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The UK 2017 General Election Examined: Income, Poverty and Brexit

Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath

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Executive Summary

The 2017 general election took place in the shadow of the vote for Brexit. It also presented more marginalised sections of British society – voters on low incomes, those in poverty and who are struggling to get by – with a far more meaningful choice than that seen at previous elections. Somewhat unusually, both Labour and the Conservatives made a pitch to lower income groups. On one side, the Conservatives made a bold play to appeal to many lower income voters’ support for Brexit and immigration control. On the other, Jeremy Corbyn and Labour instead sought to appeal to these voters’ economic concerns over living standards, redistribution, inequality and austerity. But how did these voters on lower incomes, and those at risk or in poverty, vote at the election?

Key findings:

- 1. People on low incomes are still more likely to vote for the Labour party than for the Conservative party:** 42% of them voted for Labour, compared to 37% who voted for the Conservative’s. But both parties increased their support among low income voters compared to 2015 (by about 8 percentage points each), although neither party made a dramatic breakthrough at the expense of the other. By contrast, high income voters remained much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour: 53% compared to 24%.
- 2. While the Conservative Party’s hard vision of Brexit attracted some low income voters, Labour’s radical left-wing anti-austerity vision attracted them much more.** To have the best of both worlds people on low incomes would probably favour a party that offered them *both* redistribution and control of immigration, but given the choice at the 2017 election their preference for redistribution outweighed their preference for immigration control. Other things being equal, support for Labour among people on low incomes with left-wing economic views was 66% compared to just 23% for the Conservatives – handing Labour a lead of over 40 percentage points. By contrast, support for Labour among people on low incomes but who are pro-Brexit was 32% compared to 54% for the Conservatives – a Conservative lead of 22 percentage points.
- 3. Some of the most substantial advances by the Conservative Party came in struggling non-metropolitan, pro-Brexit and Labour-held areas but the Conservative Party did not make sufficient progress in these areas to push seats from the red into the blue column.** Of an estimated 140 Labour seats in England that had given majority support to Brexit the average Conservative vote increased by 8.3 percentage points, compared to an average of 4.6 points across England as a whole. Yet Labour contained this advance, even capturing more than a dozen seats from the Conservatives that are estimated to have voted for Brexit.
- 4. People who thought that their household’s financial situation had got worse during the year before the election were considerably more likely to back Labour than the**

Conservatives (48% vs. 27%). In contrast, those who thought that their financial situation had got *better* –of which there were relatively few (just 13% thought this) - were more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (52% vs. 29%). With inflation rising, wages stagnant and low rates of growth this is an ominous finding for the Conservative Party.

5. **People’s political preferences are not only shaped by their own personal financial circumstances, but also by the surrounding conditions of the communities in which they live.** The effect on the likelihood of voting Conservative of living in an area with a high or low proportion of people at risk of working age poverty was similar in scale to the effect of having a high or low income personally. These sharp differences will continue to impact upon British politics.

Overall, our findings suggest that while many voters on low incomes agreed with the vote for Brexit, and still favour reductions in immigration, at the 2017 election they were relatively more likely to vote for Labour because of their desire for improved living standards and to oppose austerity. This suggests that Labour’s pitch to low income voters and those in poverty was a key driver of its unexpectedly strong performance at the 2017 election. It also suggests, more generally, that the main parties should take more notice of the economic concerns of these voters and keep them as much on the centre stage of British politics as possible.

1. The pitch to low income voters

How did people on low-incomes and at risk of poverty vote at the 2017 general election? How do these voting patterns compare to those at the 2016 referendum on Britain's EU membership – a vote that cut across traditional party allegiances? And, in the shadow of the post-2008 financial crisis, what might these patterns tell us about the political views and priorities of people on low incomes?

The 2017 general election took place amid a wider context of austerity in which a freeze on working-age benefits and tax credit, stagnant wages, a return to inflation and the rising cost of living, have introduced new risks for people and families struggling on low-incomes, or who are already in poverty (JRF 2017). The election also took place in the aftermath of the 2016 vote for Brexit. As our past research with the JRF has shown, people who struggle on low incomes and have few or no qualifications tended to vote for Brexit (Heath and Goodwin 2016b).

This work also pointed to the importance of place, with voters who reside in 'low skill areas' significantly more likely to vote for Brexit. That such groups, alongside pensioners, were key to Brexit has since been confirmed by others, who show that voters who struggle financially and feel 'left behind' were the most likely to play down the perceived economic risks of Brexit ahead of the vote (Clarke et al. 2017; also Curtice 2017; Goodwin and Milazzo 2015; NatCen 2016). Exploring how these same groups voted at the 2017 general election is an important task. Did these concerns about immigration and Brexit over-ride their more traditional concerns about low incomes and economic inequality within the context of austerity? Or did these concerns about economic inequality persist? And what do the answers to these questions reveal about the policy priorities of these voters?

These questions are all the more intriguing given the context of the 2017 election. Unlike in the past, when the concerns of these voters were more marginalized in Britain's political debate (see Evans and Tilley, 2017), people on lower incomes were far more central to the national conversation. After decades when general elections had provided people with echoes rather than choices, the 2017 election offered people a more meaningful choice. The Conservative Party gambled that it could convert support for Brexit among these groups into major gains at the election, including capturing some of the nearly 70 per cent of Labour-held seats that had given majority support to Brexit (Hanretty 2016). The party called on such voters to ensure the delivery of Brexit and endorse Prime Minister May's 'Lancaster House' vision of Brexit, which included leaving the single market, the customs union and ending the free movement of EU nationals.

Theresa May downplayed David Cameron's more liberal conservatism in favour of trying to win over the working-class and 'ordinary working families' (the 'OWFs'). This was partly about winning back Conservative voters who had defected to UKIP but also financially struggling voters in Labour-held seats who had voted for Brexit. The strategy was reflected in promises to cap energy prices, increase the national living wage, talk of developing a new industrial strategy, support for grammar schools and criticism of the

‘citizens of nowhere’ and ‘liberal elite’. One of May’s chief advisors (Nick Timothy) would later elaborate on this strategy, urging his party to go much further in tackling declining social mobility, a real term decline in average wages, rising intergenerational inequality, corporate irresponsibility and tax evasion. May’s brand of ‘post-liberal conservatism’ was thus seen by its advocates as different from a libertarian tradition that had dominated the party in earlier years, and also Cameron’s more socially liberal conservatism.¹

Under Jeremy Corbyn, meanwhile, Labour sought to offer a more radical left-wing platform that was rooted in the party’s traditional calls for a fairer redistribution of economic growth, to tackle poverty, advance social justice and oppose austerity. Revealingly, the Labour manifesto cited poverty sixteen times, while the Conservative manifesto only mentioned it nine times, and usually in relation to pensioners or international aid. Labour also made a wider pitch to voters on middle and lower incomes, promising to only increase income taxes on people earning over £80,000 a year, introduce new workplace protections and rights, take water, the Royal Mail, railways and energy back into public ownership, with specific references to helping families in fuel poverty, invest in infrastructure, bolster spending on public services, including childcare and the NHS, and abolish university tuition fees.

