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Excerpt

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*Part I*

The Short Term

## 1 Welcome to Brexit Britain

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On 23 June 2016, the United Kingdom held a referendum on its forty-three-year membership in the European Union (EU). People were asked whether they wanted to remain in or leave the EU. At twenty minutes to five on the morning of 24 June 2016, the BBC television presenter David Dimbleby turned to the millions of people watching the results at home: ‘We can now say the decision taken in 1975 by this country to join the common market has been reversed by this referendum to leave the EU. We are absolutely clear now that there is no way that the Remain side can win.’

Contrary to virtually all forecasts, a majority of people had voted to leave the club. A few hours later, Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron, who had gambled his premiership and the future of the United Kingdom by calling the referendum, resigned. Standing in front of Number 10 Downing Street, Cameron looked directly into the camera and said:

I was absolutely clear about my belief that Britain is stronger, safer and better off inside the EU. I made clear the referendum was about this, and this alone, not the future of any single politician, including myself. But the British people made a different decision to take a different path. As such, I think the country requires fresh leadership to take it in this direction.

Some prime ministers are only remembered for one thing. Although Cameron was the youngest prime minister in nearly two centuries and a leader who had sought to ‘modernize’ the Conservative Party, none of that mattered now. In the history books, he would be remembered as the prime minister who had set the stage for Brexit, for the UK to become the first major power to leave the EU and for opening the door to a period of domestic political turbulence that is without precedent in recent history.

In the months and years that followed, the battle over Brexit would grip the country and much of the world. What began with that shock vote to leave in 2016 quickly spiralled into an intense, unpredictable, polarizing and protracted political battle that would rumble on for nearly five years;

## 4 Part I The Short Term

through fierce debates in Parliament and Brussels, through three nationwide elections that revived and replayed the Brexit debate. This involved an almost complete implosion of one of the world's most stable two-party systems, through a resurgence of public support for national populism, and through the formation of entirely new political parties, to the meteoric rise of Boris Johnson. It encompassed a dramatic collapse of Jeremy Corbyn's Labour Party and the arrival of an altogether different crisis in the form of the Covid-19 global pandemic, before, finally, culminating in January 2021, when the UK eventually exited the EU.

Yet even today, for reasons that we will explore, the battle over Brexit is still not over. While its impact still lingers in the realignment of electoral and party politics, both its causes and consequences will continue to be debated and dissected for decades to come. All of this raises a set of profound questions that we will explore in the pages ahead.

Why did so many people vote for Brexit? What factors determined the outcome of the various elections which shaped the battle over Brexit, including the 2017 and 2019 general elections and the 2019 elections to the European Parliament? How did these events reflect the changing political loyalties and behaviour of British voters? And what longer-term impacts might Brexit have on the country's political parties, political geography, voters and political system more widely?

In this chapter, we provide an introduction to the themes discussed in more detail in subsequent chapters, beginning by exploring what motivated the initial vote in 2016 and then considering how this vote affected three areas: political parties, public opinion and Parliament. This chapter sets the scene for the rest of the book, examining events from the referendum through to Theresa May's failure to win a parliamentary majority at the general election in 2017. The chapter that follows then discusses the events which gave rise to Boris Johnson's leadership of the Conservative Party, and his party's victory in the 2019 general election and the eventual delivery of Brexit. Along the way, we will take a step back to reflect on what we have learned about why so many people voted to leave the EU, the key events and negotiations that followed the result, and wider trends in public opinion, all of which provide the context for the elections to come.

Drawing on data gathered in a series of national surveys we conducted between 2015 and 2021, the chapters which follow examine in detail what shaped the outcome of these elections, which pushed the country toward Brexit, Boris Johnson and, finally, out of the EU. By the time our journey concludes, readers will have a detailed view of how the Brexit battle unfolded, the forces that shaped it and how it continues to impact the world around us.

### Voting Brexit

In the shadow of the referendum, it was often heard that the people who voted to leave the EU ‘had not known what they were voting for’. Yet in the years that followed, this claim was undermined by the findings of a large number of academic studies that examined in detail why 17.4 million people voted to overturn the status quo by pulling the country out of the European Union.

