

Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, “Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided,” *Journal of Democracy* 28 (January 2017): 17–30.

## **Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided**

*Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin*

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On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom voted 52 to 48 percent to leave the European Union.<sup>1</sup> The vote for “Brexit” sent shockwaves around the world, rocking financial markets and rekindling global debates about the power of populism and nationalism, as well as the long-term viability of the EU. Aside from calling attention to challenges to mainstream liberal democracy and international integration, the vote for Brexit also highlights the deepening political divides that cut across traditional party lines in Britain and now threaten to further destabilize an already crumbling two-party system.

On one level, the shocking result served as a powerful reminder of the sheer force of Britain’s entrenched Euroskeptic tradition and of the acrimonious splits among the country’s political elite over Britain’s relationship with Europe. But on a deeper level, Brexit should also be seen as a symptom of longer-term social changes that have quietly been reshaping public opinion, political behavior, and party competition in Britain as well as in other Western democracies. What underlying social and attitudinal shifts made Brexit possible? To what extent was the vote for Brexit driven by the same social forces that fueled the electoral rise of the populist, right-wing U.K. Independence Party (UKIP), a party that surged to prominence in the decade before the referendum? And what do these momentous events reveal more broadly about the state of British politics and the divisions in British society?

The social changes that set the stage for Britain’s historic vote to leave the EU began decades ago. As we have argued elsewhere, one key “bottom-up” driver was a slow but relentless shift in the structure and attitudes of the electorate—the growing dominance of the middle classes and of socially liberal university graduates.<sup>2</sup> In the 1960s, more than half of those with jobs in Britain did manual work, and less than 10 percent of the electorate had a university

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degree. By the 2000s, the working class had dwindled to around a fifth of the employed electorate, while more than a third of voters were graduates. These changes gradually altered the electoral calculus for the historically dominant Labour and Conservative parties, whose traditional dividing line had been social class.

When the working classes were dominant, Labour could win power by mobilizing its core working-class support, while the Conservatives had to cultivate cross-class appeal. By the 1990s, however, the shift in the country's class structure had reversed this calculus. Labour was compelled by repeated electoral defeats and a shrinking working-class core vote to develop a new cross-class appeal, a strategy that was explicitly acknowledged and pursued by Tony Blair, who became party leader in 1994. Traditional working-class values and ideology were downplayed in Blair's rebranded "New Labour," which focused instead on building a managerial, centrist image designed to appeal to the middle classes. In particular, it sought to attract university-educated professionals, whose numbers were growing rapidly and whose social values on issues such as race, gender, and sexuality were a natural fit with the liberal left. This proved hugely successful in the short run, handing Labour an unprecedented three successive election victories. Yet success came at a price. Between 1997 and 2010, under three successive Labour governments, socially conservative, working-class white voters with few educational qualifications gradually lost faith in Labour as a party that represented them and responded to their concerns. The result among these voters was lower turnout, falling identification with Labour, and growing disaffection with the political system.<sup>3</sup>

This could have provided an opening for the Conservative Party, but David Cameron, who became the party's new leader in 2005, was focused on building a Conservative recovery by regaining support from the growing pool of university graduates and middle-class professionals that the party had lost to Blair's Labour in the 1990s. Working-class voters were concentrated in safe Labour constituencies, with daunting local majorities and weak local Conservative organizations, and so the middle-class suburbs appeared to offer a much more promising path back to power. While demographic change increased the electoral incentive for Labour to focus on middle-class university graduates, enduring geographical differences in vote patterns blunted the incentive for the Conservatives to respond by seeking the votes of working-class school

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leavers. As a result, white working-class voters were neglected by both parties, in a country where, despite recent and rapid demographic changes, the electorate remains overwhelmingly white (87 percent identified as such in the 2011 U.K. census). White working-class voters noticed the change in the parties’ behavior and reacted accordingly: They grew more negative about the traditional parties and the perceived lack of responsiveness of the political system.<sup>4</sup> Many turned their backs on electoral politics altogether, leading to lower turnout among the working classes and in historically “safe” Labour constituencies, while some began to see the extreme right-wing British National Party (BNP) as an outlet for their disaffection.<sup>5</sup>