Labour made other offers to those on low incomes, although some have argued that their policy offer did not fully match up to their rhetorical commitments.¹ The party did promise to scrap a ‘punitive’ sanctions regime; abolish the spare room subsidy (the ‘Bedroom Tax’); reinstate housing benefit for people aged under 21-years old; scrapping cuts to Bereavement Support Payments; opposing cuts to work allowances in Universal Credit and the decision to limit tax credit and UC payments to the first two children in a family; a new Child Poverty Strategy aimed at the nearly four million children currently living in poverty; a Social Security Bill that would increase Employment and Support Allowance (ESA), increase allowances for carer’s, scrap the Work Capability and Personal Independence Payment assessments; and commission a report into expanding the Access to Work programme. Labour also devoted specific attention to outlining its stance on disabled people, an estimated 4.2 million of who live in poverty. These policies were wrapped in calls to work for ‘the many, not the few’.

Given this pitch from Labour and the Conservatives, how did people on low-incomes and groups at risk of poverty navigate this choice, with the Conservative Party appealing more to their identity-related concerns over immigration, belonging and community, which had been central to the Brexit vote, and Labour appealing more to their economic concerns over jobs, incomes, inequality and redistribution? Faced with these contrasting appeals, did they split their vote evenly between the two parties? Or did the anti-austerity message resonate more with some groups of struggling voters and the anti-immigration

¹ Labour did not commit to ending a four-year freeze on working age benefits, which since 2015 has disproportionately impacted people who struggle on low incomes. Despite opposing austerity, Labour actually only committed to reversing £2 billion of £9 billion in cuts, leaving the benefits freeze in place, and just as inflation was on the rise ([Resolution Foundation, 2017](#)).

message resonate more with others? These are the questions that we will explore.

2. The Dynamics of the 2017 Vote

Much of what we know about the dynamics of the 2017 general election comes from analysis at the 'aggregate level', examining the relationship between the characteristics of areas and how they voted, as opposed to examining actual individual voters. We will first examine the dynamics of the 2017 vote at the aggregate-level before turning to look at the individual voters who participated in the British Election Study Internet Panel.

We can start by exploring turnout. Contrary to talk in earlier years about a worrying spread of political apathy (e.g. Marsh, O'Toole and Jones 2006), turnout at the 2017 general election reached almost 69 per cent, the highest since 1997 and another high after the 72 per cent rate of turnout that was recorded at the 2016 referendum. Compared to the previous election in 2015, turnout tended to increase the most in seats that tended to be more affluent, had large proportions of young people, graduates, ethnic minorities, and which had voted to remain in the EU.

Because turnout increased in many younger areas, which often had large numbers of students, many commentators talked about a 'Youthquake'. Of the 20 constituencies in England with the highest concentration of 18-29 years old, turnout increased by an average of 4.6 percentage points but of the 20 seats with the lowest proportion of young people, turnout increased by just 2.6 points. Thus, even though 'older' seats still tended to record higher turnout, in 2017 it was often younger seats that recorded the sharpest *increase* in turnout on the previous election in 2015. Though London attracted much of the attention it would be a mistake to assume that these sharp increases in turnout were only recorded in the capital. In fact, of the 50 seats that recorded the sharpest increase in turnout only 14 were in London. The tremors of the Youthquake were felt further afield in seats like Canterbury, Cambridge, Manchester Withington, and the City of Chester.

Turnout also tended to increase in pro-Remain areas. Of the 20 seats in England and Wales which registered the highest support for Brexit, turnout in 2017 increased by an average of just 1.6 percentage points, while across the 20 seats that registered the strongest support for Remain turnout increased by an average of almost 6 points. This provides some evidence of a backlash among some voters against the vote for Brexit.

These increases in turnout tended to hurt the Conservatives. Across the 20 seats that saw the sharpest increases in turnout the average Labour vote increased by 12.6 percentage points while the average Conservative vote increased by only 0.8 points. Seen through a wider lens, across the 50 seats that saw the sharpest increases in turnout the average Labour vote increased by 12 points while the average Conservative vote increased by only 3.2 points. In fact, of the 50 seats that recorded the largest increase in turnout Labour hold all but nine. Such statistics reveal how Corbyn and Labour did have some success in bringing new voters into the polling stations to support their platform.

How did the main parties tend to perform in different types of areas? Compared to 2015, the Conservative Party was more likely to increase its vote in seats where average education levels were low and there are larger proportions of older and white voters. Of the 20 seats with the largest proportion of pensioners the Conservative Party vote increased by 7.6 percentage points while Labour's increased by almost 9 points. Yet in the 20 seats with the *lowest* proportion of pensioners the Conservative vote declined by 2.4 points while Labour's vote surged by 12. The Conservatives also tended to perform better in seats with larger proportions of citizens with no qualifications. In the 20 seats with the largest proportion of voters with no qualifications the Conservative vote increased by 11 points while the Labour vote was up by almost 8 points. Yet in the 20 seats with the lowest proportion of voters with no qualifications the Conservative vote fell by -4.7 points while Labour's increased by 10 points.

There are also striking patterns regarding ethnicity. In the 20 most ethnically diverse seats (i.e. with the largest proportion of 'non-white' voters), compared to 2015 the Conservative vote declined by 0.5 points while Labour's vote increased by 10 points. In sharp contrast, in the 20 seats with the lowest non-white populations the Conservative vote increased by an average of 8.6 points while the Labour vote increased by an average of 8.5 points.

Linked to these findings is the fact that the Conservatives also made gains in seats where the UK Independence Party (UKIP) had previously been strong. There is a strong correlation between a collapse of support for UKIP and an increase of support for the Conservatives – a pattern that was especially marked in low-skill areas that are characterized by larger numbers of working-class residents and people with few or no qualifications. Across 20 seats that had given UKIP its strongest support in 2015, UKIP lost support in all of them, losing an average of 21 points. This pattern was especially visible in struggling seats in East England, such as Boston and Skegness, Castle Point and Clacton, as well as more northern Labour-held areas like Heywood and Middleton, Wentworth and Dearne, Stoke-on-Trent North and Don Valley. In such seats, compared to 2015 UKIP's vote fell by at least 20 points while the Conservative vote surged by at least 15 points, revealing how Theresa May's strategy of appealing to these areas did have some success (although as we note below, it was also somewhat limited).

Looking ahead to the next election, therefore, the Conservative's may be inclined to target pro-Brexit, working-class and currently Labour-held seats where Labour MPs are on small majorities, such as Dudley North, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Crewe and Nantwich, Barrow and Furness, and Ashfield. Labour, in contrast, may be inclined to work on ways to defend this territory while also targeting more pro-Remain and younger Conservative-held seats with small majorities, such as Pudsey, Chipping Barnet, Hendon, Finchley and Golders Green, or Putney.

Another important factor that underpins voting patterns is the difference between more urban and densely populated areas of the country versus more rural and less

populated seats. This 'urban-periphery' divide is attracting more attention among researchers. In the UK, some researchers point to these geographical divides between 'citizens residing in locations strongly connected to global growth and those who are not' (Jennings and Stoker 2017), a dynamic that is also attracting attention in the United States where both Obama and Clinton tended to poll strongly in more densely populated areas while struggling in less metropolitan districts (Scala and Johnson 2017).

