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Why the Tories Won and Labour lost

The 2019 Election Explained

Capture Politics

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Key data sources:

This book mainly uses the 2019 British Election Study (BES) to analyse voter trends during the 2019 election. The book also uses constituency election results from the House of Common online archive and polling data from polling company data archives.

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The outcome and proposed explanations

The 2019 election produced a historic win for the Conservative Party and a devastating loss for Labour. The election gave the Tories their first large majority since the 1980s, making it the first such win within my lifetime. The Conservative Party gained seats it has not represented for decades and, in some cases, never has. This election redrew the political map within the United Kingdom and, as a consequence, produced much discussion as to how this phenomenon occurred.

In fact, the debate started as soon as the decisive exit poll was released after the polls closed on December 12th. Labour representatives on the left of the party were quick to blame Brexit, with some going as far as to say that they had won the argument. Others within Labour struck a different tone, indicating they acknowledged the party had multiple problems and the cause of the defeat could not be placed on any one factor, no matter how significant it initially appeared.

Following Corbyn's announcement to step down as leader after his re-election as MP for Islington North, the Labour Party

leadership debate primarily focused on the cause of Labour's defeat. The candidate most associated with the left faction of the party, Rebecca Long-Bailey, emphasised the party's need to communicate their policies better and not overload the manifesto with too many of Labour's approved policies. In other words, the policies and overall narrative were right, just not the message they used to sell them. On the other hand, the other two candidates who lasted until the end of the race often stated that there were multiple reasons for Labour's defeat. Although there was some lack of detail on the exact reasons behind Labour's failings, theories advocated argued that the party had got it wrong on Brexit, leadership failings had eroded support and policy-making was too unrepresentative of voters' preferences. Others also asserted that spending decisions in the campaign had frightened too many voters.

With the election of Starmer and his initial indications that the party needs to go in a more moderate and pragmatic direction, old factional rivalries reopened. This very quickly created internal party debates around what could make Labour electable. The radicals within Labour naturally defended the last manifesto and maintained that other factors, especially Brexit, was the problem. In contrast, moderates argued that the radical manifesto used in the 2019 election couldn't win elections.

Conversely, whilst Labour were debating why they lost, the Tories were celebrating that their campaign had gained them the majority they so desperately craved. After the Tories had ousted May and replaced the former leader with Boris Johnson, their plan to regain control of events focused on securing a reformed Brexit deal and then putting this renewed deal to the people in a general election.

Johnson nearly came unstuck, as he was constantly blocked throughout the parliament. However, the government had a few tricks up their sleeve, and it attempted to cajole opposition MPs into accepting its offer of an election. The Conservative Party prorogued parliament and offered an election to the opposition on more than one occasion. They also blocked the opponent's efforts of alternative ways forward on Brexit, proposed legislation on their revised deal and threatened a no-deal Brexit if the government was blocked. Eventually, with all the opposition's proposals going nowhere, a second referendum feeling politically impractical and the government refusing to back down (despite extensions that the government were compelled to offer the EU), opposition groups started to rethink the election offer. With the polls looking good for opposition parties, especially for the SNP and Lib-Dems, they decided to support the government's one-line election bill. Labour also appeared confident they could take on a government that looked weak, so they gave the bill their support. Crucially, this gave the government the numbers they needed to get out of the deadlock that was crippling them.

The Tories' plan had worked; they had managed to force an election on the issue of Brexit with a leader they felt was best placed to sell their New Brexit deal. To make things even better for them, Labour had no clear position on the issue they had forced an election over (Brexit), giving the Conservatives control of the agenda heading into the election. This would pay off for the Tories and come back to haunt Labour.

The purpose of this book is to understand why this gamble paid off for the Conservative Party and was so devastating for Labour. It does this by analysing the election result and

particularly focuses on the opinions of the voters and how they made the decision to move away from Labour and support Boris Johnson's bid for a majority.