A second long-running social change overlapped with these demographic shifts and magnified their importance—growing value divides over national identity, diversity and multiculturalism, and social liberalism more generally. Rising social groups such as ethnic minorities, graduates, and middle-class professionals hold values that are very different from those of the once-dominant but now fast-declining groups—older white voters, the working classes, and school leavers. As Britain’s two main parties reoriented themselves to focus on the rising liberal groups, a mainstream political consensus emerged on such issues. This socially liberal outlook regards diversity as a core social strength; sees discrimination by gender, race, religion, or sexual orientation as a key social evil; regards national identity as a matter of civic attachment, not ethnic ancestry; and thinks that individual freedoms matter much more than communal values.<sup>6</sup> The increased political prominence of this outlook is not just a matter of electoral expediency. It reflects the typical worldview of the university-educated professionals whose weight in the electorate is rapidly increasing, and who have also come to dominate the top tiers of politics and society. Politicians of all stripes have not adopted these positions solely to win votes. Most come from the professional middle classes and share the values it holds.

Such values, however, contrast sharply with the more nationalistic, communitarian, and inward-looking outlook of the declining segments of the electorate: the older, white, and working-class voters who left school with few qualifications. Such “left-behind” voters feel cut adrift by the convergence of the main parties on a socially liberal, multicultural consensus, a worldview that is alien to them. Among these voters, national identity is linked to ancestry and birthplace, not just institutions and civic attachments, and Britishness is far more important to

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them than it is to liberal graduates. The “left-behind” groups are more focused on order and stability than on freedom and diversity, so the very things that social liberals celebrate—diversity, mobility, rapid change—strike them as profoundly threatening. Their policy preferences reflect this: They favor not only harsh responses to criminals and terrorists who threaten social order, but also tough restrictions on immigration, as they do not want a more diverse and rapidly changing Britain.

Intolerance plays a role here too. Such voters tend to emphasize a more exclusive and exclusionary sense of national identity and to hold more negative stereotypes of any minority group that falls outside this identity. But intolerance is not the whole story. Many of the things that such voters value—order, stability, tradition—are valid and legitimate social ideals. They are just profoundly different from the values of the liberal consensus that has emerged over the past twenty years. Mainstream politicians attached to that consensus were not only ignoring the values and priorities of the “left-behind,” they were actively promoting a vision of Britain that the “left-behind” voters found threatening and rejected.

### **Igniting the Bonfire: Immigration, Europe, and UKIP**

By the early 2000s, then, Britain had a growing pool of electorally marginalized, politically disaffected, and low-skilled white working-class voters whose values and identity attachments were increasingly at odds with the mainstream liberal consensus. Such “left-behind” voters were available to form the nucleus of a new political movement, but they needed an issue and a party to crystallize their inchoate discontent and to mobilize it into electoral politics. Both arrived in the mid-2000s with the emergence of immigration as a central controversy, and a resulting surge in support for a new political challenger that swiftly became the primary vehicle for public opposition to EU membership, mass immigration, ethnic change, and the socially liberal and cosmopolitan values that had come to dominate the political establishment.

The spark that lit this remarkable conflagration was a fateful decision by Tony Blair’s New Labour government in 2003. Unlike most other EU member states in Western Europe,<sup>7</sup> Britain opted not to impose temporary restrictions on the inward migration of EU nationals from the so-called A8 states in Central and Eastern Europe that were due to join the EU

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in 2004—the Czech Republic, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Hungary, Poland, Slovakia, and Slovenia. Britain's low unemployment and growing economy attracted EU migrants in much larger numbers than originally forecasted by the government. Net migration to Britain had already been rising before the decision to admit the A8, but the influx from Central Europe further boosted the numbers and made controlling them more difficult. Net migration rose from 48,000 to 268,000 per annum between 1997 and 2004 and continued to rise, topping 300,000 in the years immediately before the referendum.<sup>8</sup> The statistics regarding net migration, which was the focus of government policy targets, routinely dominated political debate and coverage of immigration in the media. The A8 influx produced a strong reaction among voters, who even prior to the accession treaty had grown concerned about rising immigration. The share of voters naming migration as one of the nation's most important issues increased from under 3 percent at the start of 1997 to around 30 percent in 2003 and then to over 40 percent toward the end of 2007.<sup>9</sup> After that point, immigration was routinely named by voters as one of the top two most important issues, even in the depths of the financial crisis and the recession. By the time of the EU referendum, immigration had been at the top of the political agenda for well over a decade, something which had never happened before in British politics.

