**The British Labour Party and Leadership Election Mandate(s) of Jeremy Corbyn:**

**Patterns of Opinion and Opposition within the Parliamentary Labour Party**

**Abstract**

*This paper offers the first systematic evaluation of opinion within the 2015-17 parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) towards the leadership of Jeremy Corbyn. We do this by identifying whether individual parliamentarians remained supportive of Corbyn as their party leader or not, and then relating opinion on this to a series of variables that form the basis of a unique dataset on the PLP. By constructing this dataset we are able to test, via multivariate analysis, a series of hypotheses based around (1) social background variables such as age and gender; (2) political background variables such as year of entry, constituency region, marginality, main competition, endorsement of their constituency Labour Party (CLP) in the leadership election of 2016, position on the infamous leaked ‘loyalty list’ and Trade Union membership; and (3) ideological background variables such as views on continued European Union [EU] membership, immigration, intervention in Syria and the renewal of Trident.*

**Introduction**

This paper provides the first systematic academic evaluation of the relationship between the 2015-17 parliamentary Labour Party (PLP) and their democratically elected leader, Jeremy Corbyn. The rationale for this stems from the tumultuous events of the summer of 2016 when mass resignations from the shadow ministerial ranks (Syal, Perraudin and Slawson 2016) led to a confidence ballot. Although not procedurally binding, 170 out of 230 Labour parliamentarians indicated their view that Corbyn should not continue as leader of the Labour Party (Stone 2016). His unwillingness to step aside triggered a formal leadership challenge by Owen Smith. Corbyn defeated Smith by 319,209 votes to 193,229 votes (or 61.8 to 38.2 percent), thus securing an even more impressive margin of victory than he had in his initial election to the leadership the previous September – when Corbyn secured 251,417 votes at 59.5 percent (Mason 2015, Sparrow 2016).

As Dorey and Denham have noted the original selection of Corbyn ‘plunged the PLP into turmoil’ (Dorey and Denham 2017), and left them ‘at war’ not only with their leader but also with their members (Blakey 2016). The PLP concluded that Corbyn had been propelled to the leadership at the behest of an increasingly hard left membership (Bale, Webb and Poletti, 2016), but that the membership was more concerned with ideological purity and control over the party, as opposed to the compromises necessary to win power (Blakey 2016). The membership, however, supported Corbyn because they saw him as a ‘principled, honest and decent’ who stood ‘for genuinely left-wing progressive politics’, as opposed to the ‘establishment, careerist politicians’ of the PLP (Blakey 2016). The membership came to view the PLP as ‘rebels’ who have attempted to subvert internal party democracy in their attempts to force Corbyn to resign, (through coordinated resignations from the frontbench and via the confidence motion), and by trying to prevent Corbyn from being on the leadership ballot by arguing that he needed the support of 20 percent of the PLP before being allowed to participate (Blakey 2016). (The rules suggested challengers needed 20 percent PLP support and that for vacancies all candidates needed 15 percent PLP support, but it was left unclear as to whether an incumbent needed nominations to participate).

The dysfunctional relationship between Corbyn and the PLP has dominated media coverage of Labour politics since September 2015. However, to date there has been no academic research that seeks to explain opinion and opposition within the PLP towards Corbyn. This paper fills that gap. Our rationale is to establish the following: first, not just the number who supported and opposed Corbyn within the PLP; and, second, whether there are any background social, political or ideological variables that bind together those who support or oppose Corbyn within the PLP. To address this we will construct a dataset on the PLP that identifies support or opposition to Corbyn. This can then be used to test a series of hypotheses in relation to the following (1) social backgrounds variables such as age and gender; (2) political background relating to their constituencies covering year of entry, region, marginality and main competition;the endorsement of their CLP in the leadership election of 2016; position on the leaked ‘loyalty list’ (see Asthana and Stewart, 2016) and Trade Union affiliation, and (3) ideological background variables which will cover attitudes towards Brexit, immigration, intervention in Syria and Trident renewal.

The paper will be split into the following sections. The first section will identify how the rise of Corbyn challenges established academic assumptions about party political leadership selection. The second section will identify and explain our social, political and ideological hypotheses, and how our data was collected and coded. The third section presents our research findings and demonstrates which of our social, political and ideological hypotheses have been supported. Our fourth section offers some analysis on what this might tell us about the relationship between Corbyn and the 2015 to 2017 PLP.

**Electing Corbyn: Challenging Academic Assumptions about Leadership Selection**

The election and then re-election of Corbyn defied the traditional assumptions that have been mapped out in the academic literature on leadership selection. The ‘Stark criteria’ are referred to often within the leadership literature on Labour Party leadership selection (see for example, Quinn 2004, 2005, 2010, 2012, 2017, Heppell 2010, Dorey and Denham 2011, 2017) and they capture the dominant strategic considerations for parties that are operating within parliamentary systems: first, the need to remain unified; second, their primary motivation is to win elections; and third, they seek office to implement policies (Stark 1996).

