



Brexit and party change: The Conservatives and Labour at Westminster

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Abstract

This article analyses the extent of party change in response to the vote for Brexit in the Conservative Party and the Labour Party. It focuses particularly on how both parties struggled to manage internal divisions and ideological conflict, and how each sought to manage the issue in terms of party competition. It argues that the Conservative Party victory at the 2019 UK general election was the result of an ultimately more effective response to the electoral dynamics unleashed by Brexit, as the party adjusted its position to successfully mobilise the coalition of Leave voters into party competition, while Labour struggled to do the same with Remain voters. In short, it suggests that substantial party change, particularly by the Conservatives, effectively averted major party system change and the realignment of British politics many analysts predicted. This case study analysis consequently contributes to the wider theoretical literature on external system shocks and party change.

Keywords

Brexit, party change, Conservative Party, Labour Party, party system, Westminster

Introduction

The vote for Brexit plunged both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party into turmoil. On the morning of 24 June 2016, within hours of the result being declared, Prime Minister David Cameron had announced his resignation as leader of the Conservative Party. The Labour leader, Jeremy Corbyn, called for Article 50 to be triggered immediately, prompting a backlash from his own party. Within days, more than two-thirds of his shadow cabinet had resigned, citing a lack of confidence in his leadership and his handling of the EU issue. On 28 June Corbyn lost a vote of no confidence by the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) 172 to 40, but refused to resign, choosing instead to fight on. The two main parties at Westminster consequently both faced summer leadership contests, as they sought to come to terms with the referendum result and map out their response. However, as discussed below, in neither case did the leadership election resolve the

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question of how the Brexit issue should be handled. Rather, both parties faced ongoing uncertainty and division which led to political paralysis and a sense of crisis for much of the next three and a half years.

This article analyses the extent of party change in the UK in response to the vote for Brexit, focusing on Labour and the Conservatives. It focuses particularly on how both parties struggled to manage internal divisions and ideological conflict, and how each sought to manage the issue in terms of party competition. It argues that the Conservative victory in 2019 was the result of an ultimately more effective response to the electoral dynamics unleashed by Brexit, as the party adjusted its position to successfully mobilise the bulk of Leave voters, while Labour struggled to do the same with Remain voters. Harmel and Janda (1994: 268) argue that external shock is normally a precondition of far-reaching party change, as it prompts the party leadership, possibly under pressure from others, to ‘undertake a fundamental re-evaluation of the party’s effectiveness’ in relation to its primary goal(s). For office-seeking parties which seek to maximise their electoral support, an election defeat is the most obvious external shock that can prompt party change. By unleashing a potent ideological conflict with the potential to create a new electoral cleavage the referendum on EU membership provided a powerful external shock to all the main parties at Westminster, particularly as the result went against the status quo long favoured by the leadership of each (Gamble, 2019: 177).

Party change prompted by the external shock of Brexit is consequently analysed firstly in relation to the Conservatives, and then Labour, in terms of the leadership of each party and the factional conflicts both faced. As the article explains, the Brexiteer faction of the Conservative Party was ultimately able to assert control of the party machine and effectively mobilise the Leave side of the Brexit cleavage, delivering electoral victory in December 2019 and the United Kingdom’s exit from the EU in January 2020. This proved possible without causing an irrevocable split in the party as Brexit could be accommodated ideologically by most Conservatives, even those who had backed Remain in the referendum campaign. The prospect of a ‘no deal’ Brexit, which threatened to split the Conservatives, was averted by Boris Johnson’s capacity as the figurehead of the Brexit movement to corral his party behind an amended Brexit Withdrawal Agreement. For Labour, the Brexit issue proved harder still to handle partly due to the electoral geography of the vote, and as a result of the failure of the majority Remain faction to co-ordinate itself and gain control of the party leadership.

Party change in theory and practice

Harmel and Janda (1994: 275) define party change as ‘alteration or modification in how parties are organised, what human and material resources they can draw upon, what they stand for and what they do’. Acknowledging the sheer breadth of this definition, they specify a focus on ‘aspects of change that are within a party’s direct control’ such as ‘party rules, structures, policies, strategies and tactics’ (Harmel and Janda, 1994). As Zulianello (2019: 112) has observed, Harmel and Janda’s framework ‘largely coincides’ with that advanced by Panebianco (1988). In his seminal work Panebianco ‘attributes central importance to the conformation of the dominant coalition’ in driving party change and distinguishes three causal stages in this process (Zulianello, 2019: 111). As Zulianello (2019: 111) helpfully summarises, the first of these is external pressure from an environmental challenge such as electoral defeat, which by exposing the failings of the leadership weakens its legitimacy and ‘triggers an organizational crisis if some internal preconditions are already present, most notably a counter-elite interested in replacing the current leading group’. The second stage sees a change in the party leadership come to pass, and the third sees it consolidate its position through changes to organisation, strategy and ideology (Panebianco, 1988: 243–245; Zulianello, 2019: 111–112). Once this cycle is complete, ‘a profound change has occurred in

terms of leadership, organizational structure, strategy, and even, in some cases, party ideology' (Zulianello, 2019: 111). Here once again we can see the commonality with Harmel and Janda's approach noted above.

