study Internet Panel, waves 7-17, wave 19 and wave 20 (April 2016 to June 2020).

Second, the Brexit shock initially caused a lot of vote-switching between the main parties, as voters shifted towards the party that most closely represented their views on Brexit. While some of this switching happened before the referendum (for example Conservative desertions to UKIP), voter volatility remained high in 2017. However, by 2019, the sorting process was almost complete, with Conservative support being made up of over 80% Leavers and Labour over 80% Remainers. As a result, voter volatility fell in 2019 to its lowest level since 1992.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

The fall in volatility suggests voting behaviour in 2019 may have started to settle into a new stable pattern. The sorting of party-choice by Brexit vote has had a massive impact on who votes for the different parties. Education and age have become much more important predictors of vote choice than in the past, with younger and more educated voters moving towards Labour and other pro-European parties, while older and less educated voters have shifted more and more towards the Conservatives.

There have also been important changes to the social class and geography of voting, most notably the collapse of the so-called 'Red Wall' — Leave voting northern constituencies that traditionally returned Labour MPs. These shifts mean that the parties will have to appeal to different types of supporter and future elections will be fought along different fault-lines.

These changing patterns of support have led political scientists to talk of a 'realignment'. Whether the changes are really here to stay or are merely a temporary interruption remains to be seen.

That will depend partly on whether 'cultural' issues like immigration and minority rights continue to divide voters after Brexit. As the referendum campaign fades into history and the economic and social impact of Brexit begins to be felt, these issues might remain crucial in dividing both voters and parties, particularly if the major political parties themselves continue to compete around the consequences of Brexit, or new credible political parties emerge in the mould of UKIP or the Brexit Party. Should this be the case, we might expect Brexit identities to evolve into more general — but equally important — social conservative-liberal identities.

Alternatively, traditional economic issues may return to the fore as the after-effects of Brexit and Covid-19 expose political differences between the haves and the have-nots. This could lead to electoral politics returning to patterns that we saw before the 2016 referendum. EU identities could evaporate and voters could again start to desert the major parties, leading to a return to high levels of electoral volatility that we saw in 2015.

Which of these futures comes to pass is almost impossible to predict. One clue lies in the fact that attitudes towards the Covid-19 response seem to be determined more by traditional left-right economic values than by those liberal-authoritarian values which underpin the Brexit divide. Ultimately, however, the only certainty about the future of British electoral politics is that it will be driven by unforeseen events and, ultimately, to how political actors respond to those events.

SOCIAL VALUES

Paula Surridge

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

How people voted in the EU referendum was not predictable from their traditional party and social class allegiances. The 'old' politics of economics, of left and right, was at best weakly correlated with referendum voting; instead referendum voting correlated with a long-standing cross-cutting 'values' divide which has at one end 'liberal' and at the other 'authoritarian' social values. This divide had been

present for a long time, and is most strongly associated with education rather than with social class. Prior to the referendum, its relationship with electoral behaviour had been of relatively marginal interest in British electoral studies, especially compared to questions of competence, leadership and issues.

The result of the referendum and the profound changes in British politics since, however, are increasingly viewed through the lens of social values. Some even argue that there has been a fundamental realignment of the electorate along this 'new' divide, with the fall of the 'Red Wall' seats the symbolic end to a process set in motion by Brexit. Yet the reality is more complex and the future of these divides unpredictable.

Using data from the British Election Study we are able to use this social values dimension alongside the traditional economic left-right dimension to create a value space in which we can locate voters and political parties and measure distances between them.

In 2015, the key divide between the two major parties lay along the economic dimension. While their voters did differ on the social values dimension the difference was smaller. The minor parties in England (UKIP and Liberal Democrats) both lay between the two major parties on this economic dimension but were each further towards the ends of the social values scale, with UKIP voters the most socially authoritarian and the Liberal Democrat voters the most socially liberal.

Voting in the EU referendum bisected the space between Labour and the Conservatives with Leave and Remain voters virtually identical in their economic values but in similar positions to UKIP and the Liberal Democrats respectively on social values. The result of this was to politicise a divide which had previously been most closely related to '3rd party' voting in general elections and to bring this social values dimension into wider voting decisions through its relationship with Brexit.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

The 2017 election saw the collapse of the UKIP vote (and a further squeeze of Liberal Democrat support) which meant that, in terms of economic values, Labour and Conservative voters moved a little closer together as these voters were absorbed back into the two party system, though it is important to note that there was still a larger gap between the parties on this dimension than on social values.

Conservative and Labour voters have moved closer on economic issues but further apart on social issues

Conservative and Labour voters' positions on the economic and social values scales at the 2015, 2017 and 2019 general elections.

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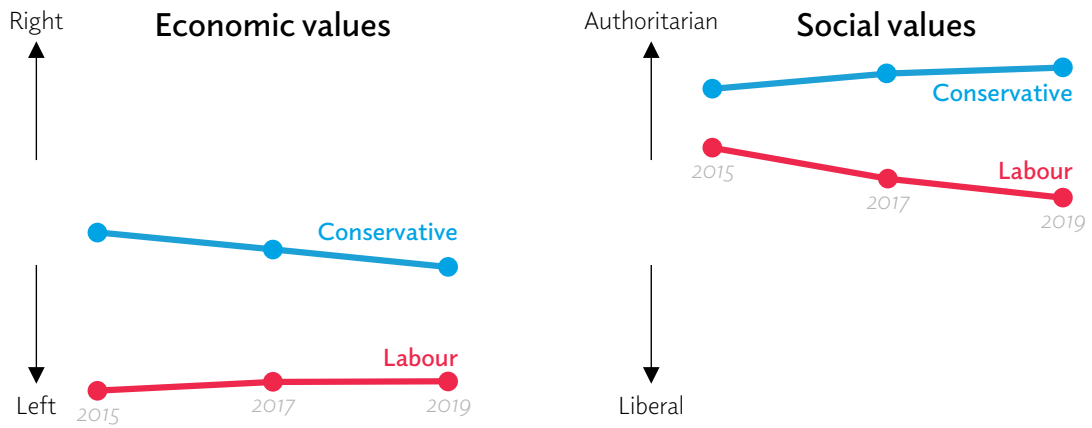


Source: British Election Study Internet Panel, wave 6 (May 2015), wave 13 (June 2017), and wave 19 (December 2019).