Based on these considerations, Stark argues that candidates for the party leadership are assessed in terms of their acceptability (can they unify); their electability (are they an asset or a liability in terms of gaining voter approval); and are they competent (do they possess the political skills to ensure that their policy goals can be implemented once in office) (Stark 1996). Built into the Stark criteria is the assumption that parties will regard acceptability as the first order consideration – i.e. a leader who will divide the party should be rejected on the basis that a divided party will be an unelectable party (Stark, 1996). After removing divisive candidates, electors will then move to the second order criteria – the candidate who appears the most electorally appealing; and should candidates be equally matched on this criteria, then party voters would turn to the candidate who appears to be the most competent and effective as Prime Minister (Stark 1996).

The Stark criteria of how electors should vote appears to be valid irrespective of the type of selection system used by the Labour Party, be that the parliamentary ballots used up until 1980, and the tripartite Electoral College used between 1983 and 2010 (Quinn 2012). However, the Stark criteria appears to be invalidated by the selection of Corbyn. As a habitual rebel across a range of policy issues over many decades, any attempt to demand loyalty to him from his parliamentary colleagues will look hypocritical, whilst his electability and competence have also been widely questioned (Diamond 2016).

However, the Stark criteria predate the new leadership selection rules that the Labour Party created in 2014, and which aided Corbyn as an outsider candidate. The abolition of the tripartite Electoral College – built around equal weighting attached to opinion within the PLP and MEPs, the CLP, and affiliated Trade Unions – diluted the influence of elected representatives, and Corbyn would have been unable to win had this remained in place (Russell 2016, 20-2). The new selection system was to be based on one member, one vote for three categories of members[[1]](#endnote-1) – first, fully paid up members; second, affiliated supporters (i.e. those who were members of organisations affiliated to the Labour Party such as Trade Unions, but voting rights were not automatically granted via Trade Union membership and to participate you would need to register); and third, registered supporters (i.e. although not fully paid up members of the party, registered supporters could pay a nominal fee and declare their support of the party (Collins 2014, 23). That meant that a newly paid up registered supporter would have the same significance as one Labour parliamentarian, meaning that the balance of influence had shifted significantly from the PLP and the Trade Unions, to the extra-parliamentary party (if even the PLP retained their gatekeeper role in terms of nominations for the standing for the leadership and in terms of activating a challenge to the incumbent[[2]](#endnote-2), Dorey and Denham 2017).

The development of these new leadership selection rules created the opportunity for a revolt of the grassroots[[3]](#endnote-3) that was not as feasible under the previous Electoral College system (Diamond 2016, 16-7). Corbyn was also aided by the behaviour of the PLP at the nomination stage in 2015. As it was for a vacancy, candidates required 15 percent PLP support or 35 nominations in order to participate. A number of PLP members ‘lent’ their support to Corbyn to ensure that the fullest and widest debate could take place (although 35 PLP members nominated Corbyn, only 14 then actually voted for him the leadership ballot, see Dorey and Denham 2017). Their calculation was that it was cost free to allow a symbolic left wing candidate to proceed as it was inconceivable that Corbyn would win (Dorey and Denham 2017). It was this miscalculation – for which Margaret Beckett later felt she had been a ‘moron’ for doing (Cowburn 2016) – that created the opportunity for Corbyn to win and create the split electoral mandate between the PLP and the extra-parliamentary party that has been so damaging.

**Hypotheses and Data Collection**

Our aim was to explore that dysfunctional relationship between Corbyn and the PLP in order to establish what binds together those that support or oppose him. In an effort to identify those correlations we put forward a range of social, political and ideological background variables that we could test.

In relation to our social background hypotheses we were influenced by the following. Opinion polling data on age suggested that voters aged between 25 and 39 in the Labour leadership election of 2016 showed a stronger tendency towards voting Corbyn than Smith (by 63 to 36 percent) but that amongst the over 60s Corbyn held a smaller lead (55 to 44 percent) (YouGov 2016). On gender the appeal of Corbyn amongst female members was larger (64 to 35 percent) than it was for males (53 to 46 percent). (YouGov 2016). On the basis of these two patterns we constructed the following hypotheses:

*[H1] On age we assume that younger Labour parliamentarians will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than older Labour parliamentarians.*

*[H2] On gender we assume that female Labour parliamentarians will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than male Labour parliamentarians.*

Our political variables covered year of entry and constituency influences – i.e. region; marginality; main competition, who their CLP endorsed – as well as position on the leaked loyalty list and Trade Union affiliation. We considered year of entry to assess a cohort effect – i.e. was it the case that those entering Parliament in the intakes of 1997, 2001 and 2005 were more modernising and Blairite, and that those for 2010 and 2015 (after the supposed discrediting of New Labour and their electoral decline) might tend more to the left. Region was of significance because of the repeated insinuation that Corbyn is too London centric and part of a narrow metropolitan liberal elite (see for example, Ramesh 2015, Wilkinson 2016 and for the wider literature on link between leadership candidates and regional appeal in Labour Party leadership contests, see Johnston, Pattie, Pemberton and Wickham-Jones 2016; and Johnston, Wickham-Jones, Pattie and Cutts 2016).

