**Introduction: A Conservative victory like no other?**

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The 2019 general election was yet another extraordinary chapter in a series of dramatic recent electoral contests. Yet, given the consistent story from the opinion pollsters (who had a good election) the extent of apparent wonderment at the broadcasters’ exit poll (enjoying another outstanding election) was itself remarkable. A resounding Conservative majority was always a strong possibility. This was a mini-landslide forewarned - and in considerable detail. YouGov’s multi-level regression with post-stratification forecasts had catalogued the likely geography of Labour’s disaster.[[1]](#footnote-1) Nonetheless, the shock of the 2017 mislaying of the Conservatives’ majority by Theresa May had loomed large over the election 30 months later, until the exit poll moment when the scale of the rout of Labour was revealed. Few had seriously doubted that the Conservatives under Boris Johnson would again win the most seats; just not that many. In the weeks before the election, some commentators even speculated on the possibility of Jeremy Corbyn as Prime Minister, leading a minority rainbow government backed by virtually all the non-Conservative parliamentary forces (Finkelstein 2019). The election night pre-exit poll forecasts of Boris Johnson and his team, whilst reflecting confidence in victory, all anticipated triumph by a smaller margin (Shipman 2019).

The scale of the Conservative victory, producing the UK’s first majority government for almost a decade, was quite something. For Labour, suffering a fall in vote share not far shy of 8%, the scale of the catastrophe is apparent when one remembers that 14 of the party’s seat losses occurred in constituencies held at every election since 1945 – part of the collapse of the fabled ‘red wall’ of Labour strongholds, in which a majority had voted to leave the EU in 2016. The geographical parameters of this ‘red wall’ were imprecise. The term tended to be used most often in respect of seats in northern England which had been held by Labour for decades but was readily extended to similarly hitherto loyal Labour seats in the Midlands. Here, the scale of the move against Labour in long-time loyal seats such as Bassetlaw, which saw an 18% swing to the Conservatives, was remarkable. Yet there was also a reasonable case for including previously solidly Labour seats in north Wales as part of the ‘red wall’, as Jonathan Bradbury suggests in this volume.

The Conservatives increased their vote share and seats, unprecedented for a party seeking a fourth consecutive term in office. In most of the constituencies captured it was a case of the Labour vote share plummeting, rather than the Conservatives’ vote share increasing by much, That, if anything, highlights the problems confronting Labour more than it demonstrates hollowness in the Conservative victory.

Following Johnson’s election as party leader in July 2019, the Conservatives had much sharper definition as the party of Brexit than under Theresa May. This is ironic given that May voted consistently in the Commons for Brexit, whereas Johnson did so only once. Johnson’s repeated assertions that May’s ‘Brexit with a Backstop’ (to keep Northern Ireland’s land border seamless) was the wrong type of EU departure were tactical. They looked hollow when he, upon elevation to the top job, quickly accepted what May had endorsed, dumping her allies, the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in the process. The course was now set for Brexit to be delivered. If Parliament continued to stall such a move, an election would be called, based upon Brexit delivery.

Polling evidence suggested two key things. First, most voters had not changed their mind on Brexit (Curtice, 2020). Second, the Conservatives would win an election. Although Johnson’s election gambit initially met with hesitation from Labour, Corbyn’s party could hardly be seen to be ever running away from a contest. As such, they acquiesced. A more sensible electoral strategy for Labour might possibly – it’s difficult to argue more strongly - have been to let Johnson struggle on, in office but barely in power in respect of Brexit and with the goodwill of a honeymoon period likely to fade.

Given Johnson’s Brexiteer credentials and the likelihood of him delivering the 2016 referendum verdict, the Conservatives unsurprisingly monopolised the Leave vote. The only other major player in that field, Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party, an easy winner of the 2019 European elections, stood aside in Conservative-held seats at the general election. Given the scale of the winning margin, it was clearly not a case of Farage acting as midwife to the delivery of Conservative election success. Nonetheless, there is evidence that Nigel Farage’s Brexit outriders offered a very modest boost. Where the Brexit Party stood, Labour’s vote fell by 8.6%, compared to 7.3% with the Brexiteers absent. The rise in the Conservatives’ vote averaged only 1.7% in constituencies with the Brexit Party present, compared to 2.5% elsewhere (Norris, 2019). Thus, Labour’s average percentage vote share was harmed nearly twice as much as was the Conservatives’ by the presence of the Farage’s party.

