

# Where next for Labour?

## Brexit, the 2019 General Election and the Realignment of British Politics

**Presentation to Labour MPs January 15, 2020**

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# Outline of the talk

- The narrow view – factors specific to the 2019 general election
- How Brexit has reshaped political loyalties in modern Britain
- The broader view – why Labour's defeat was a long time coming
- Where next for Labour? Three possible avenues

# The 2019 election: Campaign specific factors

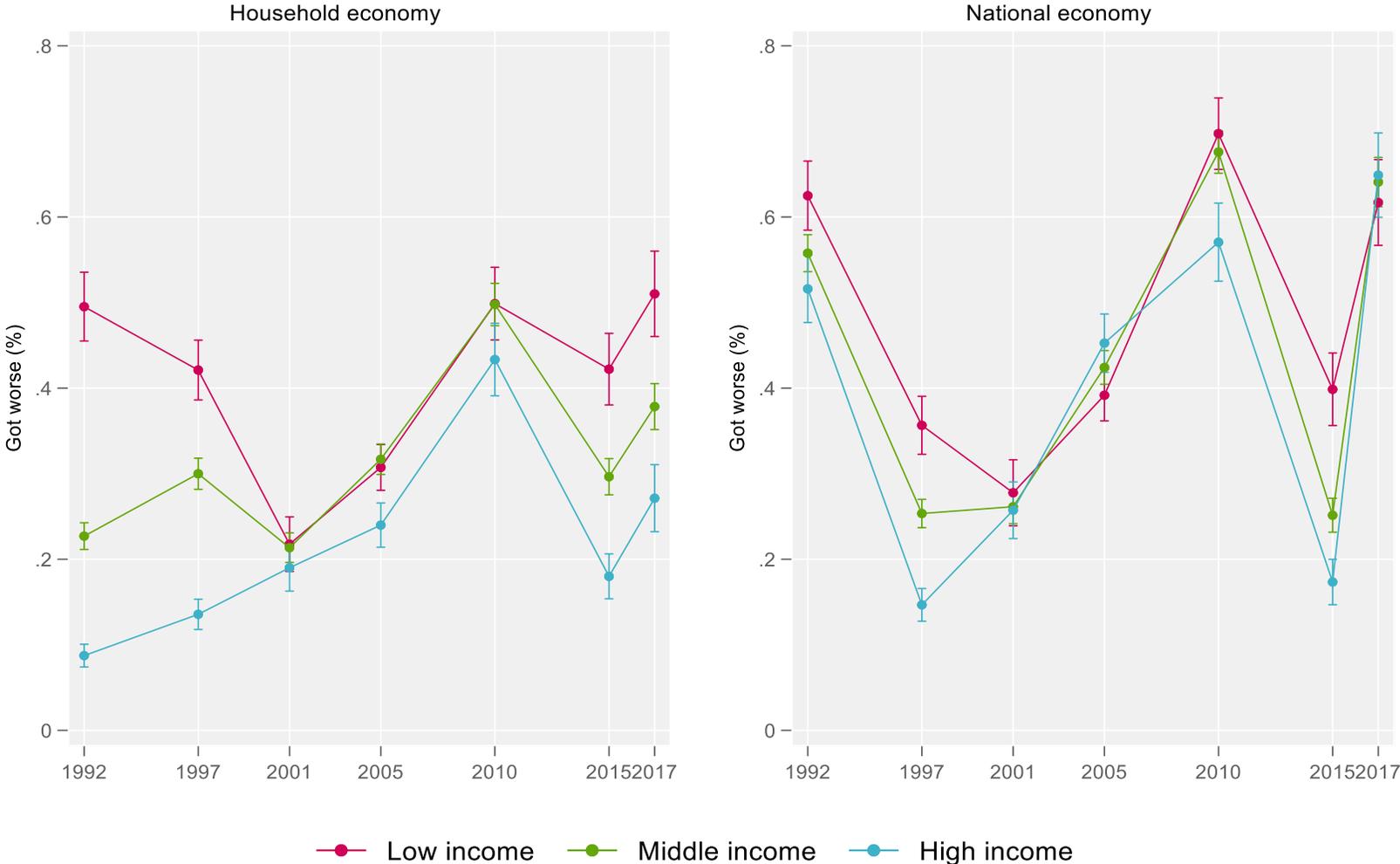
**Leadership.** Corbyn's ratings weaker than in 2017; 76% dissatisfied with how Corbyn doing his job; had worst 'net satisfaction' ratings of any opposition leader since polls began

**Brexit.** Labour had no coherent or compelling message on the biggest issue of the day. Polls suggested that two in three voters found the party's Brexit position 'unclear'.