Marginality was selected on the basis that Labour parliamentarians might hold different views depending upon whether they held marginal constituencies or not. Given that the vast majority of parliamentarians normally seek re-election they should be sensitive to voter opinion within their constituency, and that such sensitivity would be more significant in marginal constituencies[[4]](#endnote-4) (see Matland and Studlar 2004 and Baughman 2004). Not only was marginality potentially relevant to opinion towards the leadership, we also assumed that incumbents might be influenced by who their main challenger was – whether an incumbent held a marginal where the threat was from the Liberal Democrats as opposed to UKIP might alter their positioning and their rhetoric on certain policy issues. Our assumption was that if the party of the right is the main challenger, then it might be inadvisable for the incumbent to show himself/herself to be a radical leftist. We assumed that the CLP endorsement would constitute an issue of concern for Labour parliamentarians – i.e. if they chose to vote against Corbyn when their CLP had endorsed him it would increase the risk of deselection (Watts 2016).

We included the leaked loyalty list (compiled by Corbyn’s inner circle) to see how positioning on the list – whether loyalist, neutral or hostile – mapped onto positioning on the confidence motion (Asthana and Stewart, 2016). We also thought its inclusion as part of the dataset of ideological variables, might help us to understand the emergence of distinctive ideological groupings within the PLP. Could we find evidence of ‘factions’ in line with the classic Rose definition – i.e. an ‘ideologically motivated’ and ‘bound together’ group that is ‘cohesive’ and ‘disciplined’? (Rose, 1964, 37) Or was it characterised by the looser definition of ‘tendencies’, i.e. in which parliamentarians can coalesce, (or not), depending on the issue and thus they amount to ad hoc alliances? (Rose, 1964, 38). Beyond that we focused on Trade Union membership as it could also be important given the strong defence of the historical link between the Labour Party and trade unionism made by Corbyn (Corbyn, 2016), and the association between loosening the ties that characterised those of a New Labour persuasion (see Coulter, 2014). On the basis of the above we constructed the following political background based hypotheses:

*[H3] On year of entry we assume that the post-New Labour parliamentary cohorts of 2010 and 2015 will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than other cohorts of Labour parliamentarians.*

*[H4] On region we assume that those parliamentarians from London based constituencies will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than non-London constituency based parliamentarians.*

*[H5] On marginality we assume that those with safer seats (i.e. larger majorities) will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those with smaller majorities.*

*[H6] On constituency competition we assume that those whose main competition is the Conservatives will show a weaker likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those with constituencies which do not have the Conservatives in second place.*

*[H7] On constituency Labour Party endorsements we assume that Labour parliamentarians whose CLP endorse Corbyn will show a stronger likelihood for endorsing Corbyn than those CLPs who endorsed Smith.*

*[H8] On loyalty list placement, we assume that those who were placed in the loyal category would show a stronger likelihood for endorsing Corbyn than those who were labelled neutral or negative.*

*[H9] On Trade Union membership we assume that those who are members of a union will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those Labour parliamentarians who are not members.*

Our ideological distinctions were EU membership, immigration, intervention in Syria and Trident renewal. The various dilemmas associated with the European question(s) had long caused problems for the Labour Party from the 1960s to 1980s, although pro-Europeanism proved to be a key characteristic of New Labour, confirming the move towards a more positive mentality towards Europe that had occurred in the Kinnock era (see Daddow 2011). Criticism of further integration within Europe and of the EU had been a frequent component part of the left for many generations – for example, Corbyn himself voted to leave in the 1975 Referendum (Perraudin, 2016). Although Corbyn formally campaigned for remain it was widely felt that he was a reluctant advocate. Indeed, his timid campaigning was one of the triggers for the mass shadow ministerial resignations that resulted in the confidence motion and ultimately the Smith challenge (McSmith, 2016).

We selected immigration because it was one of the most intriguing dividing lines in the post New Labour era. Some Labour parliamentarians were concerned that they had lost office in 2010 in part due to the perception that they were not listening to the concerns of traditional Labour voters about immigration (Evans and Chzhen, 2013) and to fail to respond (and adapt their tone and position) risked them losing support to UKIP (Dennison and Goodwin, 2015). Opposing them was the open door immigration mentality that captured the mind set of Corbyn and their association of immigration with inclusivity, diversity and multiculturalism (Freedland 2016). We selected the parliamentary division on intervening in Syria as it reopened the conflicts of the New Labour era about Iraq, and although Corbyn chose to offer a free vote on this as it was clear that many Labour parliamentarians would defy being whipped to vote against intervention (Diamond 2016, 16-22). A similar rationale explained our selection of Trident renewal as the election of Corbyn and his commitment to unilateralism appeared to reopen a long dormant fissure within the Labour Party over defence policy (Stewart, 2016; for an overview of post war Labour Party foreign and defence policy, see Vickers, 2011). Pulling the above themes together, our ideologically driven hypotheses were as follows:

