

Party Realignment and Single-Issue Voters: Evidence from Brexit

Christian Cox* Ian Shapiro†
University of Arizona Yale University

May 20, 2024

Abstract

This paper studies the effects of the referendum on the British exit from the European Union on the Conservative Party in the United Kingdom. We look at the change in positions of Conservative Members of Parliament using a novel dataset of their opinions on British membership of the EU between 2015 and 2022. We explore the role of the United Kingdom Independence Party's collapse in these trends and contrast the outcomes with the 1975 referendum, focusing on the possible roles of discipline and entryism. Our finding that Conservative MPs who resisted switching to a pro-Leave position paid a significant electoral cost underscores that weakening political parties can render them vulnerable to hostile takeovers.

Keywords: Referendums, single-issue politics, political parties

Disclosure: The authors report there are no competing interests to declare.

*Corresponding author: christiancox@arizona.edu. Assistant Professor, Department of Economics, University of Arizona, Tucson, AZ 85718.

†ian.shapiro@yale.edu. Sterling Professor of Political Science, Yale University, New Haven, CT 06520.

1 Introduction

The British referendum on the exit from the European Union (Brexit) was a historic moment that was a surprise to many (Cohn 2016). The referendum was instigated by Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron with the expectation that pro-remain would succeed, as had Labour Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s referendum in 1975. Just as Wilson had called his referendum to finesse conflicts between Europhiles and Eurosceptics in the Labour party, Cameron’s goal was to wrest the initiative from Tory Eurosceptics who were relentlessly “banging on about Europe” to the detriment of his policy agenda and, he believed, future Tory electoral prospects. But Brexit passed by 52 to 48 percent, reshaping the political terrain for the Conservatives. The UK Independence Party (UKIP), which had been a small movement since the 1990s, was by then a consequential player in the run-up to the referendum. Tory MPs, a large majority of whom had been pro-Remain when elected a year before the referendum, were forced to reappraise their positions and eventually support withdrawal terms.

In this paper we study the pro/anti Remain in the EU positions of Conservative MPs. We compare those who were consistently pro-Remain to those who switched, aiming to understand their reasons for switching and subsequent fates. Causally identifying the underlying reasons for switching is difficult, but it is straightforward to show how badly the pro-Remain Conservatives fared. Our analysis proceeds in three stages. First, we create a novel dataset on all Brexit positions for Conservative MPs since 2015 and track their positions over time. Second, we track the rise and fall of UKIP, piecing together the extant literature on their effects on the Conservative electorate. Third, we use historical election results to study the evolution of the Conservative Party in response to single-issue British (or more precisely English) nationalists. Overall, we find that pro-Remain Conservatives were systematically driven out of the party either by switching in large numbers, losing, or retiring. By 2019, the Tories had become decisively pro-Brexit, leaving Cameron’s original strategy of detaching the party’s electoral fortunes from the Brexit question in tatters (Perrigo 2019).

Our findings speak to the larger debate over the merits and perils of unbundling party platforms through the use of referendums in the name of giving voters a greater say in political outcomes. On the one hand, as Bogdanor (2014) and others have argued, because both the Labour and Conservative parliamentary parties had long been overwhelmingly pro-Europe, the referendum gave voters a genuine choice that they would otherwise be denied. On the other hand, the choice was artificial because no alternative to remaining in Europe was specified at the time. This meant that pro-Brexit voters included free marketeers who envisaged Britain's future as some variant of Singapore-on-the-Thames and people on the left of the Labour Party who envisaged strong limitations on immigration and other protectionist measures that could not be realized within the EU framework - to name but two. This artificiality was highlighted by the fact that in 2019 Theresa May could not secure a parliamentary majority for her proposed Brexit agreement, for any alternative to it, or for holding another referendum. Our analysis relates to the work on the changes to the Conservative party after Brexit (Hayton 2022; Evans, de Geus, and Green 2023; Bale 2023) and the relationship between the Conservatives and UKIP (Bale 2018; Bale 2023).

