

JAMES PRENTICE

The Remoulding of British  
Politics

*Explaining political change in Britain 2010 - 2020*

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I

## Section 1: The book's reasoning

*This section of the book outlines how British politics has been realigned and the reasoning behind why this phenomenon has occurred.*



## Introduction

The last five years of British politics greatly altered the political landscape. On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of June 2016, the UK voted to Leave the EU, and to be more specific parts of England and Wales voted to Leave. Since this historic vote took place seismic political change has taken place. This period dominated by the EU question has claimed the scalps of another two Conservative Prime Ministers. No longer do Cameron's Conservatives run the country and now a very different Conservative Party has emerged, Johnson's party. Pre-Brexit the Conservative Party focused on battling Labour in liberal urban areas, seeking to win the middle England swing vote. Yet, now Johnson appears to have changed the party's strategy to one that seeks to win disaffected working-class voters based in former Labour heartlands. Labour also changed, it became more inward-looking and did so according to a new base. In the 1980s the party looked inward towards its industrial working-class roots, yet post-2016 it became more focused in liberal cosmopolitan city-centric areas. Under Corbyn, the party targeted younger

graduate voters and directed policy towards satisfying such communities. Labour's vote would go up in constituencies that reflected this demographic, but at the same time, they would lose ground to the Tories in more traditional seats. Interestingly, most of these seats were gained by Tories in the 2019 election.

This alteration of the two main parties' support bases would have been quite unthinkable just a decade ago when I first started studying British politics in 2011. Yet, this monumental change has occurred seemingly within a very short time period. As most of these developments took place post-2016 it is often assumed that Brexit is the cause of this new divide, but as this book will show these developments are most likely a culmination of longer-term trends. It is tempting to think that in all likelihood individuals' changing of allegiances stems from their decision in June 2016. However, it is probably more likely that the causes of Brexit went on to shape future political outcomes, such as the 2017 and 2019 elections. This book takes a longer-term approach in order to understand the exact causes behind this reshaping of British politics. The study also uses a statistics-focused approach so to identify trends that demonstrate the importance of these longer-term trends in altering the course of British politics. Therefore, the purpose of this book is to explain this gradual realignment of Britain during the 2010s and its likelihood of enduring.

### The book's Structure:

This book first outlines past literature the book bases itself on and then develops its theory. It identifies what long-term trends have caused such wide-scale political change and the possible reasons behind its cause. The second section of this book then tests this theory by outlining how new issues have risen up the voters' agenda and examines long-term trends on these new important issues. This section argues divisions on these new issues that formed gradually over time were significant in making it possible for UK politics to realign. This section ends by outlining how the rise of such new divisive issues may have weakened old allegiances and made the electorate more volatile, again creating ripe conditions for seismic political change.

The third section analyses the causes behind the critical moment of Brexit. It examines voting patterns during the referendum campaign and highlights how the longer-term divisions witnessed leading up to 2016 were very much reflected in the differences between Remain and Leave voters. Moreover, it highlights how such divisions were present in the minds of the public during the 2016 campaign and how such divides probably partly caused different parts of the electorate to take different sides during the EU referendum campaign. The section finishes by outlining the geographical distribution of the Remain and Leave vote and argues that these trends show deep long-term divisions, of which have partly been caused by socio-economic phenomena. Such events have created long-term changes that have benefited some, whilst harming others. This mainly will focus on how globalisation

may have created winners and losers and from this, created deep social divisions, of which were finally translated into political divisions in June 2016.

Section four goes on to demonstrate how this political divide did not end with Brexit but carried on into the 2017 and 2019 elections. Rather than the new political divides being created in June 2016, the book argues that these elections reflect the longer-term political developments, rather than just the Remain/Leave divide created in June 2016. This section first analyses the 2017 election. It highlights how increases in both the Labour and Conservative Party vote represented divisions that were present in the 2016 referendum. It demonstrates how the rapid increase in the Labour Party vote came from those who had very similar views to that expressed by Remain voters and the Conservative Party's vote arose from individuals who expressed views very consistent with Leave voter preferences. Moving onto the 2019 election, the book outlines how the Labour Party's losses, and the Conservative Party's gains, very much reflected the Leave side of the EU debate. This again will highlight how divides that created the Leave vote in 2016 went onto dramatically remould party support. The chapter will finish by outlining how the change in the geographical bases of support for the two main parties reflects the geographical divide found in the 2016 referendum. Therefore, again indicating that the divides that shaped Brexit continued to shape important political developments.