The 2019 election saw more direct switching from Labour to the Conservatives and so continued this process, and though in many cases seats were won by the Conservatives that had been Labour for their entire existence, this was not a sudden rupture but rather the tipping point of a process that had been occurring for some time. Nonetheless, as Figure 1 shows, 2019 was the first time that the difference between Labour and Conservative voters was greater on the social values dimension than on the economic dimension.

The result of this shift has been much discussed, most often framed as how the Conservatives can hold on to the seats won from Labour in the North of England and the Midlands. Were these votes merely loaned to the Conservatives to 'Get Brexit done' or the first indisputable evidence of a lasting realignment of the electorate, perhaps even the birth of a new political cleavage?

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

With 2021 set to bring the impact of Brexit into sharp focus and the social, economic and political aftershocks of the Covid-19 global pandemic still to be felt, it is impossible to know how British public opinion will change.

Though recent research suggests that Brexit identities remain salient for the British public, there is little evidence to suggest that these connect meaningfully with attitudes to the Covid-19 crisis. There is therefore no reason to think that there will be further polarisation of Brexit identities arising from the aftershocks of the crisis. Polling has shown that many people are worried about its economic consequences, and these economic worries seem set to increase in salience as the world moves out of the immediate health crisis and begins to rebuild. This may lead to greater emphasis on the traditional economic divides, revealing the fault lines in the voter coalition the Conservatives put together in 2019, and which have been evident in some of the battles over lockdowns.

But we have seen that there are also issues on which the social values divide is the more salient and with the consequences of Brexit itself becoming more tangible as the transition period comes to an end, it seems more likely that the next few years will be defined by the ways in which these value positions combine into distinct constellations rather than by one or other set of values dealing a knockout blow to the other — or at least to the party seen as representing them.

While this divide around social values remains critical to understanding British politics, it is not the case that we have replaced one set of binary divides with another. Indeed, it is the combination of these 'old' and 'new' divides which will shape the post-Brexit and post-pandemic era.

In a political landscape where both economic and social values matter, holding together coalitions of voters is difficult. The period from 2015 to 2019 placed pressure along the fault lines in the Labour coalition which were closely related to Brexit and the social values divide. The years 2021 to 2024 may increase the pressure on the economic fault lines within the Conservative's voter coalition, making it unlikely that British politics will settle into a convenient and predictable pattern any time soon.

TRUST, BREXIT AND BEYOND

Will Jennings

WHERE WE HAVE COME FROM?

The causes of the referendum vote have been hotly debated. While attitudes on immigration and authoritarian values had stronger direct effects, distrust of Government was a significant predictor of voting to leave the EU. Of people who reported distrusting the Government greatly, some 65% voted Leave. The various leaders of the Leave movement exploited tailwinds of rising disenchantment with politicians and elites more broadly (a trend that dates back over half a century but which was turbocharged by the parliamentary expenses scandal and the global financial crisis) thereby weakening already shaky confidence in Britain's political class.

WHERE WE ARE NOW?

In the aftermath of the 2016 referendum, political trust rallied slightly as the May Government enjoyed an initial honeymoon with voters. That trust collapsed, however, in the aftermath of the disastrous showing of the Conservatives in the 2017 election, as Brexit hit an impasse with successive deals rejected by Parliament, leaving many voters frustrated. Survey data from the British Election Study reveals how political trust has been realigned since Boris Johnson came to power. Among Leavers, who were previously more likely to express distrust, trust in MPs has climbed steadily since the summer of 2019, a trend that has been sustained into the middle of the coronavirus pandemic. At the same time, trust among Remainers has declined.

This pattern is consistent with studies that show that supporters of the losing side in elections tend to express lower levels of satisfaction with democracy, and highlights how Brexit identity now seems to condition trust in the UK's politicians and democracy.

Significantly, though, trust is no higher among Leavers than it was in the two years leading up to the referendum, while for Remainers it has, as Figure 1 shows, fallen precipitously (by almost a point on a seven-point scale from 'no trust' to 'a great deal of trust'). How long this loss of faith will persist for a group — one with a higher level of education and professional occupations — that was once more trusting of the political class, remains uncertain.

WHERE WE ARE HEADING?

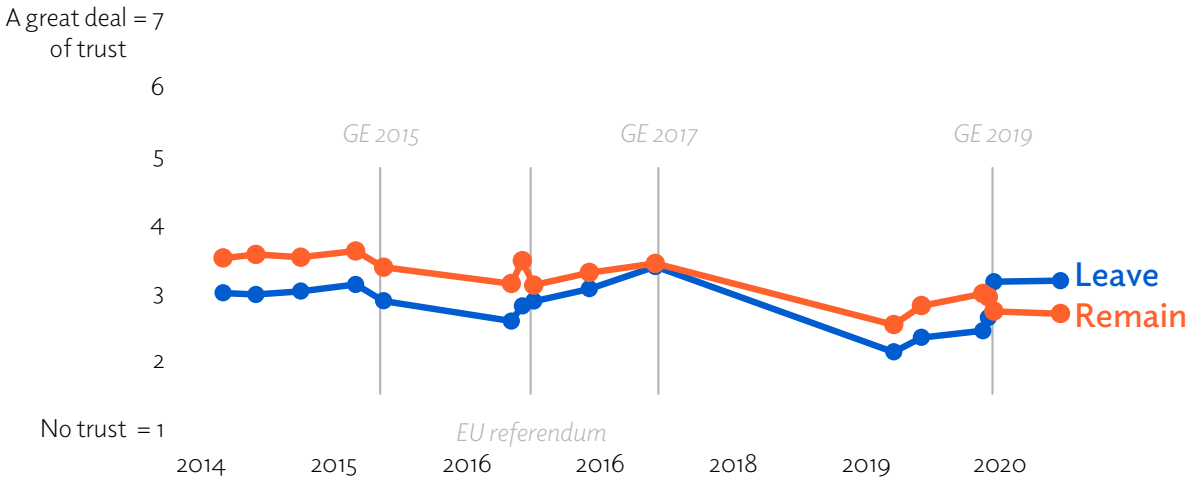
So far, 'getting Brexit done' has restored some trust in British politics, though not on the Remain side of the new political divide. But what might lie ahead for political trust? While there is much uncertainty, it is possible to identify a number of plausible scenarios that could play out in the months and years ahead.

