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Brexit and the 2019 EP Election in the UK

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Introduction

The 2019 EP election in the UK was called in the middle of an ongoing Brexit crisis and at a considerably short notice. Against all odds, Britons went to the polls to elect their country's Members of the European Parliament (MEPs) despite the fact that they had also voted by a majority to leave the European Union (EU) a few years earlier in the June 2016 EU referendum (Hobolt, 2016; Vasilopoulou, 2016). The UK parliament's rejection of the Brexit Withdrawal Bill essentially meant that the country would continue to be an EU member state and was, as such, legally obliged to hold the election. Against a background of intense political division on how to deliver Brexit, this unexpected vote became a proxy for a second referendum. In contrast to the 2017 general election which had strengthened the UK two-party system, in May 2019 voters rewarded small non-governing parties. On the one hand, two new parties, namely the Brexit Party and Change UK that campaigned on the single question of Brexit, ran for the first time in this electoral contest with the Brexit Party topping the polls. The Liberal Democrats whose campaign promised a second referendum came second, scoring their highest electoral result at any EP election. On the other hand, the mainstream Labour and Conservative parties recorded their lowest ever combined share of the vote since the first EP election in 1979. Support for the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) also shrank and the party lost all its seats in the European Parliament (EP).

What set of events compelled the government to hold such an unexpected election? In what ways did Brexit feature in the political campaign? And how did the Brexit Party manage to achieve such an unprecedented electoral success? This contribution examines the debate in the run-up to the 2019 EP election arguing that – despite the fact that only two years earlier voters had opted for the two main parties that had pledged to honour the result of the EU Referendum – both the executive and the Parliament remained divided and unable to deliver on this promise. This led to Brexit becoming a key issue in both citizens' preferences and party campaigns. Voters rewarded smaller parties, sending a strong signal both against the government and the Labour Party. However, whereas the pro-EU vote was divided across many different political parties, the Leave vote was mostly united behind the Brexit Party, which had implications for parties' short- and medium-term strategies and British politics more broadly.

I. The Unexpected 2019 EP Election

The 2019 EP election was held across the UK on Thursday 23 May 2019 after the Conservative Prime Minister Theresa May's announcement only a few weeks earlier

on 7 May. This election was held against a background of intense political divisions within the government and the Parliament. Following the British public's decision to leave the EU on 24 June 2016, the UK government invoked Article 50 of the Treaty of the EU on 29 March 2017, which legally commenced the withdrawal process with a maximum of a two-year negotiation period. Shortly after triggering Article 50, in April 2017, the Prime Minister had called for an early general election to take place in June 2017, in order to strengthen the government's hand in the UK–EU Brexit negotiations (Hobolt, 2018). Against most expectations, however, the snap election resulted in the Conservative Party losing seats and forming a minority government (Heath and Goodwin, 2017; Prosser, 2018). Despite the fact that the Conservative Party had a considerable lead in the polls a few months earlier, the 2017 general election instead weakened the Prime Minister's position both within her party and in parliament (Hobolt, 2018).

The following two years proved difficult for the government, which suffered from substantive internal division on the question of Brexit and its negotiation strategy. The leadership's position on Brexit lacked strong institutional underpinnings within the party (Lynch and Whitaker, 2018). Whereas some Remain MPs exerted pressure on the government to pursue a softer Brexit strategy, Leave MPs campaigned for a hard Brexit. Conservative Brexiteers were highly organized in parliament. They re-launched the European Research Group, for example, whose single focus was the country's withdrawal from the EU. Despite the fact that May's (2017) position included polices akin to a hard Brexit, namely leaving the single market, ending free movement and removing the UK from the jurisdiction of the European Court of Justice, her policy of maintaining frictionless trade with the EU in order to avoid a hard border with the Republic of Ireland became a contentious issue. As a result, May's withdrawal bill was perceived as a fudged compromise not satisfying either camp within the Conservative Party.

Being in a confidence and supply government arrangement with Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) complicated matters further. The deal between the two parties gave the DUP an unprecedented opportunity to exercise power in British politics. The 10 DUP MPs pushed for a Brexit deal that would not establish a UK border in the Irish sea. They consistently opposed the government's negotiation strategy, contributing to a period of instability. For the DUP, a different arrangement for Northern Ireland compared to the rest of the UK, for example by aligning to the EU single market rules in order to maintain an open border on the island, would create internal trade barriers within the UK, thus undermining the UK's constitutional integrity (Murphy and Evershed, 2019). This argumentation served to further justify Conservative MPs' opposition to the Prime Minister's deal and contributed significantly to the scale of Conservative backbench rebellion against the Withdrawal Bill (Sheldon, 2019).