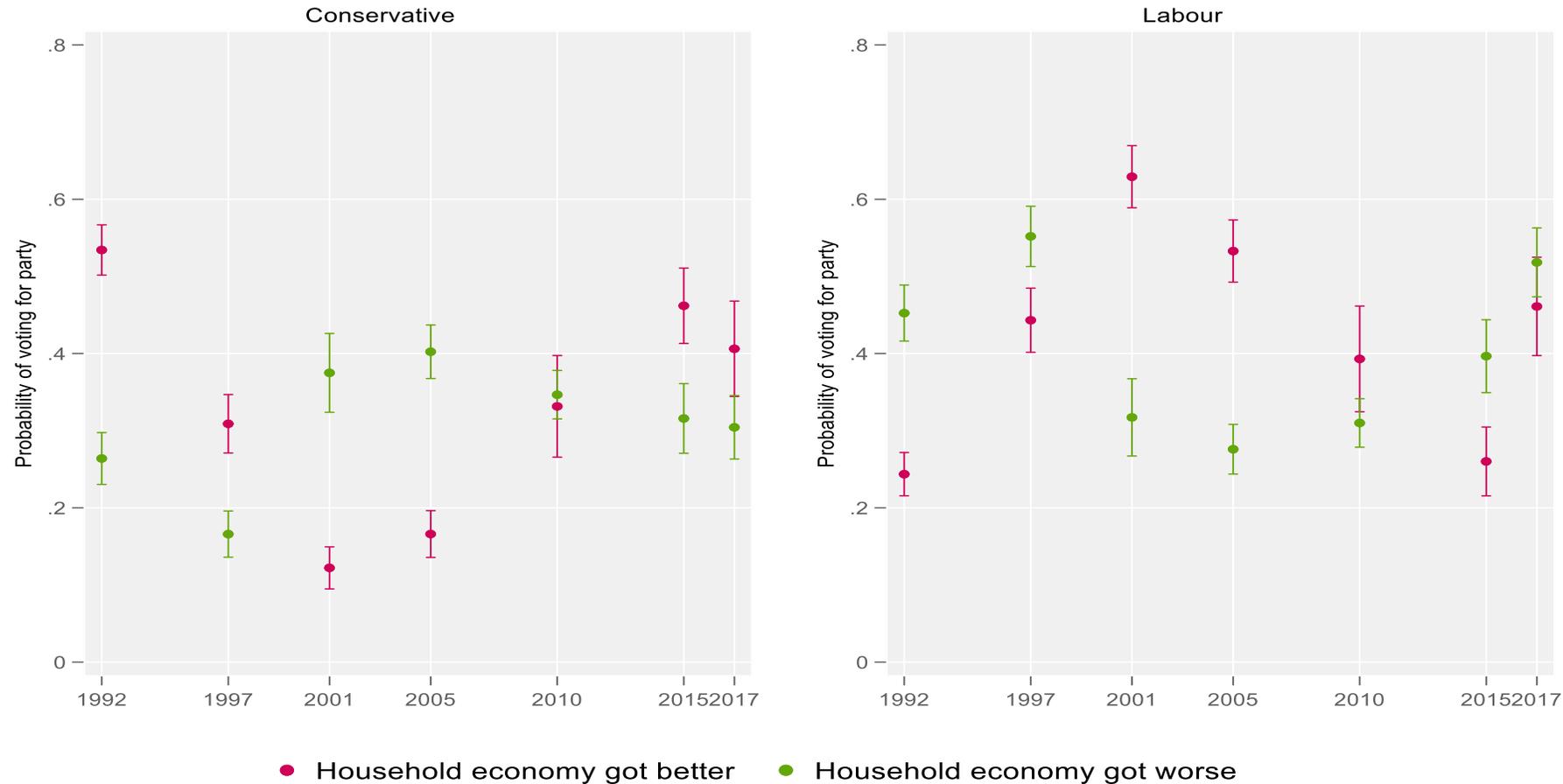
**Geography.** Helped Conservatives. In 2016, Leave won more than 60% of general election seats. Leave vote spread more efficiently. In 2019, of 401 seats that voted Leave Conservatives won 73% but of 231 Remain seats Labour won 41%. Conservatives also won 32% of Remain seats.

**Policies.** Many of Labour's policies had widespread support –nationalisation, workers on company boards, claims that the economy is 'rigged'. But undermined by lack of perceived competence and credibility; only 16% trusted Corbyn to run economy (34% for Johnson); 57% thought Labour would likely lead Britain into recession (39% for Conservatives); 67% thought Labour's policies would require tax increases (46% for Conservatives)

# Most people think the economy is worsening and those on low incomes think their households are suffering ...



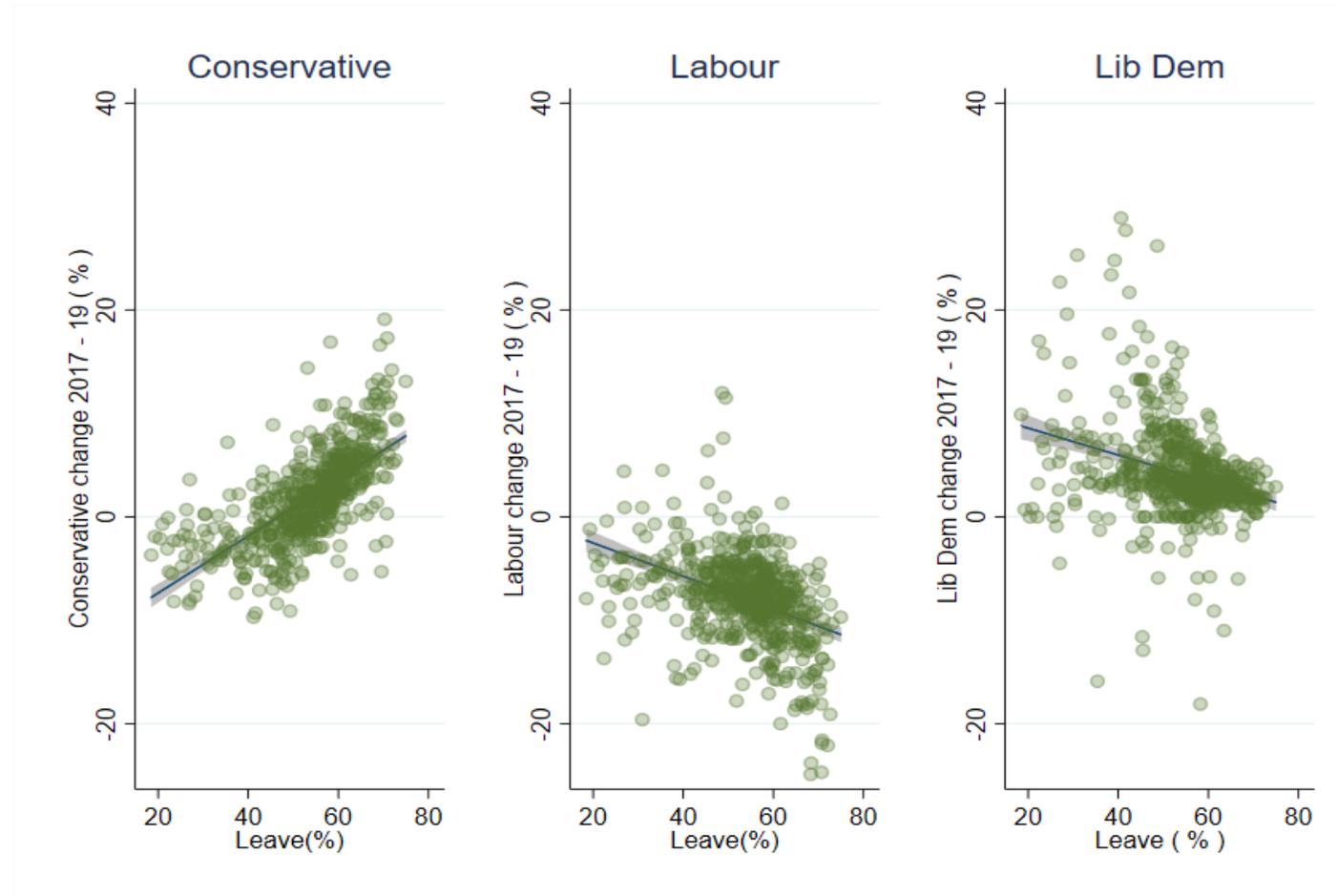
# But Labour is not capitalizing; Conservatives are not being punished by voters for economic performance despite decade in power