In 2017, Labour did tend to make gains in more densely-populated seats. Labour made gains in large parts of London but also in urban seats outside of the capital, such as Portsmouth South, Bristol West, Leicester South, Nottingham East and Cardiff Central. The story, however, is rather different in the least densely populated seats. Some of the most substantial advances by the Conservative Party came in struggling non-metropolitan areas like Bolsover, Boston and Skegness, Don Valley, Rother Valley, Ashfield and Mansfield. Such patterns reflect a growing divide not only in the life experiences of people in urban versus periphery areas but also in their voting patterns.

Linked to this is the Conservative Party's performance in pro-Brexit and Labour-held seats. The Conservatives did make gains in a large swathe of pro-Brexit Labour territory. Each of the six Labour seats that were captured by the Conservatives were estimated to have voted for Brexit. In traditional Labour seats like Rother Valley, held by Labour since 1918, the Conservative vote increased by more than 17 points. This was emblematic of a wider pattern of the Conservatives making gains in often traditional Labour seats that had also backed Brexit, such as Ashfield, Heywood and Middleton, Stoke-on-Trent North, Burnley, Stoke-on-Trent Central, Redcar, Chesterfield, Don Valley, Wentworth and Dearne and Bolsover –where the Conservative vote increased by at least 16 percentage points.

In fact, across an estimated 140 Labour seats in England that had given majority support to Brexit the average Conservative vote increased by 8.3 percentage points, compared to an average of 4.6 points across England as a whole. This advance was even more striking in the most strongly pro-Brexit Labour seats. In an estimated 71 Labour seats in England where at least 60 per cent of people had voted to leave the EU, the Conservative vote surged by more than 11 percentage points, once again suggesting that the party was more appealing to voters in these areas than it had been in 2015 and prior to the vote for Brexit.

However, the Conservative Party did not make sufficient progress in these Labour areas to push seats from the red and into the blue column. That the 'Brexit effect' was not clear-cut was reflected in the fact that Labour captured seventeen seats from the Conservatives that were estimated to have backed Brexit, revealing how Labour's offensive was not solely concentrated in strongly pro-Remain seats.² Labour more generally did not suffer a collapse of support in pro-Brexit seats, which some Conservative strategists had anticipated.

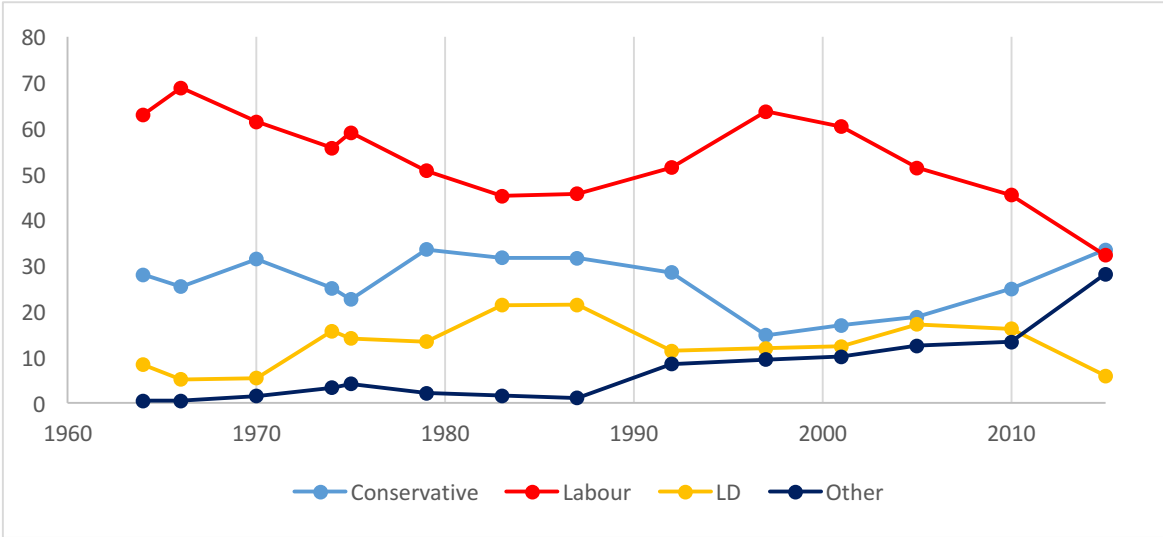
In summary, Labour tended to advance in areas of the country with larger numbers of 18-40 year olds, graduates, that were more ethnically diverse, and also where, since 2015, support for the Greens and Liberal Democrats had declined. In contrast, the Conservative Party was more likely to advance in seats where average education levels were low and there are larger proportions of older and white voters. Thus, the social and political factors that were most strongly associated with the vote for Brexit were also most strongly associated with changes in support for the main parties, although it is important to note that some shifts predated the vote for Brexit (see Ford and Goodwin 2014).

In this respect, one of the most important long term trends that has reshaped the structure of political battles in Britain concerns class. Put simply, over the last forty years or so class has become far less politically salient, and the difference between the working class who traditionally supported Labour and the middle class who traditionally supported the Conservatives has narrowed. In the 1960s, support for Labour was some 40 points higher among the working class than the middle class. By the 2010s this gap had narrowed to less than 20 points (see Heath 2015, Evans and Tilley 2012, 2017). As Labour, in particular, became a more 'middle class' party, turnout among the working class declined relatively steeply (Heath 2016).

In addition working class voters have become more likely to vote for parties other than Labour. Figure 1 shows the percentage of working class voters who supported Labour, the Conservatives, or another party in each election since the 1964 using British Election Study face to face data. Broadly speaking, when Labour has won elections, it has tended to do so by securing a majority of the votes from the working class. From 1964 to the mid-1970s (when Labour won 3 out of 4 elections) working class voters were much more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (by around 30 to 40 percentage points). In the Thatcher era these divisions narrowed somewhat to around 15 percentage points, with the Conservatives gaining over 30 percent of the working class vote. However, with the re-election of Labour under Tony Blair, Labour once again enjoyed a majority of working class support, with over 60 percent of working class voters supporting Labour in the 1997 and 2001 elections (though it should be noted that Labour enjoyed a substantial advantage among all class groups during this period, including the middle class). Although since 2005 Labour support among the working class has declined somewhat, as recently as 2010 the party still enjoyed a 20-point lead over the Conservatives.

In 2015, however, and for the first time, Labour's lead among working-class voters disappeared. The working classes were relatively evenly split between Labour and the Conservatives, while the insurgent UKIP in England and SNP in Scotland made huge inroads into working class support, securing nearly 30 per cent of the vote between them. With the collapse of UKIP in 2017, a large number of working class votes were therefore up for grabs. And as we have already outlined, somewhat unusually both of the two main parties made a concerted pitch for their votes. In the following sections we examine where these working-class voters went and why.

Figure 1: Voting behaviour of working class voters, 1964-2015



Source: British Election Study face to face cumulative file (Heath 2016).