While the surge in migration produced a sea change in public opinion, the links between the numbers and public attitudes are not straightforward. Rising numbers of migrants did generate stronger public concern, but they did not produce across-the-board opposition. Public support for the settlement of skilled workers and the acceptance of foreign students at British universities remains high. Opposition has been focused on migrants whose economic contribution is less clear, including asylum seekers, migrants joining their families, and unskilled workers.<sup>10</sup> Nor is migration seen as simply a matter of economics. In Britain, as elsewhere in Europe, the strongest and most inflexible opposition to migration has come from voters who see it as a source or symbol of rapid social change that threatens traditional identities and values.

This latter form of anti-immigration sentiment is not new. British immigration debates have long been intertwined with public anxieties over race and identity, with public hostility in earlier decades directed at black and South Asian migrants from former imperial territories in the Caribbean and the Indian subcontinent, who began arriving in large numbers from the 1950s

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onward. Yet starting in 2004, the focus of anxiety moved to the large new flow of migrants from EU states in Central and Eastern Europe. As a result, anti-immigration voters came to see migration (and the social changes that it brought) as an issue closely bound up with Britain’s EU membership—a development that made the 2016 referendum very different from the only previous referendum on Britain’s relationship with Europe, held in 1975. The majority of voters in favor of reduced immigration realized that the EU was a key obstacle to achieving that goal, and consequently became more skeptical about the merits of continued EU membership.<sup>11</sup> Anxieties about the perceived effects of migration on public services, welfare, and identity were also fueled by a strident and populist tabloid press, which adopted a relentlessly negative stance on the issue. Front-page stories blaming EU migrants for social ills, and demanding action to control their numbers, became a regular occurrence after 2004.

Though both Labour and the Conservatives were keenly aware of the growing public disquiet about immigration, neither could find an effective response given the external constraints on policy.<sup>12</sup> Labour made efforts to limit or restrict migrant access to welfare benefits and to toughen up the asylum system, but it also defended immigration as economically and socially beneficial. The party made repeated pledges to “listen” to voter concerns on the issue, but it was unable or unwilling to propose policies that would significantly reduce migration, not least because doing so would have risked antagonizing socially liberal voters and activists. Ahead of the 2010 general election, Conservative Party leader David Cameron appealed directly to anxious voters by pledging to reduce net migration to “the tens of thousands.” This was an ill-advised promise to make, as EU treaty rights guarantee the free movement of EU nationals, making this degree of control over migration impossible so long as Britain remained in the EU. Throughout the Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government of 2010–15, efforts to restrict net migration by curbing inflows from outside the EU were continually offset by continued migration from within the EU, including new arrivals from countries in Southern Europe that were grappling with economic crises and unemployment, as well as migrants from newer EU members, Romania and Bulgaria, who gained unrestricted access to Britain in 2014.

Since 2004, then, the politics of immigration has featured persistent and strong public concern, a consistent demand for greater control of inflows, and repeated failures by different

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governments to meet this demand, despite repeated pledges to do so. This had a predictable and clear impact. Voters anxious about immigration lost faith in the ability of the main parties to manage the issue effectively, and became dissatisfied with the entire political system.<sup>13</sup> Public concerns about immigration began to drive growing opposition to EU membership, which was seen as the source of uncontrollable migration inflows and the obstacle to effective policy responses. Moreover, this mix of immigration anxiety and growing distrust was concentrated among those socially conservative and less-educated white voters who already felt left behind by rapid social, economic, and value changes. Immigration was the political catalyst for these voters, symbolizing the value divides that put them at odds with the mainstream liberal consensus, eroding their trust in the traditional parties and the political system, and providing an opening for a new challenger.<sup>14</sup>

The UKIP, founded in 1993 as a single-issue, Euroskeptic party, had little success in its first decade. Yet by 2015, it had become the most successful new party in English politics for a generation.<sup>15</sup> By fusing its original message of withdrawal from the EU with strident opposition to immigration, the UKIP was able to catch the angry public mood, and its leader Nigel Farage and his self-anointed “People’s Army” quickly attracted rising support, particularly after the 2010 election. The UKIP replaced the Liberal Democrats in opinion polls as the third most popular party in 2012, established a significant presence in local councils in 2013, won a plurality in the 2014 elections to the European Parliament, and attracted two defecting Conservative members of Parliament. In the 2015 general election, it secured 12.6 percent of the national vote, although Farage’s failure to convert this support into any seats in Parliament prompted him to resign (briefly) as leader. Analyses of the UKIP’s support revealed that it came mainly, though not exclusively, from older white social conservatives who often had few educational qualifications, had voted Conservative in the past, opposed immigration and EU membership, and felt dissatisfied with the two main parties.