Controlling for demographics, people who felt their household's finances had deteriorated during the past year are generally more likely to vote for the opposition than people who it improved. In recent years, though, these subjective evaluations of the economy appear to be less important than they were previously, perhaps because voters are unclear about who to blame for the current economic situation or because they are unsure whether things would improve much under a Labour-led government. (see [Goodwin and Heath 2019](#))

# How Brexit reshaped political loyalties

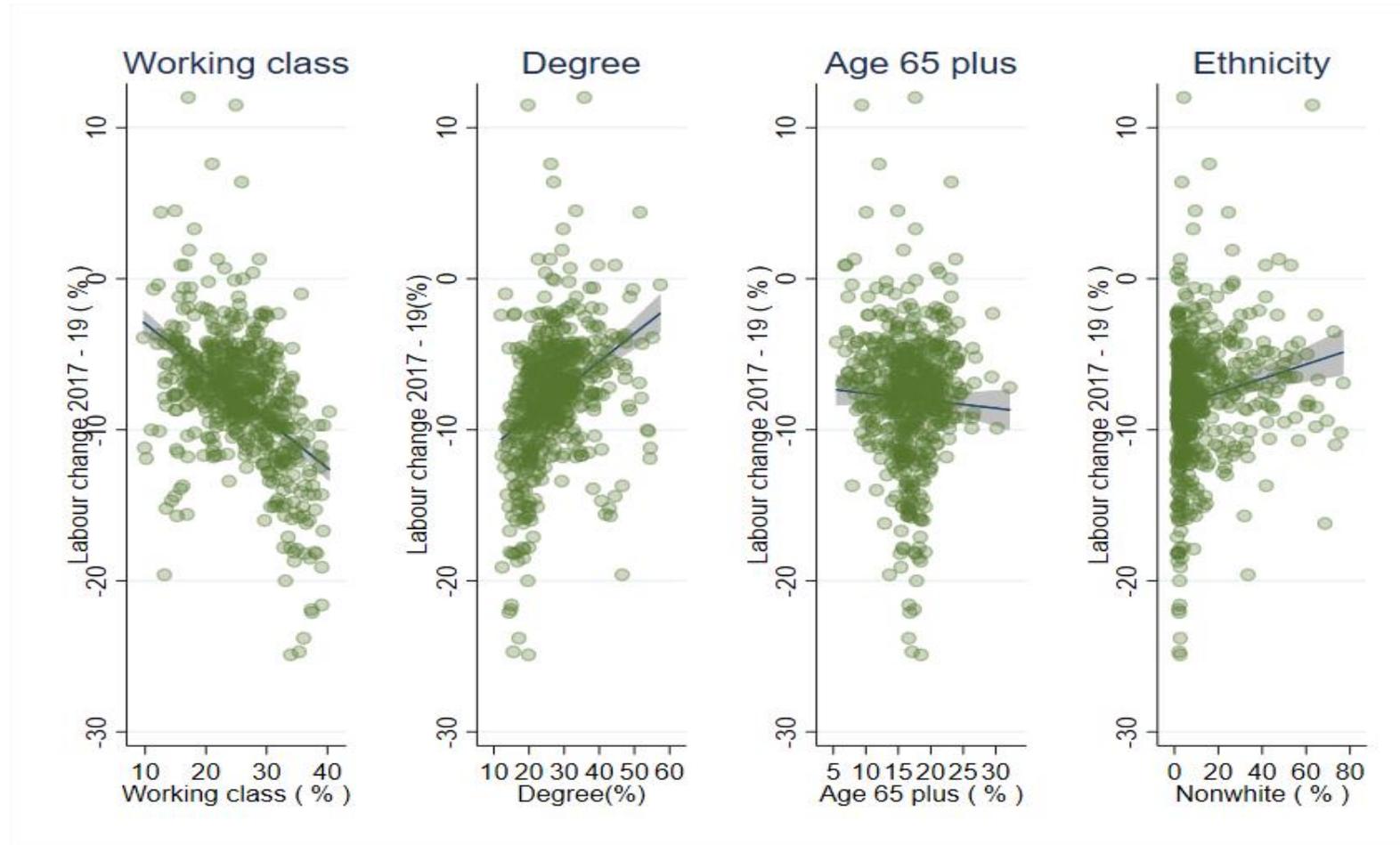
## change in party vote share by % Leave (England & Wales)



**Change in Con vote share strongly positively related to Leave vote. Conservatives suffered minor setbacks in very pro-Remain seats but more than compensated for this by greater gains in Leave seats; Labour lost votes everywhere but retreat strongest in Leave seats. Labour constrained by distribution of Remain seats. 2017 left few opportunities to make further inroads into Remain seats; of 231 sets that backed Remain only 78 held by Cons, of 95 strongest Remain seats (over 60%) only 16 held by Cons. Most already held by Labour.**

