BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION 2017: IT'S THE ECONOMY, STUPID!

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Abstract

The results of the 2017 general election were a shock to most observers of British politics. The Conservative Party led by Theresa May lost its majority in the House of Commons winning only 42.4% of the vote. Labour, on the other hand, had much better results than expected results attracting 40% of the votes. This article seeks to explain what is behind these surprising results. Drawing on the theoretical literature on economic voting, this article argues that the impact of austerity influenced the choices of a sizable section of the electorate. But voters are heterogeneous, that is, they are motivated by a variety of factors. In the case of the 2017 general election, Brexit was one of the factors that shaped the preferences of some voters.

Keywords: *Brexit, hung parliament, austerity, economic voting, Conservative Party, Labour Party*

BRİTANYA GENEL SEÇİMLERİ: ŞAŞKIN, TABİİ Kİ EKONOMİ!

Öz

2017 genel seçimlerinin sonuçları Britanya siyaseti gözlemcilerinin çoğu için bir şok olmuştur. Theresa May liderliğindeki Muhafazakar Parti oyların sadece % 42.4'ünü alarak Avam Kamarası'ndaki çoğunluğunu kaybetmiştir. Diğer yanda İşçi Partisi, oyların % 40'ını alarak beklenenden daha iyi sonuç elde etmiştir. Bu makale bu şaşırtıcı sonuçların arkasında ne yattığını açıklamaya çalışmaktadır. İktisadi oylama üzerindeki teorik yazından yararlanan bu makale kemer sıkmanın tesirinin büyükçe bir seçmen grubunun tercihlerini etkilediğini

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iddia etmektedir. Fakat seçmenler heterojendir, yani pek çok unsur tarafından etkilenerek harekete geçmektedirler. 2017 genel seçimlerinde de, Brexit bazı seçmenlerin tercihlerini şekillendiren unsurlardan biri olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Brexit, hiçbir partinin çoğunlukta olmadığı parlamento, kemer sıkma, iktisadi oylama, Muhafazakar Parti, İşçi Partisi*

Introduction

On the 18th of April of 2017, the British Prime Minister Theresa May called the media to Downing Street to announce that an early election would take place on the 8th of June. Rumours about an early election had dominated Westminster chatter for many months, but the announcement came as a surprise to most politicians and pundits. After all, May had ruled out that scenario many times. As she put it in one of those occasions, the country needed "a period of stability" following the vote to leave the European Union (EU) that took place in the summer of 2016.

However, it is the prerogative of Prime Ministers to change their minds, especially when windows of opportunity open. And that is exactly what Theresa May did in that April morning. Opinion poll after opinion poll showed that the Conservative Party had a 20% lead over the Labour Party, the main opposition party (Smith, 2016). The personal ratings of the Prime Minister were also encouraging. They showed that May was substantially more popular than the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn (Smith, 2016). In short, the national consensus at that time suggested that the Conservative Party was poised to win a comfortable majority and that Labour would suffer a humiliating defeat.

Yet these predictions proved to be wrong. Voters changed their minds during the campaign and failed to give a majority to the Conservatives. The Conservative Party achieved the highest share of the vote at the general election since 1992, winning 42.4% of the vote, but it only elected 319 MPs. The party needed at least 326 to command a working majority in the House of Commons. This result forced May to celebrate a confidence and supply agreement with the Northern Irish unionists of the Democratic Unionist Party. Labour on the other hand had much better results than anticipated. The party increased its share of the vote by 11% to 40% and elected 262 MPs.

This article seeks to explain what is behind these surprising results. Drawing on theories of economic voting, the article will argue that the impact of austerity can partly explain the results of the general election of 2017. However, economic considerations are rarely the main factor driving voting behaviour. In reality, voters are heterogeneous, that is, their behaviour is influenced by a variety of factors and calculations. In the case of the 2017 general election, the impact of

the referendum on EU membership also influenced voters' choices. Thus, the article will also analyse the impact of Brexit on voting behaviour through the prism of the globalisation cleavage identified by Kriesi et al (2006). Finally, and drawing on the literature on valence voting, the article will show that considerations about party leaders were less important than ideological considerations.

The article will start by briefly outlining the main assumptions of the theories of economic voting and how the globalisation cleavage can help to explain the impact of Brexit at the 2017 general election. Next, and as economic voting is more likely to occur when the context is congenial, the article will outline the political context in which the 2017 general election took place and it will offer a brief overview of the electoral campaign. This will show that 1) the state of the economy was a salient issue at the time of the election; and 2) voters were offered an alternative to the current government. The fourth section of the article will analyse the electoral results and will pay attention to two different variables – the austerity effect and the impact of Brexit.