*[H10] On continued EU membership we assume that those that advocate Brexit will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those Labour parliamentarians advocating remain.*

*[H11] On immigration we assume that those who advocate an open door position vis-à-vis immigration will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those Labour parliamentarians advocating controls.*

*[H12] On Syria we assume that those opposing intervention will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those Labour parliamentarians who backed the Conservatives and advocated intervening.*

*[H13] On Trident we assume that those opposing renewal will show a stronger likelihood for supporting Corbyn than those Labour parliamentarians who backed the Conservatives and advocated renewal.*

We could only test our hypotheses if we could determine who was supportive of Corbyn and who was not. We had a number of different votes to consider – i.e. nominating or voting in the 2015 leadership election, the confidence motion vote; or nominating (for Smith only as Corbyn was automatically on the ballot) in the 2016 leadership election. As our aim was to assess the dysfunctionality of the leader-PLP relationship – as evidenced by the mass resignations of late June 2016 – we focused our attention on establishing voting behaviour in the confidence motion, also of late June 2016.

For each individual Labour parliamentarian we positioned them as pro-Corbyn or anti-Corbyn based on declarations of support/opposition to Corbyn prior to the confidence motion – these were identified from declarations that they made through either their personal websites or via mainstream media. We cross referenced these findings by checking them against declared lists that were compiled by various media organisations. Through this process we identified all 40 pro-Corbyn Labour parliamentarians who voted for Corbyn in the confidence motion, and those who refused to support Corbyn – the 172 who voted against, and the 18 who abstained – those who were non Corbyn supporters.

In terms of our social background variables differentiating according gender requires no explanation, whilst age was presented as a continuous variable, ranging from 30 to 87. For our background political variables we differentiated in the following way for year of entry into Parliament: those who entered before the 2010 general election and those who entered as a result of, or after, the 2015 general election. With respect to region we differentiated between those representing a London constituency and those who were outside of London. For marginality our coding was based around the following: a majority less than or equal to 5,000; a majority between 5,001 and 10,000 and then the safest seats – i.e. those with majorities over 10,000.

With respect to our social and political background variables we acquired data that enabled us to categorise and code on age, year of entry, region, marginality and main competition, by trawling through the parliamentary profiles of each Labour parliamentarian as listed in the Parliament website – see <http://www.parliament.uk/mps-lords-and-offices/mps/>. We were able to code the position of CLPs as their endorsements were publicly declared and lists were made available at labour list – see <http://labourlist.org/2016/07/which-constituencies-have-had-confidence-votes-in-jeremy-corbyns-leadership/>. Coding for the loyalty list was straightforward as full listings were printed in the *Guardian*, showing that breakdown to be as follows: 74 as loyal (either listed as ‘core group plus’ or ‘core group’); 68 as neutral, and 79 as hostile (listed as ‘core group hostile’ or ‘hostile’ - with an additional 9 not placed) (Asthana and Stewart, 2016). On Trade Union membership we relied on public declarations by Labour parliamentarians, identifiable by exhaustive research of personal websites, social media and articles or interviews made in the mainstream media.

Our approach was different with regard to our ideological variables. On continued EU membership we differentiated between Labour parliamentarians who campaigned for remain and leave in the June 2016 referendum, with an added category of undeclared included for those who kept their opinion private. This data was relatively easy to construct as the vast majority of PLP members stated whether they were leavers or remain advocates on their constituency websites (also a high proportion of them were publicly aligned to one of the following groups – Labour Leave ([www.labourleave.org](http://www.labourleave.org)) and Labour in for Britain ([www.labourinforbritain.org.uk](http://www.labourinforbritain.org.uk))). On immigration we identified and coded Labour parliamentarians as either first, open door immigration should be viewed as desirable, second, reluctant advocates of controls and third, neutral/unknown. We determined the views of Labour parliamentarians by examining statements posted on each of them on their constituency webpages. We selected the issue of air strikes against so called Islamic State – on which the House of Commons voted in favour of in December 2015 – as Labour parliamentarians were granted a free vote and a significant proportion of them voted with the government or abstained, rather than vote against as Corbyn did. We thereby coded PLP members as voting with the government, abstaining or voting with Corbyn, with that data obtained from the division lists published by Hansard online (HC Deb, 2 December 2015). Finally, we selected the issue of the renewal of Trident from the parliamentary debate and division of July 2016, where once again the PLP was split down the middle. Here we coded according to those PLP members who voted with the government, those who abstained, and those who took the Corbyn position of opposing renewal – again we used the published division lists from Hansard (HC Deb, 16 July 2016).

**Research Findings**

Table one reports at the basic level of descriptive statistics the pattern of support for Corbyn in the confidence motion in relation to the variables that we were considering. Table two shows the output for our logistic regression model examining the relationship between our social, political, and ideological variables and support for Corbyn in the confidence vote. It shows the increased likelihood of voting for Corbyn in the leadership election, relative to the reference category for each variable.