While the limitations of space have kept this overview of the theoretical party change literature necessarily brief, given the seminal nature of the key texts discussed and the shared features that emerge it is sufficient to provide us with an analytical framework which we can deploy in relation to our case study of the Conservative and Labour parties following the EU referendum. Panebianco (1988: 243) argues that 'change in the conformation of the party's dominant coalition' impacts on both horizontal and vertical power relations within a party, so that alterations in the dominant coalition in one section of the party will likely be accompanied by changes elsewhere too. As such, this article will seek to assess the degree of factional change in both parties at three levels: amongst the party membership, the parliamentary party and the party leadership. Furthermore, these changes in a party's organisational order 'will naturally alter its behaviour and political activity' (Panebianco, 1988: 245). Accordingly the article considers the policies, strategies, ideological positioning and tactics of both parties on the grounds that these give a sound indication of the degree of party change that has or has not taken place.

Given the emphasis in the party change literature on factional takeover of positions of party leadership (i.e. the second phase of the process outlined by Panebianco), the case study analysis that follows is structured around the leadership of Theresa May and then Boris Johnson of the Conservative Party, and then the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn of the Labour Party. In addition to the academic literature, the research draws on speeches, opinion polls, contemporaneous media reports and private interviews. The conclusion of the article then assesses party change in terms of policy change, ideological change and party factions in relation to Brexit.

The Conservatives under May: Changing the leader, but not the party?

Following David Cameron's resignation as Prime Minister, it was widely expected that the party would elect a Brexiteer as his successor. This assumption was based not on the composition of the Parliamentary Conservative Party (PCP) in which a (admittedly smaller than anticipated) majority had followed their leader in publicly backing the Remain campaign during the referendum (Heppell et al., 2017). Rather, the supposition rested on the fact that the wider Conservative membership was known to be highly Eurosceptic, with a clear majority of activists defying their leader's fervent advice by voting in favour of Brexit in 2016 (YouGov, 2016a). Under the party's rules for electing a leader, MPs were charged with whittling the field down to two candidates, who would then go forward to a final ballot of the membership. The size of the pro-Brexit faction within the PCP (144 out of 330 MPs publicly declared in favour of leaving the EU according to Heppell et al., 2017: 772) was sufficient to ensure that at least one Brexiteer should reach the final ballot. Boris Johnson, having just led the Vote Leave campaign to victory, was consequently the odds-on favourite to secure the leadership. However, in a dramatic turn of events, Boris Johnson used what was meant to be the launch event for his leadership campaign to announce that he would not be standing, after his erstwhile ally in Vote Leave, Michael Gove, dramatically entered the race declaring Johnson 'unfit' to be Prime Minister. This move not only torpedoed Johnson's leadership bid but also damaged Gove's own standing amongst Brexiteers angered by this apparent betrayal (Timothy, 2020: 4). Andrea Leadsom, a socially conservative junior minister who had campaigned for Brexit, unexpectedly then emerged as the leading candidate from the Leave wing of the party.

On the Remain side, the then Home Secretary, Theresa May, soon established an unassailable position as the heavyweight candidate offering experience and the promise of competent leadership.

Although May had backed Remain, she had a reputation as a Eurosceptic and (to the frustration of David Cameron and George Osborne) had done little to assist the campaign. In an effort to reassure Brexiteers that she would not countenance any attempts to reverse or undermine the public's verdict, May moved quickly to accept the referendum result, declaring as she launched her leadership bid on 30 June that 'Brexit means Brexit', a soundbite she would use repeatedly over the months that followed (May, 2016a). In the second (and final) ballot of MPs, May secured 199 votes (60.5%), with Leadsom on 84 (25.5%) and Gove on 46 (14.0%). Nine out of ten Remainers backed May, but she also won support from one in three Leavers (Jeffery et al., 2018: 275). The scale of her victory over Leadsom reflected May's promise as a Eurosceptic Remainer to unite the party, and the perception that she was the most competent and electable candidate (Quinn, 2019). It also put pressure on Leadsom to withdraw from the contest to negate the need for the all-party ballot, something she duly did on 11 July 2016, noting her limited support amongst MPs.