Theoretical Assumptions

Theories of economic voting posit that the state of the economy influences voting behaviour. In particular, it is assumed that when unemployment and inflation are low, voters tend to reward the party of government; conversely, when there is an economic downturn and unemployment and inflation rise, voters tend to punish the incumbent party. This assumption was recently demonstrated to be correct. Analysis of electoral results observed in 12 countries in the period immediately after the global financial crisis of 2008 attention to two different variables – the austerity effect and the impact of Brexit. shows that, as Bartels aptly put it, "voters have simply, and even simplemindedly, punished incumbents of every strip for economic hard times" (Bartels, 2013: 49).

However, it is important to stress that the 2008 Great Recession was a rare cataclysmic event that had immediate and dramatic consequences (Hernández and Kriesi, 2016: 761). Most economic downturns do not have such far-reaching impact nor do they last for such a long period of time, and therefore evidence of economic voting is not normally so obvious. In truth, evidence that shows that economic considerations shape voting behaviour is difficult to come by (Bengtsson, 2004: 750).

But even when there is evidence of economic voting there is no agreement about the different heuristics used by voters when making their electoral choices. The difficulty lies in ascertaining 'how' voters think about the economy. Do they base their economic voting on the basis of the state of the economy in general in the period immediately prior to voting, or do they consider the impact of the economy in their personal circumstances? Some scholars argue that economic

voting is predominantly sociotropic, that is, voters respond directly to the state of the economy rather than to their personal circumstances. According to Grafstein "voters are sociotropic because national economic conditions provide better information about government's policy impact on their personal financial situation" (Grafstein, 2009: 452).[1]

This thesis is challenged by those who argue that it is voters' egocentric (also called 'pocketbook') subjective policy evaluations that influence their electoral choices (Whiteley et al, 2013: 234-5). In other words, voters whose living standards have deteriorated will tend to punish the party of government at the ballot box; conversely, those whose living standards have improved will tend to vote for the incumbent party. But perhaps both consideration – sociotropic and egocentric – operate in parallel. Surveys analysed by Sigelman et al showed that both sociotropic and egocentric considerations "operated side by side" (1991: 140).[2] In reality, it is likely that voters' egocentric or pocketbook evaluations are heavily influenced by the state of the national economy.

Independently of sociotropic or egocentric considerations, factors such as the political context, electoral volatility, the length of the time that the government has been in office (Bengtsson, 2004: 751-2; Hernandez and Kriesi, 2016: 210) and whether there are clear alternatives to the party of government, explain the likelihood for economic voting. Interestingly, these four factors are particularly helpful to analyse and explain the results of the 2017 general elections and enable us to establish the likelihood of economic voting at these elections.

Indeed, the 2017 general election took place after seven years of substantial cuts to public spending which affected large sections of the electorate. In addition, the effects of austerity was a topic widely discussed during the electoral campaign and the main opposition party proposed an economic programme that offered an alternative to the stances of the party of government. The fact that the Conservative Party had been in office for seven years also played a role, as voters were able to attribute blame to a party for their diminished economic

[1] According to Robert Grafstein (2009: 452) there are two strands within the sociotropic thesis: one that argues that voters evaluate the state of the economy as it is at the moment of voting, and those who argue that what affects electoral choice are voters' perceptions of how well things are likely to go in the future. See Sigelman et al (1991: 131).

[2] Gomez and Wilson concur though they argue that the defining factor in either sociotropic or egocentric behaviour is voters' degree of political sophistication. The findings of their study of the American electorate show that whilst sociotropic voting is ubiquitous, pocketbook voting "generally occurs only among the more politically sophisticated" (Gomez and Wilson, 2001: 910-911).

circumstances. Finally, electoral volatility was high at the 2017 general elections, reaching 15.50 in the volatility score of the Pederson Index.[3]

But the state of the economy was not the only factor influencing voting behaviour. The other big issue that dominated the election was Brexit. The decision to leave the EU created substantial uncertainty in British politics. There was uncertainty about the terms of the future relationship Britain would develop with the EU, and voters were also unsure about whether Brexit would happen or not. Those who had voted to leave the EU wanted to make sure that their decision would be respected by politicians. On the other hand, many of the Remain voters wanted either to prevent Brexit from happening or to ensure that the United Kingdom would remain as close as possible to the EU.

To understand the impact of Brexit in the 2017 general election we need to consider the factors that explain the decision to leave the EU. Scholars are still struggling to understand the driving factors that led to the vote to leave the EU, but some survey data suggests a tentative answer. Analysis conducted by Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017a: 156-58) shows that Leave voters were mostly concerned with the rise of immigration, the threat of terrorism and threats to national sovereignty.[4] But, as Sara B. Hobolt argued, these concerns are related to economic indicators (2013: 1273).

