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The 2017 General Election, Brexit and the Return to Two-Party Politics: An Aggregate- Level Analysis of the Result

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Forthcoming in Political Quarterly

Abstract

The outcome of the 2017 general election—a hung parliament—defied most predictions. In this article, we draw on aggregate-level data to conduct an initial exploration of the vote. What was the impact of Brexit on the 2017 general election result? What difference did the collapse of UKIP make? And what was the relative importance of factors such as turnout, education, age, and ethnic diversity on support for the two main parties? First, we find that turnout was generally higher in more pro-remain areas, and places with high concentrations of young people, ethnic minorities, and university graduates. Second, we find that the Conservatives made gains in the sort of places that had previously backed Brexit and previously voted for UKIP. But, third, we find that the gains the Conservatives made from the electoral decline of UKIP were off-set by losses in the sort of places that had previously supported the Conservatives, particularly areas in southern England with larger numbers of graduates. The implication of these findings is that while a Brexit effect contributed to a ‘realignment on the right’, with the Conservative strategy appealing to people in places that had previously voted for UKIP, this strategy was not without an electoral cost, and appears to have hurt the party in more middle class areas.

Keywords: UK general election, Brexit, vote change, turnout

Introduction

IN JUNE 2017 Britain went to the polls for a nation-wide vote for the third time in two years, and for the third time the result confounded most expectations. Ahead of the election, all but one of Britain's forecasters had predicted a majority Conservative government, with the predicted size of these majorities ranging from a low of forty-eight to a high of 124, with a mean majority of seventy.² Prior to the election campaign, 335 'expert' academics, pollsters and journalists surveyed by the Political Studies Association similarly forecast an average Conservative majority of ninety-two, though most expected a majority of at least one hundred.³ The eventual result—a hung parliament—was thus a shock.

For the incumbent Conservative party, a general election that had been called to stamp its authority on Parliament ended in a humiliating retreat. Under the leadership of Theresa May, who had become the party's leader only eleven months earlier, the Conservative party polled 42.3 per cent of the vote, an increase of 5.4 points on its result in 2015 and its highest share of the vote since Margaret Thatcher's landslide in 1983. But in the eyes of many it was a pyrrhic victory. The Conservatives won only 317 seats, thirteen fewer than in 2015 when David Cameron had won a small but surprising majority.

For the Labour party, meanwhile, an election that some had feared would culminate in an historic loss and perhaps a devastating split instead ended with heroic defeat. Prior to the campaign, when in some polls Labour had languished twenty-one points behind the Conservatives, some had talked of the party slumping to its lowest number of seats since the 1930s. But under the leadership of radical left-winger Jeremy Corbyn, Labour outperformed the final opinion polls by an average of five points, receiving forty per cent of the vote—the party's highest share since Tony Blair's second landslide in 2001, and the third highest since 1970. Corbyn and Labour won 262 seats—an increase of thirty on 2015 and the largest number since Blair's third and final victory in 2005. Compared to 2015, Labour increased its share of the vote by 9.5 percentage points, the party's largest single advance

since the election of Labour and Clement Attlee in 1945.

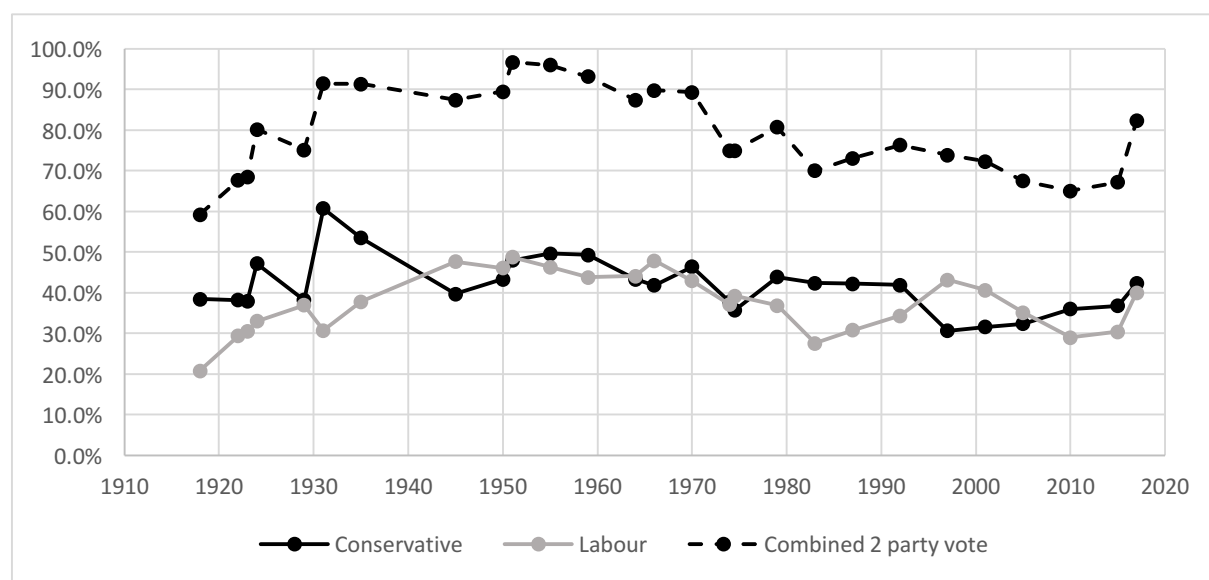
In the end, however, only seventy seats changed hands. The Conservatives gained twenty seats but lost thirty-three. Most of their gains came in Scotland, where they gained an extra twelve seats, and most of their losses came in London and the South East, where they lost six seats each, respectively, and the South West where they lost four seats. By contrast, Labour gained thirty-six seats and lost six seats. They made net gains across the country, winning an extra six seats in Scotland, three seats in Wales, and twenty-one seats across England.

Confronted with a hung parliament, Conservative expectations of a commanding majority were forced to make way for a ‘confidence and supply’ arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP). Yet despite neither party managing to secure an overall majority, one feature of the election was the return to dominance of the two main parties. With a combined 82.4 per cent share of the vote, the two main parties received their largest combined share of the vote since 1970, and with 26.5 million votes they received more votes than at any previous election since 1951. After decades when elections had provided voters with echoes rather than choices, the 2017 contest was also one where there was a more meaningful policy difference between the main parties: Theresa May’s vision of a ‘hard Brexit’ versus Jeremy Corbyn’s anti-austerity platform and populist cry to represent the ‘many not the few’. Faced with a clear and compelling choice, the 2017 election engaged voters to an extent not seen for the last twenty years, with turnout at sixty-nine per cent, the highest since 1997.