The UKIP’s rise, alongside repeated rebellions by Euroskeptic backbench Conservative MPs, was a key factor that led David Cameron in 2013 to commit to holding a referendum on Britain’s continued EU membership if he were to secure a majority government at the 2015 general election. When the surprise Conservative majority materialized, Britain was put on a

path toward the 2016 referendum, an outcome that also prompted Farage to return as UKIP leader in order to campaign for a “Leave” vote.

### **The Referendum Campaign**

In February 2016, Cameron completed an intensive round of negotiation over the terms of Britain’s EU membership. He did obtain a few concessions. These included an opt-out from the declaration in EU treaties committing member states to an “ever closer union among the peoples of Europe,” as well as an “emergency brake” whereby a member state could apply to the European Commission for permission to suspend benefit payments to EU migrants if they were placing too great a burden on social services. Though these were not major reforms, Cameron declared that they were sufficient to justify recommending that Britain remain a member of the EU.

Two months later, in April 2016, the Electoral Commission (the United Kingdom’s independent elections regulator) chose “Vote Leave,” a group dominated by Euroskeptic Conservatives, as the officially designated campaign in favor of leaving the EU. This greatly disappointed the rival “Leave.EU” campaign, a more populist group founded by major UKIP donor Aaron Banks and endorsed by UKIP leader Nigel Farage. Official designation came with the right to spend up to £7 million, free television broadcasts, the right to distribute campaign material by mail at public expense, and £600,000 in public funding. These institutional supports gave the Vote Leave campaign, which wanted to highlight issues of sovereignty and the costs of EU membership, a major advantage over the Leave.EU campaign, which favored a strong focus on immigration.

Vote Leave recruited support from senior Conservative cabinet ministers and MPs, including Boris Johnson (the former London mayor and the Conservatives’ most popular politician), as well as a handful of Labour politicians. Meanwhile, the UKIP organized rallies and a bus tour that tended to focus on Labour-voting areas of the country. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was widely criticized throughout the campaign for failing to deliver an unambiguous and passionate case for Remain and for having a fractious, semi-detached relationship with the official Remain campaign, “Britain Stronger in Europe.” Among Labour MPs, dissatisfaction



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with his leadership was fueled by a television interview in which Corbyn rated his passion for remaining in the EU at “about 7 or 7.5 [out of 10]” and by repeated difficulties in getting Corbyn to engage with referendum campaigning. Corbyn’s diffidence was noticed by voters, with one campaign poll suggesting that almost half of all Labour voters did not think that Labour wanted to remain in the EU.<sup>16</sup>

The Remain and Leave campaigns focused on different issues, reflecting the profiles and priorities of their supporters. The official pro-Remain campaign focused on the economic risks of leaving the EU, including the claimed negative repercussions that withdrawal from the single market would have on the economy, on Britain’s image as an open and globalized marketplace, and on the financial costs to firms and households. These relentless appeals to economic interest were reflected in claims by the Treasury that each household would be £4,300 worse off annually if the electorate voted for Brexit. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) only days before the vote warned that leaving the EU would harm British living standards, stoke inflation, and by 2019 reduce economic output by 5.5 percent. A further warning from Chancellor of the Exchequer George Osborne said that such an outcome would necessitate harsh public spending cuts and tax increases. Businesses also intervened. One letter from 198 business leaders, including 36 from the Financial Times Stock Exchange 100 firms, warned that Brexit would threaten jobs and put the economy at risk.