3. Poverty, Income and the 2017 Election

In order to explore how people voted at the 2017 election we can use new individual-level data from the British Election Study Internet panel.³ While an online survey is not as methodologically rigorous as face-to-face random probability surveys, the estimate of party vote shares were reasonably close to the election result. The survey is also helpful because the questionnaire on which it is based probes a wide range of topics, including attitudes toward austerity, immigration, Brexit, social and political values, and people’s backgrounds. We can start by comparing how support for the Conservatives and Labour varied among different groups.

Our past research on the 2016 referendum (Goodwin and Heath 2016) showed that large proportions of the working class, people on low incomes and those with few educational qualifications voted for Brexit. While the vote for Brexit was 52 per cent across the entire country it reached an average level of 75 per cent among voters with no qualifications, 71 per cent among routine manual workers, 59 per cent among those not in paid work and 58 per cent among those in households with an income of less than £20,000 per year. This work also pointed to the importance of place, with voters who reside in low skill areas being significantly more likely to turnout for Brexit.⁴

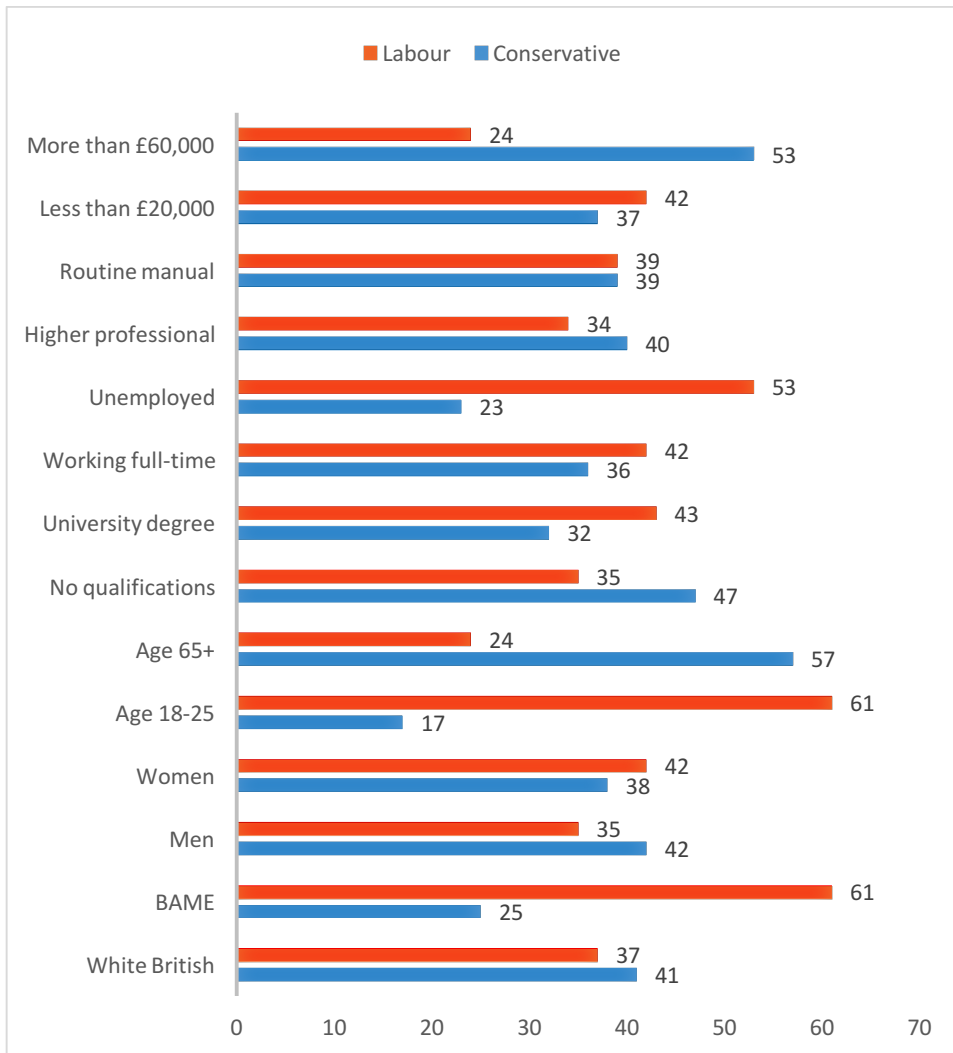
Yet compared to the referendum, in this election these social divides were not quite so clear-cut, and there was certainly not a dramatic realignment along the lines that had been important in the referendum. Figure 2 shows how, in 2017, people on low incomes were marginally more likely to vote Labour than Conservative. For people on incomes of

less than £20,000 per year, average support for Labour was 42% compared to 37% for the Conservatives, a difference of five percentage points. By contrast, people on high incomes were much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour: average support for the Conservatives among people with incomes of more than £60,000 per year was 53%, compared to 24% for Labour, a difference of 29 points.

Compared to the 2015 election, both parties managed to increase their level of support among people on low incomes, by roughly similar amounts (about 8 percentage points each). So even though both parties succeeded in making inroads, neither party made a dramatic breakthrough at the expense of the other.

We can also probe other indicators of poverty. People who are unemployed were far more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (53% vs. 23%), though there was not much of a difference in support between those working full-time (42% vs. 36%). Retired people were much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (53% vs. 27%). People of working age were more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (44% vs 34%). Data on occupational background is still being coded, so we have to be cautious in terms of how we interpret the results – but based on the data that we do have, those who work in routine manual occupations were evenly split between Labour and Conservatives (38% vs. 38%) whereas those in higher professional occupations were somewhat more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (40% vs. 34%).⁵ There is, therefore, not much evidence of a class divide in party support. A similar picture also emerges with respect to the market research social grade classifications, which is a somewhat crude measure of social class. This indicates that the middle class (AB) were somewhat more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (42% vs. 35%), whereas the working class (DE) were somewhat less likely to vote Conservative than Labour (36% vs 43%). Overall though it appears likely that in 2017 the Conservative Party attracted a record level of support among the working-class.

Figure 2 Party support among different demographic sub-groups



We can drill down further by exploring differences in people’s *subjective* experiences of economic well-being (see Table 1). With respect to people’s living conditions, people who thought that their household’s financial situation had got worse during the previous year were considerably more likely to back Labour than the Conservatives (48% vs. 27%). In contrast, those who thought that their financial situation had got *better* –of whom there were relatively few (just 13% thought this) - were more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (52% vs. 29%). Similarly, people who thought that the general economic situation of the country had got worse over the previous year, of whom there were many (61%) were more likely to vote for Labour than the Conservatives (49% vs. 26%). And the small number of voters (just over 10%) who felt that Britain’s economic situation had got better were overwhelmingly more likely to vote Conservative (80% vs. 10%).

Table 1 Economic evaluations and party support, row percentages

	Conservative	Labour	Other	Total
Household economy got worse	27	48	25	39
Household economy got better	52	29	19	13
National economy got worse	26	49	26	61
National economy got better	80	10	9	11

These differences relating to income and the economy are important but they were not the only differences to be recorded. Women were somewhat more likely to vote Labour than Conservatives (42% vs. 38%) whereas men were more likely to vote Conservative by around 7 points (42% vs. 35%). Support for Labour was also higher –by 36 percentage points – among voters from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds (BAME) than among white British. Whereas 61 percent of people from a BAME background voted Labour, just 25% gave their vote to the Conservatives.