**Table One: Opinion and Opposition in the PLP Confidence Motion of 2016:**

**Social, Political and Ideological Determinants**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Variable | Voted for Smith | Voted for Corbyn | Total |
|  | 190 (82.6%) | 40 (17.4%) | 230 (100%) |
| ***Social*** |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Gender |  |  |  |
| Male | 109 (83.9%) | 21 (16.2%) | 130 (100%) |
| Female | 81 (81.0%) | 19 (19.0%) | 100 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| ***Political*** |  |  |  |
|  |  |  |  |
| Entered Parliament |  |  |  |
| 2010 onwards | 92 (77.3%) | 27 (22.7%) | 119 (100%) |
| Before 2010 | 98 (88.3%) | 13 (11.7%) | 111 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Region |  |  |  |
| London | 35 (77.8%) | 10 (22.2%) | 45 (100%) |
| Not London | 155 (83.8%) | 30 (16.2%) | 185 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Marginality (Majority) |  |  |  |
| ≤5000 | 57 (91.9%) | 5 (8.1%) | 62 (100%) |
| 5001-10000 | 46 (82.1%) | 10 (17.9%) | 56 (100%) |
| >10000 | 87 (77.7%) | 25 (22.3%) | 112 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Second Place Party |  |  |  |
| Conservative | 142 (85.0%) | 25 (15.0%) | 167 (100%) |
| UKIP | 32 (74.4%) | 11 (25.6%) | 43 (100%) |
| Liberal Democrats | 6 (66.7%) | 3 (33.3%) | 9 (100%) |
| Other | 10 (90.9%) | 1 (9.1%) | 11 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| CLP Endorsement |  |  |  |
| Corbyn | 52 (68.4%) | 24 (31.6%) | 76 (100%) |
| Smith | 18 (85.7%) | 3 (14.3%) | 21 (100%) |
| No Endorsement | 120 (90.2%) | 13 (9.8%) | 133 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Loyalty List Placement |  |  |  |
| Positive (Core Group Plus or Core Group) | 44 (59.5%) | 30 (40.5%) | 74 (100%) |
| Neutral | 61 (89.7%) | 7 (10.3%) | 68 (100%) |
| Negative (Core Group Hostile or Hostile)  | 78 (98.7%) | 1 (1.3%) | 79 (100%) |
| Not Listed | 7 (77.8%) | 2 (22.2%) | 9 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Member of a Trade Union |  |  |  |
| Member | 168 (83.2%) | 34 (16.8%) | 202 (100%) |
| Non-member | 22 (78.6%) | 6 (21.4%) | 28 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Ideological |  |  |  |
| EU Referendum Vote |  |  |  |
| Remain | 181 (83.4%) | 36 (16.6%) | 217 (100%) |
| Not Remain | 9 (69.2%) | 4 (30.8%) | 13 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Immigration |  |  |  |
| Open Door | 135 (79.9%) | 34 (20.1%) | 169 (100%) |
| Controls Necessary | 38 (88.4%) | 5 (11.6%) | 43 (100%) |
| Undeclared | 17 (94.4%) | 1 (5.6%) | 18 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Syria\* |  |  |  |
| Against | 123 (75.5%) | 40 (24.5%) | 163 (100%) |
| For | 66 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 66 (100%) |
| Abstain | 1 (100%) | 0 (0%) | 1 (100%) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Trident |  |  |  |
| For | 162 (89.0%) | 20 (11.0%) | 182 (100%) |
| Not For | 28 (58.3%) | 20 (41.7%) | 48 (100%) |

\*Due to the fact that there were no Labour parliamentarians who voted both for Corbyn in the confidence vote and for intervention in Syria, this variable has not been included in the regression analysis.

**Table Two - Logistic Regression Model for Support for Corbyn**

 (0 = Voted for Smith, 1 = Voted for Corbyn)

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | N | 230 |  |
|  | Prob > chi2 | 0 |  |
|  | Pseudo R2 | 0.42 |  |
|  |  |  |  |
|  | Coefficient |  | Std. Error |
|  |  |  |  |
| Age | **0.05** | **\*** | (0.03) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Gender (relative to male) | -0.10 |  | (0.54) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Constituency location (relative to London) |
| Not-London | -0.18 |  | (0.65) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Year of entry (relative to those entering from 2010 onwards) |
| Before 2010 | **-1.35** | **\*** | (0.66) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Majority (relative to those with majorities of 5000 or under) |
| 5001-10000 | 0.78 |  | (0.76) |
| 10001+ | 0.89 |  | (0.66) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Second Placed Party (relative to the Conservatives) |
| UKIP | 0.80 |  | (0.61) |
| Lib Dem | 1.44 |  | (1.23) |
| Other | -0.44 |  | (1.26) |
|  |  |  |  |
| CLP endorsement (relative to those CLPs who endorsed Corbyn) |
| Pro-Smith CLP | -1.33 |  | (0.90) |
| No Endorsement | **-1.83** | **\*\*** | (0.54) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Position on the loyalty list (relative to those who were in a positive category) |
| Neutral | **-1.79** | **\*\*** | (0.59) |
| Hostile | **-3.78** | **\*\*** | (1.14) |
| Not Listed | -0.82 |  | (0.97) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Trade union membership (relative to those who are members) |
| Non-member | 1.32 |  | (0.71) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Position in the EU Referendum (relative to those who backed Remain) |
| Not Remain | -0.48 |  | (1.04) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Immigration (relative to those who advocated for an ‘open door’ policy) |
| Controls Necessary | 0.87 |  | (0.77) |
| Undeclared | -1.02 |  | (1.43) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Position on Trident (relative to those who voted in favour) |
| Not in favour | **1.65** | **\*\*** | (0.59) |
|  |  |  |  |
| Constant | **-4.54** | **\*** | (2.12) |
| \*\*\*p<0.001 \*\*0.001 ≤ p ≤ 0.01 \*0.01 < p ≤ 0.05 |