# Labour's shifting electorate

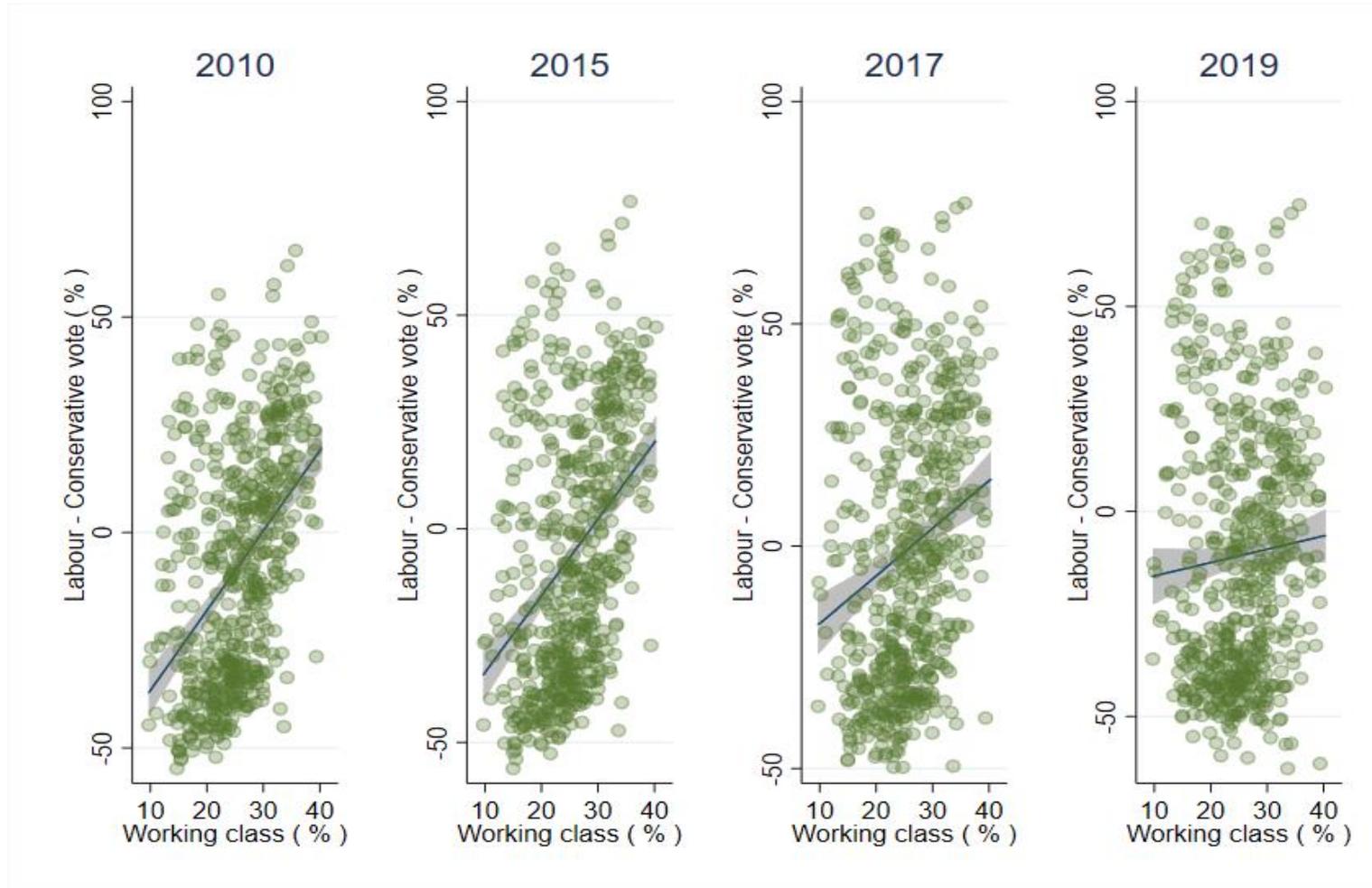
Change in Labour vote share by demographics (Eng & Wales)



Labour lost votes where they historically prospered; seats with large numbers of working-class, where average education low, populations older and predominantly white. Sequencing important. Sorts of places that previously backed UKIP then Brexit then Conservatives. Whereas Conservatives long prospered in older and heavily white seats, their breakthrough in strongly working class and less well-educated seats is a much more recent and striking development (see [Heath and Goodwin 2016](#))

# Labour's 'Falling Ladder'

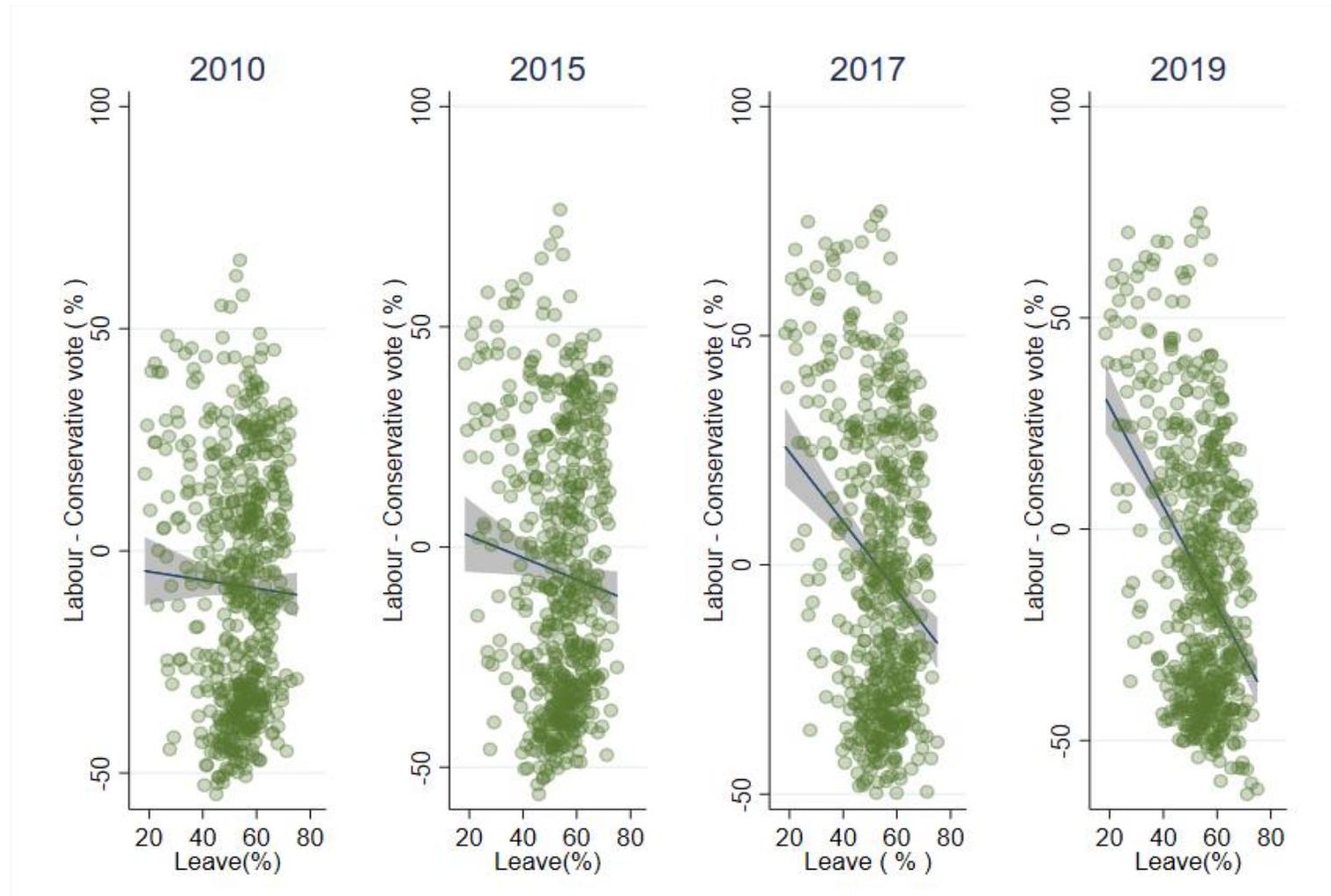
collapse in working class seats (Eng & Wales) 2010-2019



**In 2010, despite losing election, Labour still enjoyed healthy lead over Cons in seats with large working-class pop. But in each successive election this advantage dissolved. In 2019, Labour lost its competitive edge in its blue-collar heartlands and its advantage is now not statistically different from zero. This is a watershed moment for Labour**