Section five of the book concludes by stating the extent to which this book's theory can explain Britain's political change in the 2010s. It outlines how the book's theory can explain

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significant political developments across the last decade. It will argue that long-term trends caused by globalisation, such as economic dislocation and an increase in immigration, has gone on to shape new political divisions. This section will then go on to explore if these new political divisions are set to last by analysing the impact of Covid19. This book will argue that although this divide was heavily present in the 2019 election it does have the potential to fade away if the Conservative government is judged not to handle the pandemic and its economic implications well. Moreover, the ageing electorate created from the 2016 EU referendum will gradually be replaced by another generation who could be more sympathetic to other messages and liberal left-leaning parties.

Before going any further, it should be noted that when referring to political change in Britain this book is mostly referring to England and Wales because Scottish and Northern Irish politics possess different party system structures. As a result, this book's findings won't be as generalizable to Scottish and Northern Irish outcomes as to English and Welsh outcomes.

### The book's concept:

The concept central to this book is that of political realignment. Therefore, the question this book seeks to address is what was the extent the UK political system realigned in the last decade, 2010–2020? The approach of the book will be to analyse data of political opinions and voting behaviour in a way that will test the extent to which there has been a wide-scale political change in the UK within the last decade. The

more tests that produce positive results, showing signs of a realignment, the more confidently the study will conclude that a realignment has indeed occurred.

This book's question first arose out of my initial analysis of the result of the 2017 General Election (GE). In the aftermath of this election, some commentators were surprised at how Labour was able to close a large deficit to produce a shock hung parliament result (Pasha-Robinson 2017). Initially, the result felt impossible to explain under traditional models used to analyse British politics. However, when considering models used to explain political change in other types of party systems the 2017 election outcome started to make much more sense. This idea developed into my MA dissertation undertaken at the University of Essex. This analysed the potential that the 2017 GE had fundamentally changed the future direction of British politics, which is what the concept of political realignment historically has measured. This study replicated the 'Critical Election' argument used to test if the 1997 GE was a realigning election, and seeks to replicate it in the context of the 2017 GE (Evans and Norris 1999). My dissertation concluded that an electoral realignment had partially occurred within British politics, but a full realignment had not yet occurred fully as party system change had not yet emerged.

This initial research suggested that it was possible that the British political system may undergo a full realignment that would alter the way parties compete and succeed in elections. From this, statistical evidence started to emerge around deep generational divides in voting patterns, similar to the divisions displayed over Brexit (Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley

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2017). As a consequence, I continued to explore more data sources and between the 2017 and 2019 elections, more evidence emerged that the UK could be undergoing a full realignment. One particular development that made this book possible was the inability to get Brexit through the House of Commons by the 29th of March 2019. This led to past loyalties, which already had partly fragmented, to fully fragment by the time of the 2019 EU elections (Green 2019). As a result, the increased voter volatility again raised the possibility of a partial realignment found in 2017 developing into a fully-fledged one in 2019. Moreover, in academic and media discourse there was increased speculation that the UK had undergone a full realignment, (Sackur 2017; Sanders 2017; SurrIDGE et al. 2017; Goodwin 2019; Gamble 2019; Singh 2019; Sabbagh 2019). This encouraged me to investigate the potential the UK had fully realigned during the 2019 election by analysing constituency results and the British election study (BES). This book is a culmination of all this thinking and research.

The designed outcome of this study is to create a series of statistical models that test the extent to which there has been a full realignment. If all the chapters in this book show appropriate evidence, as defined by this book's hypotheses, the study will conclude that a realignment has occurred.