Tables one and two showcase the following in terms of our social variables. In terms of our age variable – i.e. *[H1]* and the assumption that younger Labour parliamentarians would demonstrate a stronger likelihood for backing Corbyn than older Labour parliamentarians – we actually found that for every year older a member of the PLP was, the log-odds of their supporting Corbyn increased by 0.05. Thus, holding all other variables constant, we would expect older parliamentarians to support Corbyn compared to younger Labour parliamentarians. On gender *[H2]* the descriptive statistics in table one suggested that no significant difference existed between female and male Labour parliamentarians and opinion on Corbyn remaining as party leader – amongst males 16.2 percent backed Corbyn and amongst female 19.0 percent backed him, and table two confirmed this meaning *[H2]* was not supported.

What of our political variables? These were year of entry *[H3]*, constituency region *[H4]*, constituency marginality *[H5]*, constituency main competition *[H6]*, CLP endorsement *[H7]*, loyalty list position *[H8]* and Trade Union membership *[H9]*. Our findings did not support our hypotheses in terms of constituency region *[H4],* marginality *[H5]*; competition *[H6];* and Trade Union membership *[H9]* as no statistically significant relationships with regard to these variables and opinion on Corbyn emerged. However, in terms of year of entry the descriptive statistical findings appeared to be significant – i.e. of those that entered Parliament in either 2010 or 2015 (n= 119) the percentage supporting Corbyn was higher (27 or 22.7 percent) than was evident for those entering Parliament before 2010 (n=111 with 13 or 11.7 percent backing Corbyn). Table two confirms this as relative to those who entered Parliament on or after 2010, those who entered Parliament before have an expected decrease in the log-odds of supporting Corbyn of 1.35. This supports *[H4]* and this is also interesting because we have already controlled for age, so the length of time as a Labour parliamentarian is not simply acting as a proxy for age.

We can also see that there is some relationship between the position of a Labour parliamentarian’s CLP in the leadership election of 2016 and how they expressed themselves in the confidence motion *[H7]*. Relative to those Labour parliamentarians from a CLP that endorsed Corbyn, there is no statistically significant relationship for those Labour parliamentarians from a CLP that endorsed Smith. However, those Labour parliamentarians from a CLP that made no endorsement had reduced log-odds of supporting Corbyn of 1.83. Finally, our findings suggest that positioning on the loyalty list was a strong predictor of behaviour in the confidence motion *[H9].* Relative to those who were placed in the loyalist category in the list, those who were labelled neutral had 1.79 lower log-odds of supporting Corbyn, whilst those who were labelled negatively had 3.78 lower log-odds. There was no significant relationship for those who were not listed.

Our ideological background variables were continued EU membership *[H8]*, immigration *[H9]*, intervention in Syria *[H10]* and the renewal of Trident *[H11]*. Table one demonstrates that support for Brexit within the PLP was incredibly small (only 10 publicly advocated exiting the EU), and table two demonstrated that no statistically significant relationship existed in terms of this and opinion on Corbyn, meaning *[H8]* was not supported. With regard to immigration table two demonstrated that no statistically significant relationship existed meaning *[H9]* was not supported*.* The vast bulk of the PLP favoured an open door approach on immigration (n=169) but the distribution of opinion against Corbyn was roughly similar between those who were open door (n=135 or 79.9 percent) and those who argued controls were necessary (n=38 or 88.4 percent). With regard to military intervention in Syria only 66 members of the PLP endorsed this not one of them that did was found to back Corbyn in the confidence motion – see table one. However, it is worth noting that of those that wanted Corbyn to step down a significant number of them (n=123) did vote with him on this. Our hypotheses vis-à-vis Trident renewal was supported [*H10*] – i.e. table two demonstrates that relative to those who voted in favour, those who did not vote in favour, or abstained, had 1.65 higher log-odds of supporting Corbyn.