Boris Johnson seemed at the time to be in control of a disciplined party from which he had banished 21 MPs and delivered Brexit, though his subsequent fate and the party's ongoing leadership squabbles hint at a nuanced story. We suggest that the Tory evolution aligns with the recent literature indicating a weakening of the party since the 1980s, though this has to some extent been tempered by measures such as the repeal of the Fixed Parliaments Act in 2022 (Shapiro 2024). Under Margaret Thatcher, and then John Major, the party stayed pro-Remain but accommodated enough of what Euro-skeptics wanted by re-negotiating the UK rebate and securing qualified majority voting on tariffs and other barriers to trade¹ to win three consecutive elections. As the party became weaker, the ability of its leaders to manage its Euro-skeptic wing atrophied. Referendums weaken parties by unbundling platforms, enabling intense

¹This curtailed the veto power of countries like France, Germany, and Italy that had locked in advantages for themselves before the UK joined (Shapiro 2024).

single-issue voters and interest groups to exert disproportionate influence on outcomes (Day 2021). The Conservatives were initially pro-Remain but could not keep their members together, so they gave in to what was in effect a hostile takeover. The Conservative Party today is weaker than Thatcher’s party: she managed the Euroskeptics without calling a referendum and today, the Brexiters control the Conservatives.

Our work relates to the weakening of the Conservative Party due to single-issue referendums and the loosening of party cohesion. The former was illustrated by Brexit, UKIP, and the prime ministerial chaos following David Cameron: Theresa May, Boris Johnson, and the most recent unprecedented 47-day tenure of Liz Truss. Contributing factors have been the adoption of leadership selection system that allows party members to override the preferences of MPs, as they did by selecting Ian Duncan-Smith in 2001 and Truss in 2022, and the decentralization of candidate selection as illustrated by the increase in entryism and the recent Conservative Party experiments with primaries (Alexandre-Collier 2016).

The paper continues as follows: section 2 describes the MP position dataset; section 3 discusses the outcomes for Conservative MPs based on their Brexit position; section 4 explores the UKIP party; section 5 studies elections in a historical context; section 6 concludes.

2 MP Position Data

We build a dataset of the Brexit positions of Members of Parliament since the 2015 election, with a focus on comparing the 2019 election positions to those of the Parliament elected in 2015 and 2017. Various journalistic outlets such as the British Broadcasting Corporation, The Guardian newspaper, and others created datasets we used to construct a list for the 2015 Parliament. For 2017, we utilize the Financial Times’ dataset for the Conservatives. We recreate this dataset for 2019 using MPs’ social media accounts and various newspapers as our main sources. See Appendix 7 for details of the dataset construction.

In the 2019 election, 373 MPs supported Remain and 235 supported leaving the EU (61% pro-Remain).² The Labour Party members, Scottish National Party members, and Liberal Democrats were almost unanimously pro-Remain, while Conservatives were split 129/225 Remain/Leave. The remaining smaller parties were largely pro-Remain. In 2016, Parliament was more pro-Remain: 479 for Remain and only 158 for leaving (BBC 2016).

Most of the change over time came from the Conservatives MPs. In 2016, their Remain/Leave split was 185/138, with little changing in 2017 at 176/138 (Mance 2017). The pro-Remain Conservative faction decreased in 2019 to 129/225 for Remain/Leave. As we will explore, many MPs were pro-Remain in 2016 but stood down or lost for a variety of reasons, including losing to pro-Leave Conservatives.

3 Evolution and Fate of pro-Remain MPs

Originally, there were 185 pro-Remain Conservative MPs (in 2015-2016). From 2017-2022, these MPs either adjusted their positions to honor the referendum results or were phased out over the subsequent two election cycles, mostly being replaced by pro-Brexit Conservatives. By 2019, most of the pro-Remain Conservatives were under attack by party leaders until they left/lost. Those who persisted in staying pro-Remain were overwhelmingly removed by either losing or standing down. Those who switched to a pro-Leave position often claimed that they were merely respecting the decision of the referendum and would work to hasten the UK's exit from the EU.³ Other switchers may have indicated a sincere ideological change towards being pro-Brexit (or at least a desire to avoid a no-deal Brexit). Regardless of their reasoning, switching paid off. Figure 1 shows the breakdown of the fates of initially pro-Remain MPs who did and

²Note that this totals to 608, and there are 650 MPs in Parliament. We were unable to find any information about the other 41. Many of these missing names were Labour MPs, so they were likely pro-Remain. The total number also includes the positions of those for whom we were unable to find 2016 opinions. Of those with verifiable 2016 opinions, the percentage would be 66% in favor of Remain.