Such trends were mirrored in a slump of public support for ‘the others’, with the share of the vote going to parties other than Labour or the Conservatives falling from thirty-two per cent in 2015 to just 17.5 per cent two years later. The collapse of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had campaigned for Brexit, was especially noticeable. Compared to 2015, when UKIP had received almost four million votes, only two years later UKIP’s number of candidates fell from 624 to 377, its share of the national vote dropped from almost thirteen per cent to just 1.8 per cent, and the number of seats in which UKIP polled at least ten per cent of the vote crashed, from 450 to only two (the eastern Conservative-held seat of Thurrock and the northern Labour-held seat of Hartlepool).⁴ Compared to

their results in 2015, the Scottish National Party (SNP), Liberal Democrats, Plaid Cymru and the Greens also recorded declines in their vote share.

Figure 1: Historic two-party share of the vote



In this article, we put the results of the 2017 general election under the microscope to explore, at the aggregate level, the factors that thwarted Conservative hopes for a commanding majority, defied predictions of a Corbyn-led catastrophe for Labour and produced the second hung parliament in the last decade. Building on our earlier work, we devote specific attention to the role of Brexit in the election.⁵ While the 2017 general election will forever be known as the ‘Brexit election’, what exactly was the impact of the Brexit issue on the outcome? How did the collapse of UKIP, a party that during the 2010–2015 parliament had paved the way for the national vote for Brexit, affect support for the main parties? And what role was played by other factors, such as turnout, age, social class and education? After providing an overview of the campaign, we will turn to examine each of these questions in turn.

Britain in flux: an overview of the campaign

The 2017 general election was one that did not need to be called. Theresa May and her team had been

encouraged by the polls, which during the fortnight before May called the election had put the Conservative party on an average of 42.8 per cent, Labour on 25.5 per cent, UKIP on eleven per cent and the Liberal Democrats on 10.3 per cent. With an average Conservative lead of 17.3 percentage points in the polls, May stood on Downing Street and asked the country to provide a strong mandate for the vision of Brexit that she had set out in the ‘Lancaster House speech’ in January 2017. This included leaving the single market and much of the customs union; negotiating a new free trade agreement with the EU; ending the free movement principle as it applies to Britain; ending the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice in Britain; and putting the final deal to a vote in both houses of Parliament. From the outset, therefore, Prime Minister May had framed the contest as one that was chiefly about Brexit, an opportunity to ‘strengthen the hand’ of the Prime Minister ahead of the Brexit negotiations, and ‘stick to our plan for a stronger Britain and take the right long-term decisions for a more secure future’. May had also suggested that opposition parties and an unelected House of Lords were seeking to block or overturn the public vote for Brexit, a claim that was reflected on the following day’s front page of *The Daily Mail*: ‘Crush the Saboteurs’.

But May and her team had also sought to broaden the Conservative electorate. Ever since becoming party leader, May, alongside her advisors Nick Timothy and Fiona Hill, had sought to downplay Cameron’s more liberal brand of conservatism and rebuild links with blue-collar Britain and ‘ordinary working families’ (the so-called ‘OWFs’), including those who had previously voted Labour. Even Maurice Glasman, a Labour peer appointed by Ed Miliband and pioneer of the ‘Blue Labour’ project, which had urged Labour to reconnect with the same groups of voters, was invited to Downing Street to discuss the strategy with May’s team.⁶ Between the autumn of 2016 and the 2017 election campaign, May and her team launched a succession of populist interventions and policy proposals designed to lure back traditional social conservatives who had defected to UKIP or felt alienated by Cameron’s ‘modernisation’, and win over pro-Brexit and economically left-behind workers in more traditional Labour areas. Aside from ‘Brexit means Brexit’, this narrative of a more interventionist conservatism was cultivated through promises to cap energy prices, increase the national living wage, develop a new industrial strategy, support grammar schools, give workers more

input into the governance of companies, and end the free movement of EU nationals. May also publicly criticised a ‘liberal elite’ and ‘citizens of nowhere’, prompting the *Financial Times* to quip how Britain’s Prime Minister ‘has even mastered the rhetoric of anti-elitism, an impressive feat for a woman whose life story takes in the Home Counties, the Bank of England and Downing Street’.⁷

Theresa May’s electoral gamble, therefore, was that the path to a commanding majority ran through not only retaining the 330 seats that the Conservative Party held at the close of the 2015–2017 parliament, an estimated 247 of which had voted to leave the EU and eighty-three of which had voted to remain, but also by capturing a large number of Labour’s 229 seats, especially those among the estimated 149 that had voted for Brexit at the 2016 referendum.⁸ May’s plan thus rested on an assumption that the Conservative party would retain votes in the typically more prosperous, more highly educated, middle-class and urban areas that had tended to back remain, while making big inroads among more economically disadvantaged, less educated and working-class areas, often away from the big cities, which had voted for Brexit. In this sense, the election result depended upon the extent to which the Brexit fault line trumped traditional partisan sympathies, and whether there was any electoral cost to heavily targeting leavers while maintaining support from remainers.

During the campaign, however, there was a decisive shift in the public mood. During the remainder of April, after May had called the election, the Conservatives enjoyed an average lead of nineteen points. Yet, by the second half of May this had dwindled to an average lead of only 9.5 points and then, in the final days of the campaign in June, to just 6.6 points. Theresa May’s leadership ratings also declined sharply. According to data compiled by YouGov on the question ‘who would make the best Prime Minister?’ on the day the election was called, May enjoyed a commanding lead of thirty-nine points. But by the final week of the campaign this had slumped to a lead of just thirteen points. In the public debate these shifts were attributed to an ill thought-out and un-costed manifesto which, days after it was published, led to a Conservative ‘U-turn’ on a social care policy that would have made people pay more of the costs of social care (a policy that was subsequently branded a ‘dementia tax’).

Others pointed to the campaigning energy and enthusiasm of Corbyn, who had been met by large crowds across the country. During the campaign, people's 'net satisfaction' with how Corbyn was performing as leader of the Labour party improved significantly. Whereas shortly before the election was called Corbyn had held a disastrous rating of -58, by the final week of the campaign this had risen to -2.⁹ This marked increase in Labour's support in the polls was probably also driven by a series of policy pledges. Corbyn and his team produced a clear and compelling vision of where they wanted to lead the country. They promised to only increase income tax for people earning over £80,000 each year; to abolish university tuition fees; to extend free childcare; to raise the minimum wage; to cap rents so they can only rise in line with inflation; to ban zero hours' contracts; to guarantee the state pension 'triple lock' for pensioners and a winter fuel allowance; to invest an additional £30 billion in the National Health Service; and to nationalise energy supply networks and rail companies. In the final week of the campaign, YouGov asked a representative sample of the population whether they felt that Corbyn and May had had a good or bad campaign. While forty-eight per cent felt that Corbyn had a good campaign and eighteen per cent felt the Labour leader had had a bad campaign, these figures were almost the reverse for May: only twenty per cent felt that May had a good campaign while forty-eight per cent felt that she had a bad campaign.¹⁰ In the final days, the Conservatives sought to shift public attention back to Brexit, but in the aftermath of a second major terrorist attack during the campaign, the discourse turned to matters of defence and security on the one hand, and public sector cuts and the loss of police jobs on the other, which Labour had sought to link to austerity.