Political division also characterized the British Parliament, which rejected the Prime Minister's Brexit Withdrawal Agreement on three occasions (15 January, 12 March and 29 March 2019) by 230, 149 and 58 votes respectively. A significant number of Conservative MPs voted against their own government (115, 75 and 34 respectively) defying party whips. In an already polarized political landscape, the government was unable to find cross-party support in order to pass the Withdrawal Bill, which was also rejected by the majority of Labour, Liberal Democrat, Scottish National Party, Green and Plaid Cymru MPs.

Theresa May had attempted to use the prospect of holding the EP election as leverage in order to convince MPs to vote for her Withdrawal Agreement and avoid the potentially embarrassing moment of holding the election. Lack of agreement in the Parliament, however, meant that the government had to request an extension of Article 50 and delay the country's withdrawal from the EU. As a result, and despite the government's previous statements to the opposite, the Prime Minister announced on 7 May that, by effectively remaining an EU member state, the UK was legally obliged to participate in the EP elections. This is because EU member states are bound by Treaty to give the right to vote to EU citizens. Refusing to organize the EP election in the UK would have likely resulted in the European Commission initiating infringement proceedings and the UK government having to face the European Court of Justice. Excluding the UK would have required EU Treaty reform, which was not a viable scenario given the time pressure.

Political divisions on the question of Brexit were also reflected in public opinion, which was split on a number of issues, including whether the UK should leave the customs union, whether it should prioritize access to the EU's single market over placing restrictions on the free movement of people, and the reciprocity of EU citizens' rights (Vasilopoulou and Talving, 2019). The public was also polarized on whether to hold an – otherwise unexpected – EP election (Table 1). Three camps remained relatively stable as developments in the British Parliament unfolded. Between 38 and 40 per cent of the population found the prospect of holding an election acceptable whereas 43–44 per cent described that possibility as unacceptable. Approximately a fifth of the electorate did not know. These responses provide an initial lens into public opinion, which was not only divided on the question of whether Brexit should happen or not, but also on whether the UK should hold the EP election.

II. A Brexit Campaign?

The political campaign was dominated by Brexit and ensuing domestic political divisions. Despite the fact that Brexit relates to the UK's relationship to the EU and as such has a European dimension, the focus of the debate was in essence national. For Brexiteers, the emphasis was primarily on how to deliver Brexit, with some asking for a 'clean break' from the EU and others cautiously supporting May's Withdrawal Bill. For those more

Table 1: How Acceptable or Unacceptable Would It Be for You if Britain Needs to Hold Elections for British MEPs to the European Parliament on 23rd May as a Consequence of Still Being an EU Member?

	15-Mar 19	*29-Mar-19*	*12-Apr-19*
	%	*%*	*%*
Acceptable	38	38	40
Unacceptable	43	43	44
Don't know	19	19	16

Source: Opinium data from the United Kingdom. https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/how-acceptable-or-unacceptable-would-it-be-for-you-if-britain-is-still-a-member-of-the-eu-on-the-23rd-may-so-will-need-to-hold-elections-for-british-meps-to-the-european-parliament/

favourable to the EU, for some the question was whether an alternative Brexit plan was a viable option whereas others campaigned explicitly for a second referendum. Pro-EU parties mentioned EU reform but overall the campaign hardly referred to European institutions. For example, issues related to the EP, such as the lead candidate (*Spitzenkandidaten*) process whereby the large EP party groups nominate their candidate for the European Commission Presidency, did not feature in the debate.

The primacy of domestic issues and Brexit in party campaigns was also a partial reflection of public opinion, which prioritized Brexit and values over candidates and policy. YouGov asked citizens two months prior to the election (14–15 March 2019) if Brexit were delayed and Britain had to elect MEPs, which factors would be the most important in deciding how to vote.[1] The issue of whether the party supported leaving or staying in the EU was the most popular answer (22 per cent) followed by whether the party represented the individual's broader values and principles (21 per cent). Reasons related to candidates and policy were instead of minor importance at seven and six percentage points respectively. Approximately a fifth of respondents did not know what would motivate them to vote in the 2019 EP election.