³The drawn-out nature of the exit was not according to plans (Blackall 2020).

did not switch positions. Figure 2 shows the decline over time of the MPs who did not switch.

After the referendum in 2017, 30 MPs left. Of those 30, 12 lost their seats to Labour, 4 to Lib-Dem, 2 retired, 7 stood down, and 5 temporarily lost their seat to Labour (but regained it with the same MP in 2019). Overall, there were 25 permanent exits in 2017. Of the 25 permanent exits in 2017, 12 are now held by Brexit-supporting Conservatives. Every MP who stood down in 2017 was replaced by a pro-Brexit Conservative. 9 are now held by Labour (the other 3 were regained by a different Conservative) and 4 are now held by Liberal Democrats. All 25 permanent exits stayed in the Remain camp up to the end of their tenure. The 5 MPs who regained their seats switched to the Leave camp.

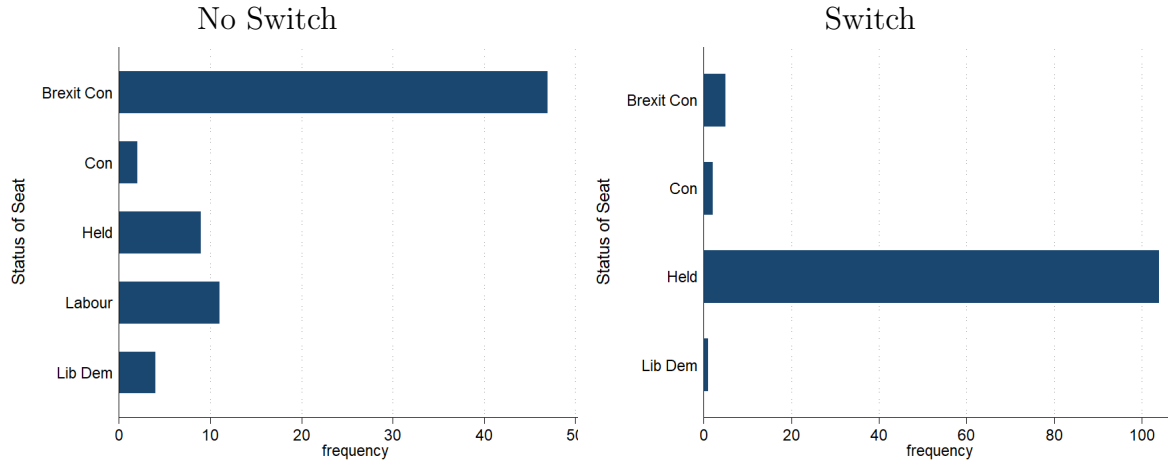
By 2019, a further 45 MPs from the original 185 left. 19 either resigned from the party or had their whip removed because they defied the party's stance on Brexit.⁴ Of these 19, 6 chose to run as independents or Liberal Democrats, all losing to Brexit Conservatives. 36/45 (inclusive of some of the 19 former Conservatives) stood down. 34/36 were replaced by Brexit Conservatives and the other 2 by Labour.⁵ Of those who stood down, 32/36 were still pro-Remain. Of the 19 who resigned from party or had the whip removed, all were still pro-Remain.