The first is a Brexit bonus for political trust following the Government's successful agreement of a last-minute deal with the EU. With Brexit done, control taken back, and the defining pledge of the Johnson Government delivered, the public might reward the government with greater trust — at least in the short-term. For Leavers this would continue the trend of rising trust since the nadir at

the end of the May premiership. For Remainers, this might be due to a fatalistic acceptance that the end of the road has been reached — with trust returning to levels closer to their pre-referendum level for this group.

Trust in MPs has fallen among remain voters

Trust in MPs in general among leave and remain voters.



Source: British Election Study Internet Panel, waves 1 to 4, waves 6 to 10, wave 12, and waves 15 to 20 (February 2014 to June 2020).

The second scenario is of political trust becalmed — with trends shaped by the polarized contours of our new Brexit identities. In focus groups we ran for UK in a Changing Europe during the summer of 2020 in towns and cities in England, the PM and his Government were already trusted on the issue of Brexit, but the political benefits from a deal could be slight: Brexit is largely seen as already done by both Leavers and Remainers. On these terms, Brexit is a card that has already been played and unlikely to have a large impact on levels of political trust — leaving it higher among Leavers than Remainers. It is possible that even if Brexit results in short-term disruption and economic pain the effects on political trust might be modest: in our focus groups, Leave supporters seemed phlegmatic about any costs of Brexit, with most considering themselves in it for the long haul. Under this scenario, it should not automatically be assumed that political trust would collapse because the deal does not offer the instant gratification of sunlit uplands.

The final scenario is of a gradual depletion of political trust, accelerated by performance-based shocks. Any disruption to transport and businesses in early 2021 as the UK adjusts to its new terms of engagement with the EU could yet deliver a competence reckoning for the government, reducing trust among Leavers and Remainers alike. This is why how the deal works out in practice will be crucial in ensuring a smooth transition free from snafus. While the trade deal marks the end of the latest chapter in UK-EU relations, the question of Europe cannot be completely exorcised from British politics — even if many voters are keen to move on. There may be some Eurosceptics in the Conservative Party for whom the withdrawal of the UK from EU governance does not go far enough, while there will likely be others pushing for closer ties on the economy, security and other policy areas. UK-EU relations are therefore likely to periodically flare up on the political agenda — and as such may be a source of public distrust, directed at UK Government and/or the EU. In this scenario, voters' realisation that leaving the EU does not mean an end to having to deal with the EU could lead to an erosion of trust, especially among Leave supporters expecting a 'clean break'.

Beyond these possibilities, a final scenario is that Brexit ceases to be a focus for political trust. Our focus groups suggest a desire among many Leavers and Remainers to move on, look to the future and attend to 'real' priorities. It may be that political trust will only be restored through addressing the concerns of citizens on other policy issues — such as overseeing post-Covid-19 economic recovery, delivering on promises of 'levelling-up', and addressing social and economic inequalities that the coronavirus pandemic has laid bare. Brexit's legacy for political trust remains up in the air, but it ultimately will be determined by how Britain's political class deliver on the outcomes expected by voters on both sides of the Brexit divide.

COVID-19

Bobby Duffy

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

In April 2020, the UK was about as united as I have seen it. Nine in ten people supported the government's first lockdown plan, with seven in ten strongly supporting it. It's just about impossible to get nine in ten Brits to agree with anything, let alone a Government policy that utterly upended their lives.

It was quite literally the case that we felt we were 'all in this together'. The only area of national life that gets close to such universal support is our deep-seated love for the NHS, which provides some explanation for our fervent backing.

And this rallying round was reflected in our levels of trust in the Government. Despite a shaky start, with, in particular, many believing they acted too slowly, at that point seven in ten trusted the Government to control the spread of the virus (see figure 1).

Trust in the Government's Covid-19 response has declined

"To what extent, if at all, do you trust the UK Government to control the spread of the coronavirus?"

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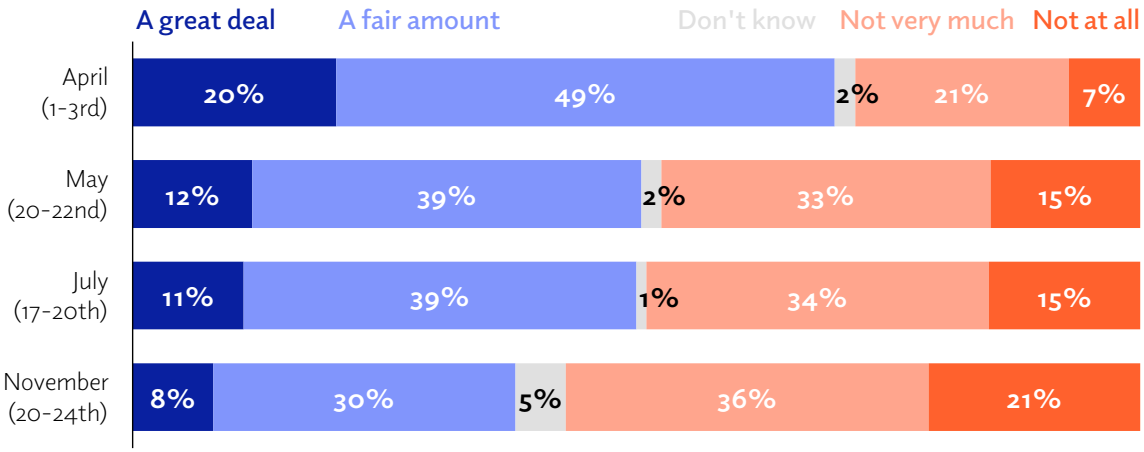


Source: The Policy Institute, King's College London and Ipsos MORI, 'The UK government's handling of the coronavirus crisis: public perceptions', 6 December 2020.