Turnout

After such a tumultuous campaign, it is no surprise that turnout increased. At sixty-nine percent, the turnout was the highest for twenty years, since New Labour's landslide in 1997, while the overall number of votes cast (more than thirty-two million) was the largest since 1992. Yet, turnout was not even across the country. Compared to 2015, some places experienced a sharp increase in turnout,

while others experienced a decline. The biggest increases in turnout were in London (+4.5) and the North East (+4.8). The biggest decrease in turnout was in Scotland (-4.7). Most other regions saw an increase in turnout of around two or three percentage points.

In the aftermath of the result, much attention focused on a ‘youthquake’—which alludes to an apparent sharp rise in turnout among the young. We have to be careful about how we interpret aggregate level data, but there is evidence that turnout varied according to the age profile of different seats. Of the twenty constituencies in England with the highest concentration of young people aged eighteen to twenty-nine years old, turnout increased by an average of 4.6 percentage points. By contrast, of the twenty constituencies in England with the lowest proportion of young people, turnout increased by just 2.6 percentage points. Thus, even though ‘older’ constituencies still tend to register higher turnout, in 2017 it was the younger areas that saw turnout increase the most. There is also evidence that turnout tended to increase more in seats that had voted to remain in the 2016 referendum, with pro-remain seats such as Oxford West and Abingdon, Winchester, Twickenham and Hornsey and Wood Green all recording some of the highest rates of turnout at the election. According to Hanretty’s (2017) constituency level estimates of the referendum vote, of the twenty constituencies in England which registered the highest support for leave in the EU referendum, turnout increased by an average of just 1.6 percentage points.¹¹ By contrast, of the twenty constituencies in England which registered the highest support for remain in the EU referendum, turnout increased by an average of 5.5 percentage points.

We are able to get a sharper understanding of the factors that influenced turnout by considering a number of different factors simultaneously. Table 1 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of turnout. The first model examines the level of turnout in each constituency. The second model examines how much turnout changed in each constituency since the 2015 general election. From Model 1 we can see that, across the country, turnout tended to be higher in constituencies where there were large numbers of graduates and which were heavily white, while turnout tended to be lower in constituencies where there were large numbers of young people. Taking these factors into account, turnout was also lower in Scotland than it was elsewhere in the country. However, if we look

at seats where turnout *changed* relative to 2015 then a slightly different pattern emerges. From Model 2, we see that turnout tended to increase most in seats that have lots of young people, graduates and people from ethnic minorities. This provides us with some evidence to suggest that at least with regard to age and ethnic diversity there was an upsurge in turnout in areas of the country that two years ago had been less likely to vote. Also, the seats where turnout was most likely to increase were also those which our earlier analysis revealed had also been the most likely to have voted remain at the 2016 referendum.¹² This evidence suggests there may have been a counter mobilisation against Theresa May’s vision of a hard Brexit in places where support for leaving the EU was low. By contrast, people living in those places which had most strongly supported Brexit in the referendum were rather less likely to vote this time out than they had been in previous elections.

Table 1: Multivariate analysis of turnout, linear regression (England, Scotland and Wales)

	Model 1: Turnout 2017		Model 2: Turnout change		Model 3: Turnout change	
	Coefficient	Std. Err.	Coefficient	Std. Err.	Coefficient	Std. Err.
% Age 18-29 years	-0.42***	0.03	0.05*	0.02	0.03	0.02
% with degree	0.46***	0.01	0.03***	0.01	-0.01	0.02
% non-white	-0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01	0.04***	0.01
Scotland	-2.57***	0.41	-7.46***	0.30	-8.13***	0.45
% Voted Leave					-0.04*	0.02
Constant	63.84	0.51	0.96	0.38	4.58	1.85
N	630		630		630	

Adjusted R-square	0.66		0.56		0.56	
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Notes: *** denotes $p < 0.005$; ** denotes $p < 0.01$; * denotes $p < 0.05$

We can test this more formally by using Hanretty’s (2017) constituency level estimates of the leave vote. From Model 3, we see that when we add this variable to the analysis, we find that turnout tended to decline in places that had backed leave and that the effect of age and education is washed out, indicating that perhaps one reason why places with lots of young people and graduates were more likely to vote this time is because they wanted to register their dissatisfaction either with the outcome of the 2016 referendum or with the subsequent direction of the Brexit process. This supports the general view that people in places which had not voted to leave the EU were particularly keen to turn out and vote in this election—which potentially did not bode well for May’s chances of securing a large mandate for her vision of Brexit.