The Results

Before focusing on the voters, this book first outlines the election result and how constituencies returned MPs. Figure 1.1 shows that the main change from the last election was the large drop-off in the Labour Party's vote share. In 2017, Labour managed to pull off a closer-than-expected election result by rapidly securing voters from smaller parties. Yet, in this election, this did not occur, with Labour being static in the polls across the campaign, with only 32% of voters awarding Labour support. Critically, this meant that nearly 8% of the electorate had moved away from Labour, making this group of voters very important in explaining the election outcome. The Conservative Party is thought to have secured much of this drop in support. This time, the Tories secured 44% of the vote, reflecting an increase in support of 1%, indicating that part of the 8% of the electorate Labour lost may have switched to the Tories. Further, a new party, the Brexit Party, which had formed after the collapse of UKIP, agreed not to field candidates in seats where there was a sitting Conservative MP. This was an attempt to deliberately target traditional Labour voters in seats the Conservatives could win, to ensure Brexit would be implemented. Whilst the exact difference this made on the election result is debated, the Brexit Party gained 2% of the vote, again potentially securing losses from Labour, once more suggesting Labour may have lost traditional voters who backed Leave to right-wing parties.

Interestingly, this trend would indicate a breakdown in traditional voting patterns, where traditional Labour voters may have broken long-term voting trends by going over to the Conservatives. The largest increase in support was gained by the Lib-Dems (+4%), indicating that Labour may have not only lost traditional voters to the Conservative Party, but they may have lost moderate Labour voters who had voted Remain to the Lib-Dems. Further, as the Greens gained 1% of the total vote share, Labour may have lost such voters to the Greens as well. In Scotland, the SNP gained an increase in support. Although nationally they only gained 0.8% of the total vote share, as Scotland only represents 8% of the population, this increase within Scotland may have taken a significant amount of support from the two main parties within this part of Britain in 2019.

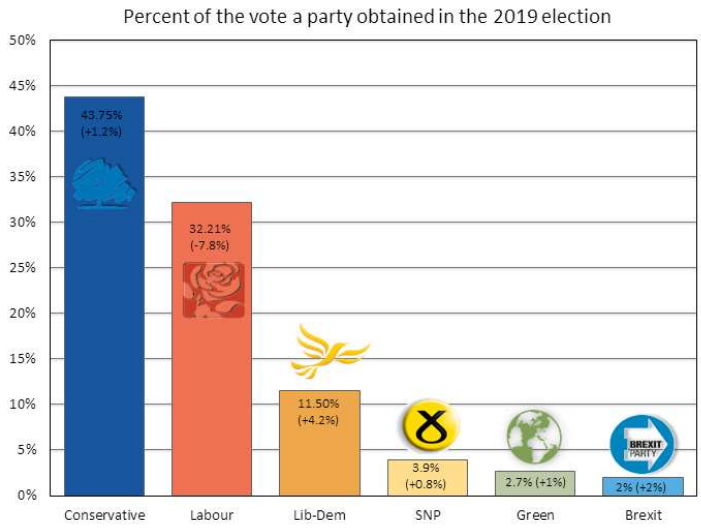

Figure 1.1: UK 2019 election outcome: share of the vote for the main parties. Source: 2019 Election result.

The constituency results:

The large swing against the Labour Party in favour of the Conservatives of around 5% translated into a direct transfer of seats. The Conservative Party gained 57 seats and lost 10, giving them a net gain of 365 seats. This increase in seats gave the Tories the large majority they had been seeking since they called the 2017 election, with them controlling 56% of parliamentary seats by 2020.

Most of the seats Labour lost were transferred to the Conservatives, with a few going to the SNP. The SNP secured 14 seats and only lost 1, producing a net gain of 13. The SNP's

success meant they controlled nearly every seat in Scotland in 2020, with them holding 7.5% of the seats in the 2019-24 parliament.