In the earlier book, *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*, which was published in the immediate aftermath of the vote in 2017, we drew on data from large-scale nationally representative surveys to examine the dynamics of the vote in detail.<sup>1</sup> Contrary to popular claims, we demonstrated how Brexit was not driven by one specific factor alone, or what took place during the referendum. Instead, the result reflected what we called ‘a complex and cross-cutting mix of calculations, emotions and cues’.

Of particular importance for most Leavers were their intense concerns about the loss of national sovereignty as a result of EU membership, their desire to regain control over what they saw as a malfunctioning immigration system, and their frustration at being left behind by the economic transformation of the country, which they felt had become far too dependent upon the EU. In conclusion, we wrote that:

it is important to recognize that a number of the forces that ultimately led to Brexit were operating for more than a decade before the referendum ... there was no one single factor that shaped how people thought about EU membership. Rather, since at least 2004 the public’s views about EU membership have been shaped by their assessment of how the governing parties were performing on key issues, especially immigration and, to a lesser extent, the economy and the NHS. People’s anxieties about how immigration flows into the country had been managed alongside worries about a perceived loss of economic control to Brussels directly cultivated support for Brexit. While the 2016 campaign may have changed some people’s minds and motivated them to cast a ballot, when it came to the fundamental question of whether to vote for Brexit, a number of key attitudes and beliefs were already in place.

In contrast to explanations that focus narrowly on things such as social media or who said what during the campaign, we demonstrated how the core motives for voting Brexit had been ‘baked in’ long before David Cameron called the referendum, in 2013. The belief that being a member of the EU was eroding sovereignty, that rapidly rising immigration from Central and Eastern Europe was damaging the economy and culture and that people were being left behind were all visible long before the referendum.

<sup>1</sup> Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2017). See also Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley (2019).

## 6 Part I The Short Term

Furthermore, we showed how people's calculations of risk played a crucial background role in shaping their decision at the ballot box. If they believed being a member of the EU undermined sovereignty, that immigration was mainly having negative effects and they were being left behind, then they were much less likely to see Brexit as a major risk and more likely to roll the dice. None of this is to say that the events of the campaign did not matter. If people felt positively about the two most prominent Brexiteers, Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage, who provided them with powerful cues to vote Leave, then they were nudged toward Brexit. Yet, powerful drivers had been years if not decades in the making.

Since publishing our book, these findings have been confirmed by other studies. Most share a general consensus that the two key drivers flagged in our study, namely people's worries over a loss of sovereignty and uncontrolled immigration, were, by far, the most powerful drivers of the vote to leave.<sup>2</sup> John Curtice found that Leavers were driven strongly by a sense that EU membership and the large-scale immigration that accompanied it threatened Britain's distinctive identity. Sara Hobolt found that support was most heavily concentrated among less well educated and older voters who felt intensely concerned about the effects of immigration and multiculturalism. Matthew Goodwin and Caitlin Milazzo found that, even after accounting for other factors, concern over immigration was a major predictor of whether or not people voted Leave. And several other studies have also pointed to the role of deep-rooted value divides between liberal-minded and typically younger graduates who voted Remain and more culturally conservative and typically middle-aged or older non-graduates who feel more attached to their national identity, more opposed to the EU and more concerned about the ongoing impact of large-scale immigration, all of which led them to vote against the status quo and for Leave.<sup>3</sup>

It is also worth pointing out that this is what Leavers said themselves, when they were asked to explain their motivation in their own words. When YouGov asked Leavers why they had voted to leave the European Union, the most popular answer was 'to strike a better balance between Britain's right to act independently, and the appropriate level of co-operation with other countries', followed by 'to help us deal better with the issue of immigration'. When Lord Ashcroft asked them the same question, the most popular answers were: 'The principle that decisions about the UK should be taken in the UK', followed by 'A feeling that

<sup>2</sup> See e.g., Curtice (2017), p. 55; Goodwin and Milazzo (2017); Carl, Dennison and Evans (2019); Fieldhouse et al. (2021).