Vote Leave, Leave.EU, and other Euroskeptic groups focused instead on arguments about immigration, EU threats to national sovereignty, and the need to redirect Britain’s contributions to the EU into public services at home, especially the National Health Service (NHS). Vote Leave claimed that EU membership cost Britain £350 million per week (“Enough to build a brand new, fully-staffed NHS hospital every week”); that more than half of net migration came from the EU; and that voters should reject the further enlargement of the EU to include countries such as Albania, Macedonia, Serbia, and Turkey. Meanwhile, the UKIP and the UKIP–allied Leave.EU campaign maintained their traditional focus on immigration, attracting controversy during the final days of the campaign by putting up a billboard showing a long line of refugees under the headline “Breaking Point.” The billboard was launched on the same day as the murder of Labour MP Jo Cox, who had allegedly been killed by a white man shouting “Britain First!”<sup>17</sup>

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Although polling throughout the campaign suggested a tight race, the consensus among the commentariat and the financial markets was that voters would in the end stick with the status quo. Political betting markets gave Remain a 93 percent chance of victory in the minutes before the first results were announced, and UKIP leader Nigel Farage even gave a concession speech early on during the overnight count, blaming the defeat he expected on a surge in voter registration among young people. What instead followed in the early hours of June 24 was the biggest shock to the British political system in living memory.

### **The Pollsters Miss the Mark**

Near the end of the campaign, seven polling companies released their final polls. Six of the seven reported a lead for Remain (one poll reported a striking 10-point Remain lead), and the one exception underestimated the Leave margin of victory.<sup>18</sup> The Leave win with 51.9 percent of the vote was larger than any of the late polling had expected. The lead for Leave was even stronger in England, where 53.4 percent voted for Brexit. Local authorities across the length and breadth of England, from rusting postindustrial Labour heartlands to prosperous Conservative suburbs, reported big majorities for Leave on very high turnouts—the overall turnout was the highest recorded in a U.K.-wide vote since 1992.

Local jurisdictions with large numbers of pensioners and a history of voting for the UKIP (such as East Dorset, Chiltern, East Hampshire, and Wealden) recorded very high turnouts and “Leave” shares. The Leave vote surpassed 70 percent in fourteen jurisdictions, many of which had been cultivated by the UKIP in the past. This was particularly so in parts of eastern England with large concentrations of “left-behind” voters (such as in Boston, South Holland, Castle Point, Thurrock, and Great Yarmouth). Leave also attracted majority support in approximately 70 percent of Labour-held areas, winning especially strong backing in poorer northern postindustrial areas (for example, Hartlepool, Middlesbrough, Blackpool, and Doncaster).

At the other end of the spectrum stood London, Northern Ireland, Scotland, and the university towns. Of the fifty local jurisdictions where the vote to remain in the EU was strongest, only eleven were not in London or Scotland, and most of these were areas with large universities. In a country divided on unfamiliar lines, London—home to the political, business,

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and media elite—was profoundly at odds with the country that it dominates and overshadows. London wholeheartedly embraced Europe, even as most of England emphatically rejected it. The same story played out in microcosm across the nation. Diverse urban areas and university towns returned large Remain majorities, but found themselves swimming against the tide, as the bulk of English local jurisdictions backed Leave.

Support for Brexit showed strong class, education, and ethnic components. The biggest majorities for Leave were in the least diverse local jurisdictions, or in those with large concentrations of working-class voters and voters with few educational qualifications. Local experiences with migration also mattered: Areas that had experienced significant demographic change as a result of inward EU migration over the past ten years registered larger Leave votes, after controlling for their other characteristics. At the individual level, support for Leave was 30 points higher among people with only “GCSE-level” qualifications (awarded to school leavers at sixteen) than it was for people with a university degree. Leave also was far stronger among those who felt anxious over the effects of immigration, who identified as English rather than British, and who generally exhibited socially conservative and authoritarian values.<sup>19</sup> Support for Brexit also overlapped very strongly with support for the UKIP in earlier elections, suggesting that the vote for Leave was driven at least in part by the same forces. Aside from this strong relationship at the aggregate level, research on individual Leave voters has suggested that 67 percent had at one time or another before the 2016 referendum expressed an interest in voting for the UKIP.<sup>20</sup>

### **The Political Fallout**

The immediate reaction to the result was chaotic. Britain’s currency and government bonds went into freefall. Yet the financial instability was dwarfed by the extraordinary political fallout. Within hours of discovering that his great gamble had failed, David Cameron announced his resignation, leaving the task of implementing Brexit to his successor. Days after the result, a wave of resignations and a vote of no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership by Labour MPs incensed at his failure to campaign effectively for EU membership triggered a crisis in the Labour opposition that would run for the entire summer.