Theresa May consequently became the United Kingdom's second female Prime Minister on 13 July 2016. This change of leadership and the strong mandate she had from the PCP consequently provided May with the opportunity to reconfigure Conservative strategy and ideological positioning in the light of the referendum. The new Prime Minister immediately undertook a far-reaching reconstruction of the government, dismissing half of David Cameron's Cabinet. However, May's new top team was only slightly more weighted in favour of Brexit than that she had inherited, with 7 Leavers and 20 Remainers sitting around the Cabinet table (Allen, 2017: 636). The most controversial and high-profile appointment was that of the leader of the Leave campaign, Boris Johnson, as Foreign Secretary. In addition to Johnson, Leavers were appointed to head the newly created Departments for Exiting the EU and for International Trade, and to the relatively peripheral posts of transport, environment, international development and the role of Leader of the Lords. This left the leadership of the Treasury, Home Office and major government spending departments such as health, education, defence and welfare in the hands of Remainers. In short, in spite of her strongly pro-Brexit rhetoric, neither May's ascent to the premiership, nor the new government she formed, represented a factional change in the party leadership.

Inevitably, given the circumstances, May's premiership would be defined by one overriding objective: taking the UK out of the EU (Seldon, 2019: ix). The Conservative leader was convinced that Brexit must mean finally delivering on the pledge she had struggled to deliver for six years as Home Secretary, to significantly reduce immigration (private interview). She consistently stated that free movement must end when the UK left the EU, which meant leaving the European single market and customs union, which she explicitly acknowledged in her Lancaster House speech in January 2017. Influenced by her long-time (and pro-Brexit) advisor Nick Timothy, this effectively set the UK on a trajectory for a hard Brexit. However, May was unable to reconcile this with her stated desire for a 'deep and special partnership' between the UK and Europe which would uphold the Union of the United Kingdom and avoid a hard border with Ireland. This tension ultimately left May unable to secure a Brexit deal that lived up to her own rhetoric and satisfied the pro-Brexit wing of her party.

The defining moment of May's premiership was her decision to call an early general election in 2017. Initially she had resisted such calls, including from her closest advisors (Timothy, 2020: 13). Two factors appear to have been crucial in changing her mind. Firstly, opinion polls consistently demonstrated that both May and the Conservatives were in a strong position over their opponents, a view seemingly validated by the capture from Labour of the seat of Copeland in February 2017, the first by-election victory for a governing party in 35 years. Secondly, a growing realisation following the 'torturous' passage of the bill to trigger Article 50 that with a majority of just 12 seats the Conservatives were going to struggle to get any Brexit deal passed by the House of Commons

(Seldon, 2019: 194). In April, an election was called for 8 June 2017, which May hoped would provide her with a personal mandate for Brexit and party change.

Fatefully for May's premiership, the outcome of the general election was a hung parliament. It marked a return to two-party politics in that between them the Conservatives and Labour won 82.4% of the vote, their highest combined share since 1970 (Heath and Goodwin, 2017: 346), although behind this lay high levels of vote switching, which did not indicate a stable political landscape. There was a clear Brexit effect on voting which saw the Conservatives increase their vote share to 42.3% (their highest since 1983), in large part through recruiting voters who had backed Leave in the referendum. Some 73% of UKIP defectors backed the Conservatives; although this was the biggest source of Conservative gains, May's party also attracted Leave voters from across the political spectrum (Mellon et al., 2018: 732). Six out of ten Leave voters in 2016 went on to back the Conservatives in 2017 (Ashcroft, 2017) shifting the composition of the party's support further in a pro-Brexit direction.

The loss of her majority left the Prime Minister seriously weakened and dependent on a confidence and supply arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) of Northern Ireland. As before, May was vulnerable to the hard Brexit faction in her party, organised by the 'European Research Group' (ERG). But the election result also emboldened Brexit sceptics on her own benches, who wanted to see a soft exit from the EU and to avoid 'no deal' at all costs. As Seldon (2019: xviii) argues, following the election her only hope of passing a Brexit deal through the Commons would have been to gain cross-party support. However, that would have necessitated a soft Brexit that would in all likelihood have split the Conservative Party, a risk she was unwilling to take.

Ironically, May's attempts 'to preserve the Conservative Party as a party of government and to resist the new polarisation between Leavers and Remainers' resulted in 'a messy compromise which gave no one what they wanted' (Gamble, 2019: 178) and led to the biggest Commons defeat for any government in history. The scale of the defeats May suffered in the votes on her doomed Withdrawal Agreement demonstrated that she had calculated correctly that a general election was required to provide her with the authority and mandate to face down the competing factions within her party. This task would be left to her successor. In sum, May's leadership oversaw some party change in terms of policy, as from the outset her insistence that 'Brexit means Brexit' implied leaving the single market and the customs union, as she laid out in her 2017 Lancaster House speech. This marked a fundamental shift in the UK's relationship with its key European partners. However, May was unable to resolve the tensions in her Brexit position or formulate a stance which could command the support of her party or parliament. As such, May largely failed to deliver party change in response to the external shock of Brexit.