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Solobowska and Ford (2021).

voting to leave the EU offered the best chance for the UK to regain control over immigration and its own borders'. When the British Election Study investigators asked the same question, they found that sovereignty and immigration were again the two most frequently cited reasons. They pointed out that: 'These results show that while the single largest word that Leavers say is "immigration", they were actually more likely to mention sovereignty related issues overall.'

The clear picture portrayed by these analyses is that Leavers are concerned primarily about sovereignty and immigration. In fact, reading responses shows that many respondents mention both sovereignty and immigration together, showing that these two issues were closely linked in the minds of British voters.<sup>4</sup> And when the Centre for Social Investigation at the University of Oxford likewise asked Leavers to rank their motives, they selected: (1) to regain control over EU immigration; (2) 'I didn't want the EU to have any role in UK law-making'; (3) 'I didn't want the UK sending any more money to the EU'; and, in a distant fourth, 'I wanted to teach British politicians a lesson.'<sup>5</sup>

Much of the evidence on factors prompting the Leave vote that has been collected since the referendum, therefore, tells a consistent and coherent story. As our original analysis suggested, Leavers were mainly motivated by their desire to restore national sovereignty and acquire greater control over immigration.

### Aftermath: Party Politics, Polls and Parliament

While the underlying cause of the Leave vote has attracted much attention, so too has its consequences. The outcome of the referendum soon had a major impact on three areas of the country's political life: on party politics, the polls and Parliament. The most immediate impact was visible in the world of partisan politics where the two major parties, the Conservatives and Labour, were thrown into turmoil.

David Cameron was promptly replaced as leader of the Conservative Party and, by extension, prime minister. His replacement was 60-year-old Theresa May, the former Home Secretary who, unlike 138 of her fellow Conservative MPs and 6 in 10 Conservative voters, had supported Remain, albeit while keeping a low profile throughout the referendum campaign. Indeed, May and her team even went out of their way to let it

<sup>4</sup> [www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-mattered-most-to-you-when-deciding-how-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum/#.Ybn6R73P39M](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-findings/what-mattered-most-to-you-when-deciding-how-to-vote-in-the-eu-referendum/#.Ybn6R73P39M)

<sup>5</sup> CSE Brexit 4: 'People's Stated Reasons for Voting Leave or Remain', Centre for Social Investigation, Nuffield College.

## 8 Part I The Short Term

be known that they did not believe the world would end if people voted to leave. While this reflected May's political pragmatism, it also owed much to the fact that she had never been especially animated by the Europe question, as one of her key advisors and speechwriters recalls.

'I think that she felt the whole thing was a bit of a distraction', said Chris Wilkins.

You know, she always pragmatically – not with a huge amount of enthusiasm, but pragmatically – felt that we had to be around the table. And that meant staying in ... She was always on the pragmatic Remain side. In all the years I've known her – I started working for Theresa in 2000/2001 – I'd never really heard her express a view about Europe, particularly. It just wasn't high on her political agenda.<sup>6</sup>

In the end, Theresa May won her party's brief leadership contest after setting out a clear and direct position on Europe and while watching her main rivals, notably Boris Johnson and Michael Gove, implode on the leadership campaign trail. She was eventually crowned leader when her last remaining rival, Andrea Leadsom, withdrew from the race after making ill-advised comments about the benefits of being a mother (May had no children). For only the second time in history, the country had a female prime minister.

It also had a prime minister who was now committed to seeing through Brexit. Keenly aware that she would be leading a strongly pro-Brexit party that would be instinctively suspicious of a leader who had supported Remain, and in a country where a majority of the electorate had just voted to depart from the EU, May quickly doubled down on her pro-Brexit credentials. She pledged repeatedly that 'Brexit Means Brexit' and warned repeatedly against any attempt to undermine or re-run the referendum, as had happened following earlier referendums in Denmark in 1992–1993, Ireland in 2001–2002 and again in Ireland in 2008–2009.

There must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to re-join it through the back door and no second referendum. The country voted to leave the European Union and it is the duty of the government and parliament to make sure that we do just that.<sup>7</sup>

She also categorically ruled out a fresh general election.