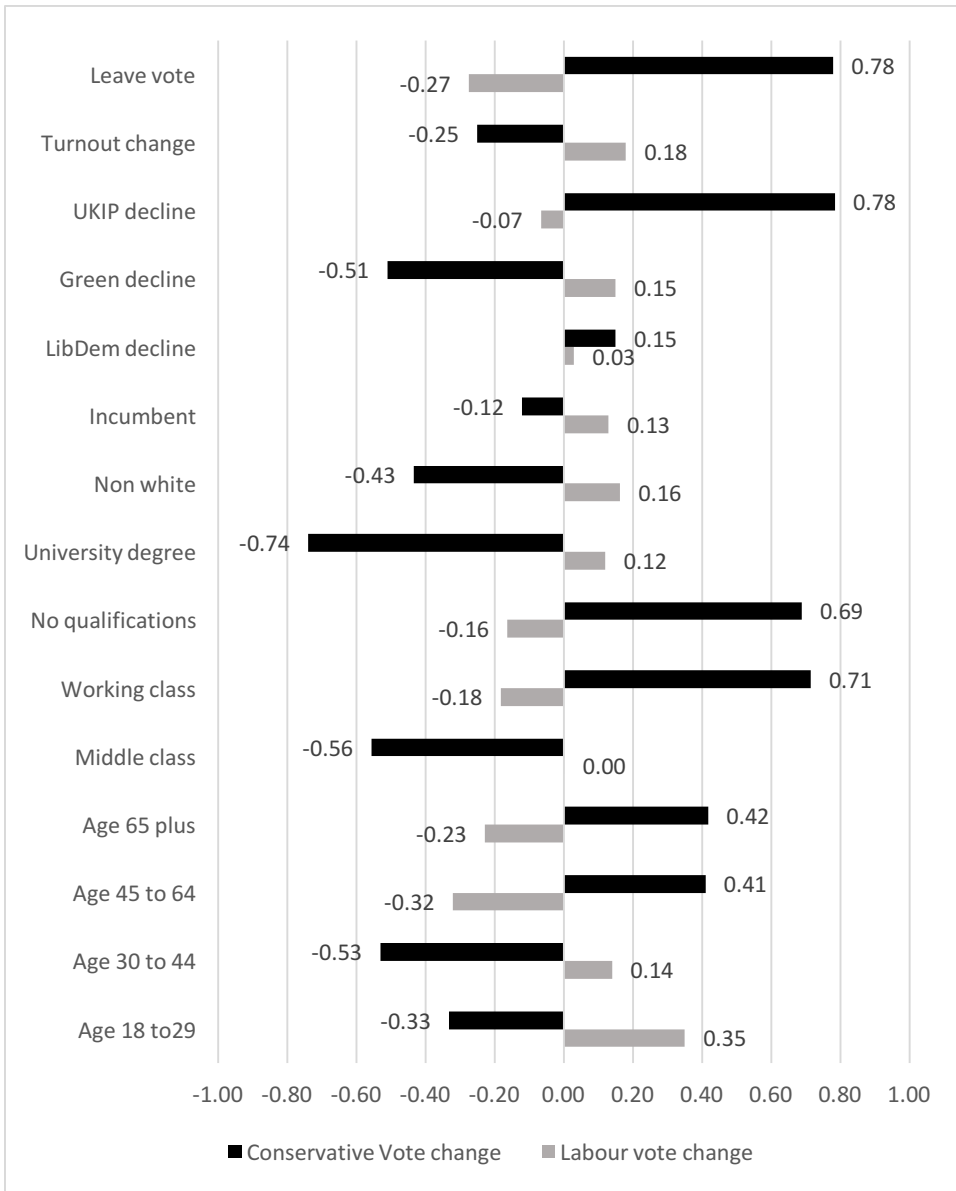
Analysing the result

We now turn our attention to analysing the result of the 2017 general election and the factors that motivated the change in support for Labour and the Conservatives. Given that the contest was supposed to be a ‘Brexit election’, we can probe a number of key questions. Did areas that had backed Brexit at the 2016 referendum move towards the Conservatives? Did areas that had voted to remain in the EU lend more support to Labour? How were these shifts, if any, mediated by the fate of UKIP, whose support collapsed? Did May and her team succeed in capturing the UKIP vote and did this strategy come with any electoral costs?

To better understand the factors that influenced support for the two main parties, we restrict our analysis to England and Wales, as a rather different set of factors are relevant for understanding electoral competition in Scotland, where the SNP is dominant and divisions over Scottish Independence are more salient. We start by considering some social and political factors that

plausibly may help to shed light on how well the Conservatives and Labour performed in different areas. Figure 2 shows the correlation between change in support for the two parties at the constituency level and a number of different factors. The Conservatives were more likely to make gains in places which our earlier research had found were among the most likely to back Brexit—seats with large numbers of people without educational qualifications, a large proportion of working-class residents, and which were predominantly older and white. By contrast, the Conservatives were less likely to make gains in places where there were a lot of young voters and university graduates. Thus, the social and political factors most strongly associated with support for Brexit were also strongly associated with changes in the level of support for the Conservatives. The Conservative strategy of focusing on a hard Brexit—and appealing to UKIP voters in particular, therefore appears to have made a difference to how well they performed. Indeed, there is a strong correlation between the collapse of the UKIP vote and increased support for the Conservatives.

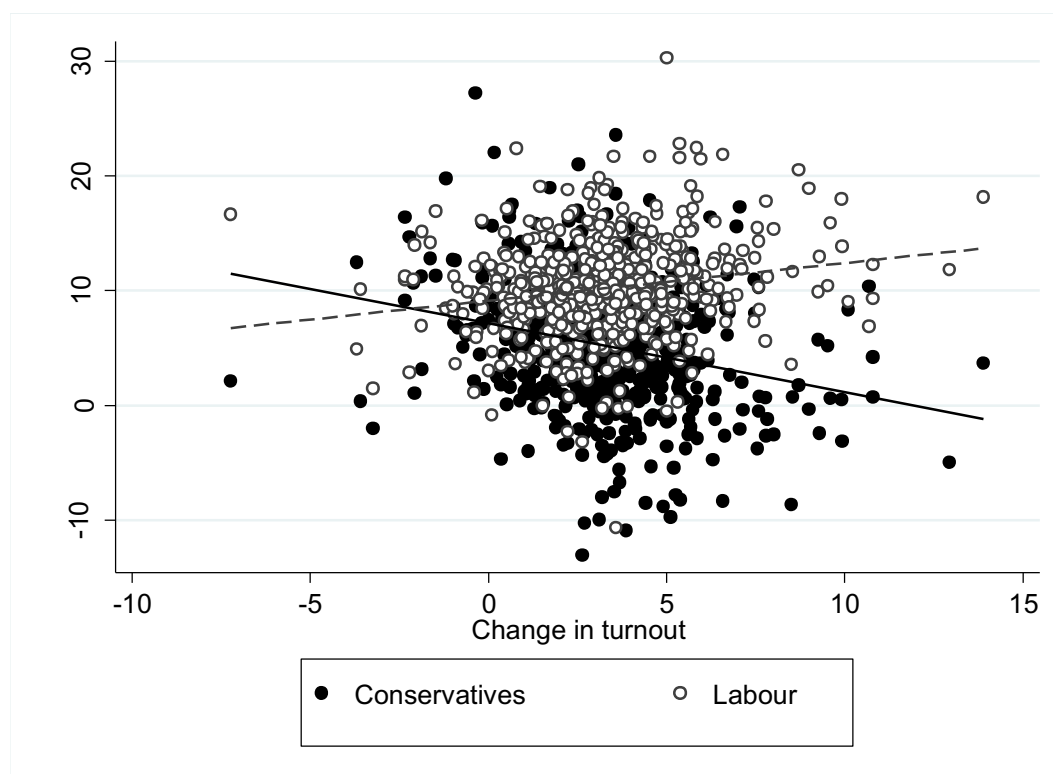
Figure 2: Correlates of vote change for the Conservatives and Labour in England and Wales



However, somewhat surprisingly the pattern of changes in support for Labour is not nearly as polarised along social or political lines. The correlations are generally much weaker, which indicates that there is not such a clear structure to the places where Corbyn and Labour tended to perform particularly well or badly. This implies that Labour managed to attract a broad coalition of support, and one that was not especially socially distinctive. Thus, arguments that frame Labour's performance rather narrowly as a 'remain backlash' or a 'youth revolt' over simplify the true picture. Nonetheless, a few noteworthy patterns emerge. As expected, Labour tended to make bigger gains in places where there were lots of eighteen to forty-four year olds, in places where turnout increased and where