By 2022, 1 MP passed away and 108 MPs remained from the original 185. Further, 99/108 have explicitly stated that they support/back Brexit now. While the other 9 have not said anything externally, given what we know from Boris Johnson's claim that all Conservative candidates in 2019 pledged to back Brexit, it can be assumed that all remaining 108 MPs have switched their opinion. Also, by 2022, 108 MPs of the once pro-Remain camp are still in office, winning their seats in both the 2017 and 2019 elections. Of those 108, 100 explicitly switched to being pro-Leave. Of those 100, 82 have held some cabinet position, at some point, after the referendum.

⁴Nick Herbert stood down for unclear reasons in 2019. In his resignation, he emphasized his support for the government and Boris Johnson; in August 2020 he entered the House of Lords under Johnson.

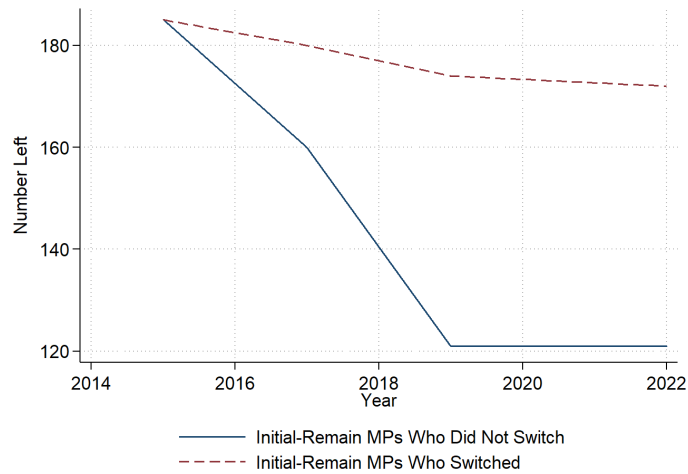
⁵Three were thrown out due to criminal accusations and charges.

Figure 1: Seat Status



The left (right) graph shows MPs who did not switch from pro-Remain to pro-Leave (switchers) and the outcomes of their seats. “Con” refers to conservatives and “Brexit Con” refers to a Conservative who supported leaving.

Figure 2: Initially pro-Remain MP Drop-off Over Time



This plots the reduction in the number of Conservative MPs in office who were initially pro-Remain.

4 The 2016 Referendum and UKIP

After 2016, UKIP saw a precipitous drop in its political influence and support. Not only did it lose all 145 local seats it was defending, but it lost heavily in the general election. The leader Nigel Farage quit and left after the referendum, claiming that UKIP had served its purpose after the successful referendum outcome. They continued to struggle in 2017, losing another 123 local seats, while also losing most of their Members of the European Parliament (MEPs). By 2019, only 4 UKIP MEPs remained from the 24 elected in 2014. Some, like Caroline Jones and William Darmouth left because they viewed the party as having gone too far to the right, and abandoned its issues with the EU, choosing instead to go on an anti-Muslim crusade. Of the 24 MEPs, 10 joined the Brexit Party, 6 switched to independent, 2 to Conservative, and 2 to other parties. Only 4 remained in UKIP. The party went from being the majority in the UK European Parliament delegation to being nearly extinct. The evolution and broadening across issues of UKIP after its initial success as a single-issue party was a likely factor in its inability to retain support (Usherwood 2019). The shifting party alliances of the MPs matched the voters: Webb and Bale (2021) studied party switching through surveys and found that former UKIP members predominately shifted to the Conservative and Brexit parties. The overall relationship between UKIP and the conservatives is well studied (Bale 2023).

Immediately after 2016, UKIP votes plummeted. Various internal power struggles, coupled with Farage's departure and the party's embrace of broader far-right and anti-Muslim politics alienated its voter base, many of whom primarily supported UKIP due of its singular and novel Leave stance among the other major parties in the UK. Some disputed that UKIP would gain disaffected Conservative voters because UKIP would be too toxic, arguing that if UKIP courted the far-right to the extent of the British National Party, then it would lose even more voters given the low popularity of such extremism on a national level (Walker and Halliday 2019). This is exactly what happened. By 2021, UKIP had collapsed, with the Conservatives picking up a

large portion of previous UKIP voters. In 2017, of 2015 UKIP voters, 50% backed the Conservatives while 50% still backed UKIP. By 2021, the majority of 2015 UKIP voters now backed the Conservatives.

