Brexit and Populism
Under the Microscope – What We Know So Far

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Overview of Talk

• An old unwritten law that Britain, alongside a few other democracies, is ‘immune’ to populism is gradually being overturned.

• One peculiarity of Britain’s Brexit moment is that it’s making British politics more ‘European’ - fragmentation, volatility, polarisation, resurgent populism - all conducive to ongoing populist mobilisation.

• Brexit did not cause all this - deeper currents been building for decades - but Brexit is exacerbating divides and carving out space for national populism.

• Britain no longer the ‘ugly ducking’ in the populist family; national populism and associated attitudes look set to remain entrenched.

• Two main parties approaching Judgement Day; One Nation Tories vs. national populists; left behind Labour vs. global winners ‘Brahmin Left’.

• There is no easy way out ...
I want to tell a story in four parts

1. **Context:** The deeper currents swirling beneath our system

2. **Tributaries:** The key elements of the Leave vote in 2016

3. **Consequences:** How Brexit impacted on the parties in 2017

4. **Guestimates:** What happened at the European elections in 2019

-> Discussion, questions, criticisms, debate!
The deeper currents, 1950s - today

Audience wearing special glasses watch a 3D ‘stereoscopic film’ at the Telekinema on the South Bank in London during the Festival of Britain, 1951
A fragmenting two-party system

In earlier decades, voters ‘locked in’ to two party system but much less true today; at 2019 EP election support plummeted to 23%, lowest since emergence of current two-party system (Cutts et al. 2019)
Collapse of ‘very strong’ identifiers from 45% in 1964 to 15% in 2015; ‘dealignment’ by no means unique to UK but contributing to more fluid, volatile system more open to challengers; also weakening class (Sanders, 2017; also Lee & Young, 2013)
Volatility at General Elections, 1966-2017

Combined level of switching from Labour to the Conservatives and from the Conservatives to Labour between one election and the next as a percentage of Lab & Con voters at previous election; BES 1964-2017 (Mellon et al. 2018)
Effective number of parties, 1945-2015

2015 most fragmented GE in history; in terms of effective number of parties winning votes and increasing disconnect between English, Welsh & Scottish systems (Green and Prosser, 2016; see also Sanders, 2017)
The declining influence of workers, unions & ‘left behind’

The rise of the professional middle-class & graduates

BSA 1993-2012; by 2012 nearly half of voters with no quals and 40% of working-class wanted to leave the EU compared to less than one fifth of professionals or graduates; majorities of working-class wanted ‘less Europe’ since Maastricht Treaty (Ford & Goodwin, 2014)
An entrenched (underestimated?) Eurosceptic tradition

British Social Attitudes surveys; from 1996 onwards support for leaving[curbing EU powers 50 per cent or above every year but two and then jumps above 60 per cent four years before EURef; further discussion see Eatwell and Goodwin (2018)
The emergence of a ‘new’ issue

Immigration and race relations as an important issue 1974-2013, alongside overall net migration levels (Ipsos-MORI). On drivers of concern over immigration see McLaren and Johnson (2007): ‘self-interest has little bearing on opposition … most concerned with threats to ingroup resources posed by immigration, threats to the shared customs and traditions of British society …’ also Ford 2008 on hierarchy of prefs
In 2015 only 10% of people who do not believe too many immigrants have been let in would vote to leave EU. But no less than 50% of those who felt too many immigrants had been let in would do so. In 1975, there was no significant relationship between immigration and support for leaving EU. If anything, relationship was reverse (Evans and Mellon, 2016).
In 2010, typically more than 40 per cent felt that the Conservative Party was the ‘best’ party to handle immigration. By the time of the referendum that had fallen below 25% and in 2019 slumped to 19%

YouGov Issues Tracker data, collected by author (see also Dennison and Goodwin, 2015)
Canaries in the Coalmine: ‘Voice’ = Rise of UKIP