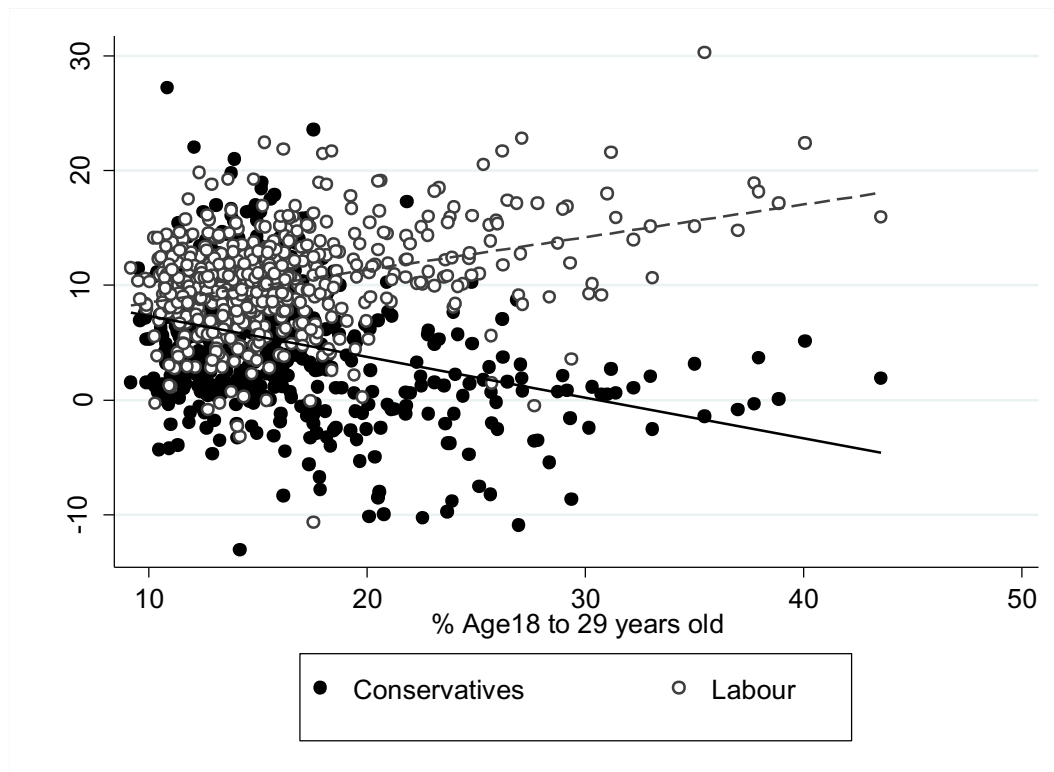
support for the Greens had declined. They also advanced in areas that were more ethnically diverse and which had a larger proportion of university graduates.

Figure 3: Change in turnout and change in support for Labour and Conservatives



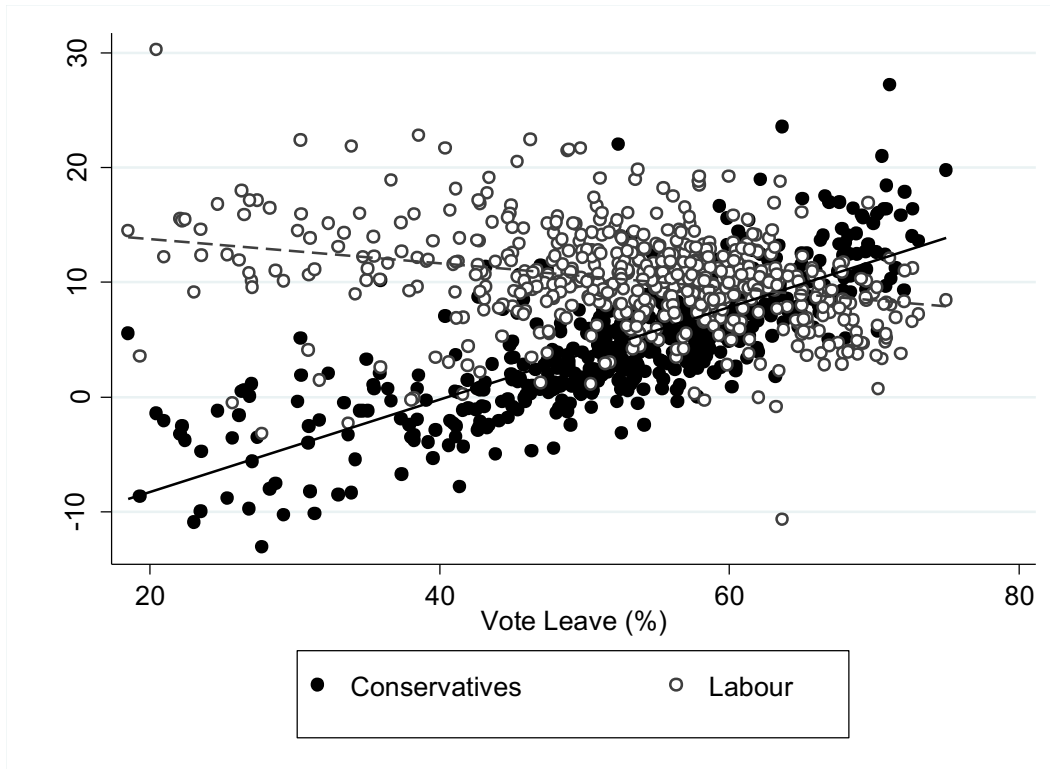
Some of these patterns are worth exploring a little more. As we have seen, the profile of places where turnout increased the most was similar to the profile of places which had been most likely to support remain. This suggests that there may have been a backlash against the vote for Brexit and direction of the Brexit process, which may have mobilised people to vote, and perhaps also to vote against the Conservatives. Some further evidence for this is presented in Figure 3. Labour tended to make greater gains in places that recorded an increase in turnout, whereas the Conservatives tended to fare somewhat worse. Revealingly, the Conservatives were only able to make greater gains than Labour in those places where turnout had declined. In the twenty constituencies where turnout increased the most, Labour made an average gain of 12.7 percentage points, whereas the Conservatives made an average gain of only 0.8 points.

Figure 4: Age and change in support for Labour and Conservatives



One reason why turnout may have made a difference is that it brought new groups of voters to the ballot box who were disproportionately more likely to vote Labour—such as the young. Figure 4 shows the relationship between the age profile of the constituency and the change in support for Labour and the Conservatives, respectively. Labour made more substantial gains in constituencies with larger numbers of young people, whereas the Conservatives tended to fare somewhat worse. In the twenty ‘youngest’ seats Labour made an average gain of about fifteen percentage points, whereas the Conservatives made an average gain of just one point.