History of the realignment concept:

This book's subject is the political science field of psephology. Within this field, this book focuses on the concept of political realignment. The literature on political realignment broadly

implies that democracies can go through large-scale change that alters the basis of party competition (Denver, Carman and Johns 2012). This theory outlines a process of how politics changes within a country for the long term, which in turn explains how countries change (Dalton et al. 1984). The process of political change occurs through large-scale social changes which culminates in a scenario where political leaders adapt by altering policy, or which voters they appeal to, or both (Burnham 1970; Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale 1980). Social change usually takes a generation to occur, which is why realignments have occurred periodically through both UK and US politics (Norris 1997; Burnham 1970). This change is usually the result of developments that are the result of political decisions taken a generation before the realignment occurs. Alternatively, sometimes these developments can even be beyond political control and are a result of wider economic trends, as identified by Anthony King when analysing party system changes (Bale 2017).

The process of realignment broadly envisages a situation where traditional voting patterns start to break down as loyalties decline, and political dealignment starts to grow. Once political dealignment is complete, democracies then go through a period of destabilisation where voters depart from their historic voting behaviour, which often produces surprising and close election results (Bartle and Allen 2011). This stage is known as a period of volatility. Traditionally in UK politics this has resulted in coalitions and hung parliaments, with governments struggling to survive and implement policy (Denver and Garnett 2014). Realignment then potentially can occur when one party secures a majority with its new base,

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subsequently forcing other parties to change their strategy, thereby changing the political system.

Historically, political realignment was thought of as a sociological process created separately from political party development and electoral behaviour. One of the first theories published on this subject was Lipset's theory of political cleavages (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This theory builds upon Downs' theory of a left/right political spectrum and insists voters can re-position themselves within multiple dimensions, also known as political cleavages (Downs 1957). This, in theory, can only occur on important issues that cut across the political divide (Mair 1997). This is because later research discovered that consistent positions, needed to alter long-term behaviour, only tend to occur on people's most important issues (Zaller 1992). As these issues cut across the left/right political divide spatial models can be altered to add a line going down the middle, thus creating four quadrants, meaning multi-dimensional politics develops (Stokes 1963). These new issues usually arise outside the political arena and are developed by significant socio-economic shifts, which political parties then latch onto, which then impacts how voters cast their ballots (Webb 2000).

This theory fits in well with UK political history, which has been guided by various sociological divides that have occurred sparingly in a political system's history (Rose and McAllister 1990). Firstly, there was the divide between the protectionist landowning class and pro-free trade liberals (Lipset and Rokkan 1967). This resulted in the collapse of the Tory Party and the dominance of the Liberal Party. Secondly,

with the emergence of trade unions, wider enfranchisement and the social consequences of industrialisation the class divide emerged, which enabled Labour to replace the Liberal Party and the old religious divides (Cook 1975). Finally, this class divide existed until the emergence of Thatcherism, when politics was realigned around a consensus surrounding global economics. This was associated with globalisation, deregulation, lowering taxation and economic competence (Miller 1990).

Research in the 1980s used newly available datasets to reveal how values and political allegiances started to change in individuals who became more socially mobile (Inglehart 1970). From this, supporting evidence emerged showing that in the USA and the UK a generation who benefited from rising prosperity began to have different values to their parents (Inglehart 1985; Nie and Verba 1976; Butler 1963). One differing value was the growing emphasis on quality of life factors, such as freedom, both in terms of civil rights and economic freedoms (Nie and Verba 1976; Särilvik and Crewe 1974). As the post-war consensus began to break down due to economic stagnation, parties found it harder to rely on electoral bases the previous generation had bequeathed them. For example, in the UK children who had benefitted from increased wealth and opportunities, which their parents did not have when growing up, grew more distant from their parents in support of the post-war consensus. For instance, levels for trade union memberships differed between generations (Särilvik and Crewe 1983; Butler and Stokes 1974). Consequently, when significant economic troubles developed in the late 1970s, this new generation of former left-leaning voters was less aligned

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to Labour and the unions, and some drifted towards Thatcher and the Conservatives (Evans 1993). The consequence of such social change was a political change of dealignment, causing left parties to move to the centre to become electorally competitive (Clarke 2004).

Due to its ability to explain important historic events in British political history this theory, therefore, has been argued to summarise political change in British political history (Crewe 1992).