These findings are consistent with Kriesi et al (2006) thesis about how the globalization cleavage is affecting electoral competition in European democracies. As globalization created 'winners' and 'losers' in society, their antagonism created a conflict which manifests itself at several levels, namely, economic, cultural and political. Kriesi et al claim that the 'losers' of globalization, who tend to be older and less educated, are more likely to vote for parties that favour economic protectionism, control over immigration, national sovereignty, and authoritarian values, the 'winners', who tend to be younger, with university qualifications and who live in the urban areas, are more inclined to vote for parties that favour political integration in Europe, support for immigration, cosmopolitan, feminist and libertarian values and (though not always uncritically) free trade (Kriesi et al, 2006: 924). The article will show, that this 'globalization' cleavage partly determined the results of the referendum on EU membership and was salient at the 2017 general election.

[3] At the general election of 2015, the volatility score was of 18.20, the highest since 1945. In 2017 the electoral volatility score slightly lower, but it was amongst the highest since 1974. See Emanuele (2015) and also Renwick (2017).

[4] Research by Sarah B. Hobolt points in the same direction. Her dataset shows that concerns with immigration and national identity influenced the behaviour of Leave voters (Hobolt, 2016: 1273).

But voters are heterogeneous, that is, their electoral behaviour is driven by a variety of considerations (Bartle, 2005: 658-9). For instance, voters who are more interested or knowledgeable about politics tend to be more ideological or policy oriented in their electoral choices whilst less aware voters tend to be influenced by the image and reputation of party leaders. On the other hand, when there is greater polarisation between parties on salient issues, considerations about the competence or credibility of party leaders become less important (Green and Hobolt, 2008: 473). The following sections will show how economic considerations, the impact of Brexit, and ideological evaluations influenced voting behaviour at the 2017 general election. But first, the article will briefly contextualise the immediate period before the election was announced and also the electoral campaign.

Context: The Prelude to the 2017 General Election

In the summer of 2016 Theresa May was appointed Prime Minister in extraordinary circumstances. After a lengthy and very confrontational referendum campaign, 51.9% of the British electorate voted to leave the EU. The results of the referendum on EU membership came as a shock to many British politicians, including to the then Prime Minister David Cameron, who campaigned for Britain to remain in the EU.

In reaction to the referendum result, Cameron announced his resignation as Prime Minister and party leader. This announcement triggered an immediate leadership election in the Conservative Party. The abruptness of Cameron's decision as well as the shock over the results of the referendum on EU membership partly explains the ensuing chaos of the leadership contest which culminated with the 'coronation' of Theresa May as Conservative leader.[5]

As soon as she arrived in 10 Downing Street May made clear that she wanted to address the divisions in British society that the Brexit vote had exposed (May, 2016). But if May was eager to share with the public her diagnosis of the referendum result, she was quite secretive about her plans for Brexit. This level of secrecy was understandable. Given the divergent positions within the government and in the Conservative Party May had very little autonomy to decide Britain's future relationship with the EU.

In January of 2017 she revealed that her government would not seek "partial membership of the European Union, associate membership of the European Union, or anything that leaves us half-in, half-out" (May, 2017). In other words, Britain would be outside the single market and the customs union. The problem

[5] Theresa May was the most voted candidate in the first round of the leadership election. Given that the second most voted candidate Andrea Leadsom stood down from the race, the second round of the election became redundant.

was that she could not guarantee the full support of Conservative backbenchers for her hard Brexit strategy. A majority of 16 MPs in a historically very rebellious party meant that the parliamentary arithmetic was challenging to say the least. On the other hand, opinion polls suggested that the Conservative Party could substantially increase its majority if an early election was called. These factors explain May's decision to call an early election for the 8th of June of 2017.

The Election Campaign

Convinced that a comfortable majority was within its grasp, the Conservative Party launched a highly presidential campaign. Given that the opinion polls showed (Smith, 2016) that May was more popular than Jeremy Corbyn, this focus made sense, however it soon became apparent that it was not the most effective electoral strategy. Though May put herself through a punishing schedule of dozens of campaign events held around the country, voters were not responding enthusiastically to her promises of a 'strong and stable' leadership.

May's highly scripted appearances at campaign events, her mechanical replies to questions, her unwillingness to meet real voters started to test the patience of voters and of media commentators. Her robotic style became so notorious that the sobriquet 'Maybot'[6] (coined by the *Guardian* sketch writer John Crace) became a meme widely shared on social media. To make matters worse, the party's shrinking membership – which amounted to no more than 150,000 activists (Keen and Audiekas, 2017) – meant that it relied on a small army of foot-soldiers to conduct the seven-week campaign on the ground.