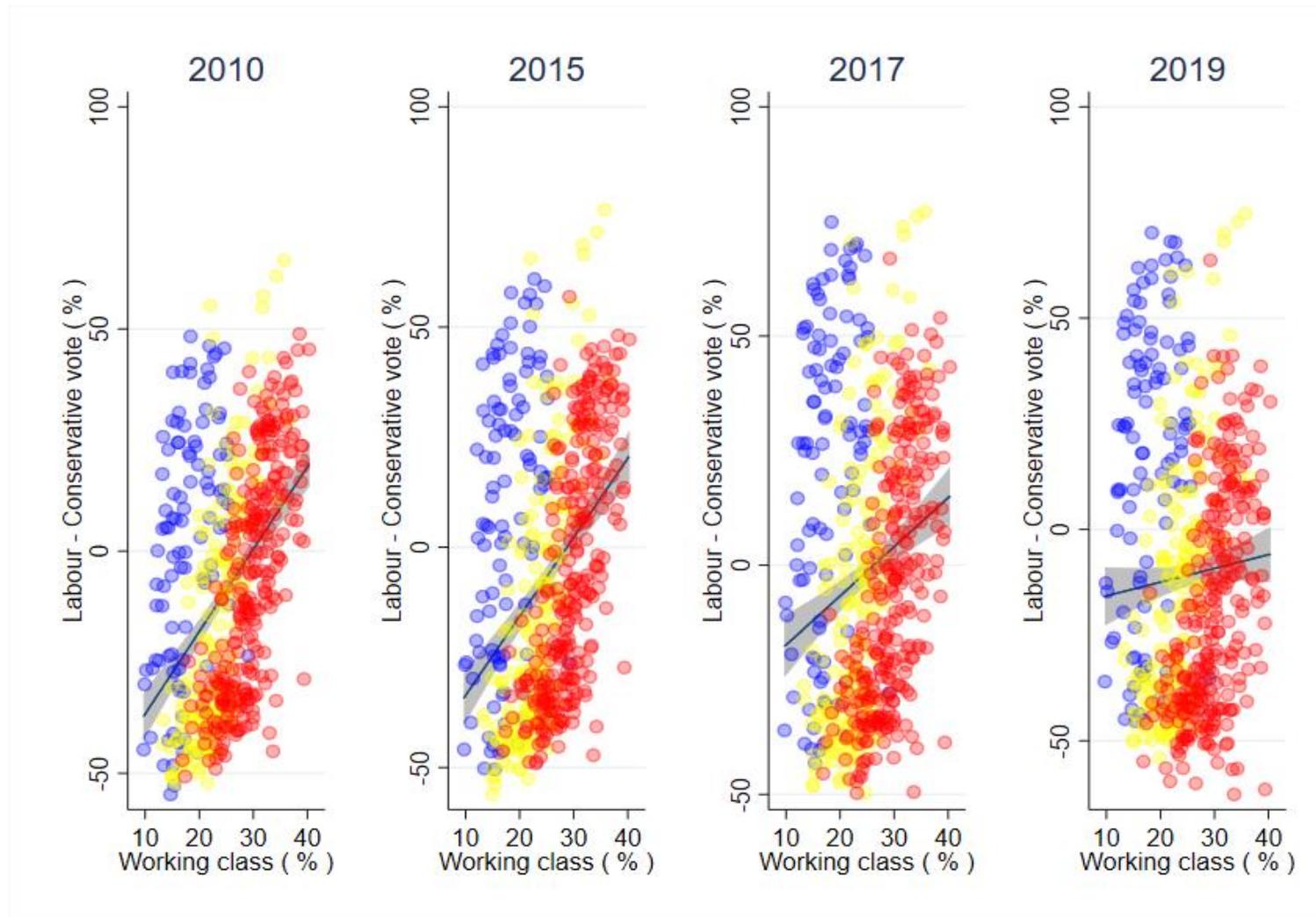
# How Brexit reshaped geography of electoral support

## Lab versus Con in Leave areas



**In 2010, the sort of places that ended up backing Leave in great numbers did not vary much in terms of support for Lab or Con. However, since the referendum the partisan balance between Labour and the Conservatives in England and Wales has intensified around Brexit. Conservatives now do very much better than Labour in the sort of seats that voted Leave in 2016.**

# Brexit also underpins Britain's class realignment



Key:

Remain seats

Evenly split seats

Leave seats

Over last few elections we can see how blue Remain and mainly middle-class seats shifted up towards Labour (most of them are now above 0 indicating a Labour lead over Conservatives). Meanwhile, the red Leave and mainly working-class seats have shifted down towards Conservatives (the majority of them now below 0 indicating a Conservative lead over Labour). Britain's electoral map has thus been fundamentally reshaped. Brexit is only one expression of this new 'cultural divide'

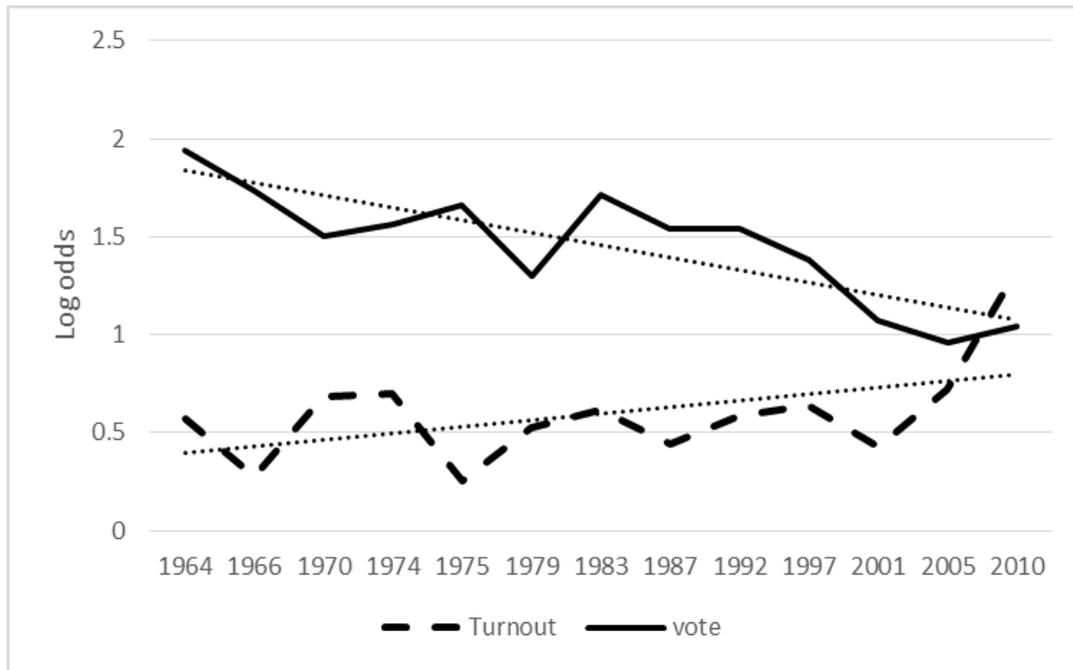
# But this story is not just about Brexit