Factional takeover: 'Getting Brexit done', eventually

What little authority Theresa May had left drained away in the first three months of 2019, as the government faced a series of humiliating defeats on the Withdrawal Agreement negotiated with the EU and was forced by Parliament to seek an extension to the Article 50 deadline of 29 March. A final desperate pivot towards a soft Brexit which might win cross-party backing led to cabinet resignations and a grassroots revolt (Seldon, 2019: 610–625). The Prime Minister had already decided that she would step down before total electoral humiliation was delivered in the European Parliament elections held on 23 May 2019, and she announced her resignation the next morning.

The results of the elections to the European Parliament were extraordinary. Labour received 13.6%, and the Conservatives finished in fourth place with just 8.8%, the worst result in the latter's history (Cutts et al., 2019: 497). The election was won by the Brexit Party, which had been formed just six weeks earlier, by the former leader of UKIP Nigel Farage. This new outfit, which

advocated a no-deal 'hard' Brexit from the EU secured 29 seats and 30.5% of the vote. Remain voters meanwhile flocked to the resurgent Liberal Democrats (16 seats, 19.6%) and the Greens (7 seats, 11.8%). This was taken as evidence of 'the continuing fragmentation of British politics' (Cutts et al., 2019: 498) with other analysts describing this four-way contest as 'the new normal' (Pettitt, 2019). In short, speculation that the British party system was at breaking point and on the cusp of a fundamental realignment was rife. One analyst wondered if we were witnessing 'the last gasps of our political order' (Goodwin, 2019).

However, as Baldini et al. (2021) note elsewhere in this special issue, the Westminster system did not break down despite this volatility. Instead, the latter half of 2019 saw substantial *party change* by the Conservatives under a new leader, Boris Johnson, effectively avert major *party system change*. Johnson, who had led the Leave campaign in the 2016 referendum, won the leadership election that followed May's resignation, becoming the first Conservative leader to be elected with the support of a majority of both the party's MPs (51.1%) and members (66.4%). Johnson was adamant that the UK must leave the EU by the end of the Article 50 extension period (at that point 31 October 2019) with or without a deal, and secured the leadership on this basis. His insistence that Brexit was 'do or die' for the Conservatives reflected the views of the party membership, more than half of whom believed that failing to deliver exit from the EU would damage the party to the extent that it would never lead a government again (YouGov, 2019a). Their depth of ideological commitment to Brexit was strikingly illustrated by the fact that a majority (54%) of members surveyed prioritised it over the survival of the Conservative Party, and almost two-thirds (63%) favoured leaving the EU even if it meant the break-up of the United Kingdom (YouGov, 2019a), the preservation of which was traditionally a central component of the party's *raison d'être*.

Boris Johnson's arrival in Downing Street prompted an almost immediate trend of a gradually improving position in the opinion polls for the Conservatives, as voters who had abandoned them in favour of the Brexit Party at the European Parliament elections started to return, seemingly willing to accept Johnson's insistence that he would 'get Brexit done'. As the figurehead of the Leave campaign in the referendum, Johnson was perhaps uniquely placed to regain the trust of such voters. He appointed the former Director of Vote Leave, Dominic Cummings, as his chief advisor, and swept away most of Theresa May's cabinet. Forming his new government, Johnson insisted that all appointees sign up to his pledge to leave the EU with or without a deal, and hard-Brexit advocates were given key posts. Notable among them were Dominic Raab (Foreign Secretary) and Priti Patel (Home Secretary) both of whom were part of a group of Conservative MPs who in 2012 had authored a radical blueprint for the future of conservatism, *Britannia Unchained*, in which they advocated fiscal conservatism, anti-statism and robustly confronting left-wing cultural values (Lakin, 2014). In short, as *The Economist* (2019) put it, the 'staid Conservative Party became a radical insurgency'. By late August, YouGov gave the Conservatives (on 34%) a 12-point lead over Labour.

This takeover of the Conservative Party by its hard Brexit faction was not without resistance, and the arrival of a new Prime Minister in Downing Street did not alter the balance of the Commons. In early September, 21 Conservative MPs rebelled against the government to back an Act of Parliament which forced the government to request an extension to Article 50 if a deal to leave the EU had not been reached and agreed by Parliament by 19 October (effectively blocking a 'No Deal' Brexit). Johnson responded by removing the party whip from the 21 rebels, so they could no longer sit as Conservatives. Those banished included nine former cabinet ministers. With the government majority reduced to minus 43, Johnson called for a general election, but the government motion fell well short of the two-thirds majority required by the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. On 17 October a revised Withdrawal Agreement was agreed with the EU, which the Prime Minister insisted could be pushed through parliament in time to meet the 31 October deadline. Unhappy with the tight deadline, parliament again voted for an extension request for

Article 50 to delay exit until 31 January 2020. Labour then agreed to vote for a general election to be held on 12 December.