Figure 5: Estimated support for leave and the change in support for Labour and Conservatives



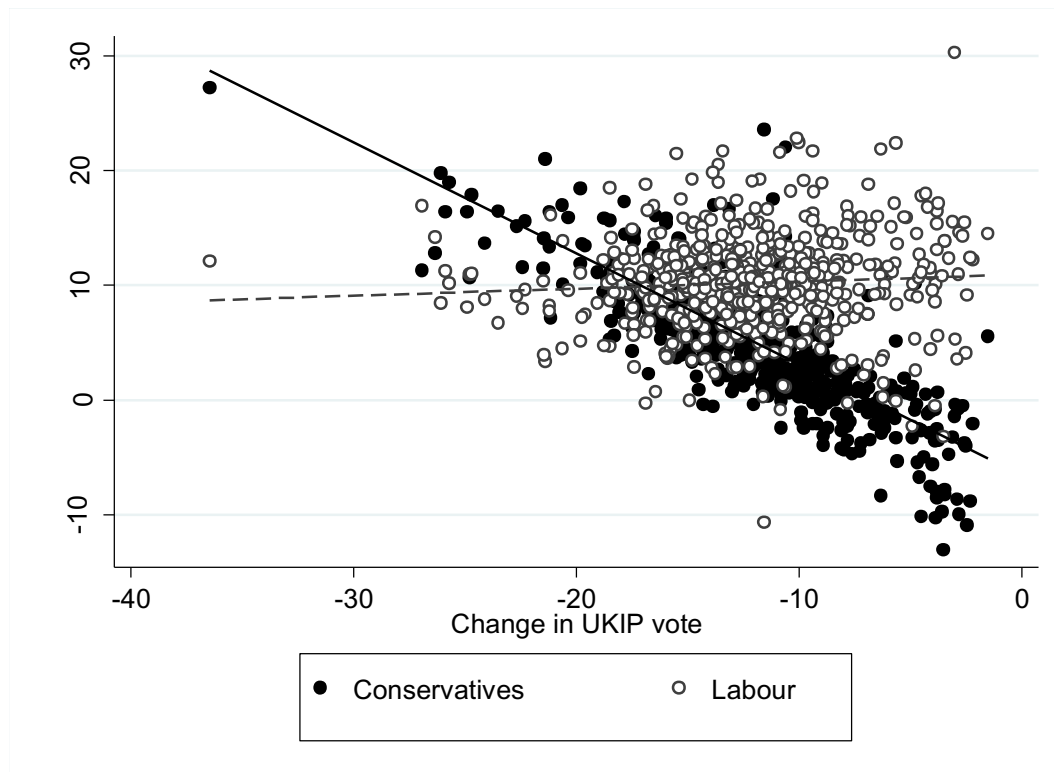
Next, Figure 5 shows the relationship between Hanretty’s (2017) constituency level estimates of the leave vote and change in support for Labour and the Conservatives. There is a slight tendency for Labour to perform better in places which supported remain, though there is a lot of variation around the line and the gradient of the slope is not particularly steep. Moreover, even in places which voted leave, Labour’s share of the vote still improved. By contrast, the relationship between support for leave and change in the share of the vote for the Tories is much stronger. Whereas the Tories lost votes in places that were very pro-remain, they gained votes in places that were very pro-leave. However, even in those places that were strongly leave, they did not gain many more votes than Labour did, and it was only in the most staunchly leave areas of the country where their gains outstripped those made by Labour. In the vast majority of places, including many which preferred leave to remain, Labour were able to outperform the Conservatives, and capture an increased share of the vote.

Out of the twenty seats in England with the highest estimated remain vote, Labour won seventeen (gaining one from the Conservatives), the Conservatives won two seats (down from three)

and the Greens retained one. In these most strongly pro-remain seats, Labour's average vote share increased by over thirteen percentage points, while the Conservatives' declined by over three points. This represents a swing of eight points from the Conservatives to Labour. By contrast, of the twenty seats in England with the highest estimated leave votes, Labour won nine and the Conservatives won eleven (the Conservatives retained seven, gained three from Labour and one from UKIP). However, even in these pro-Brexit seats, while the Conservative average vote share rocketed by fifteen points and UKIP's share plummeted by twenty points, Labour's average vote share still went up by close to seven percentage points, thus making it harder for the Conservatives to translate an increased vote share into seat gains. This represents a swing of just four points from Labour to Conservative, which means that the swing to Labour was about twice as large in the most pro-remain areas as the swing to the Conservatives was in the most pro-leave areas. Theresa May and her team had targeted pro-leave Labour areas but in the end they only captured six seats from Labour areas of the country that had voted for Brexit.

This suggests that going after such a hard Brexit may not have paid the electoral dividends that Conservatives had expected. No doubt one reason why May, who had campaigned for remain during the referendum, opted for this hard line approach was to try and appeal to the nearly four million social conservatives who had voted for UKIP in 2015. Indeed, before the election, the expectation was that UKIP voters would defect *en masse* to the Conservatives. From Figure 6, we can see how the collapse of UKIP affected support for the two main parties. There is not much of a pattern between the collapse of UKIP and change in support for Labour. On average Labour did not do much worse in places where UKIP lost a lot of ground than in places where UKIP's vote held up. By contrast, once again there is a much clearer pattern with respect to the Conservatives, who did well in places where UKIP lost a lot of votes, but badly where UKIP only lost a few votes. UKIP needed to lose close to ten percentage points of the vote before the Conservatives saw any increase in their own share of the vote. This suggests that whatever the Conservatives gained from UKIP voters moving to the Conservatives were offset by losses elsewhere.

Figure 6: Change in support for UKIP and change in support for the two main parties



Two rather distinct patterns emerge, therefore. Labour made large gains across the country, performing relatively well both in areas that had voted to leave the EU and areas that had voted to remain. By contrast, the Conservatives made progress in areas that had voted to leave but were punished in areas that had voted to remain in the EU. Although they appear to have successfully harnessed votes that in 2015 had gone to UKIP, they do not appear to have gained these votes without a cost.

Was it a Brexit election?

So far, we have presented evidence to suggest that the educational, ethnic, and age composition of different constituencies had an impact on how well the two main parties performed relative to 2015, and that Brexit, turnout and the collapse of UKIP may have influenced the final result. Yet, we need to be a little careful in terms of how we interpret these bivariate correlations. For this reason, we will now focus on the joint impact of these key social and political factors on support for the two main parties. Table 2 presents results from a series of linear regression models. In the first two models, we

examine how well the Conservatives and Labour did in the 2017 election. Thus our dependent variables relate to the vote share that each party received in each constituency. In the next two models, we examine how much they improved since 2015. Thus, our dependent variables relate to the change in the vote for each party.

From Model 1 we can see that the Conservative vote tended to be higher in seats with largely white, highly educated populations, and lower in seats with younger populations. The Conservatives also did slightly worse in constituencies where turnout increased. Controlling for all of these factors, they also tended to do slightly worse in London than elsewhere in England and Wales. To a fairly striking degree, Labour’s vote tends to be higher in exactly the opposite kind of places, which is what we would expect in a predominantly two-party system. Both models provide a fairly good fit to the data, and even these parsimonious models are able to explain a lot of the variation between constituencies in the vote share that each party receives.