Also striking were differences in levels of support for the main parties across different age cohorts. Support for the Conservatives among pensioners was some 40 percentage points greater than support among people aged 18-24 years old, whereas support for Labour was 37 percentage points greater among the young than the old. These pronounced age differences are of similar magnitude to those that we observed in the EU referendum and underscore how age has become an important factor to explaining voting in Britain. They are also somewhat greater than observed in 2015, perhaps reflecting the Conservative’s success at capturing former (typically older) UKIP voters (Goodwin and Milazzo 2015).

Lastly, and unlike previous elections, people without any educational qualifications were more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (by about 12 percentage points) whereas those with a university degree were more likely to vote Labour (by about 11 points). Although, historically, education was not as important as class in structuring vote choice in general elections, the relationship did tend to go in the same direction, with

graduates being more likely to vote Conservative. Historically, the share of the vote for the Conservatives has been between 3 and 10 percentage points higher among graduates than among those without a degree. This time it was 8 points lower.

We can get a clearer sense of how different groups voted by examining the impact of these different characteristics simultaneously, using a statistical technique called 'logistic regression'. This technique allows us to examine the 'independent' impact of each variable on individual support for each of the two main parties while controlling for each of the other variables. For example, we know that people who went to university tend to end up with better-paid jobs than people who left school at 16. So, in Figure 2, part of what we observe as an effect of income may in fact be diluted by someone's level of education. To get round this, we can examine both variables (and others) simultaneously. By examining education and income together, we can tell whether people with similar education levels but different levels of income differ in terms of their support for the two main parties.

Our results are presented in Table 3 (shown at the end of the report). When we consider age, sex and income together they suggest that people on low incomes were significantly more likely to vote Labour. There are also differences by ethnic background: people from black and minority ethnic communities and, in particular, 'white other' backgrounds were much less likely to support vote Conservative than people from white British backgrounds. Older people were also much more likely to support the Conservatives than younger people.

When studying these data, it is the effect of age that is particularly pronounced. We can illustrate this by calculating the 'predicted probability' of voting for the Conservatives or Labour for different groups, and while holding everything else constant.⁶ Support for the Conservatives was about 13 percentage points lower among those with a university degree than it was for people with GCSE qualifications or below, whereas support for Labour was 4 percentage points higher. With respect to income, support for the Conservatives was 20 percentage points higher among those on more than £60,000 than it was for those on less than £20,000 per year, whereas support for Labour was 20 points lower. Finally, and most strikingly, support for the Conservatives was nearly 30 percentage points higher among those aged 65 than it was for those aged under 30, whereas support for Labour was 23 points lower.

In summary, whereas those on lower incomes were more likely to vote Labour than those on higher incomes, people with no or few qualifications were more likely to vote Conservative than those who have more qualifications. Our findings reveal that the pattern of support for Labour and the Conservatives in 2017 was somewhat different by age and education than it had been at previous elections, and also different to the patterns that we observed at the 2016 referendum. At the time of the vote for Brexit, we found much stronger education effects with both the highly educated and wealthy being more likely to vote to remain in the EU. By contrast the effect of class and income was not

very different to what it had been in 2015 – though income, more so than class – continued to play an important role.

4. Poverty and Place

So far, we have explored the voting behaviour of people who are at risk of poverty because of individual characteristics, such as low incomes and few educational qualifications. Yet the risk of poverty is also shaped by the area in which people live, which underlines why it is important to examine the role of poverty from another angle. The JRF has calculated an index of how the risk of working age poverty varies across England and Wales (details are available [here](#)).

The Working Age Poverty Risk Index combines data on the receipt of out-of-work and in-work benefits to generate a ‘working age poverty risk score’ for each parliamentary constituency in Britain. High-risk scores mean a constituency has high levels of in- and/or out-of-work benefit receipt – two factors that are strongly associated with poverty. Low scores mean a constituency has lower levels on these indicators. The final risk score for a constituency varies between 0 and 10, where 0 would be a constituency with both the lowest rate of in-work benefit receipt and the lowest rate of tax credit receipt and 10 would be a constituency with the highest rates on both indicators. In practice, because there is variation in where constituencies rank across the two indicators, the highest score is 8.5 (Bradford West) and the lowest score is 0.1 (Wimbledon).

We can use these data to explore how the risk of working age poverty in an area influenced people’s voting behaviour across the country. To do this, we simultaneously examine the influence of people’s backgrounds, such as their personal income and level of education, as well as the characteristics of the area in which they live, such as whether they reside in a community that is at high risk of poverty. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3 at the end of the report, but we will summarize the findings here.

People who live in areas with a high risk of poverty were more likely to vote for Labour than people who live in areas that are at low risk. Indeed, we find that after controlling for individual level attributes, the probability of voting Conservative varies from 48% in places with a very low risk of poverty (such as Wimbledon) to just 27% in places with a very high risk of poverty (such as Bradford West). These differences show that the type of place where people live and the risk of poverty in an area make a substantial difference to how they vote.

In England and Wales both people on high and low incomes were much less likely to vote Conservative if they live in an area that is at high risk of poverty than an area which is at low risk of poverty. Indeed, the difference in Conservative support between people living in the most high risk and low risk poverty areas is just over 20 percentage points, which is about the same as the difference between people on high and low incomes (just

under 20 percentage points). This underlines why the role of place, not only people, is important to understanding voting patterns.

These two effects of poverty at the individual and community level combine to reveal striking differences. The probability of voting Conservative for someone who enjoys a high income and lives in a low risk poverty area is 62%, while the probability of someone on a low income in a high risk poverty area is just 23% - a difference of nearly 40 points. By contrast, the probability of voting Labour for someone on a low income in a high risk poverty area is 70%, whereas the probability of someone on a high income in a low risk poverty area is just 17% - a difference of over 50 points.

People on low incomes living in an area with a low risk of poverty have a similar probability of voting Conservative as a person on a high income living in an area with a high risk of poverty. These results show that people's political preferences are not only shaped by their own personal financial circumstances, but also by the surrounding conditions of the communities in which they live. Moreover, the effect of poverty is largely unaffected by the inclusion of other area-level variables, such as the education profile of the constituency, or the age or ethnic diversity profile of the constituency. These findings also hold if we examine the level of support for Brexit in the constituency.

5. Being Pulled in Different Directions: Austerity versus Brexit

As we have seen, people on lower incomes tend to vote Labour while those on higher incomes tend to vote Conservative. This indicates that economic inequality continues to be an important influence on how people vote. Yet voters on low-incomes, and people who are either in, or at risk of, poverty, also face competing pressures. Whereas those with few qualifications tend to be more pro-Brexit and anti-immigration, which may draw them towards the Conservatives, people on lower incomes also tend to have more support for left-wing policies and favour economic redistribution, which may draw them toward Labour.