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<th>Lab</th>
<th>Con</th>
<th>LD</th>
<th>UKIP</th>
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<td>Working class</td>
<td>+4.1</td>
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<td>-9.8</td>
<td>+9.1</td>
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<td>+1.9</td>
<td>-0.4</td>
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<td>-10.9</td>
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<td>Mean: UKIP core</td>
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<td>-1.7</td>
<td>-9.8</td>
<td>+9.9</td>
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<td><strong>UKIP Peripheral groups</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Professionals and managers</td>
<td>+4.7</td>
<td>-2.3</td>
<td>-10.5</td>
<td>+7.2</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attended university</td>
<td>+8.3</td>
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<td>Women</td>
<td>+10.5</td>
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<td>Ethnic minorities</td>
<td>+10.0</td>
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<td>-5.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean: UKIP periphery</td>
<td>+10.1</td>
<td>-4.2</td>
<td>-9.9</td>
<td>+4.4</td>
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</tbody>
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Social profile of party support. Change in support levels from last year of Labour government to last available year of coalition, by UKIP ‘core’ and ‘periphery’ groups. BESCMS 2009-2013 (Ford and Goodwin, 2014)
R-square 0.73. By and large, then, authorities that were the most likely to vote for Brexit were the same ones that had given UKIP its strongest support at the 2014 EP elections (Goodwin and Heath, 2016)
In 2010, the difference in reported turnout between the working class and salariat voting was 19 percentage points, compared to less than just 5 percentage points in 1964 (Heath, 2018).
What powered Leave? What we know

• Leave not ‘single-issue’ but driven by interplay of concerns over immigration, loss of distinctive identity & worries over how EU impacting economy and/or sovereignty (Clarke et al. 2017; Curtice 2017; Hobolt 2016)

• Immigration & reclamation of powers from EU /‘decisions about UK should be taken in the UK’ two most cited motives in open-ended research (BES, 2016; Carl, 2018; Lord Ashcroft, 2016; YouGov 2016)

• Controlling for effect of overall migration, places which experienced sudden influx of EU migrants in short (10 year) period tended to be more pro-Leave (Goodwin and Heath, 2016)

• Leavers negative about how immigration impacting on economy, culture and welfare state, those aware of rising immigration more likely to switch Remain->Leave (Goodwin and Milazzo, 2017), linked to Englishness (Henderson et al. 2017; Colley, 1992).

• Views pronounced among voters with few/no quals, weak European identity, three groups key: affluent Eurosceptics, older working-class, deprived immigration sceptics (Swales, 2016)

• ‘Economics vs. Culture’ unhelpful: perception of economic loss had indirect effects reducing perceptions of ‘Brexit risk’ (Clarke et al. 2017); support higher in ‘double whammy’ left behind areas (Goodwin and Heath, 2016); some argue areas hit hard by China imports (Colantone and Stanig, 2018) but debate ongoing (e.g. Matti and Zhou, 2016)

• P.s. not much difference in average knowledge about EU between Remainers & Leavers (Carl, 2018)
The bigger picture

• Referendum allowed voters to give voice to deeper values divide – to social conservatism, especially pronounced among workers and conservatives, alienated by drift to ‘liberal consensus’ (Evans and Tilley, 2017; Heath, 2018)

• Some evidence Brexit identities leading to ‘affective polarization’ as intense as partisanship (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2018) – but longer-term picture unclear

• Should be cautious of ‘British exceptionalism’. Consistent with pan-European literature, individuals’ strong attachment to nation and desire to preserve cultural distinctiveness key (Clarke et al. 2017; McLaren, 2007; Hobolt and de Vries, 2016)

• Need more research on interplay between culture and economics, especially at local level; relative deprivation as a bridge between the two?
Consequences: Brexit and the 2017 General Election
Two-party share of the vote, 1918-2017

2017; with a combined 82.4% share, two main parties received their largest combined share of the vote since 1970, and with 26.5 million votes they received more votes than at any previous election since 1951; (Heath & Goodwin, 2017)
The building blocks of polarisation

Correlates of vote change for Con & Lab at constituency level, 2017 GE. Eng & Wales only (Heath and Goodwin, 2017)
Estimated support for leave and change in support for Lab and Con

(Heath and Goodwin 2017; data via Hanretty, 2017)
Change in support for UKIP and support for Lab & Con

Not much of a pattern between UKIP & Labour. UKIP needed to lose close to 10 points before Tories saw increase in share of the vote (Heath and Goodwin 2017)
More than half of UKIP’s 2015 voters who voted again in 2017 switched to Cons, compared with only 18% to Lab and further 18% who stayed loyal (BES, 2017).