Although many former Labour voters could have been lost to the Lib-Dems and the Greens, due to the nature of the First Past the Post electoral system (FPTP), this does not appear to have cost Labour seats to these parties. As a result, despite increasing their vote share by 4% and securing 11.5% of the vote, the Lib-Dems only secured 11 seats. Whilst this gained them 3 additional seats, they lost 4 seats (with them losing their leader in Scotland). Therefore, whilst the Lib-Dems may have experienced a slight revival in their share of the national vote, they still have not yet reached the number of MPs they were capable of securing before they entered the coalition government in 2010.

As stated already, Labour were the main losers of the election, with them losing 8% of the vote. Although Labour gained one seat, this loss of support translated into a 60-seat loss for the party, a net loss of 59 seats.

By region:

Breaking up the parties' performance into regional variations, it can be stated that these gains and losses were not spread evenly throughout the country. For example, Tory gains were not uniform throughout the UK. The Conservatives experienced a net gain of 12 seats in the North West, with them also securing 16 seats in the Midlands regions of the UK. They also secured a net gain of 9 seats in Yorkshire. In terms of the

Conservative Party's vote share, they secured their largest gains in the West Midlands (+5%), +3.6% in the North East and +3.9% in the East Midlands. Yet, the Tories gained no seats in London and lost 7 seats in Scotland, with their share of the vote in London decreasing by 1%, 2.3% in Scotland and remaining stagnant within the South East. Therefore, when understanding how the Conservatives won the election, it is important to consider how the Conservative Party won within specific regions of the UK, particularly the Midlands and the North West.

The Conservative Party's success can, in part, be understood from Labour's large losses, some of which would have flowed towards the Tories. Labour lost out directly to the Conservatives most often in Yorkshire, Northern and Midland parts of England. The main reason Labour's losses were particularly so great in Northern parts of England was that the swing of the vote against Labour was enough to allow relatively small gains in the Conservative Party vote to translate into a large number of new Tory MPs. For example, in the North West Labour lost 8.3% of the vote, whilst the Tories only gained 1.3% of the vote. This net gain for the Tories of 9% allowed them to secure a net gain of 12 seats. Further, in Yorkshire, the Conservatives only gained 3% of the vote. Yet, Labour lost 11% of the vote, producing a net gain of 14% and 9 parliamentary seats. Therefore, it can be argued that the large drop-off in the Labour vote is the key cause of Labour losing so many seats in traditional heartland areas. Consequently, understanding why voters abandoned Labour in such large numbers, particularly within these traditional Labour areas, is key to understanding the 2019 election result.

Key constituency trends in 2019:

Delving deeper, by analysing individual constituency trends, critical voter patterns are discovered. The 2019 election shows that the Conservatives' strong performance not only came from new seats located in specific parts of the country but also amongst specific demographics. These demographics outline the key voters the Tories were able to gather support from. Therefore, understanding these patterns of socio-political support i key to understanding why the Tories were able to win, and why Labour so badly lost the 2019 general election.

Age divides:

The greater the extent older people formed a constituency's population, the larger the Conservative Party's vote share tended to be. For example, as soon as a constituency had 25% or more of its voters over the age of 60, the Conservative Party's vote share rapidly increased. Conversely, Labour experienced lower shares of the vote in constituencies with such populations, with their vote share declining rapidly in constituencies that had more than 27% of their population comprising individuals over the age of 60. Further, the number of constituencies Labour could win once they passed this threshold was very limited. In contrast, the Conservative Party won most of their seats with more than average middle-aged and older populations. In terms of seats with more youthful populations, those greater comprised of people aged 29 and under, Labour performed much more strongly. Further, Labour won areas with large numbers of younger voters, while the Conservatives were only able to win a few of these

constituencies. Interestingly, these contrasting generational patterns were reflected in the 2017 election, but they appear to have strengthened in the 2019 election. This highlights the potential that the generational divides witnessed in 2016 and 2017 could have deeply translated into political party support and shaped the election outcome. Therefore, it also raises the possibility that the issues that strongly divided the generations might have greatly shaped the election result. For example, generational divisions over the migration question may have caused older generations to have heavily backed the Conservatives and younger generations to have supported left-wing liberal parties, such as Labour and the Lib-Dems.