The result of the general election was a triumph for Johnson and a vindication of his uncompromising approach to Brexit. The Conservative majority of 80 seats was their largest since 1987 while Labour fell to its lowest number of seats (203) since 1935. Although Nigel Farage protested that Johnson's deal was 'a sellout' and 'not really Brexit' (*Independent*, 1 November 2019), fearing splitting the pro-Brexit vote he eventually stood down his party's candidates in all Conservative-held seats. Several Brexit Party MEPs, elected just months earlier, resigned from the party to urge voters to back Johnson. As Cutts et al. (2020: 8) observe, the 'core aim of the Conservative Party campaign was to unify the Leave vote' against a fragmented picture for Remain and to capture Labour-held Leave areas. In this they succeeded spectacularly, winning seats in the so-called 'red wall' of working-class Labour heartlands in the north and Midlands. Of those who had voted to Leave in 2016, 73% backed the Conservatives, 16% voted Labour and 4% for the Brexit Party (Ashcroft, 2019). A quarter of those who had voted Leave in 2016 and Labour in 2017 switched to Johnson's party. The influx of new Conservative MPs also meant that for the first time the PCP was composed of a majority (55%) of MPs who had backed Leave in the referendum (Lynch, 2020: 11).

Boris Johnson's tenure consequently marked the culmination of a long-term trend of hardening Euroscepticism in the Conservative Party, to the extent that once mainstream Conservative opinion was either silenced or forced out completely. As Alexandre-Collier (2020: 25) notes, 'exit, voice and loyalty' was 'pushed to its limits by Johnson, who eventually suspended the last Remainers and called for a general election to renew the composition of the party'. Although a narrow majority of Conservative MPs had backed Remain in the referendum, Eurosceptic sentiment was also widespread amongst this group (Alexandre-Collier, 2020; Lynch and Whitaker, 2018). Most of this group was willing therefore to accept the result of the referendum and adhere to a hard Brexit line (Alexandre-Collier, 2020: 25). In April 2019, parliament held 'indicative votes' on alternatives to the government's Brexit proposals. All were voted down, the closest result being on the proposal for staying in the Customs Union, tabled by the Conservative former cabinet minister (and Father of the House) Ken Clarke. In this vote, which fell two votes short of a majority, 37 Conservatives voted for what effectively was a soft Brexit, illustrating the extent to which this position had been pushed to the margins of acceptability in the Conservative Party even before Johnson became Prime Minister. These Brexit-sceptics were unable, however, to resist the factional takeover of the Conservative Party by the hard-Brexit wing, as they found themselves increasingly out of touch with the sentiment of the PCP, membership, voters and media (Alexandre-Collier, 2020). Instead, they themselves were largely driven out by Johnson, transforming the Conservatives unambiguously into the party of Brexit.

The degree of party change achieved by Johnson in a short space of time was remarkable. However, he was assisted in achieving this by the sense of urgency to break the deadlock created by the multiple delays to Brexit, and the sense of most Conservative MPs and party members (YouGov, 2019a) that failing to 'get Brexit done' in Johnson's phrase would be catastrophic for the future of the Conservative Party, and could potentially lead to a Corbyn-led Labour government. As an office-seeking party the primary goal of the Conservatives continued to be winning elections and holding power. Traditionally, demonstrating 'governing competence' was a key element of Conservative statecraft (Bulpitt, 1986). Under May, this was interpreted as best achieved by seeking to minimise the disruptive effects of Brexit whilst also being seen to deliver it (with 'taking back control' of immigration viewed as a key signal to the public that Brexit really was being delivered). By the time Johnson became Prime Minister, more than three years after the referendum and after Brexit had been delayed, getting Brexit over the line had become the litmus test of government competence for Leave voters, who (as the elections

to the European Parliament had demonstrated) were willing to punish the government for missing its own Brexit deadline.

The failure of parliament to demonstrate a willingness to support an alternative pathway forward (for example in defeating the various proposals tabled in the indicative votes) also left the diminishing band of Brexit-sceptics on the Conservative benches without a clear strategy to support. While some Conservatives, led by Oliver Letwin, were determined to do all they could to avert what they saw as the catastrophic risk of a 'no deal' Brexit, they were willing by late 2019 (as Letwin made clear when advocating his amendment to the House of Commons) to vote for pretty much any Brexit deal. Once Johnson secured a revised Withdrawal Agreement with the EU, Conservative resistance to it fell away (despite the limited extent of the changes it contained compared to May's deal). Every one of the 28 ERG 'Spartans' who (with the DUP) had voted against May's deal three times backed Johnson's revised agreement (Lynch, 2020: 11). Johnson therefore provides a case-study in how a change of leadership and dominant faction can drive party change.

Labour's Brexit dilemma

If the story of the Conservatives following the referendum is one of eventual transformation into a party collectively focused on delivering Brexit, for Labour it is one of continued uncertainty and division over what its response should be. Although Labour was broadly united in favour of Remain during the referendum campaign itself, with only a handful of the party's MPs campaigning for Leave, the result left the party in a state of shock. While the party's position shifted over time the fracture that the result caused was never resolved and the party remained divided over policy and strategy, with disastrous consequences at the 2019 general election.