Given the Conservative Party's failure to deliver the UK's withdrawal from the EU within the two-year period designated in Article 50, it did not invest in a fully-fledged campaign ahead of the 2019 EP election. Party officials admitted that the party was likely to be punished in the polls and that voters would turn to Nigel Farage's new Brexit Party, which was launched in April 2019 by the former UKIP leader and MEP to 'ensure that the UK leaves the EU'. Some Conservative Party MPs admitted that they would not be campaigning while others said that they would not vote at all (*Financial Times*, 2019). Instead of a manifesto, the party issued a short leaflet which included a photograph of Theresa May and the slogan 'The only party which can get Brexit done is the Conservative Party'. The leaflet focused on how the EP election could be stopped and defended the Withdrawal Agreement as a deal that 'takes back control of our money, laws, and borders'. While calling for unity, the leaflet also pointed at those who had backed and those who had blocked the government's Brexit deal. It also warned that the new Brexit Party was standing for Nigel Farage's own personal gain and that voting for that party would not get the country closer to Brexit. The message was simple: if voters wanted Brexit, the Conservative Party was their best option.

The timing of the election also coincided with internal disagreements within the Labour Party, which was criticized as ambivalent in terms of its Brexit policy. During the 2017 general election campaign, Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn had promised to honour the 2016 Brexit referendum result and push for a 'Jobs First Brexit' (Hobolt, 2018). However, there was strong divergence between the leadership and the members' views on Brexit. In a survey of Labour Party members conducted in January 2019, 89 per cent of members thought that in hindsight it was wrong to leave the EU and 72 per cent wanted the party to fully support a new referendum on Brexit (Bale *et al*., 2019). Dissatisfaction with Jeremy Corbyn's leadership, which included – beyond his Brexit policy – his handling of allegations of anti-Semitism within the party, led to the

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[1]https://whatukthinks.org/eu/questions/if-brexit-were-delayed-and-britain-had-to-elect-meps-to-the-european-parliament-which-of-the-following-factors-if-any-will-be-most-important-in-deciding-how-you-vote-in-that-election/ Accessed on 28 March 2020.

resignation of seven Labour MPs in February 2019, including former leadership hopeful Chuka Umunna. Along with another four MPs, including the Conservative Anna Soubry who was very vocal in her criticism of the government, they registered as a party to run in the EP election under the name Change UK – The Independent Group.

The prospect of a new electoral contest added pressure on Labour leadership to put forward a clearer position on Brexit and to consider the prospect of supporting a second referendum. In its 2019 EP election manifesto, Labour opposed both the government's Withdrawal Agreement and the prospect of the UK exiting the EU with no deal. However, the party continued to resist the membership's wish for a pro-EU agenda. The leader's vision, as set out in the foreword, was to unite the country behind his alternative Brexit plan, which consisted of building a 'close and cooperative relationship' with the EU. This would include a new comprehensive customs union, close single market alignment, guaranteed rights and standards, and the protection of the Good Friday peace agreement in Northern Ireland. The manifesto promised a public vote on Brexit only in the absence of an 'agreement along the lines of our alternative plan, or a general election' (Labour Party, 2019). The manifesto also featured a section on what Labour Party MEPs have achieved in the EP on issues such as labour standards, climate and equality. A number of domestic issues were also included, for example ending austerity, tackling climate change, delivering protection at work and protecting citizens' rights, signalling that for Labour this election was not only about Brexit.

The Liberal democrats, the Scottish National Party, the Greens, Plaid Cymru and Change UK supported a referendum to stop Brexit and warned against the rise of nationalism, populism and anti-liberal forces. The question of Europe dominated their electoral campaigns, which criticized both the government's policy and Jeremy Corbyn's agenda of delivering Brexit. They all issued fully-fledged manifestos, which stressed their European values and the EU's achievements in promoting freedom, peace and stability. Their campaigns also emphasized the economic benefits of EU membership, including jobs, funding and trade, as well as questions of environmental protection and labour standards. They also mentioned what their candidates would do if elected and touched upon EU reform.

UKIP and the new Brexit Party, on the other hand, issued very short campaign documents. UKIP's two-page manifesto argued that 'Brexit is being betrayed' by the political class in Westminster. The party urged leaving the EU under the 'policy of unilateral and unconditional withdrawal' and offering the EU tariff-free trade under the rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO) (UKIP, 2019). The Brexit party issued a pledge card, urging voters to opt for them in order to 'change politics for good'. It claimed that the government's Brexit deal was 'Brexit in name only' and portrayed the adoption of WTO rules for trade as a great opportunity for the country. The Party's case for Brexit was justified both in terms of restoring trust in democracy through taking control of laws, borders and trade; and in economic terms, namely more investment in the country and reducing the cost of living.