By contrast, the Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn was leading an energetic campaign which was mobilising thousands of supporters. His close-knit team of advisers had devised a shrewd campaign that made the most of Corbyn's campaigning experience and popularity with young and left-wing voters and which simultaneously protected him from negative receptions from both hostile sections of the electorate and of the media. The images of the Labour leader being well-received in rooms filled with admiring supporters provided very positive images for the television news and newspapers. This in turn contributed to generate a positive buzz around Labour's campaign. In addition, Labour did not make the mistake of centralising the campaign around the leader. Other party grandees had a leading role in the campaign, especially in parts of the country where there was a 'Corbyn problem'.

Alongside the 'ground' campaign, Labour had a savvy media strategy. Corbyn's team decided to sideline mainstream media and to focus instead on a sophisticated social media campaign that involved the micro-targeting of individual voters. With the help of a new software called Promote, the party could

[6] For an example of John Crace's use of the term Maybot see Crace (2016).

target undecided voters in marginal seats with tailor-made advertisements that were sent to their Facebook profiles and Snapchat accounts (Waterson, 2017). Moreover, videos explaining Labour's policies developed by Momentum and which appeared on YouTube, Facebook and other social media platforms were a key component of the party's online campaign to attract young voters (Margetts, 2017: 387).[7]

The highly contrasting campaigning styles of the two main parties were quickly picked up by both voters and the media and as a result the gap between the parties started to narrow in the opinion polls (BBC News, 2017). But the turning point in voting intentions happened in the third week of the campaign when the parties launched their manifestoes. The fact that the parties presented two distinct political programmes, in particular in the areas of economic policy was not a negligible factor.

Labour's *For The Many Not the Few* manifesto, which promised to reverse austerity and included proposals to nationalise the railways and the post office, to scrap tuition fees, to raise the minimum wage, to build new homes, to invest in the NHS and so on, was popular with voters. By contrast, the Conservative manifesto looked like it had been drafted, to use Bale and Webb's fitting description, "to put off rather than pull in voters" (Bale and Webb, 2017: 21). Amongst other promises, the Conservative manifesto pledged to open new grammar schools, to continue with more public spending cuts, to cut the winter fuel subsidies to the elderly, to introduce what became known as the 'Dementia Tax'[8] to fund social care and to put an end to free school dinners.

In short, there was nothing optimistic about the Conservative manifesto. None of these proposals were popular with voters, not even with the party's core voters. The most 'positive' aspect was the promise of a free vote on fox-hunting, an issue which only galvanises a tiny minority of privileged Britons who hunt. The reaction in the Conservative press and from voters on the doorstep was so negative that the party immediately changed the policy on social care by promising to cap the cost.

As the movement in the opinion polls showed, the launch of the manifestoes marked a turning point in the electoral campaign. Whilst the Tory lead in the opinion polls started to fizzle, the talk in Westminster was about a 'Labour surge'.

[7] To reach beyond university students, and to target young and disengaged voters in urban areas, the party also secured the support of a sizable number of grime artists like the Novelist, Akala, Stormzy and JME, who created the campaign #Grime4Corbyn. See Awate et al (2017).
[8] This policy proposal was designed to address the crisis of funding in social care by making people pay for care from assets over £100,000 that would be cashed after the person's death.

In short, the sizable Conservative majority that had been predicted at the start of the electoral campaign was shrinking as the electoral campaign progressed.

A week before the election, YouGov published a poll that predicted a hung parliament (YouGov, 2017). The results of the 2017 elections show that this poll was correct, but at the time it was dismissed as an outlier by the Conservative Party as well as by pundits and other polling companies on the grounds that its methodology was questionable. The general feeling was that the gap between the two main parties had narrowed during the campaign but the Conservatives would still win the election with a reasonable majority.

The Election Results

The first sign that those predictions were wrong emerged at 10 pm of the election night. The exit poll, which proved to be largely correct, pointed to a hung parliament with the Conservatives predicted to win 314 seats (12 short of the number needed for an overall majority) and Labour was expected to win 266 seats.

A few hours later, the vote counting confirmed the exit poll. The Conservative Party increased its share of the vote to 42.4%, the highest since 1992, but crucially, it lost 13 seats and consequently its parliamentary majority. These results were highly problematic for Theresa May. Without a majority in the House of Commons, she was forced to negotiate a confidence and supply agreement with the Northern Irish unionist party Democratic Unionist Party.[9]

Labour, on the other hand, lost the election but achieved a much better result than expected. Led by the unambiguously left-winger Jeremy Corbyn, the party won a 40% share of the vote and elected 262 MPs (30 more than in 2015 and the highest percentage of votes since 2005). The party performed particularly well in constituencies that had voted to remain in the EU in the referendum of the previous year. Indeed, the Brexit factor is partly the reason why Labour elected MPs for the first time in safe Conservative seats like Kensington and Chelsea and Battersea.[10] But, as Heath and Goodwin (2017a) showed, "even in places which voted Leave, Labour's share of the vote still improved", which suggests that other considerations (namely economic) influenced voting behaviour. In addition, the party increased the size of its majority in many safe Labour seats but also in many marginal seats. The party did less well in the Northeast of England and in the Midlands, but the results were far from being the disaster that had been predicted by opinion polls and pundits.