However, when we look at Models 3 and 4, a slightly different picture emerges. The vote share for the Conservatives tended to decline in places where there are lots of graduates, and in places that are more ethnically diverse. By contrast, the vote share for Labour tended to increase in places where there were a lot of young people, and where turnout increased. From the model fit statistics we can see that there is quite a clear structure to the change in the vote for the Conservatives ($R^2 = 0.61$). By contrast the fit to the data for Labour is substantially weaker ($R^2 = 0.14$), implying that there was not such a clear pattern to where they made gains and losses, and that their vote gains were more evenly distributed across different areas. Further analysis (not shown) also reveals that Labour also profited from a consolidation of the anti-Tory vote, and picked up support in seats at the expense of the Liberal Democrats and Greens.¹³

Table 2: Multivariate analysis of support for Conservatives and Labour in England and Wales, OLS regression

	Model 1:	Model 2:	Model 3:	Model 4:

	Conservative 2017		Labour 2017		Conservative gains		Labour gains	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
% Age 18-29	-1.50***	0.10	1.46***	0.11	-0.06	0.03	0.27***	0.04
% degree	0.46***	0.06	-0.88***	0.06	-0.46***	0.02	0.05*	0.02
% non-white	-0.15***	0.04	0.29***	0.05	-0.09***	0.01	0.01	0.02
Turnout change	-1.53***	0.20	1.89***	0.22	-0.12	0.07	0.18*	0.08
London	-4.17***	1.87	5.13***	2.10	1.34*	0.64	-1.91**	0.72
Constant	63.16		33.37	2.21	19.94	0.64	3.95	0.76
N	570		570		570		570	
Adjusted R-square	0.54		0.58		0.61		0.14	

Notes: *** denotes $p < 0.005$; ** denotes $p < 0.01$; * denotes $p < 0.05$

These patterns have many similarities with the patterns that we observed in our analysis of the 2016 vote for Brexit. Places where the Tories underperformed were places that were likely to have supported remaining in the EU. The places where Labour made their strongest gains were—in a slightly different way—also the sorts of places where remain had polled most strongly. As Table 2 shows, in 2015 the Conservatives had performed well in places that were highly educated, but only two years later, they performed relatively poorly in these places. Why did places with many university

graduates turn their back on the Conservative party? One possibility is that they became disillusioned with the Conservatives' stance on Brexit. If this is the case, then we would expect the effect of education to be 'explained' by the level of support for Brexit in the constituency, since people living in areas that were more highly educated tended to be more likely to back remain.

Model 1 in Table 3 tests this possibility. When constituency level estimates of support for Brexit are added to the model, we see that it has a highly significant effect on whether the Conservatives made gains or losses. Taking everything else into account, the Conservatives were much more likely to increase their share of the vote in places that had backed Brexit. Interestingly, the effect of education is substantially reduced and the magnitude of the coefficient more than halves in size (from $b = -0.46$ to $b = -0.20$). This implies that an important reason why the Conservatives tended to fare worse in constituencies with many graduates is because of the relatively low level of support for Brexit in these areas (which is why they also tended to fare better in constituencies where there were fewer graduates).

These findings have important implications for understanding how effective Theresa May and the Conservatives were at translating UKIP losses into Conservative gains. If the Conservative strategy of appealing to pro-Brexit UKIP voters drives down support among well-educated Tory remainers, then the gains they make among the former may be off-set by losses among the latter. In this case, the Conservatives would only expect to see a net increase in their vote share in places where there are relatively few graduates—and might actually see their vote share decline in places where the concentration of graduates is higher—even if they still succeed in capturing votes that have come from former UKIP supporters. To explore this possibility, we can investigate whether there is an interaction between changes in the UKIP vote and the education profile of a constituency. If there is, this would imply that the Conservatives made more effective gains from the UKIP vote in low skilled areas (such as North East) than they did in high skilled areas (such as South East and South West).

Table 3: Multivariate analysis of Conservative gains and UKIP losses in England and Wales, OLS regression

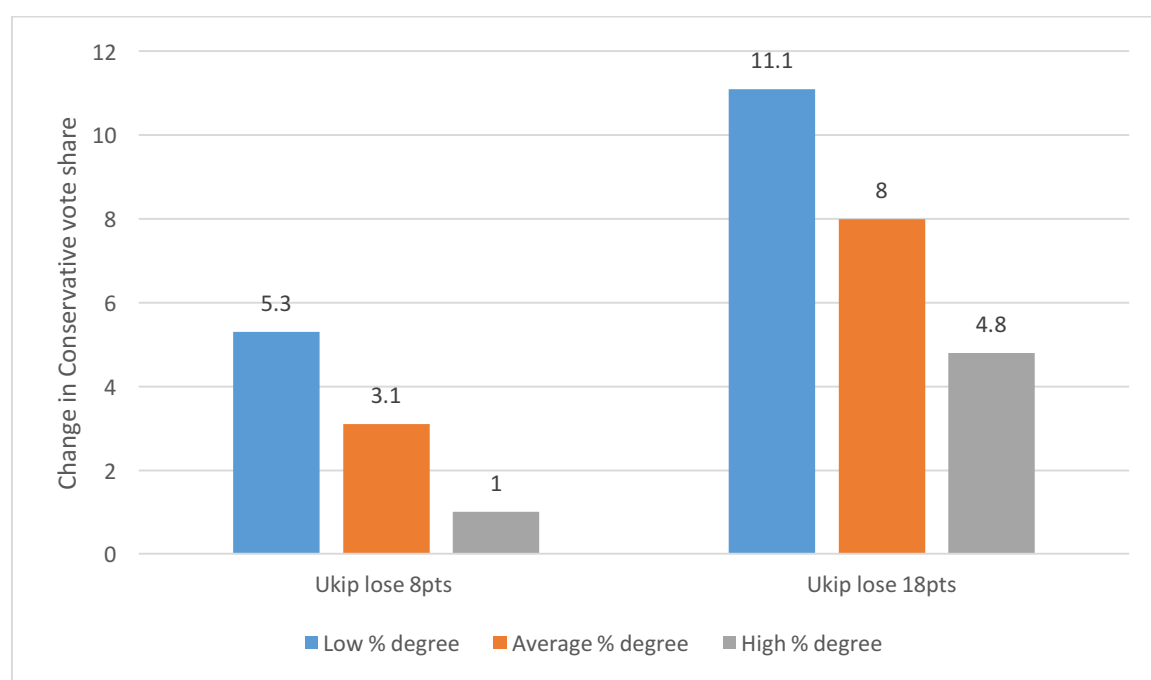
	Model 1: Conservative gains and Brexit		Model 2: Conservative gains and UKIP losses	
	Coef.	Std. Err.	Coef.	Std. Err.
% Age 18-29	0.08*	0.04	-0.03	0.03
% degree	-0.20***	0.04	-0.17***	0.04
% non-white	-0.08***	0.01	-0.05***	0.01
Turnout change	-0.04	0.07	0.00	0.06
London	0.75	0.62	0.03	0.59
Ukip vote change	-		-0.82***	0.08
Leave vote	0.24***	0.04	-	-
Ukip change * % degree	-	-	0.01***	0.00
Constant	-3.19	3.44	4.74	1.30
N	570		570	
Adjusted R-square	0.64		0.70	

Notes: *** denotes $p < 0.005$; ** denotes $p < 0.01$; * denotes $p < 0.05$

Model 2 in Table 3 provides clear evidence that the Conservatives made stronger gains in places where UKIP's share of the vote declined ($b = -0.82$). However, from the positive sign of the interaction between the change in UKIP's vote share and the educational profile of the constituency, we can see that the Conservative gains from UKIP were offset by the losses they received in places where there were larger numbers of graduates (who had previously tended to back the Conservatives). Thus, the

Conservatives only registered any benefit from UKIP's collapse in places where there were relatively few graduates. But, in places where there were many more graduates, the Conservative vote share suffered.