Realignment literature states that such political change has occurred periodically because they tend to occur through generational changes. This means that a pattern between age, public opinion and voting patterns slowly starts to materialise in successive elections (Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976; Rose and McAllister 1990). This pattern strengthens as one generation replaces another with each passing election, finally culminating in a critical election where the electorate realigns around these new cohort divides (Key 1955). Critical elections usually occur in times of crisis which force a change within the electorate who have grown tired of old loyalties (Rose and McAllister 1990). Such generational changes that have been identified are large-scale economic changes. For example, in the USA the Great Depression was identified as a time of change, with voters switching from the Republicans to Roosevelt's Democrats (Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale 1980; Burnham 1970). In this example, the economic boom in the 1920s brought a sudden and sharp increase in living standards which, when eliminated by the Great Depression, brought about a re-evaluation of voters' traditional voting loyalties

(Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976). Traditionally loyal Republican voters who had grown accustomed to higher affluence became more post-materialist and expected these higher living standards to continue (Inglehart and Klingemann 1976). When the reverse occurred many became disillusioned with the Republican laissez-faire approach to the crisis which failed to work. As a result, when Roosevelt offered economic reform packages many of these voters switched to the Democrats who became their loyal voting base for the next generation of elections (Campbell 1964).

Another example can be found in 1970s Britain which followed a similar pattern to that of 1930s America. Post-war Britain experienced sustained economic affluence, which produced an increased emphasis on post-materialist quality of life values (Inglehart 1985). The oil shock then brought stagflation and an economic crisis to Britain, which was made worse by successive trade union strikes. As the Labour government failed to deal with economic problems, characterised by lowering living standards and union strikes, the generation who had become more accustomed to higher living standards changed their allegiance in successive elections during the 1970s (Särilvik and Crewe 1983). Voters whose parents may have remained loyal to Labour themselves did not feel this same loyalty and changed their allegiance (Särilvik and Crewe 1983). This change then led to Labour being in opposition for 18 years, causing a crisis on the left (Bogdanor 2018).

Moreover, there are political decisions which lead to generational changes that later realign political systems. One such realignment can be said to have occurred in the USA with politicians' decision to expand higher education after World

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War Two. This led to a generation that experienced a more diverse community and was exposed to more liberal ideas than their preceding generations (Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976; Inglehart 1970). Moreover, this generation also experienced higher affluence, cementing more liberal and post-material attitudes. This resulted in a generation that had more liberal views than their parents, which when the civil rights movement emerged caused a weakening in allegiances (Nie, Verba and Petrocik 1976). Children of Republicans started to grow more distant from the Republicans' stances on equality and war. As one generation replaced another and racial inequality issues created political and constitutional crises these younger voters abandoned their Republican upbringings and gravitated towards the Democrats. This culminated in a critical election with the elections of presidents Kennedy and Johnson (Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale 1980).

Another example of political decisions leading to social changes which created a realignment can be said to have occurred in 1920s Britain. With the emergence of mass industrialisation and the enfranchisement of all male voters, religion began to become less prominent in voters' minds and occupational class divides rose in prominence (Cook 1975). As this trend became stronger as more voters entered the electorate and one generation replaced another, this resulted in voters switching from the Liberal Party to the Labour Party (Cook 1975). This realignment lasted for several elections after the critical election of 1924 where the first Labour government was elected, resulting in a class divide that dominated British politics for decades (Butler 1963). This class divide broke down in the 1980s with increased affluence

causing new middle-class voters to move away from Labour and towards the Conservatives (Särilvik and Crewe 1983; Butler and Stokes 1974). This caused electoral competition to be focused around these middle-England centre-ground voters and looked to have been a permanent change.

The main change which this book focuses upon is the implementation of the Washington consensus that put Britain into a globalised economic world, which further integrated the UK into the European Union. This consensus led to economic policies of embracing globalisation, deregulation, privatisation and lower levels of taxation, much of which New Labour came to accept (Stiglitz 2013). The book will particularly focus upon the idea that the creation of a globalised economic world has created winners and losers and from this, has created new political tribes (Kriesi 2014). Globalisation has also been theorised to increase the influence of the EU over the UK and also helped increase levels of migration (Betz 1993). Crucially, much past literature has shown this to be essential in making new realignments possible (Dalton et al. 1984; Elff 2009; Wolinetz 2009; Norris and Inglehart 2019). The greater the effect these new non-economic issues have the more the electorate will be deemed to have changed from voting on traditional economic issues to new issues. From this, the extent voters have electorally realigned will be established (Evans and Chzhen 2013).