Heath and Goodwin (2017) found that the 2017 election started a realignment among Conservative voters: the Conservative Party gained in UKIP areas but lost in more educated areas. Cutts, Goodwin, and Heath (2020) showed that the 2019 Conservative swing was driven by areas that were already weak for Labour and indicated a gradual trend of the left's loss of the working-class vote. Similarly, Cutts, Goodwin, and Heath (2019) studied the 2019 European Parliament election with emphasis on the new Brexit Party and the strong performance of pro-Remain parties; they also discussed Labour's loss of territory.

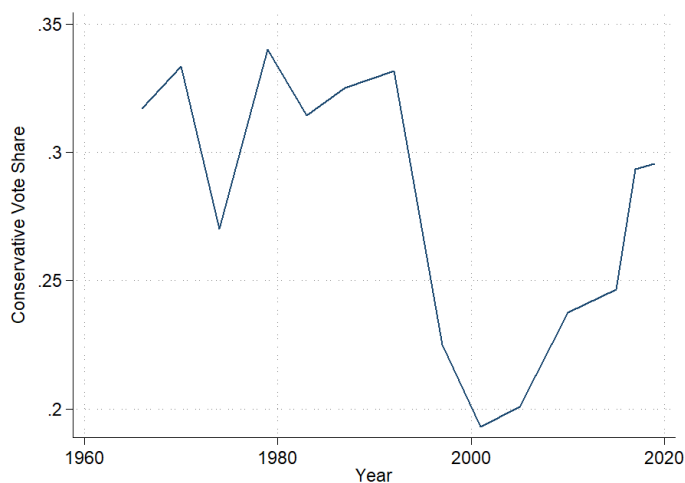
5 Historical Comparison

Finally, we utilize data on county-level results for both the 1975 and 2016 European-inclusion referendums alongside the Conservative vote share. Figure 3 shows a high Conservative vote share in the 1980s, which collapsed in the early 2000s and has been steadily gaining ground.

High 1975-Leave support correlated negatively with the Conservative vote share (1970-1987) and positively in 2016, meaning that voting to leave correlated with the Conservative vote share in 2005-2019. The effects were stronger in both cases post-referendum. This hints at the distinct shift of anti-European sentiment and which parties catered to that voter base. The Tories were generally more pro-Europe during the 1970s and Labour less so, in part because British labor law was more pro-union than European Union law. That has changed over time (Deakin, Lele, and Siems 2007; Vaubel 2008).

Table 1 shows the relationship between the Conservative vote share and the two referendums over a 5 year window before and after. Column 1 shows that the Conservatives did not do well in counties with high Leave support and that this only got

Figure 3: Conservative National Vote Share



This plots the (conditional on turnout) Conservative vote share over time.

slightly worse after the referendum (column 2); this aligns with the idea that Thatcher balanced placating leavers without fully embracing the idea. Columns 3 and 4 show the same effects around the 2016 referendum. Here, the Conservatives gained non-trivial ground in pro-Leave counties; this is consistent with their shift towards absorbing UKIP voters.

Table 1: Conservative vote share and EU Referendums

DV: Conservative Vote Share	1970-1975	1979-1987	2005-2015	2017-2019
Leave-1975	-0.0131*** (0.0015)	-0.0151*** (0.0011)		
Leave-2016			0.0030*** (0.0004)	0.0055*** (0.0005)
Constant	0.7210*** (0.0445)	0.8168*** (0.0335)	0.0727*** (0.0213)	0.0057 (0.0263)
Observations	74	111	306	206
R^2	0.511	0.619	0.135	0.342

Robust standard errors in parentheses; * $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$. These show county-level Conservative vote shares across four time periods based on the county-level percentages of support for the leave referendums in 1975 and 2016.

