

# Briefing: Low-income voters, the 2019 General Election and the future of British politics

This report looks at the effect of low-income voters on the 2019 UK General Election, and how their motivations and concerns affected their choices. It explains Labour's defeat, the Conservative breakthrough in many traditional Labour areas, and what this reveals about British politics. Key to understanding this are the people struggling to stay afloat on lower than average incomes. Current economic and societal impacts of COVID-19 mean all political parties need to keep the focus of debate on this pivotal group, many of whom are at risk of being swept into poverty.

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### Key points and recommendations

- Low-income workers, central to driving recent political change, potentially face a double injustice. They were less able to isolate themselves at home and are now most exposed to the worst economic effects of the COVID-19 crisis. Left unaddressed this differential experience could have profound political effects.
- The Conservatives are now more popular with people on low incomes than high incomes. Labour is as popular with the wealthy as with those on low incomes.
- Labour urgently need to revive their offer, particularly in light of the effect COVID-19 is having on low-income voters. They should reconnect with these voters not only through economic policies, but also by tapping into concerns about Britain's place in the world, immigration, law-and-order and rapid social change.
- The Conservative call to 'level-up' the nation and redistribute resources away from London to the regions, combined with support for Brexit, won many traditional Labour voters; but they'll need to work hard to retain that support.

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## Executive summary

- Britain's two main parties – the Conservatives and Labour – are undergoing a process of change prompted by a series of electoral upsets starting in 2016. The Conservative Party under Theresa May and now Boris Johnson has signalled its desire to embrace low-income, 'left behind' workers who were traditionally Labour-leaning. Labour under Sir Keir Starmer is trying to find its way to a workable accommodation between a set of diverse voting blocs that can propel it back to power. Neither can succeed without consulting the evidence.
- This report draws on new data to explore these debates. Focusing on the general election of 2019, we show how the electorates of the two main parties have changed in profound ways. Low-income voters, who have been central to driving recent political change, played a central role in putting the Conservatives into power and Labour into opposition.
- While Labour enjoyed a lead among low-income voters as recently as 2017, this has disappeared. Despite being in office for nearly a decade, in 2019 the Conservatives established a 15-point lead over Labour among people on low incomes. It is the first time in recorded history that the Conservative Party has outpolled Labour among people on low incomes.
- Most of the Conservative Party's new votes from low-income voters came direct from Labour. In 2019, Labour lost nearly one in three low-income voters who had turned out to vote for the party in 2017. By contrast the Conservatives retained 90% of low-income voters who voted for them in 2017.
- Remarkably, the Conservatives are now more popular among people on low incomes than they are among people on high incomes. The Conservatives are no longer the party of the rich, while Labour is no longer the party of the poor. The Labour Party that Sir Keir Starmer recently became leader of is today just as popular among the wealthy as it is among those on low incomes. Both parties have inverted their traditional support base.
- In conclusion, while the Conservatives will need to work hard to retain support from these low-income voters, Labour urgently needs to revive its offer – especially given tentative evidence that it is low-income voters who, unjustly, will be affected the hardest by the outbreak of COVID-19 and the accompanying economic crisis.

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## Introduction: low-income voters in British politics

The 2019 General Election took place against the backdrop of the vote for Brexit and a prolonged period of gridlock over the issue in parliament. The election produced the largest Conservative majority since 1987, the largest majority for any party since 2001, and the largest share of the vote for the Conservatives since 1979. Boris Johnson and his party enjoyed sweeping gains in many Labour heartlands, areas that had provided majority support for Brexit just three years earlier.<sup>1</sup> For some within the Conservative Party, the result was a vindication of their decision to appeal far more strongly to low-income or 'left behind' workers.

While the Conservatives were returned to power, Labour was left to reflect on a historic defeat. Four months later, in April 2020, Jeremy Corbyn was replaced as leader of the Labour Party by Sir Keir Starmer, the former Shadow Secretary of State for Exiting the European Union. Starmer won the leadership contest after securing 56% of the vote in the first round. He promised to rebuild his party's relationship with voters and find a way back to power.

Both of these events point to how British politics is changing in important ways. They raise some big and profound questions. What might account for Labour's historic defeat? How was the Conservative Party able to break through in many traditional Labour areas? What led so many people in these more working class and low-wage seats to switch from the Labour Party to the Conservatives? And what does all of this reveal about British politics more generally?

This report shows that key to answering these questions are people who struggle to get by on lower than average incomes. Ever since Britain voted for Brexit in 2016, the authors have worked with JRF to show, in a series of reports, how low-income voters have been absolutely central to driving political change in modern Britain.