While support for the Spring lockdown was pretty close to universal, the impact on people varied hugely. Around half were 'accepting', taking the restrictions in their stride; but nearly as many were already 'suffering' with the stress and many practical impacts; and a small hardcore were 'resisting'.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

By summer last year, old identities and allegiances had asserted themselves, and the population segmented in a different way (see Figure 2), into the 'trusting', 'dissenting' and 'frustrated', with the trusting much more likely to be Conservative and Brexit supporters. Trust in the Government's ability to control the spread of the virus stepped down, from seven in ten in April, half by the summer and then a more politically-defined tribe of 38% in our latest study from November.

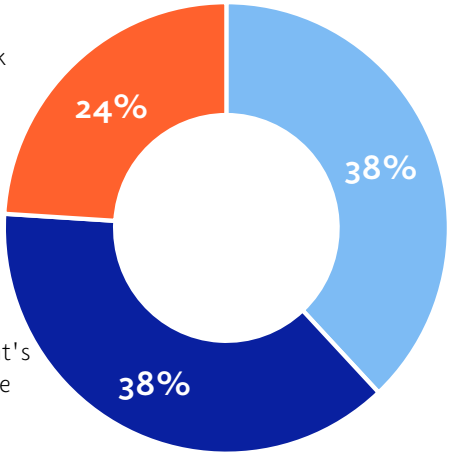
The public response's to coronavirus fall into three groups

UK IN A CHANGING EUROPE

Cluster analysis of UK public attitudes towards the relaxation of lockdown measures and the risks posed by Covid-19, May 2020.

The Frustrated
The least worried, and most likely to think we need to lift the restrictions faster. They see the risks of Covid-19 as much lower than the other groups, and are more ambivalent about the Government's approach.

The Dissenting
The group most worried about the health risks, and most critical of the Government's response. They are most likely to think the restrictions are being eased too quickly.



The Trusting
While very worried about the health implications of the virus, they are most likely to be putting their trust in Government. They are the only group where a majority support the relaxation measures announced by the Government.

Source: The Policy Institute, King's College London and Ipsos MORI, 'The Trusting, the Dissenting and the Frustrated: how the UK is dividing as lockdown is eased', 7 June 2020.

With the arrival of an effective vaccine, thoughts have turned to our route back to normality. Again, this has highlighted how we're really not all in it together. Our latest study, looking at how attitudes to inequality have shifted during the pandemic, shows how many of us now are about these longer-term impacts: 63% think that Covid-19 will worsen inequalities, and those without savings, in low-income work and in deprived areas who are seen to have suffered the most.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

This points to one particularly important message. Surprisingly, from all the different inequalities that Covid-19 has exposed and accentuated, it's the different impact on deprived and well-off areas that people are most likely to pick out (see Figure 3). Geography has become key, perhaps emphasised by the local and regional tiers that have been such a focus in recent months: there is certainly a widespread perception that some regions have been treated better than others, and this resentment is stronger in the North of England.

This cranks up the importance of the 'levelling up' agenda, as Covid-19 has made it clearer just how varied economic capacity and resilience is between different regions. An already huge task of shifting

regional economic outcomes is going to become even more challenging to achieve, while being at the top of the public's agenda. This is about an impact on overall faith in the system, not narrow questions of redistribution — and it seems highly likely that faith is going to be severely tested in the coming months and years as the UK deals with the Covid-19 fallout and Brexit simultaneously.

The public expects geographic and income inequalities to increase due to Covid-19

"Which types of inequality, if any, do you think will increase as a result of the coronavirus crisis? Please tick all that apply."

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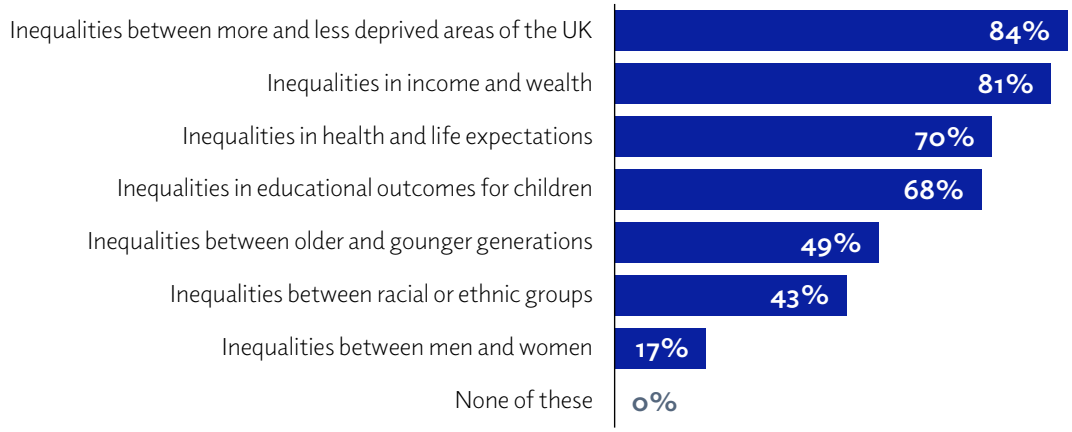

Source: The Policy Institute, King's College London, UK in a Changing Europe.

