The UK political system

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There is no historical precedent for what the politics of a member state looks like after leaving the European Union. However, what we do have is a case study of what happens to the politics of a member state as it goes through the process of withdrawing from the European project: destabilised, fractured and dominated by questions of political identity.

Perhaps the most important political effect of Brexit was not what it caused but what it revealed – a country split on values and divided by geography, with all too many people feeling wholly disconnected from the political system. The disagreement over the Brexit process between Leavers and Remainers was complex rather than binary, exposing pre-existing divisions rather than creating new ones. As a result, it is hardly surprising that the Brexit cleavage – which seemed to appear in British society out of nowhere during the referendum campaign – did not fade after the June 2016 vote.

Rather than a singular event which catalysed long-term change in the UK's political system, it is perhaps more illuminating to view Brexit as a process which accelerated existing political trends and structural changes. One such trend is partisan dealignment, or the long-term decline of party loyalty (and therefore increased volatility) among voters.

Data from the British Election Study illustrates that the proportion of the electorate reporting a very strong party identification fell from 45% in 1964 to 10% in 2005.[1] Just 1 in 10 Brits now says that they identify with a political party very strongly, compared to half of the voting population in the 1960s.[2] Following the referendum, the Leave and Remain campaigns came to provide labels for people's political identity that increasingly seemed to suit people better than traditional political labels. As a result, British Election Study research found that only 1 in 16 people have no Brexit identity, whereas more than 1 in 5 have no party identity.[3]

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The UK public had long held a worryingly dim view of their parliament and political institutions, and their impressions have only worsened over time. Those who believe that the UK's political system needs quite a lot or a great deal of improvement stood at 60% in 2003, 68% a year before the referendum and is now at 72%.[4] The Brexit process did appear to deepen some of these perceptions of distrust, but attitudes were heavily dependent on outcomes. Trust slumped among Remainers after the referendum result; then among Leavers when the hung parliament of 2017-19 looked like it might attempt to force the government into holding a second referendum; and, finally, trust rebounded among Leavers when Boris Johnson won the general election.

Nonetheless, while the intricacies of parliamentary process were discussed as never before in the UK's daily news programmes, any greater familiarity with them among the public served to breed contempt rather than respect. 42% went on to say that "many of the country's problems could be dealt with more effectively if the government didn't have to worry so much about votes in Parliament."[5]

The fact that Parliament was centre stage in the Brexit drama was almost certainly the temporary result of a hung parliament rather than a permanent change in the relationship between the executive and legislature. Some changes were potentially long-lasting, however. As part of an attempt to circumvent parliamentary opposition, Boris Johnson expelled 21 Conservative Members of Parliament (MPs) who fought against a no-deal Brexit. In the general election that followed in 2019 – fought on a pledge that the no-deal scenario should remain part of the Government's strategy –, many of these MPs, some of them experienced ex-ministers, did not contest their seats.

This is a permanent loss of experience, and the seeming acceptance of defeat for a more pragmatic, less obviously Europhobic strain of Conservativism. In their place are new MPs, joined by others who represent areas – mostly outside major cities – where previously the Labour party performed strongly. These places were won on the back of a pledge to 'get Brexit done'.

Moreover, the Government has taken steps to ensure that it will be much harder for Parliament to influence the Brexit process going forward.[6] The first version of the Withdrawal Agreement Bill ensured Parliament would vote not only on the negotiating mandate for the future relationship talks with the EU but also the final treaty on that future relationship. The post-2019 election version of the Bill stripped out these provisions, however, meaning that Parliament will have little formal say in

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The referendum and its aftermath revealed a UK divided along a number of different cleavages, not least age and education level. Perhaps the key fissure in the UK's electoral geography now, as in much of Europe, is between major cities that have benefitted from globalisation and are populated by citizens with broadly more socially liberal values, and places on the periphery which are more likely to have been – and feel – disadvantaged by the long-term changes in society. This poses major problems for parties – and Labour in particular – that cannot simply be forgotten once Brexit is 'out of the way'. Brexit gave working-class voters who had long felt excluded from the political conversation a voice – and many of them went on to give Johnson their vote.

As a result, for the first time since the Labour Party was formed a century ago, the working class are now more likely to vote for the Conservatives than the middle class.[7] This also poses a geographical problem for the Conservatives: there are a number of seats, predominantly but not exclusively in the south of England, where a high number of middle-class graduates live. Overall, these seats swung to Labour and the Liberal Democrats under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership. A Labour leader with the same policy bona fides but sans the personal baggage will make things more difficult for Johnson.