## Labour's defeat was a long time coming

- We first pointed to deeper, structural problems in Labour's electorate in 2014, noting a deeper values divide that was emerging in British politics ([Ford & Goodwin 2014](#))
- Labour's relationship with working-class has been weakening over the long-haul, started long before Brexit and will likely remain in place for many years, if not decades, to come. Reflects a wider trend that is weakening many centre-left parties that have not had to navigate Brexit ([Eatwell and Goodwin 2018](#))
- Like other centre-left parties Labour grappling with a tension between expanding support among the (growing) liberal metropolitan middle-class whilst retaining support among (shrinking) working-class (Ford and Goodwin 2014; [Tilley & Evans 2017](#); [Heath 2018](#))
- Tony Blair and New Labour navigated this by appealing to the ascendant, socially liberal middle-class and drifting right on economics but downplayed strong, direct appeals to the working-class (Thau 2020)
- Representation of working-class MPs dramatically declined while 'careerist'/middle-class MPs less likely to back welfare policies ([O'Grady 2019](#)). Working-class increasingly abstained (Heath 2018)
- This strategy worked when the working-class had nowhere else to go (e.g. 1997-2012) but it left many of these voters open to counter-mobilization.
- This then happened: abstention -> UKIP -> Leave -> Brexit Party -> Boris Johnson

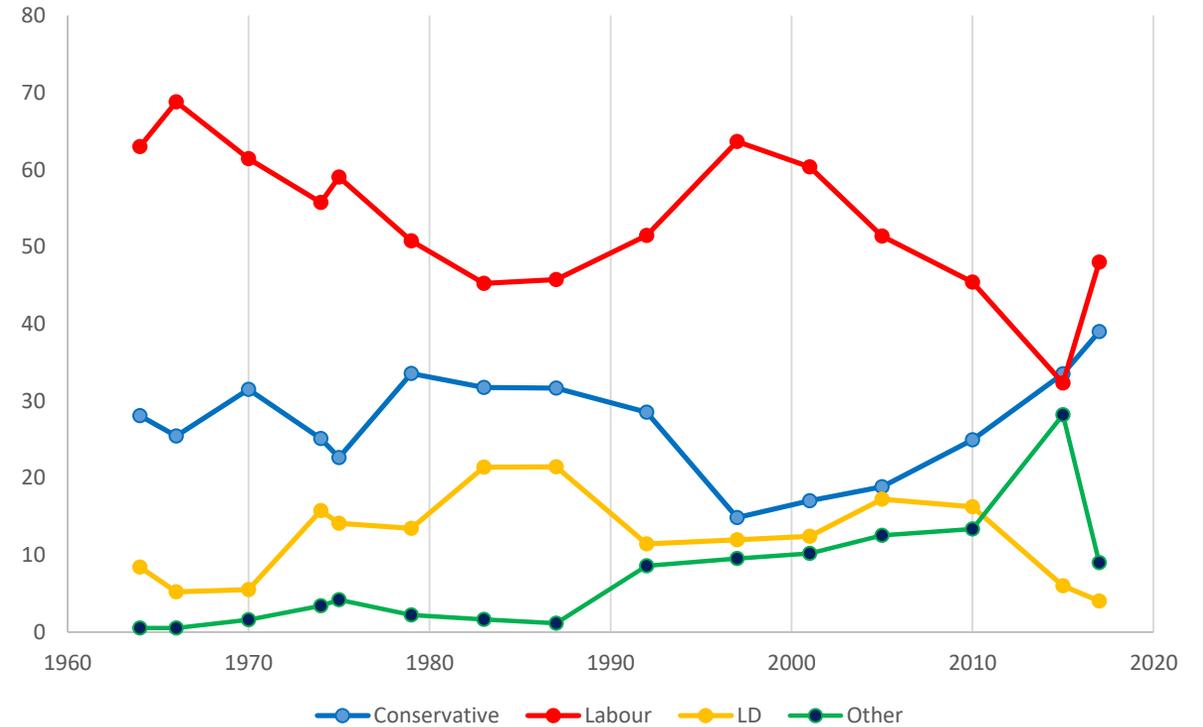
# How class dealignment and realignment has weakened the Labour Party since the 1960s

Decline of class voting and rise of working-class abstention, 1964-2010



([Heath 2018](#)); in 2010 class becomes more important in explaining abstention than it does vote choice