The Conservatives were not the only ones thrown into disarray. In the aftermath of the referendum, the Labour Party also imploded as the party was rocked by not one but two events. The first was the vote to

<sup>6</sup> Interview with Chris Wilkins. Special Advisor, Department of Education June 2014–June 2015 and Director of Strategy and Chief Speechwriter Number 10 Downing Street, July 2016–June 2017. Interview 22 June 2020. UK in a Changing Europe Brexit Witness Archives.

<sup>7</sup> [www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46920529](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-46920529)

leave the EU, which attracted considerable support across the Labour heartlands and posed a direct challenge to the dominant faction in the Labour movement. Whereas during the 1970s and 1980s, Labour had been strongly Eurosceptic, even campaigning in 1983 for an early Brexit, from then onwards the party had embraced a liberal cosmopolitanism which was far more supportive of EU membership, immigration and globalization. It peaked with Tony Blair's short-lived attempt to lead the country into the Euro single currency and Labour's complete embrace of freedom of movement. By the time of the Brexit referendum, it was reflected in the fact that only 10 of the 232 Labour MPs had campaigned for Brexit.

The second event to rock the party had arrived less than one year before the vote for Brexit when the radical left-wing activist Jeremy Corbyn had been elected leader of the Labour Party. Corbyn, who came from the more Eurosceptic wing of the Labour movement and was instinctively suspicious of the EU, proceeded to swing Labour sharply to the left. Such was his ambivalence on the Brexit question that some leading pro-EU Labour campaigners such as Will Straw worried during the referendum that Corbyn might even come out for Leave. 'There was an article in *The Guardian* or somewhere', said Straw, 'with some remarks that he had given at some hustings event. He basically gave a long-standing Jeremy Corbyn remark about his views on the EU. So, we were really worried about that, and what that would mean.'<sup>8</sup>

Corbyn's Euroscepticism was also reflected elsewhere. Throughout the referendum, Labour's pro-Remain campaigners had repeatedly struggled to build links with Corbyn's team, with members of the latter failing to attend meetings and publicly criticizing Remain efforts in the final weeks before the vote. Alan Johnson, who led Labour's campaign to stay in the EU, felt he did not have the backing of the Labour leadership. Meanwhile, both the Corbynistas and trade unions were critical of what they saw as a Conservative-led campaign to remain in the EU, which made it difficult to include more working-class voices. Corbyn himself repeatedly failed to set out a passionate and compelling case for Remain.

As a result, while New Labour grandees such as Gordon Brown and Tony Blair sought to fill the vacuum, there was no powerful pro-Remain cue for voters from the leader of the Labour Party. This fact was reflected in the finding, only three weeks before the referendum, that only half of Labour voters realized that their party wanted to remain in the EU.

<sup>8</sup> Interview with Will Straw, Executive Director, Britain Stronger in Europe, July 2015–September 2016. Interview date 12 February 2021. UK in a Changing Europe Brexit Witness Archives.



## 10 Part I The Short Term

Focus groups commissioned by the Remain campaign suggested that many voters were ‘uniformly uncertain’ about Labour’s position, did not know where Corbyn stood, or thought that while the Labour leader supported Remain ‘his heart isn’t in it.’<sup>9</sup>

This uncertainty also had been partly shaped by the fact that Corbyn’s allies were often more focused on keeping their new leader in power, defending him against attempted internal coups and setting out a radical domestic policy agenda of their own than campaigning in the Brexit referendum. Some underestimated the scale of public support for Brexit: ‘My own view then’, recalled Shadow Chancellor John McDonnell, ‘it shows you how we underestimated the whole thing, was that this [the referendum] was just party management by Cameron to shut up his Eurosceptics, win the referendum, move on, settle it for another number of years and just get on with the real world. I treated it very much like that.’<sup>10</sup>