While the Labour Party has emerged from the Brexit saga with fewer MPs, it can perhaps claim to be more united now that the Corbyn project is at an end. Its members and MPs – at loggerheads between 2015 and 2020 – converged on Keir Starmer as the best man to lead the party. True, he won the leadership contest as the candidate most associated with the Remain movement in the UK. Furthermore, he was also the only candidate in the contest to not rule out the UK rejoining the bloc in the long-term.

Nevertheless, his stance on Brexit was probably less important to his victory than his triangulation between Corbynism and the rest of the Labour Party.

Despite not being backed by Corbyn, in a sense Starmer could be seen as the continuity candidate: the one best placed to go with the grain of Labour's new electoral coalition forged by Brexit, and build on the relative gains made in areas with a disproportionate number of graduates. Progress could come from winning and retaining the support of enough socially liberal voters – largely those middle-class graduates mentioned above –, making just enough headway to potentially deny Boris Johnson a majority in the next general election. However, success also likely means winning back voters with more socially conservative values and who have felt detached from the Labour Party for some time. A politics fought on economic competence rather than social values is therefore likely to offer more propitious terrain for Labour.

And, of course, great changes are coming to the UK's economic model. The fiscal headroom to deal with any short-term disruption caused by Brexit has shrunk following the COVID-19 crisis. Previously urgent commitments to 'level up' the UK will become harder to deliver; not merely as a result of the eye-watering levels of government borrowing undertaken to deal with the pandemic, but also because COVID-19 itself has had a profoundly unequal impact. The virus has hit more disadvantaged urban areas harder, not only in terms of death rates but also its impact on the education of children from less well-off households.[8]

Levelling up, in other words, will be significantly complicated by the pandemic, and could be exacerbated further by the type of Brexit deal envisaged by the Prime Minister. This makes it foolish to assume – as many did the day after the general election – that the Conservative Party

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will be hegemonic for the next couple of election cycles.

It may, of course, be the case that the crisis will see an even greater reassertion of national borders and national identity. Moreover, issues such as immigration – seemingly a significantly less salient and heated debate since the referendum – could re-emerge as key dividing lines in British politics. However, it is equally possible that the nature of this crisis and its economic consequences will end up reorienting UK politics back towards questions of economic redistribution, the workplace, and the resilience and adequacy of key public services hit by a decade of austerity.

One policy area whose salience has changed as a result of COVID-19 is Brexit itself – it has now become a second-order issue in the UK, as well as a much lower priority for the EU. Decisions on whether the UK should ask for an extension to the transition period (due to end on 31 December 2020) will need to be made by the end of June 2020. However, as of yet, there is still no sign that the Government will shift its position of steadfastly refusing to do so.

Even if the Brexit question does fade from view – and the Leaver and Remainer labels dissipate –, that should not give the UK's politicians the false perception that the country is any less divided. Indeed, when thinking about responses to the key challenges the country now faces, policymakers would be wise to remember the lessons that emerged from the Brexit process. The electorate is volatile and unpredictable. Voters remain detached from the formal political process. And people and regions across the UK vary in their capacity to rebound from economic shocks and crises. If these lessons really have finally been learnt, that could be the most profound effect of Brexit.

[1] Fieldhouse, Edward; Jane Green; Geoffrey Evans; Jonathan Mellon; Christopher Prosser; Hermann Schmitt and Cees van der Eijk (2019), *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, p.53.

[2] Sanders, David (2017), "The UK's changing party system: The prospects for a party realignment at Westminster", *Journal of the British Academy*, Volume 5, pp.91-124.

[3] The UK in a Changing Europe (2019), "Brexit and public opinion 2019", London.

[4] Blackwell, Joel; Brigid Fowler and Ruth Fox (2019), "Audit of Political Engagement 16: The 2019 Report", London: Hansard Society.

[5] *Ibid*., p.5.

[6] The UK in a Changing Europe (2020), "Parliament and Brexit", London.

[7] Evans, Geoff and Jonathan Mellon, "The Re-shaping Of Class Voting", British Election Study, 06 March 2020.

[8] Office for National Statistics (2020), "Deaths involving COVID-19 by local area and socioeconomic deprivation: deaths occurring between 1 March and 17 April 2020"; Cullinane, Carl and Rebecca Montacute (2020), "COVID-19 and Social Mobility Impact Brief #1: School Shutdown", London: The Sutton Trust.