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The following week, the front-runner to succeed Cameron, former mayor of London Boris Johnson, withdrew from the leadership race after his Conservative ally in the Leave campaign, Michael Gove, unexpectedly announced that he would run for the job. Gove himself withdrew the following week after failing to secure sufficient support among his fellow MPs. Just as things seemed to be quieting down, Nigel Farage unexpectedly resigned as UKIP leader, triggering a rolling internal battle for control of the party that had done most to drive the Euroskeptic agenda.<sup>21</sup> Ten days after the country had voted for Brexit, the three largest parties in England were all embroiled in simultaneous leadership crises.

Order was gradually restored as the summer wore on. New Conservative prime minister Theresa May, who had backed Remain but had been largely absent during the campaign, was elected unopposed in mid-July after her last remaining competitor, vocal Brexiteer Andrea Leadsom, withdrew following several gaffes and missteps. Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was reelected by the Labour membership in September after a bruising internal contest, while the UKIP's internal feuding continues at the time of this writing (November 2016), as the party, having achieved its founding objective, tries to agree on a new direction. As the dust begins to settle, all the parties are struggling to come to terms with a political landscape that was profoundly changed by the events of June 23 and with a political agenda set to be dominated for years by the most complex and high-stakes international negotiation in modern British history.

Whatever approach the government pursues in implementing the referendum verdict, the vote for Brexit has accelerated the polarization of values, outlooks, and political priorities that increasingly divides university-educated cosmopolitans from poorly qualified nationalists. The coming period of difficult and protracted negotiations between Britain and the EU will most likely entrench the divides separating England's socially liberal youth from its socially conservative pensioners, and its diverse and outward-looking big cities from its homogeneous and introspective small towns and declining industrial heartlands. The 2016 vote laid bare the depths of the divisions between these groups and placed them on opposite sides of the defining political decision for a generation. Both traditional governing parties now have to wrestle with internal conflicts between Leavers and Remainers, and between those who now want to prioritize

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single-market access and those who want to prioritize stronger curbs on free movement and migration.

The position of Prime Minister Theresa May during the early months of her premiership suggests an effort to reorient the Conservative Party toward traditional social conservatism and the English nationalism that often unites Leave voters. May starts in a strong position—her Conservative Party has consistently led Labour in opinion polls by double digits since the referendum vote—but such a strategy could put at risk the support of more liberal, Remain-voting Conservatives in the longer run. Labour under Jeremy Corbyn has wholeheartedly embraced the socially liberal values of Remain voters, but without much enthusiasm for the EU, at least from the party's leader and his allies. As a result, the Remain cause, which British Election Study data suggest emerged from the trauma of the referendum defeat as a much clearer and more salient political identity for its proponents, lacks coherent or credible support from the leaders of the two main parties.<sup>22</sup> This is a politically unstable situation. Demands for a clear voice for Remain voters are likely to grow as the problems and uncertainties of Brexit accumulate, and if neither traditional party is able to provide them with one, then at some point they may seek it elsewhere.

Leave voters also pose problems for the parties. Their clear preference for immigration controls on EU workers is considered by many political leaders in Europe to be incompatible with Britain's retaining full access to the single market. This puts Prime Minister May in the difficult position of trying to negotiate a new agreement with the EU that maximizes access to European markets for the City of London, while also including the more radical immigration reform that Leave voters clearly want to see. May's challenge is magnified by the fact that few comprehensive trade agreements have ever been resolved in a short timeframe, and the Brexit negotiation is likely to be more complex than most. A transitional deal may ease pressures, but it would be unlikely (at least initially) to deliver the immigration restrictions that Leave voters expect to see. On the other hand, if the government prioritizes swift action on immigration control over access to European markets, this could have large and unpredictable consequences for the economy. It is possible that any viable deal will produce a significant backlash, regardless of its contents. Many Leave voters have very low trust in the political system, yet also very high

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expectations that Brexit will not only deliver specific policy goals, but will reverse the entrenched social and economic changes they oppose. Such expectations may be impossible to meet. A reckoning would then be inevitable, and would open a new window of opportunity for radical right-wing populists. Managing the inevitable disappointment and disruption that will follow Brexit will be the current government's biggest challenge, while stoking and mobilizing a popular backlash may be the UKIP's best opportunity for post-Brexit renewal.