[9] This agreement was worth one billion pounds over the course of two years.

[10] These constituencies voted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum on EU membership. In Kensington and Chelsea 68.7% of voters chose to remain; in the borough of Wandsworth, where Battersea is located, 75.03% voted to remain in the EU.

As the support for Labour surged, the smaller parties experienced a decline in their vote share. This phenomenon can be explained by Labour's unashamedly anti-austerity manifesto. Research by Hobolt and Tilley (2016: 972) shows that when the two main parties converge on a policy of austerity, support for parties that offer alternatives policies tends to rise. This outcome was visible in the results of the 2015 general election which showed a significant rise in the vote for smaller parties. But in 2017, the ideological differences between Labour and the Conservatives were abundantly clear. As the two main parties offered ideologically distinct programmes, the support for smaller parties declined.

For instance, the Scottish National Party (SNP) lost 21 seats (and retained 35 seats) on a 3% share of the vote. The Liberal Democrats, who decided to run a Brexit-focused campaign, managed to elect only four more MPs than in 2015, raising the total number to 12, but won only 7.4% share of the vote. These results suggest that the party's promise to hold a second referendum on EU membership was misguided. Moreover, the Liberal Democrats were still paying the price for having formed a coalition government with the Conservative Party in 2010.

The Greens had equally disappointing results. The party halved its share of the vote since 2015 though it retained its seat in Brighton Pavilion. Data from the British Election Study analysed by Ed Fieldhouse and Chris Prosser (2017), suggests that a substantial number of Liberal Democrat and Green voters shifted allegiance to Labour. The rise in Labour's vote share and the decline in the vote for smaller parties suggest that economic and ideological considerations influenced voting behaviour.[11]

Another surprise of the election was the spectacular collapse of UKIP. To fully understand UKIP's collapse, it is important to compare the results of the 2017 general election with the previous general election. In 2015, UKIP became the third most popular party in Britain, winning 12.6% of the vote (but electing only one MP). Two years later the party attracted only 1.8% of popular support and lost its single MP.

UKIP's dramatic decline was driven by a variety of factors. Firstly, the victory of the Leave side in the 2016 referendum on EU membership left the party without a purpose. Secondly, since the EU referendum the party has been deeply divided about its future. The successive leadership elections and the very public bickering between the party's different factions have contributed to its decline in popularity. Thirdly, Theresa May's endorsement of a 'hard Brexit' approach had an impact on UKIP's popularity. Research by Mellon and Prosser (2017) shows that in 2017 most UKIP voters defected to the Conservative Party.

[11] Bengtsson shows that the presence of a clear alternative and electoral volatility are some of the key factors that drive economic voting (Bengtsson, 2004: 751-2).

The other interesting feature of the 2017 general election was the rise in turnout to 69%, the highest since 1997. It is likely that the imminent withdrawal from the EU motivated many voters who opposed Brexit to participate in the election. Secondly, the fact that the two main parties had campaigned on very different programmes and offered distinct political visions both in terms of policies and in terms of leadership styles may have mobilised voters who thus far had never participated in elections. Interestingly, many of these first-time voters voted Labour (Heath and Goodwin, 2017b: 351).

Understanding the Results: An Anti-Austerity Election?

As explained earlier, the literature on economic voting suggests that voters' assessment (both sociotropic and egocentric) of the economy influences their electoral choices (Sigelman et al, 1991). To ascertain whether these considerations affected voting behaviour at the 2017 general election it is important to consider the economic context in which the election took place.

When the election was announced voters had been subjected to seven long years of public spending cuts, wage stagnation, stagnant or anaemic economic growth and rising inequalities. The cuts to school budgets and to social care, the closure of public libraries, the longer waiting lists on the NHS and the rising inflation affected most voters, in particular those with children. For a sizable number of voters their living standards had suffered a considerable squeeze.

The 2017 British Social Attitudes Survey showed that at the time of the election voters were tired of austerity and were receptive to different policy proposals. This survey showed that for the first time since 2008, 48% of voters were in favour of higher taxation to fund higher spending in public services and that 42% supported redistribution of wealth from the rich to the poor (NatCen, 2017).