III. A Proxy for a Second Referendum?

In contrast to the 2017 general election which strengthened the UK two-party system, in May 2019 voters rewarded small non-governing parties and punished larger mainstream

parties. This is consistent with both previous EP election results in the UK (Vasilopoulou, 2017) and the general trend of EP elections as 'second-order' electoral contests, namely platforms for protest against the government and large governing parties (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Table 2 shows the vote and seat shares in 2019 and the change in vote share compared to the 2014 EP election. In an unprecedented success for a new party, the Brexit Party topped the polls with 30.8 per cent and 29 seats. The strongly pro-European Liberal Democrats came second with 19.8 per cent of the vote, its highest share at any EP election and a considerable improvement of 13.1 percentage points compared to 2014, which translated to 16 seats. Other parties with a clear pro-EU stance, including the Greens, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru also increased their support. Change UK received 3.3 per cent of the vote, but did not secure any seats. On the other hand, the Labour and Conservative parties recorded their lowest ever combined share of the vote since the first EP election in 1979 (Cutts *et al.*, 2019). Their support slipped by 11 and 14.4 percentage points respectively compared to the 2014 EP election. Labour came third with 13.7 per cent of the vote whereas the Conservative Party finished fifth with only 8.9 per cent, below the Greens.

The two major parties, however, were not the only electoral losers. UKIP only received 3.2 per cent of the vote, dropping by 23.6 percentage points compared to the 2014 EP election. This development was in line with a broader trend of electoral decline. UKIP support had already dropped from 12.6 per cent in the May 2015 general election to only 1.8 per cent of the vote in June 2017. For years, UKIP had campaigned for the UK's withdrawal from the EU. After the 2016 referendum, however, the party 'found itself lacking a clear purpose' (Prosser, 2018, p. 1228). Shortly after the referendum, Nigel Farage, its charismatic leader, resigned paving the way to a period of crisis. UKIP experienced internal division and held five leadership elections, as leaders struggled to unite the party. Progressively, UKIP shifted its focus towards immigration. It adopted a very strong anti-Islamic rhetoric and sought alliances with controversial figures, including ex-English Defence League leader, Tommy Robinson (see also Heath and Goodwin, 2017).

Turnout was 37 per cent, which represented a small increase compared to 2014 and was the second highest since the first EP election in 1979. Aggregate-level analysis has

Table 2: 2019 European Parliament Election Results in the UK

Party Name	Seats 2019	Votes 2019 (%)	Change in vote share since 2014
Brexit Party	29	30.8	+30.8
Liberal Democrats	16	19.8	+13.1
Labour	10	13.7	-11
Greens	7	11.8	+4.1
Conservative Party	4	8.9	−14.4
Scottish National Party	3	3.5	+1.1
Plaid Cymru	1	1	+0.3
Change UK	0	3.3	+3.3
UKIP	0	3.2	−23.6

Source: https://europarl.europa.eu/election-results-2019/en/national-results/united-kingdom/2019-2024/

shown that turnout was lower in places that had given strong support to leaving the EU in 2016 and that turnout increased in strong and moderate Remain areas (Cutts *et al.*, 2019). This suggests that those living in Remain areas might have mobilised in order to signal their disillusionment with Brexit. Still, most voters did not vote at all and turnout was much lower compared to the average across the EU (50.66 per cent) and the 2017 general election (68.8 per cent).

More broadly, it should be noted that the EP election results in the UK conformed with the wider European trend of fragmentation, declining support for the traditional left and right, and rising support for liberals and the greens. At the same time, they were indicative of voters' frustration with Brexit and the government's handling of it. Table 3 outlines the main reasons people gave for choosing the party they voted for. Approximately half of the respondents cast their vote on the basis of either the party's Brexit policy or in order to show their dissatisfaction with the government's negotiation position. This lends some support to the second-order elections model of voting behaviour whereby voters use elections to the EP in order to signal their discontent with domestic politics and government performance (Reif and Schmitt, 1980). Questions related to candidates and policies other than Brexit did not feature prominently in people's preferences. Interestingly, the Brexit party and Liberal Democrats achieved most of their support on the basis of voters' dissatisfaction with Brexit and the UK government's handling of it (at a total of 81 per cent and 68 per cent respectively). On the other hand, Labour and the Conservatives received most of their votes from people who always voted for them at 36 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. Competence was also a key reason for choosing the two large parties. Other prominent reasons for voting Labour included having the best policies on issues other than Brexit and for the Conservatives that they were the least bad option on offer.