These competing pressures were especially visible at the 2017 general election at which both Labour and the Conservatives sought to appeal to low-income voters and those in poverty, albeit in quite different ways. While the Conservative Party mainly pitched to the identity concerns held by many lower income voters who had voted for Brexit, Labour mainly pitched to the economic concerns of these same social groups over austerity, inequality and falling living standards. Therefore, for people on lower incomes and who also often lack qualifications the 2017 election provided a choice which pulled them in different directions. On one side, Labour pitched to their material interests and desire for economic fairness. On the other, the Conservatives pitched to their concerns over identity, their desire for reduced immigration and support for a 'harder' Brexit.

How did people on low incomes and groups at risk of poverty navigate this choice? Faced with these competing appeals, did these groups split evenly between the two

parties? Or did the anti-austerity message resonate more with some groups of poor voters while the anti-immigration message resonated more with others?

We can answer these questions by exploring voters' political preferences. We start by considering the 'Brexit Effect' in shaping people's voting patterns at the 2017 general election. At the time of the election, most voters ranked Brexit as the top issue facing Britain, with 57 per cent identifying 'leaving the EU' as among the *most* important issues, well ahead of health (40 per cent), immigration (36 per cent) and the economy (27 per cent). In fact, according to data compiled by YouGov Brexit had consistently been ranked as the top issue ever since the 2016 referendum.⁷ The importance of Brexit is also underlined by the British Election Study, which used an open-ended question to ask voters throughout the campaign to identify the *single* most important issue. Brexit dominated, with about one in three respondents using the word 'Brexit' when asked to identify the top issue.⁸

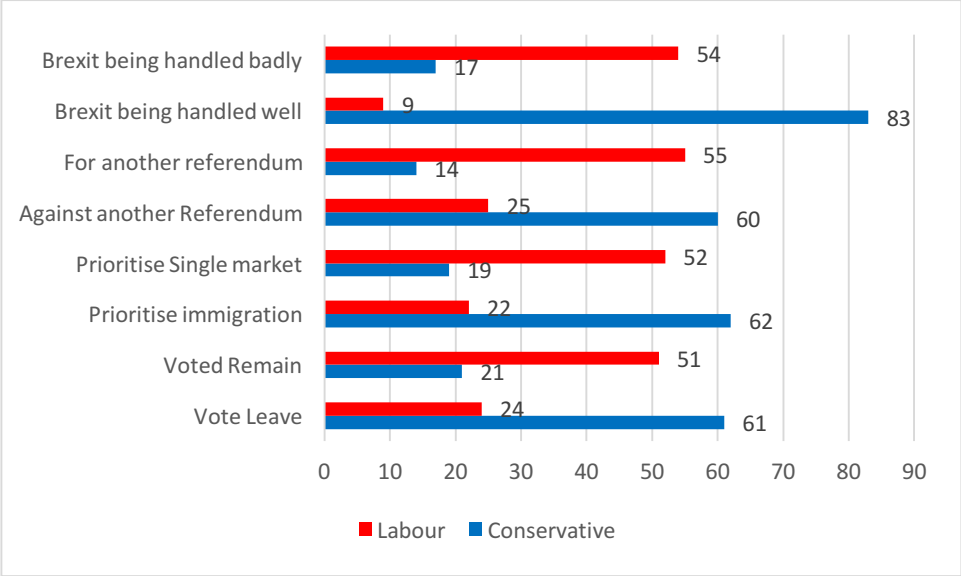
What do voters think about Brexit? Although there is still a great deal of uncertainty about what effect, if any, Brexit will have on Britain's future, on balance a plurality of all respondents thought that Brexit would lower immigration: 47% said that Brexit would help to reduce immigration to the UK, compared to 6% who thought it might increase immigration (the rest didn't know or thought immigration would stay the same). However, on balance people were also rather more likely to think that Brexit would be bad for the economy as well as bad for their own finances, and that Brexit will increase unemployment. People were relatively evenly divided on whether Brexit would help to boost international trade or not. There is thus broad acceptance that Brexit will be bad for jobs and the economy, but will nonetheless help to restrict immigration – a picture that is consistent with other research (see Clarke et al. 2017).

When asked about the trade-off between how people would like to see the Brexit negotiations develop, people are evenly divided about whether access to the single market or control of immigration should be prioritized: 39% place retaining access to the single market as a higher priority than restricting immigration, and 39% place restricting immigration as a higher priority than retaining access to the single market (the rest either didn't know or would place both as an equal priority). There is also broad awareness that retaining access to the single market would involve continuing a financial contribution to the EU (47% said it would compared to 27% who said it wouldn't) and accepting free movement (50% said it would compared to 24% who said it wouldn't). On balance then, people have a broad awareness about the respective trade-offs involved. Even if people recognize that Brexit is likely to be bad for the economy and that controlling free movement is incompatible with retaining access to the single market – they are still relatively evenly divided about whether to push for a soft Brexit (retaining access to the single market) or a hard Brexit (prioritizing the control of immigration).

How does support for these trade-offs relate to people's political allegiances? As shown in Figure 3 below, people who voted to remain in the EU were much more likely

to vote Labour than Conservative (51% vs. 21%) whereas people who voted for Brexit were much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (61% vs. 24%). Similarly, people who prioritize access to the single market were much more likely to vote Labour (52% vs. 19%), while people who prioritize restricting immigration were much more likely to vote Conservative (62% vs. 22%).

Figure 3 Party support and attitudes towards Brexit



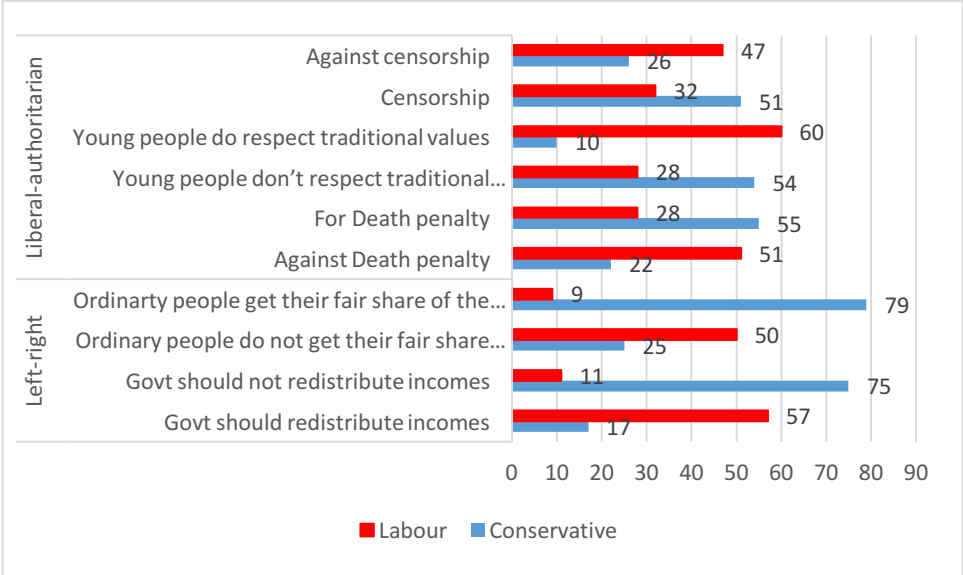
Our earlier work with the JRF revealed that support for Leaving the EU [\[add link\]](#) was strongly related to social values, and that people who held more socially conservative values were far more likely to vote Leave. However, there was not much of a relationship between supporting Leave and whether or not someone considered themselves to be on the left wing or right wing of the political spectrum. The 2016 referendum vote was structured more or less on a single value dimension, with more liberal-minded voters opting to Remain and more socially conservative or authoritarian voters opting to Leave. This helps to explain why there was significant support for Brexit in Labour-held areas as well as Conservative areas. But to what extent, if at all, did this hold true at the 2017 election?