Analysis of the electoral results and of economic data shows that economic, and particularly egocentric considerations, influenced voting behaviour. Indeed, research by the Resolution Foundation shows that whilst the incomes of pensioner households had grown by nine per cent since the mid-2000s, the incomes of households headed by 25-44 years olds were still not back to their pre-crisis peak at the time of the election (Corlett and Clarke, 2017). Tellingly, the over-60s voted overwhelmingly Conservative, whereas Labour saw its vote share increase in all the other age groups, but in particular amongst the 25-45 age cohort. In other words, the voters who had been negatively affected by the stagnant economy punished the government by voting for the party that offered an alternative whilst the voters who had been positively affected by the economy voted for the incumbent party.

Interestingly, these economic considerations also influenced voting behaviour in the referendum on EU membership that took place in the summer of 2016. As Helen Thompson reminds us, the vote to leave the EU took place in a similar macroeconomic climate (2017: 393). In addition, data shows that the poorest households were more likely to vote Leave than the wealthiest households (Goodwin and Heath, 2017). These economic evaluations are also visible in the geography of the Brexit vote. According to Jonathan Hopkin, "Remain polled comfortable majorities only in London and other prosperous smaller cities such as Oxford, Cambridge or Brighton, usually with higher incomes"; in contrast, "large shares of Leave votes were found predominantly in poorer, former manufacturing areas of England and Wales" (2017: 474).

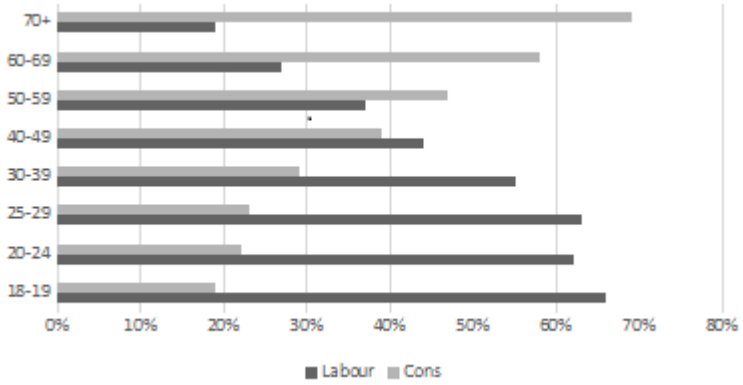
Obviously, concerns with immigration and national identity played a key role in the referendum vote, but these factors cannot be disentangled from the economy. As Sara B. Hobolt argued, "such fears of immigration and multiculturalism are more pronounced among voters with lower levels of education and with a more vulnerable position in the labour market" (2016: 1273). Conversely, university graduates and professionals were less likely to see the benefits of leaving the EU (Clarke et al, 2017b: 458).

Understanding the Results: The Impact of Brexit

As shown above, economic considerations influenced voting behaviour at the 2017 general election, but they were not the only factor. The electoral results show that the decision to leave the EU also influenced voters' choices. To fully understand how Brexit influenced the 2017 elections we should first consider how globalisation and its impact have affected the dynamic of party competition in Britain. As explained earlier, the antagonism between the 'winners' and 'losers' of globalization manifests itself in their electoral choices (Kriesi et al, 2006: 926). Thus, the 'losers' of globalisation are more likely to vote for parties that favour economic protectionism, whilst the 'winners' are more inclined to vote for parties that favour political integration in Europe, and that support liberal and cosmopolitan values (Kriesi et al, 2006: 926).

These patterns of voting behaviour were visible in the 2017 general election and in the 2016 referendum on EU membership. Analysis by the pollster YouGov indicated that over 60% of those aged 18-24 years old voted Labour and that 69% of those aged more than 70-years old voted Conservative at the 2017 general election. As figure 1 shows, the average age for a Conservative voter starts at 47 years old whereas the average Labour voter is under 44-years old (Curtis, 2017).

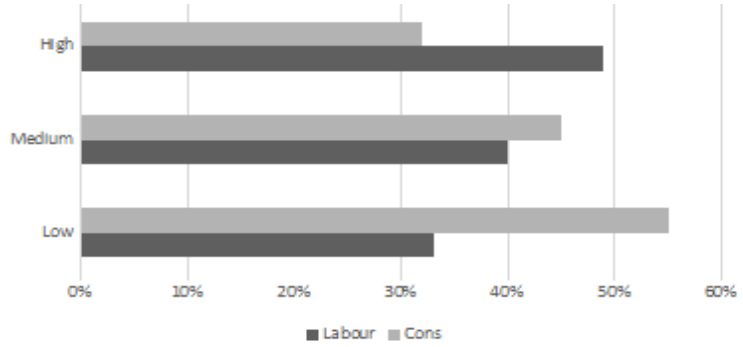
Figure 1: Generational Divide at 2017 General Election



Source: YouGov, 2017a.