As noted above, the referendum outcome triggered mass frontbench resignations and a vote of no confidence in Jeremy Corbyn by the PLP. Alan Johnson, who led Labour's official pro-Remain campaign in the referendum, felt that Corbyn's contribution had been 'risible' and accused the leader's closest associates of 'actively undermining the party's efforts' (Casalicchio, 2016). Anna Turley MP (Turley, 2020) recalled her 'absolute horror' at the 'jokey interview' Corbyn gave to a Channel 4 comedy show during the campaign, in which when asked to rate the strength of his desire to stay in the EU he gave it 'seven and a half out of ten'. Her anger at 'seeing this kind of abdication of responsibility, the lack of a serious message', and the 'self-indulgence of it' were what pushed Turley to resign from the frontbench and back the vote of no confidence in Corbyn. Similar sentiments were expressed by parliamentary colleagues who joined her.

A YouGov (2016b) poll of Labour members found that 90% of them had backed Remain, and that 52% thought their leader had performed badly in the campaign. Corbyn was challenged by Owen Smith who put a referendum to ratify any Brexit deal agreed between the UK and the EU at the heart of his campaign. However, in the ballot Labour members prioritised the form of party change that the Corbyn leadership represented over the Brexit issue, with 62% voting to re-elect him. Arguably, the challenge strengthened Corbyn's grip on the party by reaffirming the strength of the mandate he enjoyed from members, and by relieving him of opponents in his shadow ministerial team.

The dilemma over how to respond to the Brexit vote was more acute for Labour than the Conservatives for several reasons. Although the majority of Labour voters had backed Remain, seven out of 10 Labour MPs represented areas that had voted to Leave (Gamble, 2018: 1217). Manwaring and Beech (2018: 28) argue that 'Brexit revealed a divided UK, with especially deep fissures in the English left over the type of country Labour-inclined voters want to see' and characterise this division as 'progressive left versus conservative Labour'. The 'ambivalent stance' (Dorey, 2017: 324) adopted by the Labour leadership at the 2017 general election represented an attempt to hold together this uneasy coalition of Labour voters. On the one hand Corbyn had accepted the

triggering of Article 50 and the end of free movement, but on the other he indicated ongoing support for a social Europe and the benefits of immigration (Goes, 2018: 68). This strategy proved relatively successful as Leave-voting traditional Labour areas largely ‘stayed loyal’, while Labour also surged in some strongly pro-Remain areas, for example university towns and cities (Whiteley et al., 2017). While Brexit was a key determinant of voting for Conservative voters, it was less of an issue for Labour voters, for whom the NHS and austerity were the most salient issues (Dorey, 2017: 325).

The Corbyn project was an attempt to radically change the Labour Party through leadership change and factional takeover by the far left, which had been marginalised since the 1980s. At the heart of this project was a strategy of growing and leveraging the power of the wider Labour membership and activist base (the ‘movement’) to transform the party as a whole. However, Brexit created a major contradiction in this strategy as the party was led by an instinctive Eurosceptic whose primary base of support was the overwhelmingly pro-EU party membership. In particular, ‘Corbynmania’ generated a surge in support from younger, university-educated cosmopolitan members and voters who were highly likely to favour remaining in the EU. Scepticism towards the project of European integration is a core component of the Bennite tradition from which Corbyn and other key figures in his leadership clique hailed, ‘and simply cannot be squared’ with the views of the mass Labour membership (Mosbacher, 2018). Corbyn was therefore not able to use the weight of Labour opinion to impose a clear position on his party one way or the other. Instead, Corbyn’s Brexit strategy was characterised by shifting compromise, as he gradually and reluctantly moved towards a more pro-Remain position. In short, Corbyn tried to distance himself (and his party) from Brexit in the hope that the Conservatives would be left to own the issue and be blamed for the difficulties it was causing (private interview). This worked for a period in that Labour was able to vote tactically to defeat government proposals, but ultimately became unsustainable as the dénouement approached.

The Shadow Brexit Secretary, Keir Starmer, announced Labour’s initial holding position in a speech in March 2017. In essence this was that Labour would apply ‘six tests’ when considering whether or not to support any putative Brexit deal negotiated by the government. In reality, these tests were sufficiently broad to allow almost any deal to be opposed, but this position enabled Labour to claim at the 2017 general election that they would both respect the referendum result, end free movement, and also (somehow) negotiate a Brexit deal with no economic downside. In 2018, the party moved to a policy of maintaining a permanent customs union with the EU but remained ambiguous on the single market. As the year went on, pressure to adopt a second referendum policy grew, led by Starmer inside the shadow cabinet. Polling of Labour members found that they overwhelmingly favoured remaining in the EU and wanted the party to back a ‘people’s vote’ (ESRC Party Members Project, 2019). However, the PLP was divided – while the vast majority of Labour MPs had backed remaining in the EU in 2016, many (particularly those that represented Leave-voting areas) were reluctant to be seen to be seeking to impede the ‘will of the people’ expressed through a democratic process.