These economic impacts are only one aspect of Covid-19's potential to further divide the country. The restrictions on our lives have prompted some to try to open up yet more fronts in the UK's nascent 'culture war', rallying those who see the lockdowns as an assault on civil liberties. Nigel Farage's 'Reform Party' started by opposing lockdowns, but has quickly moved on to cycle lanes and environmental policies more generally, perhaps anticipating that Covid-19 restrictions are now a relatively short-term dividing line.

But it also shows how culture wars work. In the models of polarisation it's called 'conflict extension', where more and more apparently disparate issues are rolled together to create stronger identity-led reactions, where your views on more and more subjects can be predicted just from knowing your political identity.

Thankfully, as yet, we're in nothing like the same position as the US on these divides. While our trust in Government to deal with Covid-19 and its impact is more related to our party political and Brexit identities than it was, we've not seen anything like the political divides on interventions like face-masks that split the US, for example.

The depressing interpretation of this is that we're just at an earlier stage of our culture war than the US. But it could also be to do with a messier alignment of these issues to our underlying values in the UK, which are key to establishing these identity divides. Our new analysis with James Dennison using Scwhartz's ten 'basic human values' shows that the value basis for support for the lockdown does not neatly fit on to the value divide in the UK in recent years that has, to some extent, defined the politics of Brexit.

Instead, those favouring lockdown are both the—typically pro-Brexit—individuals who strongly value 'security' and 'conformity', as well as the universalism-minded, who are the biggest supporters

of immigration and EU membership. Those most concerned about civil liberties are those who were actually most divided on immigration and Brexit — those scoring high on values of 'power' and 'achievement'.

We don't then have the values alignment across Covid-19 and political issues that we see in the US, which can quickly set into warring tribes that can't connect. In the end, Covid-19 will show that our biggest risk in the UK is not a drifting apart of two monolithic, opposing blocs, but an increasingly fragmented public that any political party will struggle to stitch and keep together.

PUBLIC ATTITUDES IN SCOTLAND

Alisa Henderson

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

The Scottish Remain vote in the 2016 referendum was always likely to create shock waves as exit approached. Scottish voters have been more likely to believe it was wrong to the leave the EU, more hostile to a harder or no deal Brexit, and less positive about the Government's handling of Brexit. Nearly 60% believe Brexit has made independence more likely.

Disquiet about the UK Government and its policy is unsurprising since the majority of Scots did not vote for it, the SNP having improved in the 2019 UK General Election on its fortunes in 2017. But perceptions of the current Government's handling of the coronavirus crisis have made things worse. Scottish voters evaluate it, and its leader, less favourably than the Scottish Government and its first minister: with 70% declaring the UK Government incompetent in its handling and 67% declaring the Scottish government competent. This is not to say that Scots believe the Scottish Government is doing brilliantly. However, support for Nicola Sturgeon remains high and outright antipathy low: indeed, only two per cent of Scots gave her 0/10 for her performance.

The PM himself — who was awarded a zero by 40% of Scots — is one source of poor Government polling. We knew as far back as the summer of 2019 that a Boris Johnson premiership would not be popular with Scots. Half of Scottish Conservative voters claimed they would not vote for the party in 2019 if he became leader, while one in five No voters claimed a Johnson premiership would prompt them to vote Yes in any independence referendum. Various polls showed that the prospective Prime Minister was thought to put party before country and would be unlikely to unite the country. Opinion has not improved with familiarity.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

These three factors — Brexit, assessments of the handling of coronavirus, and Boris Johnson — help explain why support for independence is currently high. Since the 2019 General Election, there have been 21 opinion polls, of which only two have shown opposition to independence in the lead. This is unprecedented in Scotland in terms of both the sustained lead, and its size. Notwithstanding a handful of polls showing Yes ahead after the 2014 and 2016 referendums what we are seeing now is unlike this in scope and scale.

This is not to say that the fundamental arguments have changed significantly: economic risk remains the most forceful argument for the status quo, resonating with No and Yes voters, while a sense of Scottish difference and a lack of trust for Westminster is seen as a powerful argument for independence. The anticipated economic chaos from Brexit and lockdown cuts both ways: individual exposure to economic risk might be heightened, but the portrayal of a clear dividing line between, on the one hand, the existing union as an economic safe-haven and, on the other, an independent Scotland plagued by economic uncertainty is more blurry than in 2014.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Looking ahead to the Scottish election of May 2021, the SNP has a clear lead, having polled at over 50% since December 2019. Currently at 55% it could drop 10 percentage points and still be on course to form a majority Government. That level of movement is not impossible - the SNP's support dropped by six points before the 2016 election — but it seems unlikely as any fall in the SNP's popularity requires another a corresponding rise for another party. There appear rather few contenders for this. With the exception of three polls in late 2019, the Liberal Democrats have not polled in double digits for Holyrood vote intention since the 2016 election. Labour remains in a difficult position. While its supporters are now more in line with its constitutional position (with only 25% saying they'd vote Yes), this is in part because they have lost independence-supporting or 'indy-curious' voters since 2014.

It is the Conservatives who are in the most interesting position. In past elections, the perception that the SNP was the best party to 'stand up for Scotland' won it votes. As leader of the Scottish Conservatives, Douglas Ross has clearly attempted to portray the Tories as a unionist party able to defend Scotland's interests. His efforts have not been helped, however, by various interventions by Boris Johnson suggesting that devolution has been a mistake, even 'a disaster'.

Given what is occurring in the opinion polls at the moment, we can anticipate various themes in the 2021 election campaign.

First, a debate over whether to hold a referendum. While there might be limited enthusiasm in the Scottish electorate for holding a referendum very soon, the settled view is that it should be a matter for the Scottish rather than the UK Parliament.

Second, we can reasonably anticipate debates about how to steer Scotland through the economic recovery from successive lockdowns and, possibly, Brexit. The arrival of new competences in 2015/2016 now means that devolved election campaigns offer more than competing promises to spend money, and we can anticipate discussions about how to generate sufficient wealth to pay for public services in a post-Brexit, post-Covid-19 Scotland.