Alongside age, education has become one of the key demographic indicators of voting behaviour in Britain. Analysis by YouGov presented in Figure 2, suggest that the Labour vote was particularly strong amongst voters with university degrees (Curtis, 2017). Conversely, the vote for the Conservatives was particularly high amongst those with only high school qualifications. The variables of age and education are related as younger voters tend to have more qualifications than older voters.

Figure 2: Educational Gap at 2017 General Election

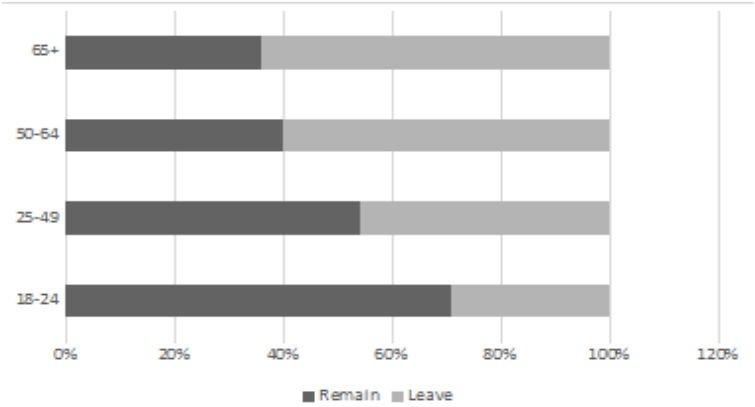


Source: YouGov, 2017b.

Geography also played a role in the election. Whilst Labour voters tend to live in urban and ethnically diverse areas of Britain (Surridge, 2017), Conservative voters tend to be clustered in rural and suburban areas that are also less ethnically diverse. This pattern had also been observed at the 2015 election, where UKIP

was particularly popular in the less ethnically diverse areas of Britain (Curtice et al, 2010: 404).

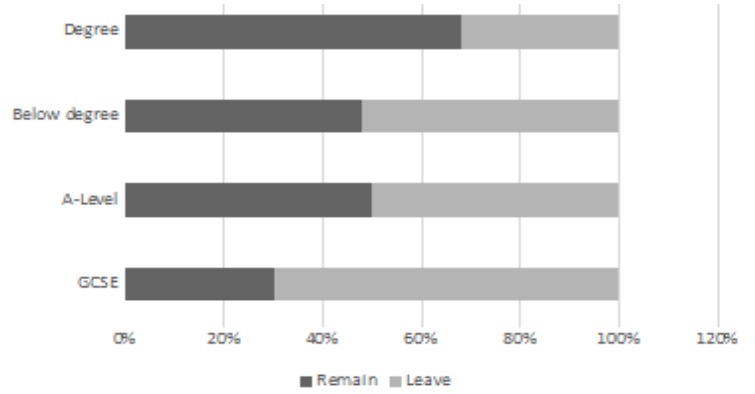
Figure 3: Generational Divide at Referendum on EU Membership



Source: YouGov, 2016.

The results of the election mirror those of the referendum on EU membership. As figure 3 indicates, in terms of age, the young voted overwhelmingly to remain in the EU, whereas the majority of over-50s voted to leave. In terms of educational divide, Figure 4 shows 70% of Leave voters only had secondary education whilst 68% of those who voted Remain had a university degree (Curtice, 2017: 33).[12]

Figure 4: Educational Divide at EU Referendum



Source: YouGov, 2016.

[12] See also Goodwin and Heath (2016).

The mirroring of the results of the referendum on EU membership in the general election suggests the emergence of new trends in class voting, which in turn show the importance of economic considerations in voters' decisions. Analysis by Paula Surridge shows that working class support for Labour declined to its lowest level ever in geographical areas that voted for Brexit. She found that for every 10 per cent more of working class voters in a constituency, there was a fall of about 3 per cent in the Labour vote and a rise of about 5 per cent in the Tory vote between 2010 and 2017 (Surridge, 2017). This being said, Labour attracted considerable support from the 'educated left behind', that is, voters who do not fit the category of working class given their educational status, but who experience the insecurity of the labour market and the decline in living standards normally experienced by traditional working-class voters (Whiteley, 2016).

A Brexit Election?

