

‘The referendum was clear: the British people voted to leave the single market and to take back control of our borders.’

Nigel Farage

‘There must be no attempts to remain inside the EU, no attempts to rejoin it through the back door, and no second referendum.’

Theresa May

‘My role as the Labour prime minister would be to ensure that [another referendum] is carried out in a fair way, that the offers put are fair, and that I will carry out the result of that referendum.’

Jeremy Corbyn

‘Every day we let this Brexit mess go on means less money being invested in the UK, fewer jobs being created and less tax revenue to pay for our public services.’

Jo Swinson

‘We’ve got the deal. It’s oven ready. Vote Conservative tomorrow to get Brexit done’.

Boris Johnson

‘I think ... that we can turn the tide within the next 12 weeks and I’m absolutely confident that we can send the corona virus packing in this country.’

Boris Johnson

‘The return of the virus and the return of restrictions were not an Act of God. They are a failure of government.’

Keir Starmer

## Brexit Britain

In June 2016, more than 17 million people voted for Britain to leave the European Union. The fallout of this momentous referendum has been tumultuous and unpredictable. Now, from the authors of the highly acclaimed *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Cambridge University Press, 2017), comes the definitive guide to the transformation of British politics in the years following the Brexit vote. By charting the impact of Brexit on three major elections – the 2017 and 2019 general elections as well as the 2019 European Parliament elections – this book reveals the deeper currents reshaping modern Britain. The authors draw upon many years of unique and unprecedented data from their own surveys, giving key insights into how and why Brexit has changed British electoral politics. The book is written in a clear and accessible style, appealing to students, scholars and anyone interested in the impact of Brexit on Britain today.

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# Brexit Britain

*The Consequences of the Vote to Leave  
the European Union*

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## Foreword

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*Brexit Britain* is a book about the choices that people, parties and politicians make, and the consequences that follow from these in turbulent times. More precisely, the book is about the choices that people make as voters, and that parties and leaders make as vote seekers and policy-makers in turbulent times. This book builds on the previously published book *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* by Clarke, Goodwin and Whiteley.<sup>1</sup>

In the *Brexit* book the authors explored what led more than 17 million people, in 2016, to vote to leave the European Union. It showed why many of the factors that led people to vote for Brexit, and that delivered the surprising success of the Leave campaign, had been ‘baked in’ long before the referendum campaign even began. It also showed how these Brexit voters had clear and coherent motives for voting to leave, including their concerns about national sovereignty and immigration.

However, at the time of its writing, neither the authors – nor anyone else for that matter – had the prescience to see what was to come. Leaving the EU would become a difficult and tortuous process that plunged the country into one of the most serious and protracted political and constitutional crises in modern history. Leaving the EU would also lead to the United Kingdom adopting a ‘hard’ version of Brexit that will continue to stoke controversies for years to come. These controversies include the potential independence of Scotland, where people voted overwhelmingly to remain in the European Union, and forging a new relationship between the United Kingdom and the EU with ongoing concerns over security and peace in Northern Ireland.

For these reasons, it became clear, in the time between the vote for Brexit in 2016 and Boris Johnson’s electoral triumph in 2019, that a sequel to the *Brexit* book was in order. This sequel, *Brexit Britain*, has three principal and related objectives. First, it examines the long-running process of Brexit, particularly the years of turmoil which followed the

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

## xviii Foreword

referendum vote and witnessed many twists and turns in the negotiations between the UK and the EU. Second, we study how the political turmoil that was unleashed by the Brexit vote shaped all three of the major nationwide elections in 2017, the spring of 2019 and the winter of 2019, producing major changes with significant consequences.

As we show in this book, this sequence of elections brought about the rise and fall of Jeremy Corbyn and the Labour Party, and the success of Boris Johnson and the pro-Brexit Conservative Party. As a result, they helped to produce what Members of Parliament had been unable to achieve – an outcome to the negotiations between the UK and the EU, with the final departure of the UK from the European Union on 31 January 2020. Thus, the country has been pushed in a fundamentally different direction, namely out of the European Union and into a so-called ‘Global Britain’. In sum, the bases of electoral politics, political geography and political behaviour have changed in fundamental ways, while British politics has become increasingly polarized.

The third objective of *Brexit Britain* involves investigation of how the themes of change, choice, consequence and performance play in explanations of how short-term and longer-term forces have been at work during these tumultuous years. As we show, these choices have dynamic properties, that is, they change in the short – and longer-terms, as events and issues evolve, and as new information becomes available.

These choices are also influenced by, as we will see, what is known among political scientists as ‘valence politics’.<sup>2</sup> Valence politics involves issues about which there is widespread agreement among people and parties about what the policy goals are, but disagreement about how to achieve them. Thus, people form evaluations of how well or badly an issue has developed and how the party-in-government has handled it, and these evaluations shape electoral choices. Typical examples of valence issues are economic growth combined with low inflation and unemployment, high-quality and accessible healthcare, protection from threats to physical security posed by rogue regimes, terrorists and criminals, and environmental quality. In the British case, several such issues have come to the fore in the time period covered by this book, that is, the period bracketed by the Brexit referendum in 2016 and the arrival of the Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020. In this book, we show how valence politics has had a profound impact on the country’s politics.

We approach these three objectives by organizing the book in three parts. The first part focuses on short-term effects during the period from

<sup>2</sup> On valence politics theory, see Stokes (1992) and especially Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley (2004) and Whiteley, Clarke, Sanders and Stewart (2013).



the referendum up to and including the 2019 European and general elections. The part consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 examines the political events which followed the shockwaves generated by the vote to leave the EU through to Theresa May's loss of her majority in the 2017 general election.