Education and class:

As the proportion of the constituency's population with a degree-level qualification rose above 25%, the Conservative Party's vote share sharply declined. Alternatively, Labour's vote share increased significantly amongst areas more numerate in higher levels of qualifications, and did so rapidly in constituencies that had a very high proportion of their voters having obtained a university-level qualification. The Conservatives received more votes in areas where a large proportion of voters had only obtained lower-level qualifications. With regards to Labour, the party often performed much more poorly in constituencies that comprised a greater than average proportion of voters having only obtained low-level qualifications. In areas that had the highest proportion of such voters residing within a single constituency, the Conservatives received a strong vote share, with Labour performing more poorly than they had done in 2017. Therefore,

Labour's inability to perform strongly in areas more numerate in low-qualification voters, alongside the Tories' gains in such localities, might partly explain the changes in the parties' fortunes. It also indicates that understanding why traditional Labour voters with fewer qualifications abandoned Labour is key to understanding why they lost the election. Further, it also raises the possibility that the issues that divided qualification groupings were important in shaping the 2019 election result.

Occupational class statistics appeared not to strongly correlate with either party's vote share, which is interesting as previously areas with greater levels of individuals working in routine and manual (working-class) occupations historically have increased Labour support. These trends weakening imply that Labour's working-class support wavered in this election, with it possibly helping the Tories to increase their share of the vote enough to win some traditional Labour constituencies. Meanwhile, Labour continued to perform better in areas that had a greater proportion of professional (middle-class) workers. Alternatively, the Conservatives performed less well than they historically had managed in such localities, with them struggling to win some constituencies that had populations with much greater than average middle-class professional workers. This further indicates that the class divide had broken down and that other divides that split voters across generations and qualification groupings had become more important in shaping election outcomes.

The Brexit divide:

Figure 1.2 shows that as the Leave vote within a constituency increased, so too did the Conservative Party vote. Meanwhile, Labour support increased as the percentage of the Remain vote increased. The graphs also show that the Conservatives won seats that heavily voted to Leave, with a few exceptions. They also show that Labour won seats that heavily voted Remain, with some outliers. This was a key trend throughout the 2019 constituency election results. According to logistic regression modelling, the more a constituency voted to leave the EU, the greater the likelihood was that they would elect a Conservative MP, with there being a lower chance of electing a Labour representative, see the bottom of Figure 1.2. Labour was more likely to gain an MP the more an area had voted Remain. When less than 45% of a constituency had voted to Leave (meaning a clear majority voted to Remain), Labour became more likely than not (+0.5) to gain an MP. Yet, the bottom of Figure 1.2 shows that when 55% or more of a constituency voted to Leave the EU, the Conservatives became more likely than not (+0.5) to secure an MP. Therefore, as these political groupings affected the probability of the two main parties winning MPs, understanding why these socio-political groupings voted the way they did is key to understanding the causes behind the 2019 election outcome.