6 Conclusion

This paper studied the evolution of the Conservatives driven by the single issue of Brexit. We find that it was clearly in the short-term electoral interest of Conservative MPs who were initially pro-Remain to switch.⁶ We hypothesize that the shift, driven by the referendum outcome, was in part due to the collapse of UKIP, allowing the Conservatives to court pro-Brexit voters. Those who switched may have done so because of entryism, but this is hard to identify because anticipatory switching could head off a possible challenge. Further analysis on entryism using country-level variation and information on inter-party local challengers may be able to disentangle these effects.

The narrative suggests that the Conservatives have some similarities to the United States Republicans, meaning that they are affected by sectional constituencies and populism, particularly recently (Alexandre-Collier 2022; Shapiro 2024). The extent to which Boris Johnson was able to enact strict discipline to “get Brexit done” (Evans, de Geus, and Green 2021) may conceal the possibility that rather than party discipline, individual MPs were just responding to the possibility of entryism in their districts. The recent upheaval in Conservative leadership attests to the unlikelihood of Johnson’s initial disciplinary ability (Alexiadou 2022). If it instead reflects, as we have suggested, a hostile takeover of a weakened party, this will not bode well for their future in a two-party system in which victory depends on appealing to broad swaths of the electorate.

Referendums reward and empower single-issue activists with intense preferences who can be unrepresentative of the electorate, insensitive to the costs of their referendum choice in terms of other policies, or both. This is obscured when party platforms are unbundled into serial votes on single issues, avoiding the discounting of policy choices against one another that goes into constructing party platforms in the first place. We have seen both phenomena with the antitax movement that gained purchase and momentum from Proposition 13 in California in 1978 (Graetz 2024). It is

⁶Hanretty, Mellon, and English (2021) find limited effects on turnout of the disconnect between voters and incumbents on Brexit .

relatively easy to produce apparent majorities for tax cuts when they are polled as single issues, yet this strong support decreases when they are paired with spending cuts for popular programs (Birney, Shapiro, and Graetz 2006). There is strong suggestive evidence that the same was true of Brexit as the costs of leaving Europe have begun manifesting themselves, as evidenced in the polls; as of March 2023, 55 percent of the British people thought that it was a mistake to leave Europe as opposed to 32 percent who believed it was the right decision (Statista 2023).

References

- ALEXANDRE-COLLIER, A. (2016): “The ‘open garden of politics’: The impact of open primaries for candidate selection in the British Conservative Party,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 18, 706–723.
- (2022): “David Cameron, Boris Johnson and the ‘populist hypothesis’ in the British Conservative Party,” *Comparative European Politics*, 1–17.
- ALEXIADOU, D. (2022): “Boris Johnson never took full control of the Tory party – uniting it now seems impossible,” *The Conversation*.
- BALE, T. (2018): “Who leads and who follows? The symbiotic relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives—and populism and Euroscepticism,” *Politics*, 38, 263–277.
- (2023): *The conservative party after Brexit: Turmoil and transformation*, John Wiley & Sons.
- BBC STAFF (2016): “EU vote: Where the cabinet and other MPs stand,” *BBC*.
- BIRNEY, M., M. J. GRAETZ, AND I. SHAPIRO (2006): “Public opinion and the push to repeal the estate tax,” *National Tax Journal*, 59, 439–461.
- BLACKALL, M. (2020): “‘Quick and easy’: what leavers said about a UK-EU Brexit trade deal,” *The Guardian*.
- BOGDANOR, V. (2014): “The Referendum on Europe, 1975,” .
- COHN, N. (2016): “Why the surprise over ‘Brexit’? Don’t blame the polls,” *New York Times*, 24.
- CUTTS, D., M. GOODWIN, O. HEATH, AND C. MILAZZO (2019): “Resurgent remain and a rebooted revolt on the right: exploring the 2019 European parliament elections in the United Kingdom,” *The Political Quarterly*, 90, 496–514.