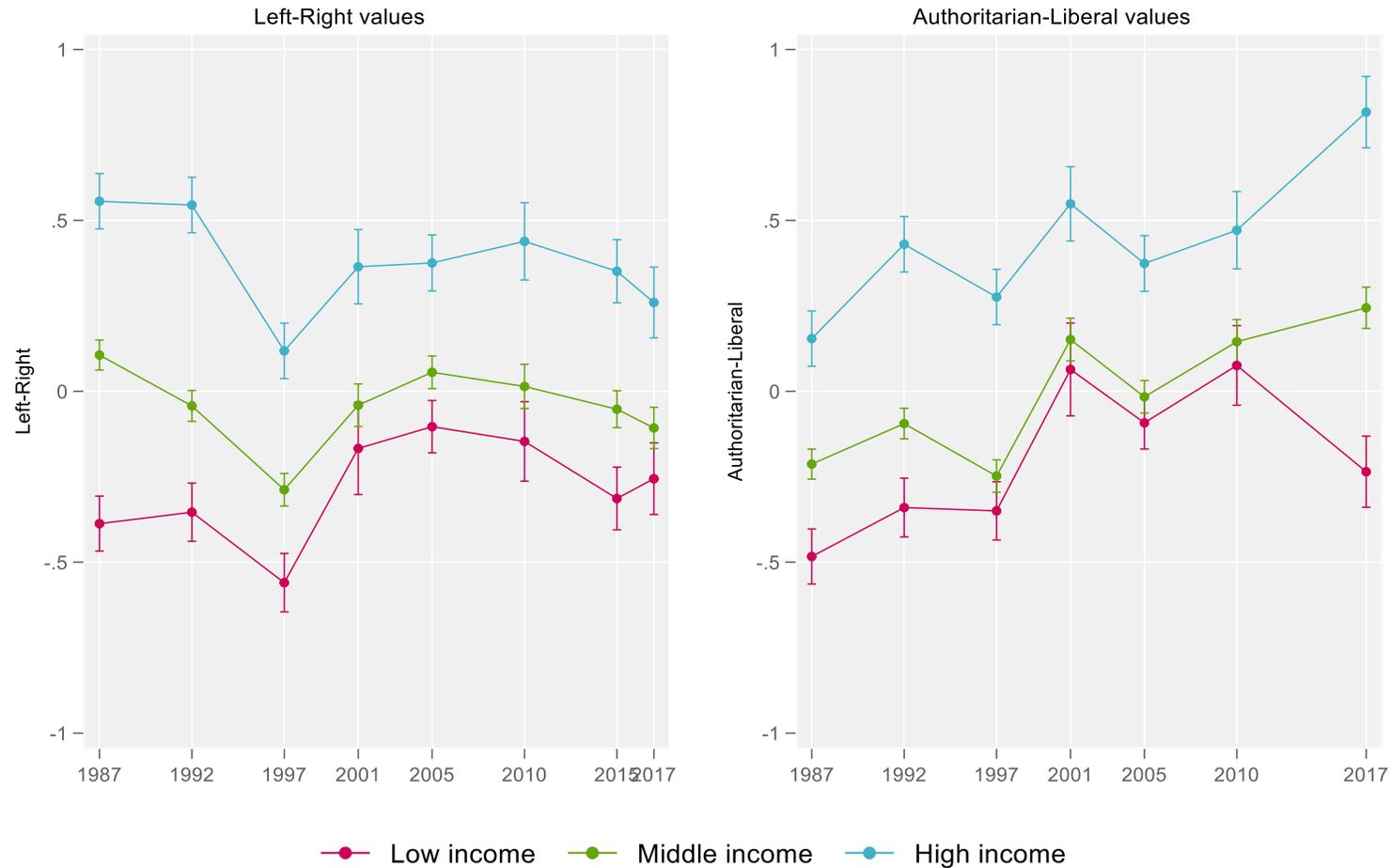
Vote choice among working class, 1964-2017



([Goodwin and Heath \(2017\)](#))

# The emergence of a sharper values divide

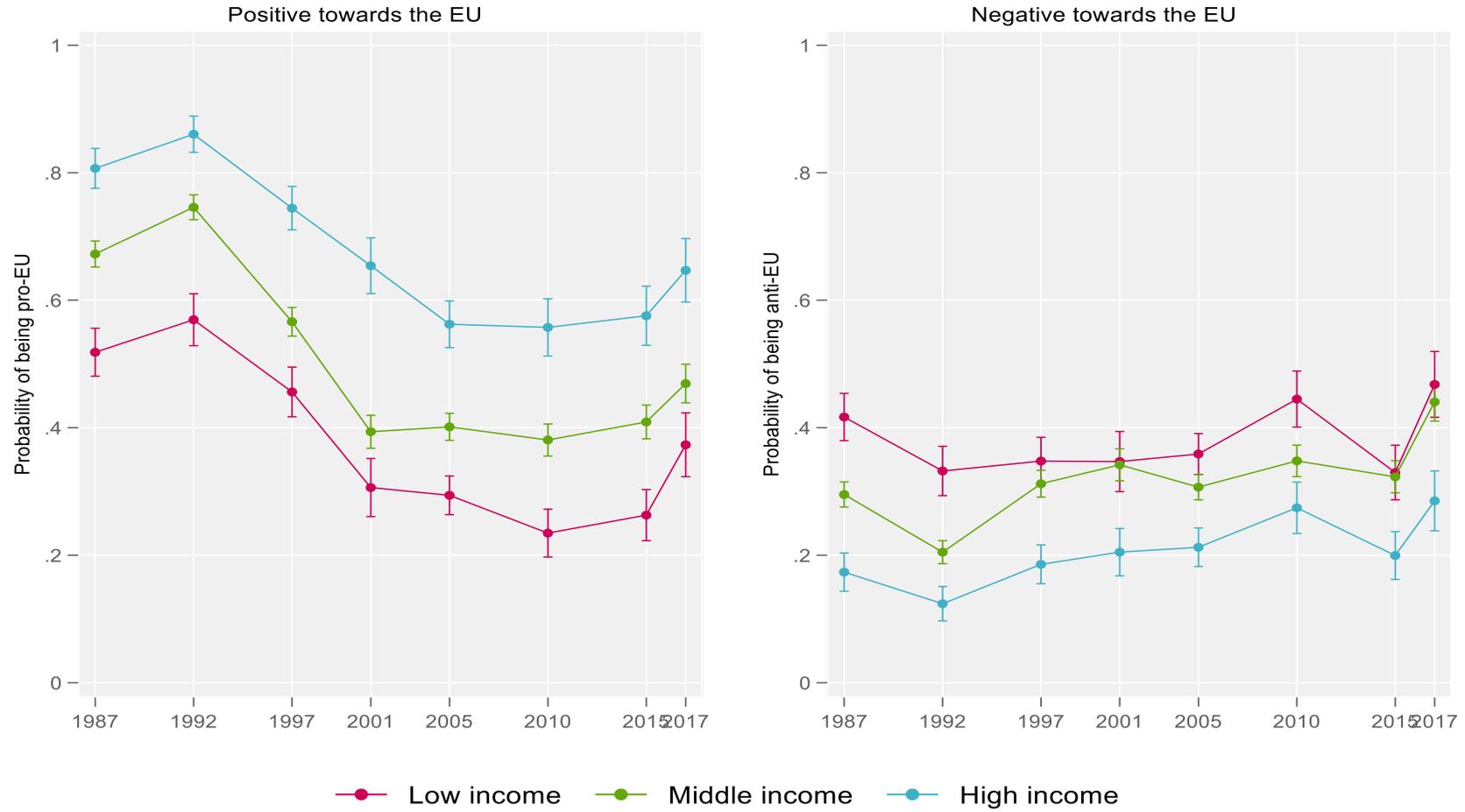
‘Left versus right’ & ‘liberal versus authoritarian’ divides



[Goodwin and Heath 2019](#); Low-income voters have been moving in a more ‘authoritarian’ direction; since 2010 we have seen greater polarization around the value divide between high and low income voters.