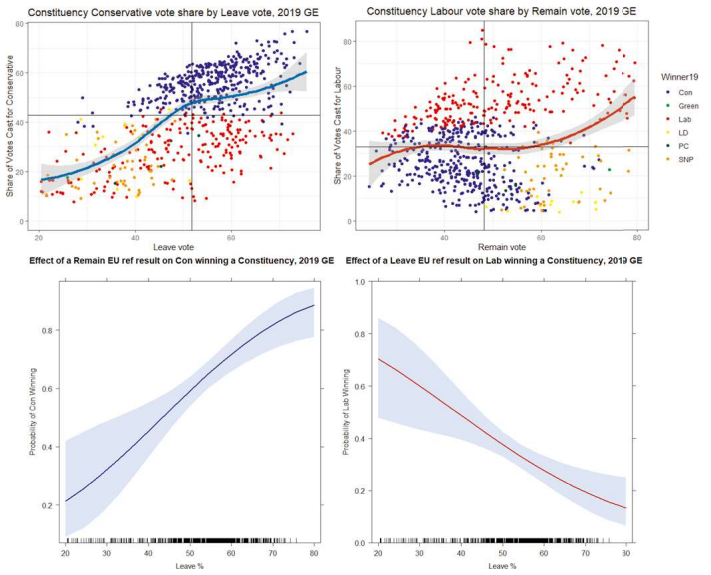

Figure 1.2: (Top) The share of the Conservative Party constituency vote by its Leave vote and the share of the constituency Labour Party vote by its Remain support. (Bottom) How the % of a constituency that voted Leave affected the probability for Labour & Conservative to gain an MP.

Specific constituency trends:

Changes in Labour support: Going into more detail about the geographical trends, it can be stated that changing patterns of party support are more detailed than has been discussed. Geographical trends have been summarised as a north/south divide, where the loss of Labour's northern Red Wall was the defining feature of change in party competition. However, this

ignored the more detailed change that occurred. Figure 1.3 reflects the size of the increase, or decrease, in the percentage of the vote in every constituency for both the Labour and the Conservative Party between the 2017 and 2019 elections. When analysing Figure 1.3, a distinct trend emerges, regardless of regional location. Seats that can be described as more Remain, urban, cosmopolitan, younger, highly educated and more reliant on professional occupations were less likely to decrease Labour support. In some cases, it even increased it.

The bottom right map representing changes in Labour's share of the vote across the decade shows Labour's strongest gains occurred in specific constituencies. For example, Labour gained in London seats, Brighton, Canterbury, Liverpool and Manchester areas. The most interesting point to make here is that constituencies very close to areas where Labour gained, like Canterbury, Brighton and Manchester, show the opposite trend. In such areas, Labour received a decrease, represented by a light red colour.

This indicates that rather than just being a general regional trend, it was instead a constituency-type trend. Labour performed better in areas that benefited from being more exposed to higher education, cosmopolitanism and globalisation, yet areas that have not gained these traits relatively nearby have rejected Labour. Critically, this means that places more likely to contain a large volume of liberal-minded voters increased Labour support.

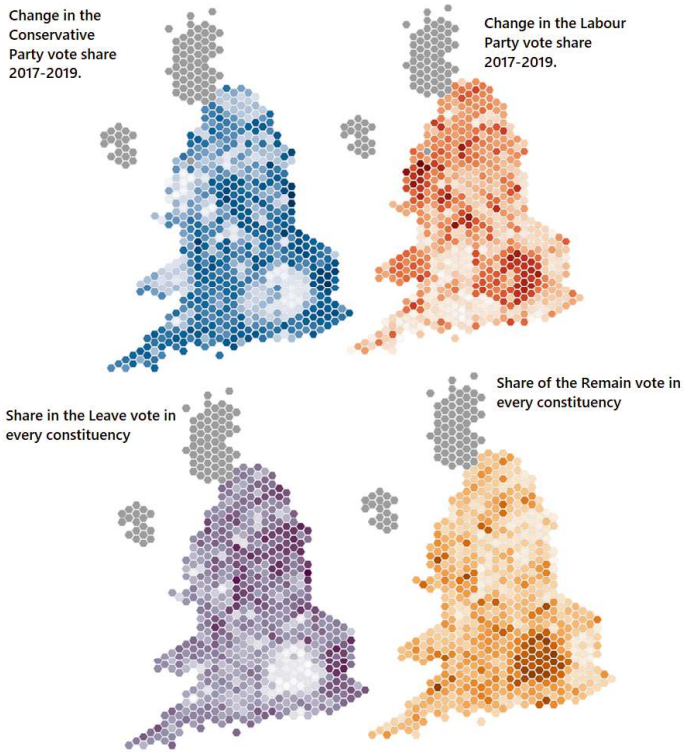

Figure 1.3: (Top) Change in the Conservative and Labour Party share of the vote between the 2017 and 2019 elections. (Bottom) Share of the Leave and Remain vote. Source: 2017 and 2019 election results.