In another rather messy compromise, Labour’s position became that they would support a second referendum only if they could not force a general election. In February 2019 seven MPs resigned from Labour to sit as ‘The Independent Group’ and fearing further defections Corbyn announced that Labour MPs would be whipped in favour of voting for a second referendum (Elgot, 2019). As matters reached crisis point in the first quarter of 2019, holding a second referendum became the ‘least-worst way out’ in the minds of increasing numbers of Labour MPs (private interview). In the indicative vote held on 1 April 2019, some 203 Labour MPs backed the idea of holding a confirmatory public vote on the Withdrawal Agreement, but that still left 40 MPs – a sixth of the PLP – ignoring the whips’ instructions to support it. The rebels included three members of the shadow cabinet, and eight shadow ministers, none of whom was disciplined by the party

leadership, reinforcing the sense that Corbyn was not only a late convert, but a reluctant one, to the people's vote campaign.

At the 2019 general election Labour's manifesto promised a 'final say' for the public in a second referendum, to be held after a further renegotiation of the Withdrawal Agreement. After initially refusing to be drawn on how he would vote and campaign in such a referendum, Jeremy Corbyn said he would maintain a neutral position, while other senior figures in the shadow cabinet indicated that they would back Remain (BBC News, 2019). These mixed messages were reflected in the fact that in the 2019 general election campaign for every voter who found Labour's policy on Brexit clear, three said it was unclear (YouGov, 2019b). In contrast, by a margin of two to one Boris Johnson's stance was perceived as clear, as was that of the (pro-Remain) Liberal Democrats (YouGov, 2019b). The election consequently saw Labour fail to effectively mobilise Remain voters in the way the Conservatives did Leave voters, going down to its worst defeat since 1935 in the process.

The political crisis of Brexit provided a number of strategic opportunities for the Corbyn leadership, but it ultimately proved unable to effectively capitalise on them. Firstly, after a fractious first year as Leader of the Opposition attempting to hold together a recalcitrant shadow cabinet and PLP, the 2016 leadership challenge ultimately provided the opportunity to purge the shadow ministerial ranks of dissenting voices and secure the hold of Corbyn and his allies over the key positions of power in the party. The factional takeover of Labour by the radical left, which for decades had been pushed to the margins, was largely complete by the end of 2016, with the scale of the membership's re-endorsement leaving him untouchable as leader. In that sense, Brexit assisted Corbyn's agenda for party change in Labour. Conservative divisions over Brexit fuelled May's decision to call the 2017 general election, which provided the opportunity for Corbyn to potentially become Prime Minister. Although he fell short of winning the election, it left him significantly strengthened personally and, by depriving the Conservatives of their majority, enhanced Labour's capacity to influence events through Parliament.

Labour enjoyed tactical victories following the 2017 election, inflicting multiple defeats on the government. However, Corbyn failed to clarify the party's key strategic direction in relation to Brexit, in terms of either the final destination or how it might be reached. Instead, Labour's strategy amounted to little more than waiting for Brexit to consume and destroy the Conservatives, with the assumption being that they would then be able to capitalise on the chaos to secure power (private interview). The aftermath of the 2017 election provided Corbyn with the opportunity to seize the agenda by pushing for a soft-Brexit with cross-party support. This was the Brexit outcome which looked most likely to be able to secure majority support in Parliament, and would have irrevocably split the Conservatives if May had adopted it as government policy. For that reason, she was highly unlikely to do so, but that refusal would have provided Corbyn with the opportunity to shift Labour into a pro-Remain position, which would have left the party better placed to mobilise Remain voters against the Conservatives in 2019. Instead, Corbyn's wider agenda for party change in a radical left direction was hampered as Brexit completely overshadowed the rest of British politics, and was ultimately destroyed by the 2019 general election. Ironically given the radicalism of Corbyn's politics, he was reluctant to drive party change in Labour to shift its policy, strategy or tactics towards favouring Remain and casting Brexit as a 'Tory' project. Instead, the leader and his office became a major drag on efforts to shift Labour in that direction.