# And this values divide has deep roots

## Public attitudes toward the EU, 1987-2017

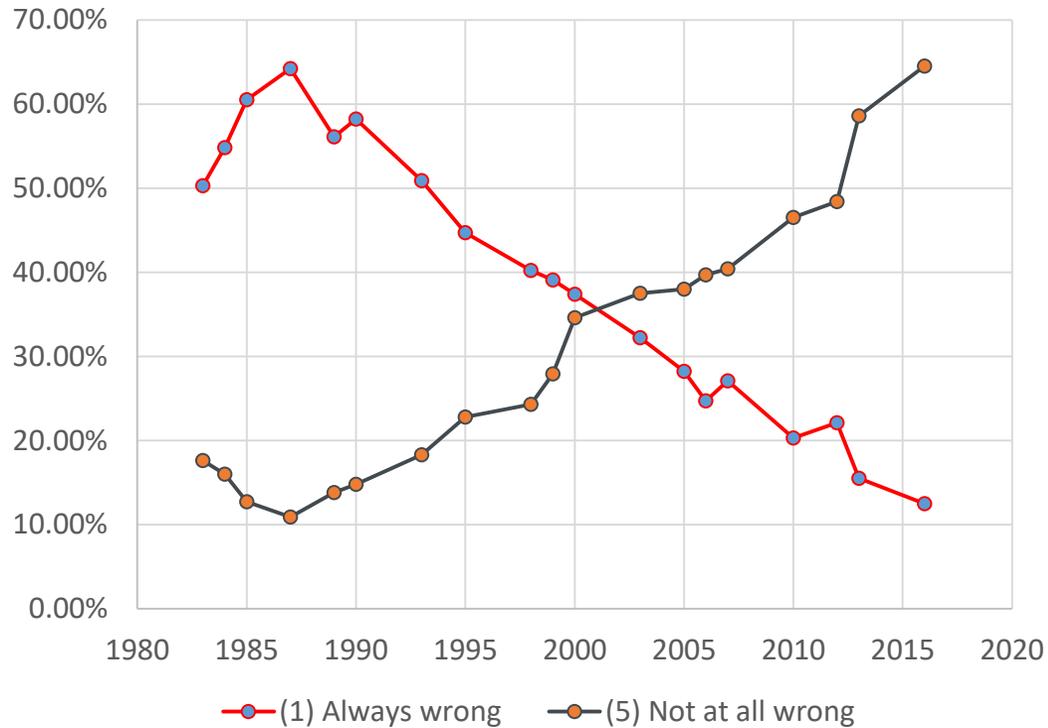


[Goodwin and Heath 2019](#); low income voters consistently less positive towards the EU; short-term arguments about austerity and legacy of the financial crisis miss the stability of these divides and also their durability going forward

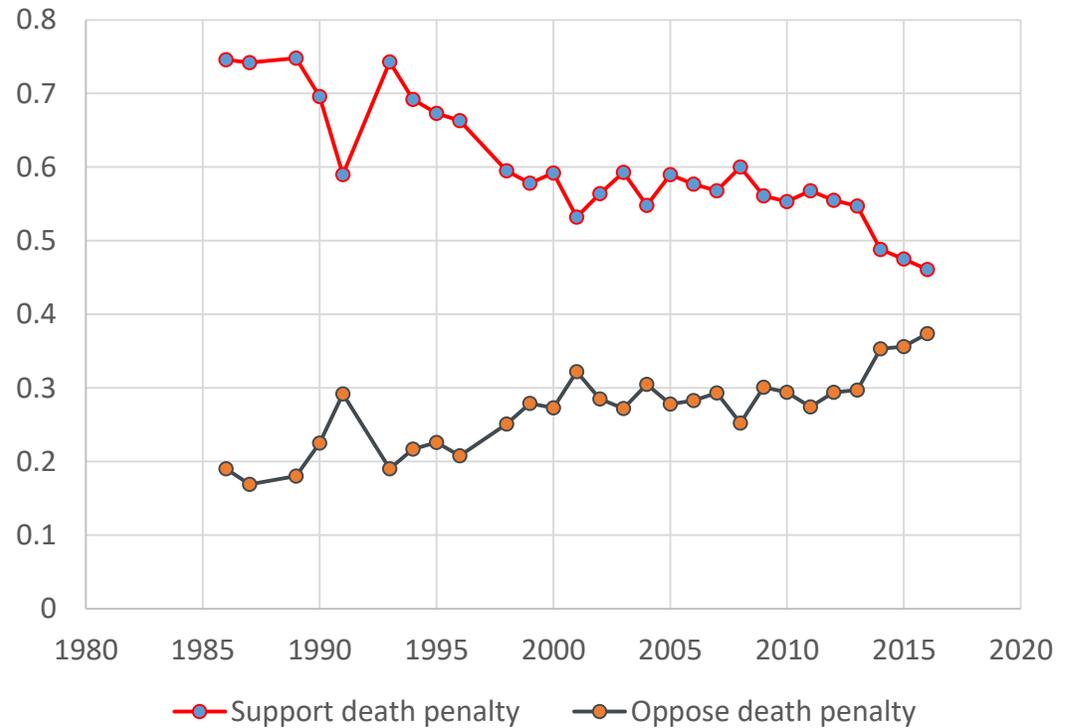
# Does the future belong to the liberal left?

Important to take in full picture; what is Labour saying to voters who hold more authoritarian outlook?

**British society has become much more pro gay equality...**



**...but still in favour of the death penalty**



**Source:** British Social Attitudes

**Question:** About sexual relations between two adults of the same sex. Do you think it is always wrong OR not wrong at all?

**Question:** How much do you agree or disagree that ... for some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence

# Where next for Labour?

Short answer: no easy way out. But three possibilities ...

## **Win back the Red Wall?**

Have to accept that many of these voters are ‘cross-pressured’; yes, they want economic reform but they also want a more cultural security too, instinctively socially conservative on many questions. Don’t obsess about Brexit. Many other ways to tap into this value dimension (migration, law and order, security, national pride). Problem for Labour recently is that it has been on the liberal side on nearly all these issues – has said little to authoritarian voters.

## **Embrace new electorate?**

Expand among liberal, metropolitan, middle class, degree-holders, ethnic (& EU) minorities while Conservatives pursue a more socially conservative and nationalist programme. These groups are an expanding part of the electorate. Problem for Labour is it *already holds* most seats where these groups are numerous and so increasing its vote share by squeezing Lib Dems or Greens not sufficient to win election in foreseeable future. It really does need a ‘Red Bridge’ for ‘Red Wall’, because it could easily lose further ground in other parts of the country (like Wales)

## **Occupy the Centre ground?**

Labour failed to capitalise on favourable economic conditions for an opposition party – and to do so must present a credible alternative. Ideological moderation boosts a party’s perceived competence (Johns and Kolln 2019) and so a move towards the centre ground may yield election gains. Centre ground is now also further to the left than it used to be (Bartle et al 2019).

# Studies cited in talk

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