Chapter 2 continues the story by charting the major events during the Brexit negotiations from the aftermath of the 2017 general election through to the outcome of the 2019 general election. These propelled Boris Johnson into power and set the stage for the delivery of Brexit. Chapters 3, 4 and 5 then drill down into detail about each of the three elections that involved: the 2017 general election, the Spring 2019 European Parliament election and finally the December 2019 general election.

Part II takes a step back to examine three major and related developments involving longer-term changes and their effects, both across time and space, which have helped to produce the Brexit outcome. This has three chapters. Chapter 6 focuses on the decline of social class as a determinant of electoral choice and the rise of age-related politics. Ever since the path-breaking study by David Butler and Donald Stokes in 1969,<sup>3</sup> the 'class cleavage' has dominated much research on voting in Britain. This cleavage typically has been measured by support for Labour among voters in working-class occupations and support for the Conservatives in middle-class occupations. However, the influence of social class measured in this way was never as strong as Butler and Stokes claimed, something clearly revealed by their panel surveys which re-interviewed the same voters at multiple points in time. That said, there is a broader conception of class, described as the Human Development Index, which includes additional measures going beyond narrowly defined occupational status. This does have a considerable impact on electoral support at the constituency level. However, and as we show in this chapter, narrowly defined class politics has largely disappeared at the level of the individual voter. It has been replaced by the new age/education cleavage whose origins and effects are explored in Chapter 6.

Chapter 7 examines a second development of importance, the geographic fragmentation of electoral choice at the level of the different countries that form that the United Kingdom, and in particular the specific context of England. This fragmentation is well illustrated by the fact that Scotland and Northern Ireland voted to remain in the EU referendum whereas England and Wales voted to leave. Similar divisions also are apparent across the English regions. Since the referendum,

<sup>3</sup> Butler and Stokes (1969).

fragmentation and polarization have been sharply exacerbated by Brexit and the continuing controversies it has caused.

In Chapter 8, we take a look at how these two and other developments pose a threat to government accountability. Accountability means that voters form evaluations of how well or badly a government delivers the policies that people want, and these evaluations inform electoral choices. Accountability is a critical part of the process of democratic governance, and it is closely linked to the theory of valence politics. A number of developments in politics and the economy suggest that the ability of governments to deliver on key valence issues is now at risk. In an especially fragmented polity and society, accountability can be difficult to achieve. In addition to the two longer-term developments described above, there are other developments. There is a large number of people who feel left behind in the economy and society, and many of them voted to leave the EU in the referendum. The capacity of governments to satisfy voter expectations has also been challenged by the forces of globalization, European integration, the marketization of public services and growing social inequality. In Chapter 8, we look at government accountability for management of the economy, which is a key valence issue. Our finding that accountability is ‘alive and well’ in British politics challenges pessimistic views expressed by the critics of the processes associated with contemporary democracy.<sup>4</sup>

Part III looks to the future by exploring the economic and political fallout from the Brexit vote. Chapter 9 broadens the analysis by considering the impact of Brexit on the economy more generally. We address whether Brexit has the potential to reduce innovation and economic growth in the future. A key issue in evaluating this possibility is to try to untangle the effects of Brexit from the effects of the Covid pandemic, and this is done by looking at data over a long period of time. The conclusion is that the pandemic really overshadows the effects of Brexit, although this may change in the future.

In Chapter 10, we investigate the effect of Brexit, together with the pandemic on changes in support for the Conservative Party and for Prime Minister Boris Johnson. The chapter also looks more broadly at the effects of Brexit on the political system. This involves investigating citizen satisfaction with the performance of democracy, and also their trust in political institutions such as Parliament and the political parties. A third issue examined in the chapter is the threat to the unity of the United Kingdom posed by Scottish independence.

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Achen and Bartels (2016).

The Postscript at the end of the book summarizes our central conclusions. In brief, we show that, although Brexit has had and will continue to have disruptive consequences, it is not the disaster claimed by many commentators. The previously published *Brexit* book showed that, if Britain had not joined the European Union in the first place, it would have made little difference to the country's economic prosperity, its international influence, and the longer-term trends shaping electoral politics. This conclusion is largely reinforced by the findings in this book. And, although Brexit has been a highly divisive and occasionally traumatic experience for many, leaving the EU will not affect the reality that Britain's future continues to hinge on the choices made by its people, parties and politicians.

This is particularly true in a situation in which further European integration has stalled. The European Union currently faces a serious threat to its fundamental values, such as the rule of law, from its own member states in Eastern Europe, and an economic divide which is growing between northern and southern states. The EU is limited in what it can achieve, because of the heterogeneity of the countries that comprise it, and the fact that these countries are unlikely to cede significant sovereignty to Brussels in the foreseeable future. The EU's accomplishments in terms of economic prosperity and general security are also limited by the fact that it remains largely a regulatory entity, rather than a sovereign state.

Finally, for all readers, including those not familiar with the theories and methods used in this type of research, the book has been written with the general reader in mind. The figures and tables are presented in a very accessible way that allows readers to follow the arguments without having to know technical details. For those readers who want details about the survey methodology and the statistical methods used in the analyses, they can consult the two appendices.

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Paul Whiteley  
Harold D. Clarke  
Matthew Goodwin  
Marianne C. Stewart

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Paul, Matt, and Marianne