Voting at a general election is a more complicated affair than voting in a ‘remain-or-leave’ referendum. This is because there are far more cross-cutting pressures that might influence people’s voting, such as their feelings of loyalty to the parties, or the fact that a much broader range of issues are being debated. So how did people’s values influence their vote choice at the general election that was held one year on from the referendum?

We explore two distinct sets of values. Firstly, we examine whether people hold socially conservative or liberal views; which includes their attitudes towards things like the death penalty, censorship, and traditional values. Past research indicates that those who are socially conservative are more worried about immigration and want to reduce it. Secondly, we examine whether people hold right wing or left wing economic views; which includes their level of support for redistribution and their perception of the extent to which ordinary people get their fair share of the UK's wealth.

Figure 4 presents our results. People who hold more socially authoritarian attitudes, such as supporting the death penalty, were far more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (55% vs 28%). By contrast, people who hold more economically left wing attitudes, such as favouring income redistribution, were much more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (57% vs 17%). So, whereas there is some evidence that socially conservative values still mattered, the role of traditional economic left-right values was far more important at the 2017 election than at the 2016 referendum.

Figure 4 Policy attitudes and political values



How do these values relate to income? The results of the analysis are presented in Table 2 at the end of the report, but we will summarize the findings here. Support for right-wing versus left-wing economic policies are strongly influenced by income. Rich people are much more economically right wing than people on low incomes. There is a slight tendency for graduates to be more economically right wing than those with low qualifications, but the effect of education is much weaker than the effect of income. People from ethnic minority groups tend to be more economically left wing than white British people, women tend to be more right wing than men, and people who are not in

work tend to be more left wing than those who are in work. Thus, on balance, the groups most at risk of poverty still tend to hold more economically left wing attitudes and favour redistribution. Given the commitments made by Labour during the campaign, we may therefore expect these groups to be drawn towards Labour on economic policies.

By contrast, a slightly different pattern emerges with respect to whether people hold socially liberal or authoritarian values – and whether people prioritize access to the single market or controlling immigration. Those with more socially conservative views were much more likely to support Leave, in large part because of worries about immigration, whilst those with more liberal views were more likely to support remain.

These attitudes are strongly influenced by education, and age. Graduates and the young tend to be much more liberal (and pro-soft Brexit) than people with low qualifications and the old, who tend to be more authoritarian (and pro-hard Brexit). There is some evidence that people on low incomes tend to be more authoritarian and pro-hard Brexit than those on high incomes, but the effect of income is generally much weaker than the effect of education (and age). There was some link between income and these views with those on low incomes more likely to have voted Leave and somewhat more likely to have socially conservative opinions. This meant that the Conservative Party's focus on a 'hard' Brexit delivering lower immigration did attract some of these voters.

People at risk of poverty – those on low incomes, who are not in work, and people with few qualifications – are therefore pulled in different directions. These groups tend to be more economically left wing, which may draw them towards Labour, but they also tend to hold socially authoritarian views and favour Brexit, which may draw them towards the Conservatives. However, it worth noting that the political preferences of groups at risk of poverty are not homogenous, and that whereas attitudes towards redistribution are strongly related to income, their attitudes towards Brexit are more strongly related to education.

5. Making a Choice: Austerity versus Brexit

To explore these issues we can see how different values shaped voting patterns among those at risk of poverty by examining them in conjunction with the demographic variables that we have already considered. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 3 at the end of the report, but we will summarize the findings here. Left-right economic values and attitudes towards Brexit had a strong impact on people's 2017 vote choice, and in the expected direction. People with left wing economic views are much more likely to vote for Labour than the Conservatives. People who are pro-Brexit are much more likely to vote for the Conservatives than Labour.

However, examining these different attitudes also sheds light on how groups at risk of poverty navigated the competing messages from the two major parties. When we add the Brexit variable into our model the effect of education all but disappears. This indicates

that an important reason why graduates were more likely to vote Labour is because they were more anti-Brexit (and why people with low educational skills were more likely to vote Conservative is that they were more pro-Brexit). In addition, once attitudes towards Brexit are taken into account, the effect of income becomes somewhat stronger. This suggests that low income voters were attracted to the Conservative Party's anti-immigration appeal, and that without it support for Labour would have been even higher.

Finally, in the third model we examine the impact of left-right economic views. When we control for whether or not someone is economically left wing the effect of income is greatly reduced, indicating that an important reason why people on low incomes voted Labour is because they favoured redistribution and were attracted to Corbyn's anti-austerity platform. This suggests that Labour's appeal to lower income voters and its more economically populist message did appeal to these voters and was a powerful driver of Labour's support.

These models help to show how the political preferences of groups at risk of poverty influenced their vote choice. While the Conservative Party's hard vision of Brexit may have attracted some voters on low incomes, Labour's radical left-wing anti-austerity vision attracted them much more. We can illustrate this by calculating the 'predicted probability' of voting for the Conservatives or Labour for people on low incomes with different political views, while holding everything else constant. Other things being equal, support for Labour among people on low incomes with left-wing economic views was 66% compared to just 23% for the Conservatives – representing a Labour lead of over 40 percentage points.⁹ By contrast, support for Labour among people on low incomes who are pro-Brexit was just 32% compared to 54% for the Conservatives – representing a Tory lead of 22 percentage points.¹⁰ This indicates that the effect of support for left-wing economic views had a stronger impact on vote choice than the effect of pro-Brexit and anti-immigration views. Even though the Conservatives did well among the segment of the population on low incomes who were relatively pro-Brexit, Labour did even better among the segment who were relatively left-wing. To have the best of both worlds people on low incomes would probably favour a party that offered them *both* redistribution and control of immigration, but given the choice on balance their preference for redistribution outweighed their preference for immigration control.

Conclusions and Implications

Elections are a time of frenzied speculation during the run up to the result and detailed post-mortems in the aftermath, with every gain and loss scrutinized in minute detail. The focus of analysis and coverage is therefore often about change, and what tipped the balance one way or the other. However, focusing on these marginal changes often obscures the big picture and the important fault lines that run through society.

Whereas the impact of poverty and deprivation was not a particularly novel feature of the 2017 election – and in many respects was similar to the pattern in 2015– it was

nonetheless important. Britain is a deeply divided country, and the life chances of people vary enormously depending upon their own personal backgrounds and the areas in which they live. These divisions continue to be important, and the voting patterns of people on low incomes in deprived areas are very different to the political preferences of the well off in affluent areas.

The election provided an opportunity for poor and marginalized sections of society to take centre stage. Somewhat unusually, both of Britain's main parties made a pitch for their votes. On the one hand, the Conservatives made a bold play to appeal to the Brexit majority. On the other, Labour pitched to the material interests of those on low incomes.