Concluding discussion

This article set out to assess the degree of party change in both parties in terms of ideology, policy and factionalism. In the case of the Conservatives, this process can be divided into two distinct phases – first a period of limited party change under Theresa May, followed by a radical

transformation under Boris Johnson which saw the party effectively captured by its hard Brexit faction. In the immediate aftermath of the referendum, Cameron's resignation prompted a change of leadership, but to the surprise of many observers the election was won not by a Brexiteer but by a Remainer, as the pro-Brexit faction of the PCP failed to unite around a candidate and the strongly pro-Brexit party membership were denied a say in the outcome after Andrea Leadsom withdrew from the contest. May nevertheless oversaw policy change as she defined the parameters of Brexit to include leaving the single market and customs union, tilting the party ideologically towards a hard Brexit. Remainders continued to dominate the party leadership, however, and May was unable to negotiate a Withdrawal Agreement that satisfied the pro-Brexit faction in the PCP.

May's resignation provided the pro-Brexit faction with the opportunity to secure the party leadership. Johnson's victory marked the factional takeover of the Conservative Party by its hard-Brexit wing. In that sense, as Panebianco suggested it would, the conformation of the dominant coalition in the party more widely came to impact on vertical power relations to reshape that at the level of party leadership. The prioritisation of Brexit above all else, the marginalisation and exclusion of dissenting voices, and the consolidation of power brought about by the 2019 general election victory, marked the completion of this process of profound party change. The Conservatives had transformed themselves unambiguously into the party of Brexit. This enabled them to squeeze out pro-Brexit competitors (UKIP and latterly the Brexit Party) and effectively mobilise an electoral coalition based on the 2016 Leave vote which enabled them to move deep into Labour territory. The rise of Eurosceptic sentiment in the Conservative Party over several decades meant that the vast bulk of the party membership and the PCP had little ideological resistance to moving in this direction. The main focus of concern for Conservative 'Remainer' rebels was the threat of a 'no deal' Brexit, which was averted by Johnson's revival of a revised Withdrawal Agreement. Johnson therefore provides a case-study in how a change of leadership and dominant faction can drive seemingly dramatic party change over a relatively short period, but this needs to be understood within the broader context of deepening Conservative Euroscepticism since the late-1980s. In short, the long-term ideological current of hardening Euroscepticism in the party eventually facilitated a process of rapid and far-reaching party change.

On the other side of the political divide, perhaps the most striking question is why did the Labour leadership not similarly come to reflect the overwhelmingly pro-Remain sentiment of the wider party? This seems particularly curious given the nature of the Corbyn project, which was built on the support of the party membership and located its authority not in the PLP but the wider Labour movement. The answer to that is twofold. Firstly, Labour faced an intractable problem of electoral geography, with many Labour MPs acutely aware of the fact that they represented areas that had voted unequivocally in favour of leaving the EU. Secondly, the Brexit referendum intersected with a wider process of party change which the Corbyn leadership represented and which was prioritised by the party membership, namely the reorientation of the party's ideological and policy outlook in a much more radical left-wing direction. Ultimately, Labour did reach a position of endorsing a second referendum at the 2019 general election, but only after a painful and halting process to which it was always clear the leader himself was very reluctant to fully commit. Given Johnson's capacity to unite the Leave vote Labour's best hope at the 2019 general election was to do the same with Remain, but competitor pro-Remain parties such as the Greens and the Liberal Democrats, and other issues such as the serious misgivings many voters had regarding Corbyn's leadership meant that proved impossible.

The case study analysis of the response of the Conservative and Labour parties to the external shock of the vote for Brexit has also provided us with insights into the wider question of party change. In this respect, it makes a contribution to the theoretical literature in three key ways. Firstly, it has demonstrated that parties can be confronted with a need to change as a result of external events

which provide a shock to the party system, in the case of Brexit by creating a new electoral cleavage which reshapes the terms of political competition, particularly in an era of declining partisan attachment. Another example of this is the cleavage created in Scottish politics by the independence debate and referendum in 2014, to which the Labour party in particular has struggled to respond effectively. This suggests that there is scope for the literature on party change to develop a more sophisticated conceptual understanding of external shock, and also to be more closely integrated with analysis of voter demographics and cleavage politics. This is particularly important if the use of referendums becomes more, not less frequent, perhaps becoming an institutionalised feature of the UK political system (White, 2021). Secondly, the analysis has shown how the ideological context is important for facilitating or resisting party change in response to electoral shock. In the case of Brexit, both parties faced internal ideological divisions, but the Conservatives were ultimately advantaged by their long-term shift towards hard Euroscepticism which enabled them to more easily adjust to the reality of the referendum result. Again, this implies that there is an opportunity for the literature on party change to engage more closely with that on ideologies and integrate this more closely into theoretical understandings of party change. Thirdly, the analysis has shown how (as Panebianco suggests) the conformation of the dominant coalition ripples through parties at different levels, in the case of the Conservatives pushing the party to prioritise a relatively hard Brexit over all else, and in the case of Labour ultimately shifting the party towards a second referendum position. If a party leader seeks to go against the grain of the dominant coalition in their party it comes at significant political cost, as Jeremy Corbyn found in 2019. Successful party leadership therefore depends on a capacity to understand, manipulate and direct the dominant coalition.

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