When the shock result arrived, many Labour MPs not only felt disillusioned by the outcome but also with the direction of their party and what they saw as the failure of Corbynistas to make the case for Remain. Corbyn’s critics saw the result as a much-needed opportunity to oust the leader and redirect Labour back toward its liberal cosmopolitan tradition. A wave of resignations by Labour MPs followed, including from a dozen shadow cabinet ministers. One of those ministers, Hilary Benn, recalled: ‘It was a culmination of, I suppose, frustration at the referendum result and what was perceived as having not been a very energetic effort on his [Corbyn’s] part during the campaign, where we were in the polls and the fact that while Jeremy has many qualities, leading the main opposition party was not one of them.’<sup>11</sup>

Yet Corbyn and his allies dug in. In a leadership election three months later, in September 2016, Corbyn was comfortably re-elected with almost 62 per cent of the vote, a larger share than what he received when he was first elected leader of the Labour Party in 2015.<sup>12</sup> Reflecting similar arguments being made about Brexit, Corbyn urged Labour MPs and members to ‘respect the democratic choice that has been made.’

<sup>9</sup> ‘Labour Voters in the Dark about Party’s Stance on Brexit, research says’, *The Guardian*, 30 May 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Interview with John McDonnell, Shadow Chancellor of the Exchequer, September 2015–April 2020. 19 February 2021.

<sup>11</sup> Interview with Hilary Benn, Chair of the Select Committee on Exiting the European Union, October 2016–January 2021. UK in a Changing Europe Brexit Witness Archives.

<sup>12</sup> In the leadership election of September 2016, Jeremy Corbyn polled 62 per cent and Owen Smith 38 per cent. Corbyn had received just short of 60 per cent of the vote in the initial leadership election in 2015. On Labour membership and leadership see Whiteley, Poletti, Webb and Bale (2019).

Yet while the question of leadership in the major parties appeared to have been settled, at least for the time being, the deeper divides that had found their expression through the referendum vote had most certainly not. Polls soon indicated that Brexit had completely changed the issue agenda in British politics. Whereas during 2014 and 2015, the most important issues for voters had been the economy, immigration and the National Health Service, in the immediate aftermath of the referendum Brexit surged to the forefront of the agenda and remained at or near the top for much of the next three years.<sup>13</sup>

Crucially, Brexit did not sit comfortably in the existing ‘left versus right’ divide in British politics. Support for leaving the EU cut directly across traditional party lines, clearing the way for entirely new political identities and loyalties and pushing the country toward a far more polarized, volatile and unpredictable politics. This was reflected in the nature of the Leave vote. Our 2015–2016 national panel survey indicates Brexit had been supported by 61 per cent of people who had cast ballots for the Conservatives in 2015, 26 per cent of 2015 Labour voters and 36 per cent of 2015 Liberal Democrat voters. Attitudes towards Brexit not only cut across traditional political lines but, as we will see in the chapters to come, would soon reshape the nature of support for the major parties, reconfiguring them around the new fault line.

Aside from cutting across party lines, the new Brexit divide would prove to be remarkably durable. Contrary to the idea, fashionable in the aftermath of the referendum, that Leavers would change their minds, between the vote for Brexit in 2016 and the eventual delivery of Brexit, public support for exiting the EU remained remarkably stable. As shown in Figure 1.1, between 2016 and late 2021 the percentage of voters who felt that the decision to Leave the EU had been ‘wrong’ remained generally consistent, falling by a modest amount from 47 to 40 per cent over the entire five-year period. Meanwhile, the percentage who felt that the country had been ‘right to Leave’ also remained stable, rising by a similar margin from 44 to 48 per cent.

There was also considerable polarization among Leavers and Remainers; while typically more than 80 per cent of Leavers felt that the vote to Leave had been the ‘right decision’, more than 80 per cent of Remainers felt it was the ‘wrong decision’. These divides would remain clearly visible as the Brexit struggle continued, with young, graduates and liberal left voters being far more likely than their older, non-graduate and conservative counterparts to express Bregret about the events of 2016.

<sup>13</sup> We draw here on issue salience data compiled by the Ipsos-MORI Issues Index. Available online: [Ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/issues-index-2007-onwards](https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/issues-index-2007-onwards)