Third and lastly — and they are nearly always last these days — we can anticipate robust debates about devolved policy competence around the state of the Scottish NHS, the state of education (including the exams fiasco of 2020) as well as individual flash points (the Salmond trial) and legislation halted due to coronavirus (bills on gender recognition reform, foxhunting, and the circular economy among them).

Support for independence is now routinely polling above 50%, and the SNP is streets ahead in election polling. But Nicola Sturgeon and her party are not invulnerable to claims that after 14 years in office, they might have made more striking gains for Scots.

CONSERVATIVES

Matthew J. Goodwin

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

At the 2019 General Election, Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party won their largest majority for more than thirty years while Labour, which had pivoted to supporting a second referendum, was reduced to its lowest number of seats since 1935. Along the way, Labour lost a large chunk of its oldest and most cherished working-class territory — the so-called 'Red Wall', stretching from north Wales across to the northeast coast of England.

The result not only extended the period of Conservative rule to at least 14 years but confirmed the passing of the Withdrawal Agreement in December 2019, with a parliamentary majority of 124. It also confirmed the continuing 'realignment' of British politics which began before the Brexit referendum but has accelerated since.

As our research has shown, a longer-term trend saw the Conservatives become more popular among people on low incomes than people on high incomes. While they are no longer the party of the rich, Labour is no longer the party of the poor. Labour is just as popular among the wealthy as it is among low-income voters. Both parties inverted their traditional support base.

This reflected the Conservative Party's success in winning over 'cross-pressured' voters who often agreed with Labour for economic reasons but ultimately sided with the Conservatives for identity and cultural reasons, mainly their desire to see Brexit delivered and reform immigration. Values continue to push ahead of things like income and class as the main predictor of vote choice.

The result gave further expression to deeper currents that we first pointed to in 2014 and which continued at the 2015 General Election. Johnson tapped into voters who lean left on the economy, wanting greater effort devoted to tackling economic injustice and inequality, but who back Brexit, want that vote respected and immigration reformed.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

In the year since the general election, and amid the outbreak of coronavirus, Boris Johnson and the Conservatives have watched their commanding 16-point average lead in the polls turn into regular leads for Labour in the polls. Part of this no doubt reflects the Government's loss of support for its handling of the coronavirus pandemic, which other contributors have noted.

However, even today we see continuing evidence of the underlying realignment; the Conservatives continue to lead Labour by nine points among the working-class while Labour leads the Conservatives by 11 points among the middle-class; and the Conservatives lead Labour by 41 points among Leavers, while Labour leads by 36 points among Remainers. Johnson might have lost his commanding lead in the polls but he continues to draw significant support from the same social groups that provided his winning majority, while Labour is not only recruiting strong support from middle-class liberal professionals, graduates and ethnic minorities but across society more generally. This also reflects the restoration of two-party politics and reduced fragmentation in the party system.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

The future of these shifts in British politics will ultimately depend on Johnson's ability to frame Brexit and his wider 'levelling-up' agenda as a success and hold together his more socially conservative electorate. His traditionally blue conservative party has taken on a purple tinge; his new voters are looking for meaningful control of net migration levels, the redistribution of not just bridges and trains but social status and power away from London and other things that reflect their emphasis on stability, order and authority — like taking a firmer stance in the so-called 'culture wars' over things like statues, the teaching of history and editing of other symbols of nationhood.

Delivering on this will not be easy for the instinctively 'liberal' Johnson who both socially and economically stands some way apart from many of his new voters. The delivery of a Brexit deal or no-deal will also remove the *raison d'être* of his premiership, potentially weakening the 'glue' that is holding the entire edifice together. While the Conservatives have polled strongly among new groups they have also been haemorrhaging support among middle-class liberal professionals, graduates and minorities, which points to other challenges for Boris Johnson (although such shifts are also often overstated). Nonetheless, the fact that these shifts are taking place against the backdrop of a Britain that has left the EU reflects the power of the realignment that is unfolding in Britain. Whether or not Johnson can continue to capitalise from it remains to be seen.

ETHNIC MINORITY VOTERS

Neema Begum and Nicole Martin

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

As the UK went into national lockdown in March 2020, ethnic minority doctors were among the first to die of Covid-19. More and more evidence came to light that ethnic minorities have been hardest hit by the Coronavirus pandemic, with higher rates of death among Black and Asian people.

What might be the implications of this crisis for ethnic minority political attitudes, especially as the end of the Brexit transition period looms? One minority community we may look at to provide an answer is the British Indian group, who were the most pro-Brexit and often show higher support for the Conservatives compared to any other ethnic minority group.

Historically strong support for Labour among minority groups is attributed to its history as the party responsible for anti-discrimination legislation, and the Conservatives' reputation as being hostile to post-war Commonwealth immigration. For voters who consider the situation of their ethnic group as a whole alongside their own situation, this partly explains differences in voting patterns between groups. This sense of 'linked fate', combined with a strong feeling of ethnic deprivation — that members of one's ethnic group get less than they ought — partly explains greater support for Labour. In other words, ethnic minorities who feel strongly that they are unfairly discriminated against as a group are more likely to vote Labour who they perceive as working for ethnic minority group interests

more than the Conservatives. The stronger Conservative appeal for British Indians, however, is linked to lower levels of group-based voting due to a weaker sense of this relative ethnic deprivation.

The Government's response to the crisis has also highlighted the prominent place of British Indians in the Conservative Party, with the Chancellor Rishi Sunak tasked with managing the economic fallout resulting from the ongoing crisis and successive lockdowns. Indeed, Sunak himself is the embodiment of the upwardly mobile, economically successful British Indian and the kind of ethnic minority voters that the Conservatives have worked hard to attract since David Cameron became leader back in 2005.