Labour, already most popular in 2015 amongst voters who voted remain in 2016, won large number of Con Remainers but also pro-EU Green & Lib Dems. Nearly two thirds 2015 Greens went Lab, one in four Lib Dem. More than half Remainers voted Lab, undecided ‘came home’ (BES, 2017)
Socio-demographic change, Conservatives and Labour, change 2015-2017

In 2017, Leavers and ‘hard’ Brexiteers turned to Cons in greater numbers than in 2015 while Cons lost ground among Remainers voters ‘soft’ Brexiteers. Divisions in Labour less sharp although Labour advanced more strongly among Remainers. Reflected deeper shifts as liberals swung behind Labour, social conservatives more sharply behind Cons. BES Internet Panel Wave 13; compiled and presented (Curtice, 2017)
Guestimates: The 2019 European elections and Beyond

**Seats won**
- Brexit Party: 29
- Lib Dem: 16
- Labour: 10
- Greens: 7
- Conservative: 4
- SNP: 3
- Plaid Cymru: 1
- Change UK: 0
- UKIP: 0

**Vote share**
- Brexit Party: 31.6%
- Lib Dem: 20.3%
- Labour: 14.1%
- Greens: 12.1%
- Conservative: 9.1%
- SNP: 3.6%
- Plaid Cymru: 1%
- Change UK: 3.4%
- UKIP: 3.3%

**Vote share change**
- Brexit Party: +31.6
- Lib Dem: +13.4
- Labour: -11.3
- Greens: +4.2
- Conservative: -14.8
- SNP: +1.1
- Plaid Cymru: +0.3
- Change UK: +3.4
- UKIP: -24.2

Source: Press Association
Fragmentation 2018-2019

Note: 179 polls, vote intention trends estimated using Hodrick-Prescott filter
People living in places which had given strong support to leaving the EU in 2016 were less likely to vote at the 2019 EP election than they had been at past elections, even when controlling for socio-demographic factors (Cutts et al. 2019)
Farage doubles down on Brexit Land/
Lib Dems not simply backlash of Remainia

The correlation between support for Brexit Party and Leave in 2016 EU is a little stronger than the correlation between support for UKIP in 2014 and support for Leave in 2016. Lib Dems not simply ‘backlash of Remainia. (Cutts et al. 2019)
Conservatives now battling on two fronts

Not much of a relationship between Conservative vote change and Brexit Party because those who would defect already did in 2014; but is stronger evidence Lib Dem surge inflicted damage on Cons; sequencing key (Cutts et al. 2019)
Labour appears to be hurt most by Brexit Party in less well educated left behind areas but not in more highly educated areas while little evidence Lib Dems gaining at expense of Labour (though comparing 2014). What does appear likely is Labour’s 2017 coalition is now splintering (Cutts et al. 2019)
More than half (53%) of 2017 Conservatives who took part in the European elections voted Brexit Party. Just 21% stayed with Tories. Around one in eight (12%) switched to Lib Dems. Labour 2017 voters were more likely to stay with their party, but only 38% did so. More than one in five (22%) went Lib Dem, 17% to Greens and 13% went Brexit Party (Lord Ashcroft, 2019)
Indirect effect of national populism

YouGov Polls, January-June 2019

Intended (Westminster) Vote Choice of 2017 Conservative Voters; @GoodwinMJ
Conclusions: Where are we heading?

1. ‘The Fundamentals’ favour outsiders; long-term weakening of PID, decline of class voting, rising volatility will cultivate ongoing fertile soil for challengers to ‘the establishment’

2. Working-class exclusion: broader marginalisation of working-class voters in main parties, and also non-graduates, will fuel broader ‘spiral of working-class exclusion from broader electoral politics’ (Evans and Tilley, 2017); ditto liberal pitch of Labour and Conservatives (& Boris?)

3. A Conservative Catch-22: if drift back to ‘one nation’ conservatism via close alignment with EU could fend off ‘Revolt in Remainia’ and losses to Lib Dems but such a move leaves NP flank wide open. Conversely, if push for hard Brexit Lib Dems get revenge for ‘decapitation’ in 2015

4. A Pincer Movement for Labour: 2017 electorate clearly falling apart; price of drifting to a second referendum is likely establishment of national populism as permanent challenger; but failing to do so powers Lib Dems and Greens.

5. Populist supply professionalised: populist supply is radically transformed - Conservative donors, credibility gap, growing electoral experience; diffuse message; less toxic. Either the Conservatives re-absorb national populist tradition or national populist tradition becomes entrenched as permanent fixture on Britain’s political landscape (incl. left behind Lab areas)
Studies cited/further reading

- Oliver Heath and Matthew Goodwin (2016) "The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: An aggregate-level analysis of the result”, Political Quarterly, 87(3), 323-332
- Jon Mellon (2016) "*Party Attachment in Great Britain: Five Decades of Dealignment.*" Available at SSRN 2745654