### **The Electoral Challenge of Tomorrow**

Although the political shifts that culminated in Brexit appear to have been remarkably rapid, the fuel that Euroskeptics and Leavers ignited to spectacular effect had been accumulating for a long time. A slow but steady alteration in the social structure of the electorate and the resultant shift in the focus of political competition away from the working class and toward the middle class had opened up a clear and growing gap in the electoral market. The origins of the vote for Brexit can be traced back over decades to changes in British society and politics that, by the time of the 2016 referendum, had left a growing segment of older, white, nationalist, and socially conservative voters feeling marginalized from mainstream politics and opposed to the socially liberal values that have become dominant in their country.

Repeated failures by both main parties to respond to public demands for controlled migration stoked a high-profile and deeply polarizing debate that thrust latent conflicts over identity and nationalism, social values and social change, into the center of British politics. Particularly from 2010 onward, these conflicts were mobilized by the U.K. Independence Party, which campaigned relentlessly to fuse these anxieties with the question of Britain's EU membership. This has been deeply disruptive for a political system in which electoral battles for at least the past two decades had focused instead on questions of economic stewardship and the management of public services, with the two main parties split primarily over redistribution and the relative roles that should be played by the state and the market. The 2016 referendum and the vote for Brexit exposed and deepened a newer set of cleavages that are largely cultural rather than economic.

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Across the Western democracies, the divides between nationalists and cosmopolitans, liberals and conservatives, and cultural traditionalists and multiculturalists cut across old divisions and present established parties with new and difficult challenges. In Britain, negotiating an acceptable exit deal with the EU is the primary policy challenge for the government today. But for all the country’s political parties, articulating and responding to the divisions that were laid bare in the Brexit vote will be the primary electoral challenge of tomorrow.

## NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Voters in the U.K. overseas territory of Gibraltar also took part in the vote, and (reflecting its strong economic integration with Spain) registered the strongest Remain vote of any voting area—96 percent of Gibraltarians voted Remain.

<sup>2</sup> For a detailed history of these changes and also of the UKIP, see Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Public Support for the Radical Right in Britain* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>3</sup> On this point, see Geoffrey Evans and James Tilley, “How Parties Shape Class Politics: Explaining the Decline of the Class Basis of Party Support,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (January 2012): 137–61.

<sup>4</sup> For more on the political costs of centrism in this period, see Heinz Brandenburg and Robert Johns, “The Declining Representativeness of the British Party System, and Why It Matters,” *Political Studies* 62 (June 2013): 704–25.

<sup>5</sup> For more on the drivers of BNP support, see Robert Ford and Matthew J. Goodwin, “Angry White Men: Individual and Contextual Predictors of Support for the British National Party,” *Political Studies* 58 (January 2010): 1–25.

<sup>6</sup> The classic account of the growing prominence of such values in Western democracies is Ronald Inglehart, *Modernization and Postmodernization* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997). Relevant British evidence on the value divide is presented in James R. Tilley, “Research Note: Libertarian-Authoritarian Value Change in Britain, 1974–2001,” *Political Studies* 53 (June 2005): 442–453; and in Zsolt Kiss and Alison Park, “National Identity: Exploring Britishness,” in *British Social Attitudes: The 31<sup>st</sup> Report*, Alison Park, Caroline Bryson, and John Curtice, eds. (London: NatCen Social Research, 2014), [http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38984/bsa31\\_national\\_identity.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38984/bsa31_national_identity.pdf).

<sup>7</sup> The other exceptions were Sweden and Ireland.

<sup>8</sup> In the year ending March 2016, the latest estimates put net migration at 327,000.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, the regular issues index data collected by Ipsos-MORI, which tracks the salience of issues each month, at [www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2420/Issues-Index-Archive.aspx](http://www.ipsos-mori.com/researchpublications/researcharchive/2420/Issues-Index-Archive.aspx).