For the Prime Minister and his chief adviser, Dominic Cummings, the election outcome was vindication of a strategy to offer only a small core set of promises to voters, dominated by the pithy appeal to ‘Get Brexit Done’. The slogan appeared to offer closure – of a sort – to a saga which had bedevilled UK politics since the June 2016 referendum. Having seen the fate of his predecessors, David Cameron and Theresa May, Johnson’s approach was simple; cut through the confusion; cast aside erstwhile allies; deliver on the instruction from voters; and leave the EU. The details of a trade deal seemingly unlikely to be advantageous to the UK could be sorted later. How a trading bloc of 66 million would achieve better terms by quitting one of over 500 million remained unexplained. Johnson calculated, correctly, that a combination of the satisfaction of the pro-Brexit demands of the committed; the end of the affair for the weary; the lack of desire for the second referendum offered by Labour and the split in the Remain vote, would allow the Conservatives to chart a course for victory. It came to pass. The Conservatives gained 56 seats that had voted to leave the EU in 2016. Labour lost 53 such constituencies.

Johnson’s shrewd political judgement was, however, greatly abetted in its success, by the shortcomings of the leader of the Labour Party. Jeremy Corbyn entered the 2019 election with the worst ratings of any party leader in British political history. Having trailed Theresa May on the ‘who would make the best Prime Minister?’ question throughout her period in office, Corbyn found himself even further behind Johnson, even though the new Prime Minister’s rating were hardly sparkling. Corbyn’s mandate from his party was manifestly large and had been confirmed twice but it had not eased the concerns of many within Labour’s parliamentary ranks that their leader could not win an election. Meanwhile, Johnson, although confronted by a difficult political in-tray on assuming the top job, had a clear mandate from his parliamentarians and his party membership in his elevation. His internal control of his party appeared even more assured after the election. The Conservative parliamentary ranks were infused by new blood: 30% of its 2019 intake were Commons freshers. Johnson was entitled to take the view that many would not have arrived had it not been for him – although one might reasonably assert that Jeremy Corbyn also assisted their passage.

**The plan of the volume**

This volume analyses the 2019 General Election by dissecting its context, results, parties, finances, geography and media coverage. The analysis is divided into four sections: results and context, political parties, territorial dimensions and election themes.

To begin the first section, David Denver outlines the election results and discusses how the opinion polls consistently pointed to a denouement involving a clear Conservative victory. That outcome is considered by Sir John Curtice in the broader context of whether a large overall majority represented a return to normality within our electoral system, after a decade of hung parliaments or narrow majorities. Does the outcome indicate that overall majorities are likely to be the norm once more or was this in some sense an exceptional result? That overall majority was a response to frustration with political stalemate and Louise Thompson contextualises the election in examining the parliamentary impasse that yielded such a decisive election result.

Section two’s examination of the campaigns of the political parties begins with Sam Power, Tim Bale and Paul Webb exploring the Conservatives’ approach. They note how a tight campaign swerved potential dangers. Although Boris Johnson could be regarded as a potential asset, he was also high risk and it was decided to run a carefully controlled campaign, averting dangerous confrontations. The BBC journalist, Andrew Neil, was left without an interview with the Conservative leader. Beyond the endless insistence upon getting Brexit done, the Conservatives emphasised that the age of austerity and its attendant fiscal rules were in the rear-view mirror. Borrowing for investment was fine.

Eunice Goes examines Labour’s campaign, which lacked the verve and mobilisation of 2017 as it charted a course towards a record-equalling fourth consecutive defeat. The lack of confidence within Labour’s ranks was displayed on Jeremy Corbyn’s campaign trail. Many of the seats visited by the Labour leader were already held by his party. The concern for the 76 Labour-held seats with a majority of less than 8,000 over the Conservatives was apparent. Goes analyses the impacts of Brexit, Corbyn and anti-semitism, a negative triple whammy, upon Labour’s performance.

David Cutts and Andrew Russell assess the performance of another party which, from a very different perspective from the Conservatives, at least offered clarity on Brexit. The Liberal Democrats’ 2019 decision to simply revoke Article 50 and cancel EU withdrawal drew accolades among the fellow-travellers at the party conference three months before the election. It also contributed to the Liberal Democrats becoming more exclusively a party backed by 2016 Remain voters – but not many of them and very few beyond. More broadly, the public had little knowledge of what else the Liberal Democrats stood for (see also Curtice 2019). This inability to harness the Remain vote placed the prospect of ‘Jo Swinson – our next Prime Minister’, as trumpeted on party leaflets, look on the implausible, even ludicrous, side of optimism.