**Analysis: Identifying Patterns of Opinion and Opposition**

Overall, our findings on opinion towards Corbyn within the PLP indicate limited evidence in terms of social, political or ideological patterns. Some evidence is forthcoming in terms of those who continue to *support* Corbyn – i.e. they do demonstrate some shared characteristics in the sense that his parliamentary support comes from those who are older parliamentarians, who have been in Parliament since before 2010, and were anti-Trident. However, what is perhaps more interesting and significant is the fact that are few social, political and ideological background variables that are shared by those who voted *against* Corbyn in the confidence motion.

The accusation made by Corbyn backers is that Labour parliamentarians who have opposed him are motivated by self-interest – i.e. their personal career interests are best served by his removal and replacement by a more ideological sympathetic leader of the party (see Seymour, 2016). If Labour parliamentarians were motivated solely by self-interested then they would fear losing their seat at the next General Election. Our findings do see a slightly stronger sense of urgency in terms of the need to remove Corbyn based on constituency marginality (see table one). It is indeed true that the percentage advocating his removal from the leadership is higher amongst those with constituencies with majorities under 5000, (at 91.9 percent, n=57 out of 62) than it is amongst those with safer seats in the 5001 to 10000 range (at 82.1 percent, n=46 out of 56), and that the percentage is lower still amongst those with majorities over 10000 (at 77.7, n=87 out of 112). However, the fact remains that even amongst the safest of constituencies, two thirds of Labour parliamentarians were seeking his removal from the leadership. If Labour parliamentarians were motivated solely by self-interest then they might fear antagonising their CLPs and increasing the possibility of deselection. However, our findings on CLP endorsement and confidence motion position identified the following. A total of 76 CLPs publicly declared their support for Corbyn, and although in 24 of those constituencies the MP voted for Corbyn to remain, a total of 52 risked the wrath of their own members by voting against Corbyn.

What of the membership accusation that the PLP’s failure to back Corbyn is shaped by ideological considerations? That critique suggests that an essentially centrist PLP could not accept that the more leftist membership had chosen a leader that the PLP did not ideologically approve of.

However, on this consider the following from our descriptive statistics. First, on Trident a total of 48 PLP members of the PLP opposed its renewal – i.e. agreed with Corbyn – and yet 28 of them used the confidence motion to express their view that Corbyn should step aside, and only 20 backed him. Second, 169 members of the PLP favoured the position of Corbyn vis-à-vis open door immigration and only 43 have explicitly spoken of the need to impose controls, and yet Corbyn can only secure the backing of 40 members of the PLP. Third, on militarily intervening in Syria a total of 163 members of the PLP voted against this (and against the government, and agreed with Corbyn), but of those 40 indicated their wish that Corbyn remained in the leadership, and 123 expressed their feeling that they no longer had confidence in his continued leadership. It is also worth noting that the number of Labour parliamentarians in agreement with Corbyn across all three issues – i.e. against Trident renewal, opposing intervention in Syria and advocating an open door mentality vis-à-vis immigration – was 39. The diametric opposite of Corbyn across all three issues – advocating Trident renewal, making the case for intervention in Syria and arguing for immigration controls – is only 19. The evidence of a *cohesive* block of anti-Corbyn Labour parliamentarians in ideological terms is limited, and such findings imply caution when claiming that an ideological plot was the driver of the attempts within the PLP to unseat Corbyn.

Table 3: Patterns of Opinion and Opposition to Corbyn within the PLP: Voting according to the Loyalty List in relation to Ideological Considerations

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Loyalty List Position | N= | ImmigrationOpen Door Neutral Controls | Syrian InterventionOppose Neutral Support | Trident RenewalOppose Neutral Support | ConfidenceNo Yes |
| Loyal  | 74 |  65 3 6 |  68 0 6 |  24 0 50 | 44 30 |
| Neutral | 68 |  48 5 15  |  57 0 11 |  14 0 54 | 61 7 |
| Hostile  | 79 |  48 9 22 |  32 1 46 |  8 0 71 | 78 1 |
| Not placed  | 9 |  8 1 0 |  6 0 3 |  2 0 7 | 7 2 |
| N= | 230 |  169 18 43 |  163 1 66 |  48 0 182 | 170 40 |

When we look at those who are hostile to Corbyn on the loyalty list we acknowledge that only one from 79 of them voted for Corbyn to remain in office. Moreover, when we break it down (table three) we see that of those in the hostile group 71 advocated Trident renewal, 46 of them opposed intervention in Syria, but only 22 of them advocated controls in terms of immigration. Meanwhile, of those supposedly loyal to Corbyn in the list (n=74) a total of 65 did agree with him on immigration (i.e. open door) and 68 agreed with him on Syrian intervention; but only 24 agreed with him on Trident renewal. The variance of opinion across the three ideological variables did not show clear evidence of clearly defined left and right wing factions, rather it shows a myriad or zig zagging of opinions within the PLP. When we put together the findings in table three, linking ideological disposition across the three variables of immigration, Syrian intervention and Trident renewal, it does show a propensity for those disagreeing with Corbyn to vote against him. However, it also shows that over half of those who were supposedly in the loyal grouping voted against him (44 against to 30 for).