This descriptive analysis of the most important reasons for citizens' vote choice indicates that Brexit and government performance were key predictors of the vote.
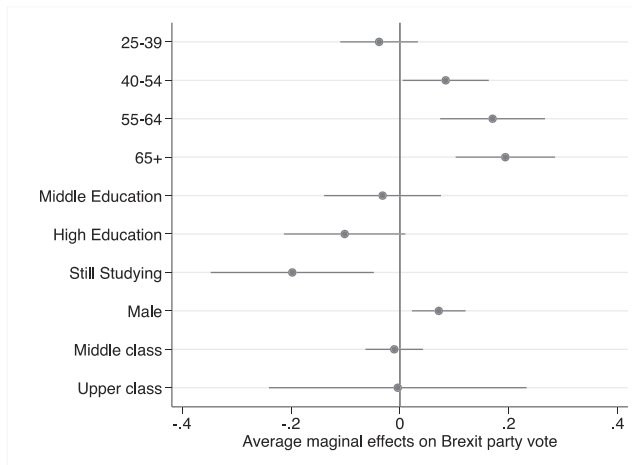
Table 3: Below are Some Reasons that People Have Given for Choosing the Party They Voted. Please Can You Rank Them in Order of How Important They Were in Your Decision

	Total	Brexit	LD	Lab	Green	Con	UKIP	ChUK
They had the best policy on Brexit	30	37	58	6	22	7	27	26
I wanted to show my dissatisfaction with the UK government's current negotiating position on Brexit	21	44	10	7	10	1	26	20
I always vote for that party	11	0	5	36	5	34	9	0
They seem the most competent of the parties on offer	8	2	8	12	11	16	8	10
I didn't like any of the parties, but I wanted to vote and this party was the least bad option	8	2	7	9	12	19	9	16
I wanted to show that I'm not happy with the party I usually vote for	7	8	7	2	12	2	8	18
They had the best policies on issues other than Brexit	6	1	2	13	20	6	6	3
They had the best leadership of the parties on offer	4	4	2	8	2	6	3	1
I voted for who I thought were the best candidates, regardless of their party	4	2	2	7	5	9	5	5

Note: First mentions in the ranking. Source: https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2019/05/my-euro-election-post-vote-poll-most-tory-switchers-say-they-will-stay-with-their-new-party/

Figure 1: Socio-demographic Model of the Brexit Party Vote.

Source: European Election Study, Schmitt *et al*., 2019.

We also know from aggregate-level analysis that the Brexit Party performed well in Leave areas and places with high levels of previous UKIP support, suggesting that it strongly benefited from pre-existing divides in British society (Cutts *et al*., 2019: 505). To further understand the nature of these political divides and how they influenced the 2019 EP election result, we carried out individual-level analysis focusing on Brexit Party support and using data from the post-election survey of the European Election Study (EES) (Schmitt *et al*., 2019) (for descriptive statistics and full results, see Supporting Information).[2]

We commenced by running a model that focuses on individuals' demographic characteristics. Research suggests that key socio-demographic changes, such as increases in life expectancy and the expansion of higher education, are contributing to the emergence of new cleavages in European democracies (Ford and Jennings, 2020). These divisions were also identified as key predictors of the Brexit referendum (Hobolt, 2016). If the divide is stable, it should also be present in the 2019 EP vote. Figure 1 shows the average marginal effects of age, education, gender and social class based on a logit model of Brexit Party vote with vote for all other parties as the reference category (Table A2, model 1). We observe that similarly to the referendum result, the effects of age and education are significant. Older citizens were more likely to opt for the Brexit Party. Specifically, compared to the reference category (18–24 years old), citizens over 65 years old were 19 percentage points more likely to vote for the Brexit Party. Individuals between 55 and 64 years old were similarly 17 percentage points more likely to choose the Brexit Party in the 2019

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[2]This is a post-election study, conducted in all 28 EU member states after the elections to the EP were held between 23 and 26 May 2019. It asks a number of questions tapping into electoral behaviour. Party choices and general political attitudes, and covers respondents' background socio-demographic characteristics.