For pro-Brexit British Indians, leaving the EU represented an opportunity for greater trade between the UK and India while the end to freedom of movement (which privileged European migration) and a points-based system that might allow more skilled migrants from India. Promises made by the Vote Leave campaign in this respect have since been reaffirmed by the Johnson government (by Sajid Javid while Home Secretary), may be one reason that the Conservative party lost relatively little support from British Indian voters in 2017.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Ethnic minorities have been disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 outbreak for a number of reasons. For one thing, they were more at risk of catching the virus as many work in sectors that have been at the forefront of managing the pandemic — not just by being employed by the NHS itself, but also as delivery and taxi drivers, supermarket and warehouse workers. For another, as figures published by the Resolution Foundation have shown, pandemic-related job losses have had a disproportionate impact on ethnic minorities, many of whom are self-employed.

Rishi Sunak's Eat Out to Help Out scheme was intended to protect the restaurant and hospitality sector where many British Bangladeshi male workers, who were strong Brexit supporters, are concentrated. However, Eat Out to Help Out has also been criticised, for example, in Bradford where some British Pakistanis have expressed concern that the scheme directly led to the virus running rampant in their community.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

These different experiences of Covid-19 may reinforce growing divergences in ethnic minority political attitudes, as seen in the vote for Brexit. For instance, Covid-19, along with the government's at-best ambivalent reaction to Black Lives Matter protests, may well strengthen anti-Conservative feeling among Black Caribbeans and Black Africans.

And while Brexit itself may have catalysed divergences between ethnic minority voters and been a gateway to growing Indian support for the Conservatives, this may now prove to be less pronounced among the many British Indians who work in the health sector and have been on the frontline of fighting the pandemic.

Then there is the question of whether the Government can deliver on its Brexit promises — promises that helped attract around a third of ethnic minority voters to the Leave side?

The post-Brexit points-based immigration system will be critical to this, especially for British

Indians and British Bangladeshis who wanted what they felt was a 'fairer' system compared to EU freedom of movement.

On the other hand, perceptions that Brexit may be distracting from the Government's Covid-19 response will not play well with the majority of ethnic minorities who voted Remain. Moreover, trust in the Conservative Government and evaluations of how far the Government has protected ethnic minority communities will be particularly important when it comes to the Government's planned mass roll-out of vaccines over the coming months. There is some evidence emerging, however, that ethnic minorities are less willing to take the vaccine than whites. Information and messaging from the government around the vaccine and how this is communicated to minority communities will be critical.

At present, it is unclear whether ethnic minority attitudes about the pandemic and its handling will be just another (albeit particularly important) competence judgement. If so, it could ultimately prove subordinate to other concerns. It may be, however, that Britain's ethnic minority voters will remember the pandemic as being especially bad for their community, thereby compounding the Conservative party's reputation as one that fails to deliver for ethnic minorities.

IMMIGRATION

Lauren McLaren

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

The British public's discomfort with rising immigration levels has been evident over several decades. Between the mid-1960s and 1970 — a time when immigration numbers were relatively low (only approximately five per cent of the British public was estimated to be foreign-born by the mid-1960s) — more than 75% of the British public felt fairly or very strongly that there were already too many immigrants in the country. This is despite the fact that less than 15% of the public agreed that immigration was a local problem.

Later surveys also showed overwhelming unease with the numbers arriving in the 1990s and 2000s. In the lead-up to the Brexit vote in 2016, more than 40% of the British public were naming immigration as one of the most important issues facing the country. But even before this in the 2002-2008 period, 40% or more were naming immigration as their most important issue, and this was often the single most commonly named issue. And yet these top-line figures masked significant internal divisions over the contributions of immigrants and immigration to the UK economy and society that culminated in the Brexit referendum result.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Since the referendum many observers have noticed a shift toward more positive immigration attitudes — including regarding immigration levels, with the majority of the British public now saying they

think the number of immigrants to Britain should remain the same or even be increased. This is in stark contrast to survey data from 2013 showing that 77% of the British public wanted immigration to be reduced a little or a lot. My own research also shows a trend toward more positive immigration attitudes in the UK.

Right now, though, the British public is still divided in terms of our level of comfort with being a country of immigration — and more generally a country of immigrant-origin diversity. Other public opinion indicators that are strongly related to immigration attitudes provide further hints that our divisions over immigration will not be resolved very easily in the short-term. This includes indicators of authoritarianism, understandings of 'Britishness' that still emphasise long-standing cultural connections to the country, and a continued divide over Brexit.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Change may, however, be afoot. My research finds persistent, long-standing generational differences in immigration attitudes that began with generations born in the 1970s and 1980s.

The evidence suggests that younger generations (namely, people in their 40s or younger) are likely to have had very different experiences with immigration and immigrant-origin diversity, especially — and most crucially — during their early years of socialization.

Surveys reveal that older generations currently have far less direct interaction with immigrant-origin minorities than those born after the 1970s. These older generations will — without doubt — have also had far less of this interaction when they were growing up themselves, given the relatively small numbers of migrants to the UK at the time. 'Virtual' experience with immigrant-origin diversity via prominent media and sport personalities during early years of socialization for the older generations was limited as well, and public discourse surrounding immigration and diversity was likely to be very different at that time compared to the 1970s and beyond when younger generations were going through their important years of political socialization.

All of this suggests that immigration and immigrant-origin diversity would have been new and potentially threatening to these older generations once diversity began to increase even more significantly.

It also suggests that within a decade or so the British population itself is likely to have changed so much through 'generational replacement' that the balance of opinion regarding immigration will be marked less by division and more by increasing movement towards positive views of immigrants and immigration.

Comparative research also reveals a long-term 'habituation' effect: though sharp increases in immigration may result in a short-term public backlash especially when diversity is not already very high, within 10 years or so the backlash disappears and public opinion regarding immigration returns to its previous level. This strongly suggests the need to consider not only short-term fluctuations in immigration opinions but also longer-term shifts.