**Conclusion**

This paper makes an original and distinctive contribution to the academic literature on the Labour Party and the selection(s) of Corbyn to the leadership. Accounts do exist on how Corbyn was initially elected to the party leadership – see Dorey and Denham, 2017 and Quinn, 2017. Both imply that Corbyn’s success challenged the Stark criteria on party leadership selection – i.e. select the candidate who is the most ideological acceptable, most electable and most competent (Stark, 1996). Rather, Corbyn’s selection by the membership seemed to be more consistent with May’s ‘law of curvilinear disparity’ which assumes that party activists would be more ideological extreme (i.e. radical) than the more ideological moderate (i.e. pragmatic) parliamentarians (see May, 1973). That was significant as this was a theory that has been questioned within the academic literature on the selection of the leader of the Labour party in the era of the Electoral College (Quinn, 2010).

Upon acquiring the party leadership assessments on Corbyn’s performance and prospects as party leader have been overwhelmingly critical (see Crines, 2015, Richards, 2016, Diamond, 2016, Bale, 2016), although academic assessment will now be adjusted to reflect the stronger than expectation in the 2017 General Election when the Labour vote increased from 9.3 to 12.8 million (30.4 to 40 percent) and they gained seats (229 to 262) despite still losing. However, what has been absent from the academic literature to date is a detailed exploration of the relationship between Corbyn – elected at the behest of the membership – and the PLP. By constructing a detailed dataset which identifies opinion within the PLP to Corbyn continuing as leader of the Labour Party, and relating this to a series of social, political and ideological variables, we have been able to test the assumptions that have underpinned the critical accounts on Corbyn identified above, (as well as a myriad of journalistic accounts), on the Corbyn-PLP relationship.

From this a more complex pattern emerges in terms of opinion and opposition to Corbyn within the PLP. In terms of those who voted for his removal our research found no significant social, political or ideological patterns at play. The fear of deselection or the fear of electoral defeat did not motivate Labour parliamentarians to remain loyal to Corbyn, and nor was it the case that the PLP is split down clearly defined left-right ideological terms, with the right voting against Corbyn, and the left supporting him. Our findings show that the mapping of immigration onto military intervention and nuclear capability creates a myriad of positions amongst the PLP, rather than clearly defined factional groupings. Significantly, those advocating the removal of Corbyn do not confirm to the Rose definition of a cohesive and organised ideological faction (Rose, 1964). Moreover, our research suggests that the motivation to unseat Corbyn by the PLP should be seen as a reassertion of the aforementioned Stark criteria – i.e. the PLP concluded that the members had been mistaken in their choice. Corbyn was too divisive, too unelectable, and his competence was too widely questioned, to make him a credible candidate to be Prime Minister.

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1. The election of Corbyn also challenged traditional academic assumptions about membership levels. Over recent decades the Labour Party has experienced a decline in membership levels – from 405,238 when they entered power in 1997 to only 156,205 as they approached the 2010 General Election (Pemberton and Wickham-Jones 2013). That decline in membership has not been specific to the Labour Party as decline has also been the trend across most European polities (Seyd and Whiteley 2004, 356; see also Scarrow and Gezgor 2010; van Biezen, Mair and Poguntke 2012). However, after oscillating at around 190,000 during the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, Labour Party membership increased dramatically parallel to the respective leadership elections and the rise of Corbyn, reaching around 515,000 members at the onset of the Corbyn-Smith contest (Keen and Audickas 2016).

 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The Collins Report concluded that Labour parliamentarians who decide to stand for the Labour leadership would need nominations from 15 percent of the PLP as opposed to former threshold of 12.5 percent (Collins 2014, 27). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. The election of Corbyn challenged established assumption about the distribution of power within the Labour Party. This had been shaped by the organisational transformation initiated by under Blair, and how increasing centralisation led to a top down, command and control style of leadership in which members were subordinated. For New Labour modernisers the need to bypass the views of constituency Labour Party (CLP) members, and Trade Unions, was felt to be necessary as their views were deemed to be too left and out of sync with the views of the electorate and thus impediments to acquiring and remaining in office (for a strident critique of these assumptions, see Minkin 2014). This shift away from the grassroots and towards elite centralisation and the ‘party in office’ has been a trend across social democratic European parties, and was said to be reflective of the classical ‘cartel party’ thesis (Katz and Mair 1994). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. We based this on the historical precedent that the last time Labour elected a leader so widely associated with their left – Michael Foot – it coincided with a leftwards shift policy, and the infamous ‘longest suicide note in history’ manifesto for the 1983 General Election. Due to the fact that a more left wing leader and platform resulted in Labour losing three million votes relative to the 1979 General Election, and nearly nine percent of the vote as they lost 60 seats, we assumed that this historical precedent would be of greatest concern to those holding more marginal constituencies, and would be less concern to those holding safer constituencies (see Miller, 1984). [↑](#endnote-ref-4)