Our findings suggest that many of these voters who are struggling to get by, while they may agree with the vote for Brexit and calls to curb immigration, were more likely to vote for Labour because of their desire for economic redistribution and to endorse Labour's anti-austerity platform. This suggests that Labour's pitch to low income voters, and those in poverty, was a key driver of its performance at the 2017 election, but no political party made a major and clear breakthrough with these groups. While the Conservative vision of Brexit attracted some poor voters, Labour's more radical anti-austerity vision tended to attract these voters even more. Both of the main parties, therefore, would be well advised to take the economic concerns of these key groups seriously and to keep them as much on the centre stage of British politics as possible.

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Data behind the analysis

Table 2: Demographics and values, OLS regression

VARIABLES	(1) Left-right scale	(2) Lib-Auth scale	(3) EU priority scale
Age			
Age 30 to 44 yrs	-0.00 (0.06)	0.94*** (0.06)	0.71*** (0.09)
Age 45 to 54 yrs	-0.07 (0.06)	1.16*** (0.06)	1.16*** (0.09)
Age 55 to 64 yrs	-0.03 (0.06)	1.25*** (0.06)	1.31*** (0.09)
Age 65 plus	0.32*** (0.07)	1.39*** (0.07)	1.39*** (0.11)
Income			
£20-39,000	0.30*** (0.04)	0.01 (0.04)	-0.14** (0.06)
£40-59,000	0.79*** (0.06)	-0.15** (0.07)	-0.41*** (0.10)
£60,000 plus	1.58*** (0.09)	-0.32*** (0.10)	-0.42*** (0.15)
Education			
A Level	0.18*** (0.04)	-0.71*** (0.04)	-0.98*** (0.06)
University	0.10*** (0.03)	-1.81*** (0.03)	-2.38*** (0.05)
White other	-0.35*** (0.07)	-0.73*** (0.08)	-1.24*** (0.12)
BAME	-0.38*** (0.07)	0.56*** (0.08)	-0.03 (0.12)
Female	0.26*** (0.03)	0.28*** (0.03)	0.33*** (0.04)
Work status			
Student	-0.12 (0.09)	-1.16*** (0.09)	-1.09*** (0.14)
Retired	0.00 (0.05)	0.03 (0.05)	0.13 (0.08)
Not in work	-0.50*** (0.05)	-0.19*** (0.05)	0.03 (0.07)
Constant	2.60*** (0.06)	6.02*** (0.06)	5.11*** (0.10)

Observations	23,268	22,615	22,949
R-squared	0.04	0.21	0.15

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses. *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Reference categories are age 18 to 29 years old, income less than £20,000 per year, GCSE or below qualifications, white British, male, in work.

The coefficients reported in the table refers to the unstandardized beta coefficients. Values marked with an asterisk indicate that there is a statistically 'significant' difference between the group in question and the reference category, controlling for the other variables in the model. Values greater than zero indicate that the group in question tends to be more rightwing (for example) than the reference group, holding all other factors constant; and values less than zero indicate that the group in question tends to be less right-wing (for example) than the reference group, holding all other factors constant.

Table 3: Demographics, values and vote choice, Logistic regression

	(1) Conservative	(2) Conservative	(3) Conservative
Age 30 to 44 yrs	0.65*** (0.08)	0.43*** (0.09)	0.66*** (0.12)
Age 45 to 54 yrs	0.88*** (0.08)	0.50*** (0.09)	0.91*** (0.12)
Age 55 to 64 yrs	1.15*** (0.08)	0.75*** (0.10)	1.18*** (0.12)
Age 65 plus	1.61*** (0.09)	1.27*** (0.11)	1.62*** (0.14)
£20-39,000	0.17*** (0.05)	0.23*** (0.06)	0.10 (0.07)
£40-59,000	0.45*** (0.08)	0.65*** (0.09)	0.30** (0.12)
£60,000 plus	1.03*** (0.13)	1.32*** (0.14)	0.58*** (0.19)
A Level	-0.05 (0.05)	0.17*** (0.06)	-0.00 (0.07)
University	-0.55*** (0.04)	-0.04 (0.05)	-0.26*** (0.06)

White other	-0.76*** (0.12)	-0.49*** (0.13)	-0.37** (0.17)
BAME	-0.46*** (0.10)	-0.48*** (0.11)	-0.33** (0.14)
Female	-0.05 (0.04)	-0.11** (0.04)	-0.32*** (0.05)
Student	-0.75*** (0.14)	-0.58*** (0.16)	-0.80*** (0.22)
Retired	0.00 (0.06)	-0.06 (0.07)	-0.03 (0.09)
Not in work	-0.47*** (0.06)	-0.53*** (0.07)	-0.20** (0.09)
JRF poverty index	-0.20*** (0.01)	-0.25*** (0.02)	-0.19*** (0.02)
EU priority scale		0.31*** (0.01)	0.33*** (0.01)
Left-right scale			0.81*** (0.02)
Constant	-0.24*** (0.09)	-1.71*** (0.11)	-4.52*** (0.16)
Observations	14,108	12,830	12,063

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses *** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1. Reference categories are age 18 to 29 years old, income less than £20,000 per year, GCSE or below qualifications, white British, male, in work.

The coefficients reported in the table refers to the log odds ratio. Values marked with an asterisk indicate that there is a statistically 'significant' difference in the likelihood of voting Conservative rather than Labour between the group in question and the reference category, controlling for the other variables in the model. Values greater than zero indicate that the group in question is more likely to vote Conservative than the reference group, holding all other factors constant; and values less than zero indicate that the group in question is less likely to vote Conservative than the reference group, holding all other factors constant.

Notes

¹ Nick Timothy, 'If we want to win, Tories cannot be free-market fundamentalists', *The Telegraph* August 10 2017

² Seats that were estimated to have given majority support to Brexit and which also went from Conservative to Labour at the 2017 general election included High Peak, Weaver Vale, Warrington South, Keighley, Colne Valley, Croydon Central, Stockton South, Bury North, Crewe and Nantwich, Derby North, Vale of Clwyd, Ipswich, Bedford, Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport, Peterborough, Lincoln and Portsmouth South

³ Fieldhouse, E., J. Green., G. Evans., H. Schmitt, C. van der Eijk, J. Mellon and C. Prosser (2017) British Election Study Internet Panel Wave 13. DOI: 10.15127/1.293723

⁴ Where the skill level of an area is based on the percentage of people in the constituency with a university degree.

⁵ Data on occupational background is currently only available for about half the sample, so these results may change when the coding is completed.

⁶ These estimates are based on multinomial logistic regression models

⁷ YouGov Political Tracker. Available online:

https://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/qsiscyspgx/YG%20Trackers%20-%20Top%20Issues.pdf (accessed August 18 2017).

⁸ British Election Study, 'What was it all about? The 2017 election campaign in voters' own words', August 2 2017. Available online: <http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-was-it-all-about-the-2017-election-campaign-in-voters-own-words/#.WZatXdPyuWg> (accessed August 18 2017).

⁹ We define people with left wing views as those who are one standard deviation to the left of the average position on the left-right scale for people with low incomes.

¹⁰ We define people as pro-Brexit who are one standard deviation away from the mean on the immigration-single market EU priority scale for people with low incomes.