- CUTTS, D., M. GOODWIN, O. HEATH, AND P. SURRIDGE (2020): “Brexit, the 2019 General Election and the realignment of British politics,” *The Political Quarterly*, 91, 7–23.
- DAY, S. (2021): “‘Brexit Fissures’: Party Politics and Territorial Politics Post-2017,” in *Brexit and After*, Springer, 107–121.
- DEAKIN, S., P. LELE, AND M. SIEMS (2007): “The evolution of labour law: Calibrating and comparing regulatory regimes,” *International Labour Review*, 146, 133–162.
- EVANS, G., R. DE GEUS, AND J. GREEN (2021): “Boris Johnson to the Rescue? How the Conservatives Won the Radical-Right Vote in the 2019 General Election,” *Political Studies*, 003232172111051191.
- (2023): “Boris Johnson to the rescue? How the conservatives won the radical-right vote in the 2019 General Election,” *Political Studies*, 71, 984–1005.
- GRAETZ, M. (2024): “The Power to Destroy: How the Antitax Movement Hijacked America,” *Princeton University Press*.
- HANRETTY, C., J. MELLON, AND P. ENGLISH (2021): “Members of parliament are minimally accountable for their issue stances (and they know it),” *American Political Science Review*, 115, 1275–1291.
- HAYTON, R. (2022): “Brexit and party change: The Conservatives and Labour at Westminster,” *International Political Science Review*, 43, 345–358.
- HEATH, O. AND M. GOODWIN (2017): “The 2017 general election, Brexit and the return to two-party politics: An aggregate-level analysis of the result,” *The Political Quarterly*, 88, 345–358.
- MANCE, H. (2017): “Majority of New Conservative mps backed UK to remain in EU,” *Financial Times*, <https://tinyurl.com/yckartvf>.
- PERRIGO, B. (2019): “Get Brexit Done: The 3 Words that Helped Boris Johnson Win Britain’s 2019 Election,” *Time*.
- SHAPIRO, I. (2024): “Uncommon Sense,” *Yale University Press*, 169–95.
- STATISTA RESEARCH DEPARTMENT (2023): “In hindsight, do you think Britain was right or wrong to vote to leave the EU?” <http://www.statista.com/statistics/987347/brexit-opinion-poll/>.
- USHERWOOD, S. (2019): “Shooting the fox? UKIP’s populism in the post-Brexit era,” *West European Politics*, 42, 1209–1229.
- VAUBEL, R. (2008): “The political economy of labor market regulation by the European Union,” *The Review of International Organizations*, 3, 435–465.
- WALKER, P. AND J. HALLIDAY (2019): “Revealed: Ukip membership surge shifts party to far right,” *The Guardian*.
- WEBB, P. AND T. BALE (2021): “Shopping for a better deal? Party switching among

grassroots members in Britain,” *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, 1–11.

7 Appendix: Data Details

Our dataset lists every elected member of Parliament, the constituency which they won, the party that held the seat before the election, the current winner, whether the winner was an incumbent or not, their position on Brexit in 2016, and any further notes regarding their election or position. In very few instances, we were unable to find any information about their views in 2016. This happened often with the younger members, who often were regular citizens during the time of the referendum, and thus (presumably) did not publish their opinions online. To work around this, we found their opinion during the time of the election and counted that. We also highlight extra information would be pertinent to the MP; for example, if a pro-Leave Conservative had won the seat from a pro-Remain Conservative or the reasons why a Labour MP campaigned for pro-Leave. The dataset is divided into different tabs, each representing every party in Parliament that has at least 1 elected member. This includes the Sinn Fein party, which does not formally sit in Parliament out of protest.

The positions of the MPs came from a variety of sources, most notably the social media platform Twitter. Almost all the MPs (aside from some of the Conservatives) had active Twitter accounts, and a large majority of data came from posts made by them in 2016 showing their campaigning activities for their position, holding signs with their explicit position on it, or merely statements regarding what side they were taking. The personal websites of the MPs also often contained more detailed statements which described how they would vote or how they had voted in the 2016 referendum. Facebook was a relatively minor social media source for MPs’ positions (only occasional posts by the MPs; Twitter was clearly a more common form of the “public square”). Traditional media sources included local newspaper interviews, BBC articles, and The Guardian.