Figure 7: Estimated Tory gains for UKIP losses



The substantive effect of these patterns can be illustrated by calculating the estimated impact of UKIP's decline on the Conservative vote in different types of areas, as shown in Figure 7. We can distinguish between areas where there are slightly fewer graduates than average, where there were an average number, and where there were slightly above average. All other things being equal, Conservative gains are much higher in places where the UKIP vote declined a lot than where it declined a more modest amount. However, in relatively low-skilled areas, the Conservatives were very effective at turning UKIP losses into Tory gains. In these sorts of places an eight-point drop in UKIP's share of the vote translated to about a five-point gain for the Conservatives. However, in relatively high-skilled areas the Conservatives were not nearly as effective in turning UKIP losses into Tory gains. In these sorts of places, an eight-point drop in the UKIP vote translated into just a one-point gain for the Tories.

How can we interpret this pattern? One possible explanation concerns the behaviour of former UKIP voters themselves. Perhaps in high skilled areas UKIP voters were more likely to revolt against the Conservatives? This seems unlikely given that in places where UKIP's vote declined by five points, the Conservative share of the vote actually declined, which implies that at least some people who had previously voted for the Conservatives did not do so this time. A more plausible interpretation concerns the behaviour of Conservative voters, who might have been alienated by Theresa May's vision of a 'hard Brexit'. There thus appears to be a trade-off between the appeals that the Conservatives made which had particular resonance in more deprived areas, therefore allowing them to make substantial gains at the expense of UKIP, and how those same appeals were received in more high-skilled areas, where they lost votes and needed big swings away from UKIP in order to just hold support and tread electoral water. May's strategy of aggressively courting the 2015 UKIP vote might, therefore, have backfired and been at least partially responsible for the Conservative party losing seats, particularly in London, the South East and the South West.

Discussion: implications of the result

The 2017 general election was called by Theresa May in the hope of securing a strong mandate both for her premiership and her vision of Brexit. The election was a gamble, with May and her team essentially placing the opposite bet to that which had been placed by Tony Blair and New Labour more than twenty years earlier. Whereas Blair and Co. had gambled that they could retain support from their traditional blue-collar and socially conservative workers while reaching into the more liberal, urban and university-educated middle-classes, May and her team gambled that they could retain support from the more middle-class and pro-remain wing of the Conservative party while reaching into the more pro-Brexit, left behind and Labour areas of the country. Our analysis of the results, at the aggregate-level, has revealed the factors that combined to ensure that this gamble would—ultimately—lose.

May's strategy and a retro manifesto, which had included calls to restore fox hunting alongside strong support for a hard Brexit and grammar schools, did win considerable support from the key social groups they had been directed toward. Our analysis provides evidence that the Conservatives gained in more economically left behind, heavily white and older areas that had previously given disproportionately strong support to Nigel Farage and UKIP. But this narrow strategy also came with costs and was much less popular in more high skilled areas that in 2015 had given lower support to UKIP, but had still turned out for the Conservatives.

Labour, meanwhile, managed to attract support from a broader coalition and one that is not nearly as socially distinctive as that of the Conservative party. The gains that the party made came from a variety of different sources. Jeremy Corbyn's acceptance of Brexit while wanting to protect jobs does not appear to have cost Labour votes in areas that had voted for Brexit and it was, simultaneously, a much more popular option in the younger and more diverse areas that had voted to remain in the EU. Labour's impressive performance also appears to have been helped by an increase in turnout, which changed the composition of voters. Turnout was higher in younger and more ethnically diverse seats, and where there were larger numbers of graduates. Thus, there were more voters in places sympathetic to Labour, and these voters were in turn more likely to support Labour than previously. Labour also benefited from a consolidation of the anti-Tory vote, particularly from the Liberal Democrats and the Greens

Whether Jeremy Corbyn and Labour are able to maintain or even expand this coalition further to secure a majority government remains to be seen, as does the extent to which the Conservative party is able to rebuild its support among younger, better educated and more pro-remain groups, who will be required for any return to a majority government. The move towards two-party politics may also turn out to be a blip rather than a permanent realignment, and there is still the potential for minor parties to reassert themselves. One thing, however, appears fairly certain. While the 2017 general election result defied predictions and also easy explanations, the next election—whenever it is called—will also have the capacity to surprise.

Notes

¹ We're grateful to Chris Hanretty, Georgios Xezonakis, and Elie Pelling for helpful comments and feedback on earlier drafts.

² Forecasts compiled and shared by Simon Hix;

<https://twitter.com/simonjihix/status/872724388768092160> (accessed 18 June 2017).

³ Political Studies Association, *Expert Predictions of the 2017 General Election*, Political Studies Association, 2017;

<https://www.psa.ac.uk/sites/default/files/PSA%20GE2017%20Expert%20Survey.pdf> (accessed 18 June 2017).

⁴ On electoral support for the UK Independence Party see M. J. Goodwin and C. Milazzo, *UKIP: Inside the Campaign to Redraw the Map of British Politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2015.

⁵ M. J. Goodwin and O. Heath, 'The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2016, pp. 323–332.

⁶ 'May's manifesto chief held talks with former Miliband aide', *Financial Times*, 9 May 2017.

⁷ 'Theresa May's balancing act and the neutering of UKIP', *Financial Times*, 24 February 2017.

⁸ These estimates are taken from data compiled by Chris Hanretty. Aside from the paper in point 11 below see also 'Revised estimates of leave vote share in Westminster constituencies', Medium, 18 August 2016; <https://medium.com/@chrishanretty/revised-estimates-of-leave-vote-share-in-westminster-constituencies-c4612f06319d> (accessed 24 June 2017).

⁹ Data on net satisfaction of party leaders compiled by YouGov. See the YouGov archive; <https://yougov.co.uk/publicopinion/archive/> (accessed 24 June 2017).

¹⁰ The remainder said neither/did not know. YouGov/Sunday Times, 1–2 June 2017.

¹¹ C. Hanretty, 'Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership' *Journal of Elections and Public Opinion*, published online 17 March 2017, pp. 1–18.

¹² Goodwin and Heath, 'The 2016 referendum'.

¹³ When we include data on change in the Liberal Democrat and Green share of the vote in Model 4, the R-square increases from 0.14 to 0.44.