James Dennison examines the smaller parties, assessing the significance of the decision by Nigel Farage’s Brexit Party not to contest any of the 317 seats won by the Conservatives at the 2017 election. The Brexit Party offered a possible electoral repository for Labour Leave voters who could neither bring themselves to vote Conservative nor back a Labour Party led by Jeremy Corbyn. Dennison also examines the modest progress, in vote share at least, of the Greens, under their Remain Alliance with the Liberal Democrats and Plaid Cymru, noting that a sizeable minority of the Green vote had previously voted Labour. This section also considers the brief life of Change UK, the main changes wrought by its defectors from the Labour and Conservative parties being the regular ones to the new party’s name.

Section three’s consideration of the election in the devolved nations begins with the analysis of Scotland by James Mitchell and Ailsa Henderson. As a pro-Remain party with a monopoly of a large pro-independence vote, the SNP was always likely to do well and so it transpired. The Conservatives’ attempt to harness the anti-independence majority was ranged against their minority status as a pro-Leave party, toned down where possible for Scottish consumption but unhelpful. Labour meanwhile struggled to define itself via either constitutional question. In Leave-voting Wales, Jonathan Bradbury analyses how and why Labour struggled to hold part of its ‘natural’ territory, conceding long-held seats in the north of the country and suffering losses in vote shares throughout. Northern Ireland’s concerns over Brexit led to election pacts which also took on a nationalist (anti-Brexit) versus unionist (pro-Brexit, albeit not on British Johnson’s terms) flavour. As Jonathan Tonge and Jocelyn Evans note, however, detachment from unionism and nationalism helped the Alliance Party, also anti-Brexit but opposed to pacts, to make strides. The DUP and Sinn Féin were punished for the failure to restore the power-sharing Northern Ireland Assembly, a problem rectified within one month of the election.

The fourth section covers various important aspects of the campaign, analysing some of its target recipients. In *Britain Votes 2017*, Justin Fisher noted how, despite being the party of government calling the snap election, the Conservative party machine was under-prepared. He outlines how this was not the case in 2019, with the Conservatives much better prepared for an early election, organisationally and financially. Katharine Dommett and Mehmet Emin Bakir examine how that preparation played out online, noting how both the Conservative and Labour parties invested heavily in Facebook advertising. Matthew Flinders’ analysis of the campaign notes how *all* political leaders were trying to overcome a lack of trust in them among the electorate. In that respect, Corbyn’s problems were acute but not isolated. Sarah Harrison considers these democratic frustrations among young voters and, notwithstanding a propensity to vote for alternatives to the prevailing Conservative government, does not find an exceptional level of disillusionment. Her findings highlight concerns that the problem is the democratic journey. The targeting of the campaign at women is assessed by Emily Harmer and Rosalynd Southern. Party manifestos concentrated their gendered concerns in familiar areas. The authors note, however, significant improvements in representation, with Labour and the Liberal Democrats now having more female MPs than male. Finally, Dominic Wring and Stephen Ward assess the role of the traditional media, noting that the press still matters as its older readership are likely to vote. They also observe how the backing of most newspapers for the Conservatives was the most gung-ho for some time.

Our concluding analysis assesses the relative importance of the key aspects of the election; Johnson’s elevation to the Conservative leadership in the summer; the promise to ‘Get Brexit Done’, the failures of the Labour opposition under Corbyn and the apparent hubris of the Liberal Democrats. The sum of the parts was a victory which surprised in terms of its scale but not its victor.

**References**

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1. In 2017, YouGov pioneered the use of multi-level regression with post-stratification (MRP) to forecast a UK general election outcome, correctly predicting a hung parliament when virtually all conventional opinion polls pointed to a large Conservative majority. In contrast to opinion polls that estimate party shares of the vote from a representative sample of around 1,000 people, MRP forecasts use samples of tens of thousands of electors in combination with other data sources to estimate the number of seats each party will win. Under MRP, polling data are first modelled using numerous individual-level socio-demographic characteristics to estimate the probability of different groups of people voting for a party (multi-level regression). These probabilities are then applied to the socio-demographic make-ups of each individual constituency and weighted for other factors such as past voting patterns in that locality (post-stratification). In 2019,’ MRP’ entered the mainstream of the general election lexicon. The publication of YouGov’s MRP forecast, in late November, was eagerly awaited and its central forecast was a Conservative majority of 68 (a subsequent iteration closer to the election revised this down to 28). In a notable development, political parties also produced their own MRP forecasts to inform their campaign strategies – see Fisher, this volume. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)