And then there is the Conservative Government's points-based immigration policy. Despite the potential economic difficulty this policy may produce for some sectors of the economy (e.g., hospitality), the points-based system may ultimately produce even more support for new immigration.

The limited evidence that systematically investigates whether the public distinguishes between skilled and unskilled immigration shows that, in fact, it does. For instance, in a survey experiment from 2014, nearly 75% of the British public said we should allow professionals to come live and work in the UK whereas amongst respondents who were asked about unskilled labourers, only approximately 28-35% would allow this group to come. Thus, continued high levels of immigration particularly by skilled workers may further bolster the growing support for immigration in the long-run — though it is important to recognize that this distinction between skill levels may be less important than the specific job an immigrant is recruited to do, with 60% saying care workers should have priority and only 18% saying the same of bankers.

Overall, then, while the cultural divide over immigration looks set to continue for some time, it is likely that immigration could become far less divisive within a decade or two.

THE LEGACY OF BREXIT

John Curtice

WHERE HAVE WE COME FROM?

So, that's it. Brexit's been done. The 'will of the people' as expressed in the 2016 referendum has been fulfilled. Britain can now put four years of intense and passionate debate behind it and focus on the opportunities thus created.

But is that what we should necessarily expect? After all, the 1975 referendum failed to end the debate. By the early 1980s Labour was campaigning for withdrawal and by the end of the decade the Conservatives were beginning to tear themselves apart over Europe. In 1991, LSE academic Alan Sked founded the Anti-Federalist League, the forerunner of UKIP — and the rest is history.

So is the Brexit debate really over, or is its imprint likely to affect our politics for years to come?

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

At first glance, a clear and simple answer was provided by the outcome of the 2019 general election. Promising to 'get Brexit done', the Conservatives won an overall majority of 80, apparently demonstrating that most voters now hoped it would be.

However, that election was fought under an electoral system that typically produces a mismatch between votes and seats. Only 47% of the votes were cast for parties that backed Brexit. Nearly all the rest (52%) went to parties willing to endorse a second referendum. The election turned out as it did not because the vote indicated a clear majority for Brexit but because most Leave voters backed the Conservatives while the support of Remain supporters was scattered across a number of different parties.

Meanwhile, polling undertaken since the UK left the EU at the end of January 2020 has failed to

provide clear evidence of a new consensus. Seventeen polls have asked people how they would vote if the 2016 referendum were rerun now: on average 52% have said Remain, 48% Leave. On the other hand, when nine other polls have asked whether Britain should stay out of the EU or re-join, the balance of opinion has been in favour — albeit equally narrowly — of staying out. Yet, when during this period YouGov have asked whether 'in hindsight' the decision to leave was right or wrong, more have come to say it was wrong. Between February and May 2020 on average 42% said it was right and 45% wrong. By October through December the figures were 39% and 49% respectively.

In short, however one looks at the evidence — and is duly mindful of the limitations of polls — Britain still looks to be more or less divided down the middle on Brexit. Indeed, we cannot even be sure that by the time the UK actually left there was still a majority in favour of leaving.

There are two other reasons why the Brexit debate may not disappear soon. First, many voters' commitment to one side or the other is strong — much stronger than their attachment to any political party. A NatCen survey in July 2020 found that 39% still said that they were a 'very strong' 'Remainer' or 'Leaver' whereas just 9% indicated that they were a 'very strong' supporter of any of the parties. Second, the age profile of Remain and Leave support suggests that, other things being equal, public opinion could become more favourable to EU membership over time. Support for Brexit is highest among older voters, who for the most part will leave the electorate earlier than the younger voters who form the core of Remain support.

WHERE ARE WE HEADING?

Of course, this evidence does no more than suggest that the potential might exist for Brexit to remain an issue on the country's political stage. Whether or not it will also depends on how the political parties decide to address — or not address — the issue from now on.

During the last year both the Conservatives and Labour have had to adapt to an electoral landscape that has been transformed by the decision of Leave voters in 2017 and (even more so) in 2019 to fall in behind the Conservatives, while Labour has found itself increasingly reliant on the votes of Remain supporters. In 2019, for every Remain supporter the Conservatives won, the party secured the backing of no less than five Leave supporters, while Labour relied on four Remain supporters for every Leave supporter. As a result, the traditional class divide in party support has disappeared, and Labour finds itself the most popular party among graduates, with the Conservatives most popular among those with few if any educational qualifications.

In negotiating a relatively 'hard' Brexit, the Conservatives appear intent on continuing to try to ride the Leave tiger that delivered the party electoral success in 2019. To retain that support, they will now need to persuade voters that Brexit is proving to be a success. Labour, in contrast, has seemed to want to end the Brexit debate in the hope that it can win back the support it has lost among Leave-supporting, mostly working-class voters — and thus a return to a more familiar electoral landscape. However, there is little sign that the party's silence on Brexit for most of 2020 has proven particularly successful in this respect, and if Brexit proves less than smooth the party may well be expected by its predominantly pro-Remain electorate to voice their concerns.

There is perhaps one reason above all why Brexit is unlikely to disappear from Britain's political agenda. The decision to leave the EU has helped fuel an increase in support for independence in Scotland, where, in contrast to the rest of the UK, voters backed Remain in 2016 by 62% to 38%.

Sixteen polls taken since the summer of 2020 have on average suggested that 54% would now vote Yes to independence, while the figure stands at no less than 60% among those who voted Remain.

A Scottish Parliament election will be held in May 2021 at which the SNP will be seeking support for holding another independence referendum. Should they win a parliamentary majority, a whole new chapter may well be added to Britain's Brexit story.

The UK in a Changing Europe promotes rigorous, high-quality and independent research into the complex and ever changing relationship between the UK and the EU. It is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and based at King's College London.

T 020 7848 2630
E info@UKandEU.ac.uk
TheUKinaChangingEurope
@UKandEU
UKandEU.ac.uk/#newsletter-signup

www.UKandEU.ac.uk

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King's College London