This book explores the possibility that this model of British politics broke down in the 2010s and was replaced by a new model that could continue to shape British political outcomes.

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This book's definition of the realignment concept:

With the emergence of modern computing, the behavioural revolution occurred and new theories took over, such as valance theory. Despite valence theories (which assert that voters' assessment of parties' and their respective leaders' competence best explains voting behaviour) becoming the dominant focus of election research (Whiteley et al. 2013) other academics continued work with the realignment thesis. Rather than abandoning the realignment concept altogether, academics worked on creating a more detailed definition of realignment so future change could be better analysed under the realignment thesis. For example, such research addressed the lack of an agreed definition for realignment (Evans and Norris 1999). Therefore, researchers subsequently attempted to create a theory that could encompass enough factors that could adequately measure the concept of political realignment and tested the extent the 1997 election could be called a realigning election (Evans and Norris 1999). This research culminated in the book 'Critical Elections', of which this book takes its definition of realignment, so to avoid conceptual stretching.

This book sought to create a more concrete definition of realignment by merging long-term explanations with short-term ones. It did this by building upon a theory published by V.O. Keys which highlighted analysis where some elections in American political history produced large-scale and long-lasting political change, known as a critical election (Keys 1955). This theory was further developed by analysing case studies to explore which statistical tests could effectively

identify which previous elections could be described as a critical one. Such work used America as a case study due to the large amount of electoral historical data that this country has recorded both at a national and local level (Burnham 1970). Other work also attempted to draw relevant statistical tests that could effectively identify the process of realignment (Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale 1980). As the theory was applied to more countries outside the USA, alternative statistical tests were generated (Clubb, Flanigan and Zingale 1980). The UK for example had statistical tests that differed from methods identified originally in America. For example, America focused more on geographic aggregate changes and the UK focused more on individual-level voter changes (Miller 1991; Flanagan and Dalton 1984). As a result, the concept of a critical election, the core component of a realignment, suffered from conceptual stretching.

Consequently, academics spanning different fields of political science decided to come together to analyse the extent to which the 1997 GE was a realigning election (Evans and Norris 1999). This led to the production of a book that created a much less contested conceptual definition that utilised many different political science approaches to explain political change (Evans and Norris 1999). For instance, Budge analysed parties' manifesto content by exploring the possibility that party positions had dramatically changed, highlighting the potential of extensive party system change (Budge 1999). Webb and Farrell analysed party membership ideological changes, to gauge how intra-party democracy may be changing, and if this would likely cause a change in the party system (Webb & Farrell 1999). Curtice analysed changes

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in regional voting patterns, while Evans researched class trends to investigate the potential of wider social electoral realignment occurring (Curtice 1999; Evans and Norris 1999). Finally, other academics such as Norris and Franklin focused on earlier theories emphasising the importance of new issues, which could create the emergence of new cleavage divides that consequently generate realignments (Franklin 1999; Evans and Norris 1999). This theory found that there were too many tests that the 1997 GE failed to meet within the three categories explored. Consequently, it was concluded a realignment had not occurred (Evans and Norris 1999).

Overall, this book covers all three main theories: patterns of party competition, electoral changes and a new issue cleavage, thus creating a broader and more detailed analytical framework. This definition has been accepted as a sound theoretical framework with which to test the extent a realignment has occurred, and consequently, the theory has not changed since.

The three main components are fully defined as:

### *New issue alignments:*

This book will define ‘new’ issues as falling outside the domain of economics and public service provision. This is because the last period of dealignment, which oversaw the breakdown of class-based politics, placed heavy emphasis on economic competence and public service provision as the most important issue (Clarke et al. 2011). Therefore, a new issue that can cause a realignment away from this consensus is most likely not to be thought of solely as an economic