<sup>10</sup> See Robert Ford; Gareth Morell, and Anthony Heath, “‘Fewer But Better?’ Public Views About Immigration,” in *British Social Attitudes: The 29<sup>th</sup> Report*, Alison Park et al., eds. (London: NatCen Social Research, 2012), [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/1141/bsa29\\_immigration.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/1141/bsa29_immigration.pdf); and Robert Ford and Anthony Heath, “Immigration: A Nation Divided?” in *British Social Attitudes: The 31<sup>st</sup> Report*, Alison Park, Caroline Bryson, and

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Robert Ford and Matthew Goodwin, “Britain After Brexit: A Nation Divided,” *Journal of Democracy* 28 (January 2017): 17–30.

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John Curtice, eds. (London: NatCen Social Research, 2014), [www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38190/bsa31\\_immigration.pdf](http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38190/bsa31_immigration.pdf).

<sup>11</sup> See Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon, “How Immigration Became A Eurosceptic Issue,” LSE Brexit, 5 January 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/01/05/how-immigration-became-a-eurosceptic-issue>.

<sup>12</sup> For more on the impact of external constraints on British immigration policy, see Robert Ford, Will Jennings, and Will Somerville (2015) “Public Opinion, Responsiveness and Constraint: Britain’s Three Immigration Policy Regimes,” *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies* 41 (March 2015): 1391–1411.

<sup>13</sup> See James Dennison and Matthew J. Goodwin, “Immigration, Issue Ownership and the Rise of UKIP,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 68 (September 2015): 168–87.

<sup>14</sup> Lauren McLaren, “Immigration and Trust in Politics in Britain,” *British Journal of Political Science* 42 (January 2012): 163–85.

<sup>15</sup> Scotland experienced its own very different political earthquake in this period, with the remarkable rise to dominance of the Scottish National Party. See Robert Johns and James Mitchell, *Takeover: Explaining the Extraordinary Rise of the SNP* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2016). Scottish politics is now so different from English politics that it makes little sense to talk about a common “British” politics on matters such as the EU, immigration, or identity.

<sup>16</sup> John Ashmore, “Labour Voters Remain Unsure of Party’s EU Referendum Position,” Politics Home, 31 May 2016, [www.politicshome.com/news/europe/eu-policy-agenda/brexit/news/75574/labour-voters-remain-unsure-party-s-eu-referendum](http://www.politicshome.com/news/europe/eu-policy-agenda/brexit/news/75574/labour-voters-remain-unsure-party-s-eu-referendum).

<sup>17</sup> Britain First is the name of an extreme right political organization, but it is not clear if the attacker’s reference to this organization was intentional or accidental.

<sup>18</sup> For a fuller discussion of the polling and the EU referendum, see the British Polling Council press release, “Performance of the Polls in the EU Referendum,” 24 June 2016, [www.britishpollingcouncil.org/performance-of-the-polls-in-the-eu-referendum](http://www.britishpollingcouncil.org/performance-of-the-polls-in-the-eu-referendum).

<sup>19</sup> Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, “Brexit Vote Explained: Poverty, Low Skills and Lack of Opportunities,” Joseph Rowntree Foundation, 31 August 2016, available at [www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities](http://www.jrf.org.uk/report/brexit-vote-explained-poverty-low-skills-and-lack-opportunities).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Mellon and Geoffrey Evans, “Are Leave Voters Mainly UKIP?” British Election Study, 7 August 2016, [www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/are-leave-voters-mainly-ukip-by-jonathan-mellon-and-geoffrey-evans/#.WBdLgZOLSi4](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/are-leave-voters-mainly-ukip-by-jonathan-mellon-and-geoffrey-evans/#.WBdLgZOLSi4).

<sup>21</sup> Farage’s resignation triggered a leadership election in which the front-runner (Stephen Woolfe) withdrew after failing to complete his paperwork and the eventual winner (Diane James) resigned after three days. The ensuing second leadership election featured Woolfe, who withdrew again after a physical confrontation with another MEP in Brussels, and another favored candidate (Raheem Kassam) withdrew weeks later. Senior UKIP figures do not seem overly keen on leading a party whose founding mission has now been accomplished.

<sup>22</sup> See “Brexit Britain: British Election Study Insights from the Post-EU Referendum Wave of the British Election Study Panel,” 10 June 2016, [www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/brexit-britain-british-election-study-insights-from-the-post-eu-referendum-wave-of-the-bes-internet-panel/#.WDLSPmLRhE](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/brexit-britain-british-election-study-insights-from-the-post-eu-referendum-wave-of-the-bes-internet-panel/#.WDLSPmLRhE).