Both the 2017 general election and the 2016 referendum on EU membership reflected these new demographic trends. But this does not necessarily imply that there was a 'Brexit realignment' at the 2017 general election (Jennings and Stoker, 2017: 359). Indeed, the results suggest that a multitude of factors – from economic considerations, to party ideology, to the popularity of leaders or local considerations – influenced voters' calculations at the 2017 general election, however the electoral results show as well that the referendum on EU membership affected the partisan choices of some voters (Curtice, 2017). In addition, data from the British Election Study shows that Britain's withdrawal from the EU was very much on voters' minds (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2017).[13]

Tellingly, Labour attracted the support of the majority of Remain voters, including Conservative Remain voters, pro-EU Greens and Liberal Democrats. In total, more than half of Remain voters voted Labour (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2017). Interestingly, Labour's share of vote in Leave areas did not suffer, except in the North East of England. These results can be explained by the fact that Labour had voted to trigger article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which officially started the process of withdrawal from the EU. It was also widely known that Jeremy Corbyn was a left-wing Eurosceptic. In addition, the party had made it clear that it would not overturn the results of the EU referendum. As a result, Labour supporters who had voted Leave in the referendum on EU membership felt reassured and decided to vote for Labour for other reasons.

The Conservatives, on the other hand, obtained very different results. Analysis by Heath and Goodwin shows that the Conservative Party could only capitalise on the Brexit vote in "the most staunchly leave areas of the country"

[13] The BES study asked 30,000 respondents what was "the single most important issue facing the country now" and more than 30% mentioned Brexit or the EU (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2017).

(2017: 352). Their research shows that in the 20 seats in England with the highest estimated Leave votes, Labour won nine seats; the Conservatives won eleven seats (Heath and Goodwin, 2017: 352). Roughly put, this means that whilst Labour registered gains in both Leave and Remain areas (though it performed better in Remain areas), the Conservatives had good results in areas that voted Leave but obtained spectacularly bad results in areas, like Kensington and Chelsea, and Battersea, that had voted overwhelmingly to Remain in the EU. This suggests that the Conservatives were successful at winning votes from UKIP[14] but at a considerable electoral cost.

Concluding Remarks

The results of the 2017 general election were extraordinary. For the second time since 2010, British voters refused to give a majority to any of the two main parties. This type of result is not normally expected in party systems that use electoral systems based on the plurality rule. By generating these results the 2017 general election revealed a highly volatile electorate and an unstable party system. The results also suggest that British voters are reacting to long-term structural changes to their living conditions, namely to the impact of the process of globalization that has intensified since the 1990s, to the impact of the 2008 global financial crisis and to the 2016 decision to leave the EU.

The impact of these substantial changes has been mostly felt in the economic sphere. Over the last decade, voters have experienced a deterioration in their living standards. Social mobility has halted and wage stagnation has been a reality for many voters since the late 1990s. In addition, the depth of the global financial crisis as well as the impact of seven years of severe public spending cuts was acutely felt by a sizable section of the electorate. In these circumstances, it is not surprising that economic considerations influenced voting behaviour at the 2017 general election and at the 2016 referendum on EU membership.

The article showed how these economic considerations can explain the disappointing results of the Conservative Party as well as the better than expected results of the Labour Party. The results suggest that many voters blamed the Conservatives for their challenging economic circumstances. But the fact that the two parties presented distinct programmes on the economy also showed that ideological considerations influenced voters' choices. The 2017 general election registered the highest vote share for the two main parties since 1974.

Similarly, the electoral results show that the decision to leave the EU was an important factor that influenced the choices of many voters. But it is important

[14] The BES data shows that "more than half of UKIP's 2015 voters who voted again in 2017 switched to the Conservatives, compared with only 18% to Labour and a further 18% who stayed loyal" (Fieldhouse and Prosser, 2017).

to bear in mind that economic considerations also informed that decision. The results of the referendum showed that the demographic groups that have been more adversely affected by economic globalisation voted overwhelmingly in favour of leaving the EU. As explained in the article, Leave voters were mostly driven by concerns with immigration, national sovereignty, security and national identity. However, these concerns are directly linked to economic considerations. Survey data shows that the voters who oppose immigration and are concerned with questions of sovereignty and identity have fewer qualifications, do not enjoy a secure position in the labour market and tend to leave in the most deprived areas of Britain.

In any case, the Conservative government interpreted the electoral results as a sign of voters' dissatisfaction with the economy in general and with the effects of austerity in particular. As a result, several cabinet ministers and Conservative MPs have put pressure on the Chancellor of the Exchequer Philip Hammond to ease the austerity measures and to increase public spending in the most exposed public services. But the political and economic uncertainty created by Brexit is constraining the ability of the government to address these concerns. Moreover, the ongoing internal infighting in the Conservative Party about Brexit suggests that the likelihood of an early election is high. If this scenario materialises, neither Brexit, nor the economic and cultural factors that led to it, will be delivered and addressed, leaving voters with no other option but to deliver another shockwave to the political system.

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