Figure 2: Attitudinal Model of the Brexit Party Vote.
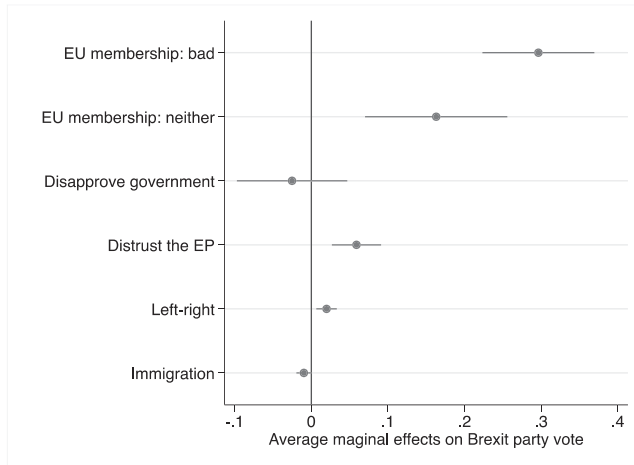
Source: European Election Study, Schmitt et al., 2019.

EP election. Education was also a significant predictor with those still studying for a degree being 19 percentage points less likely to vote for the Brexit Party compared to those with low levels of education. This of course might also reflect the effect of age on vote choice. We also find that males were more likely to choose the Brexit Party, but that self-declared social class did not have an effect.

These findings indicate that the demographic divide was also present in the 2019 EP election. Hobolt et al. (2020) suggest that the Brexit referendum gave rise to affective polarization on the basis of individuals' views on Brexit. These Brexit identities cut across traditional party lines and can be as intense as partisanship. To what extent did these identities influence the vote in 2019 and how did they feature in people's minds in comparison to considerations traditionally associated with the second-order model of vote, such as the government's record? To test this, we proceeded to add a set of attitudinal variables to our vote choice model. Figure 2 presents the average marginal effects of people's views of the UK's membership of the EU[3] and their approval of the government's record to date while also controlling for trust in the EP, views on immigration and left–right self-placement (Table A2, model 2). The key observation here is the magnitude of the effect of individuals' opinions on their country's EU membership. Those who thought that the UK's membership of the EU is a bad thing were 30 percentage points more likely to opt for the Brexit Party compared to those that viewed EU membership positively. Interestingly, those who viewed membership as neither a good nor a bad thing were also more likely to choose the Brexit Party by 16 percentage points. Other attitudinal characteristics such as distrust in the EP, self-placement on the left–right dimension and immigration views were significant but did not carry as much weight in people's voting decision. Interestingly, the

[3]As a proxy for referendum vote, which is not included in the ESS, we are using the following question: Generally speaking, do you think that [country] membership of the European Union is...? (good thing; bad thing; neither).

extent to which citizens disapproved of the government's record did not seem to play a role in these preferences.

IV. Discussion

The 2019 EP election marked the 40th anniversary since the first election to the EP in 1979, and was conceivably the last EP election to be held in the UK. The results in the UK were striking. Smaller non-governing parties with unambiguous EU positions became unprecedented electoral winners. The newly-founded Brexit Party whose sole purpose was to ensure that the UK leaves the EU topped the polls. The Liberal Democrats campaigned on a second referendum ticket and finished second, scoring their highest ever result in an EP election. The two larger parties, on the other hand, which had promised to honour the referendum result but were fraught with internal division, were punished at the ballot box. They recorded their lowest ever combined share of the vote in an EP election.

To a large extent these results are in line with the broader European pattern where smaller parties won at the expense of the centre-left and the centre-right. Second-order elections, however, tend to be characterized by electoral volatility and as such one should be cautious about interpreting their results as an indication of electoral realignment and party system change. That said, voters' behaviour in EP elections have the potential to shape short and medium-term party strategies. Only one day after the vote on 24 May 2019 – and before the official results were declared – the Prime Minister announced her resignation. This paved the way for Boris Johnson being elected as the Conservative Party leader on 23 July 2019. Despite the fact that the Conservatives lost votes both to the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats (Cutts *et al.*, 2019), the new Conservative Party leader interpreted the 2019 election loss as a strong signal for adopting a hard line on Brexit. The pro-EU vote, however, was divided across a number of parties. This was perhaps an early warning that these parties had to pool their resources in order to create a unified front vis-à-vis the Brexit camp. Their inability to do so likely contributed to their weakening and the Conservatives' sweeping victory only a few months later in the December 2019 general election.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of the article.