Changes in Conservative support: Conversely, looking at the top left of Figure 1.3, the Conservative heat map, the Conservative vote increased most in areas that can be described as Leave, older, less qualified, traditional working-class areas. Oppositely, the Tories struggled to gain in the metropolitan areas where Labour gained. Again, there emerges a clear

trend in the types of constituencies a main party improved. They gained most in the types of areas in the UK that have been theorised to have lost out from global economic trends. For instance, Figure 1.3 shows that the Conservatives gained most in small-town constituencies in the Midlands and North, most of which have likely been hurt by de-industrialisation. Moreover, further research found that the largest swings from Labour to the Conservatives also occurred in such seats. However, the heat map shows the Conservatives' gains were not as large in urban large towns and city constituencies that resided near such places, such as in Manchester.

Furthermore, the Tories struggled to make gains, and in some cases incurred losses in the region most reflecting a cosmopolitan global Britain, Greater London. The South East, of which has disproportionately benefited from modern economic developments, also showed smaller gains for the Conservatives. However, the exception to this rule appears to be in smaller towns isolated on the coastline that tend not to have benefited from economic developments. For example, in Kent, in places like Dover and East Sussex, in constituencies like Hastings, only recorded a majority increase of 2.8% for the Conservatives. Vitally, all this again shows that rather than broad regional trends being important, there is a broader and more detailed constituency profile that has shaped changing party fortunes. When compared to the 2017 election results, it can be argued that areas that were less likely to express modern liberal views tended to increase the Conservative Party vote. Oppositely, areas likely to reflect strongly modern liberal values tended not to increase the Conservative Party vote.

The historic shift of the Tories' gains:

The average change in the parties' vote share only compares change to 2017 and ignores important historical facts that better show the monumental change this election produced. It can be said that some of the seats Labour lost in this election to the Tories were typically in key marginal areas, which you would expect to see in a decisive election. However, the majority of the seats the party lost were long-term Labour seats, some of which, not so long ago, would have been considered to be "safe" Labour areas.

Out of the 54 seats the Labour Party lost to the Tories, 40 could be described as once former safe Labour seats. The other seats could be described as traditional key-marginal seats that often switch between the two.

Out of the 40 seats that could be labelled as once safe Labour Party areas, 18 had never been won by the Conservatives, 25 of these seats had not been won post-1945, and 34 had not been won since the landslide victory of the Thatcher government in 1983. Interestingly, the vast majority of these seats had not been gained by the Tories since the emergence of New Labour.

These large historic changes represent the possibility that both the Labour Party and the Conservative Party have changed their bases of support, and Labour's once impenetrable red wall is now just a historical footnote in the long history of British politics.

Critically, tracking the results in these changing constituencies, it can be stated that there has been a narrowing of Labour's lead since the 1997 election (see Figure 1.4). This indicates that the phenomenon witnessed in these constituen-

cies could have been developing for around two decades. In 1997, in these 40 "safe seats", Labour had a 16,000 majority. Yet, in 2017, they only had a 4,000 majority, whilst in 2019 they had a 3,000 vote deficit. This does highlight something quite troubling for the Labour Party. The cause of this huge electoral defeat might not be isolated to one given factor at one given time. Instead, the data demonstrates that Labour probably has experienced multiple problems with various sections of the electorate within these particular constituencies. The decline of New Labour appears to have caused the first wave of a loss in support. However, Labour's problems continued into opposition, indicating these voters have wider concerns than just what Labour did in government. The next wave occurred in 2015, indicating migration could have been a factor, as this issue dominated this particular election. Along with this, in 2017, the gap between the two main parties closed, indicating that dissatisfaction with Brexit and Corbyn's Labour occurred pre-2019.