In the aftermath of the referendum in 2016, [we showed](#) how it was the poorest households, and people who are vulnerable to poverty, who were the most likely to vote for Brexit. Then, in 2017, [we showed](#) how many of these voters were 'cross-pressured' by their competing concerns over economic issues like jobs and inequality, and cultural issues like Brexit and immigration. While Labour retained a slight lead over the Conservatives among this group, neither party made a decisive breakthrough; Labour enjoyed its strongest support among low-income voters since the heyday of Tony Blair but the Conservatives enjoyed their strongest support among this group since the era of Margaret Thatcher.

Meanwhile, [we showed](#) how low-income voters in Scotland did not hold cohesive preferences about Brexit and the independence of Scotland, and why there were good reasons for all of the parties, including the Scottish National Party, to revisit their appeal to this group.

Then, in [the most comprehensive report](#) to date on low-income voters in Britain, we brought all of this work together to show how, between 1987 and 2017, low-income voters have become more 'up-for-grabs' than ever before; they have become more likely to switch their vote at elections, less loyal to one party, and more likely to

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engage with politics. Labour, we argued, needed to refresh its offer to these voters if it was to prevent further loss of support. The Conservatives, meanwhile, needed to revive their offer to these voters in order to continue their recent gains.

This report brings the story up-to-date and shows how, at the 2019 general election, these longer-term trends collided to deliver a comprehensive victory for the Conservative Party and a bruising defeat for Labour. Section 1 puts the 2019 general election in context, exploring the evolution of British politics. Section 2 turns to examine aggregate-level support for Labour and the Conservatives, with a focus on voting behaviour in low-wage seats. Section 3 draws on new individual-level data to investigate how people who live on low incomes voted at the 2019 General Election and how this compares with past elections. Section 4 examines the relationship between poverty, income and place. In Section 5 we present our key messages and reflect on how all the main parties might retain or revive support among people on low incomes and/or those who are at risk of poverty.

## 1 Background: toward the 2019 General Election

The 2019 General Election arrived after a decade of political turbulence. It bookended a decade that started with the fall-out from a global financial crisis and ended with a fierce debate about Britain's relationship with the European Union and its place in the world. In between, there arrived a succession of shocks: the rise of Nigel Farage and the populist and pro-Brexit UK Independence Party; the rise to dominance of the SNP in Scotland; the rise of Jeremy Corbyn; an unexpected majority for David Cameron's Conservative Party in 2015; the vote for Brexit a year later; a widely unexpected hung parliament in 2017; and the return of populism, with Farage and the Brexit Party finishing in first place at the 2019 European elections.<sup>2</sup>

These events reflected the arrival of much higher rates of volatility in British politics. Between 2010 and 2017, nearly half of all voters switched their votes from one party to another.<sup>3</sup> This played a key role in producing a degree of fragmentation in Britain's party system that is largely without precedent in the post-war era. Shortly before the 2019 General Election, the two main parties, Labour and Conservative, had polled just 46% of the vote combined. This 'squeeze' reflected the rise of challengers, including the Brexit Party and Liberal Democrats, which at one point held more than 40% of the national vote between them.<sup>4</sup>

Linked closely to this volatility was widespread public dissatisfaction with the parties, politicians and how Westminster was seen to be managing the most important issue of the day: Brexit. As the 2019 General Election neared, no less than 72% of voters felt dissatisfied with the Government, 68% felt dissatisfied with Corbyn, 56% felt dissatisfied with Johnson, 56% felt dissatisfied with Farage, and 51% felt dissatisfied with the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Jo Swinson. Meanwhile, just 18% felt that the Government was managing Brexit 'well' while 75% felt that it was being handled 'badly'. Perceptions about the state of the economy were also negative. When voters were asked shortly before the election whether they expected the economy to get better or worse, 50% expected the economy to deteriorate and only 21% expected it to improve. While most voters felt dissatisfied with politics a large number were also convinced that the economy was deteriorating.<sup>5</sup>

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This was the immediate backdrop to the 2019 General Election, which was finally called after MPs failed to pass a Brexit deal and Prime Minister Boris Johnson had been unable to command sufficient support for the timetable of his proposed Withdrawal Agreement Bill. Brexit, unsurprisingly, dominated the campaign, though it was not the only issue.

Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party combined their primary call to 'Get Brexit Done' with more traditional messages on social issues and a different economic response to that which had been offered by David Cameron and George Osborne a decade earlier.

Seeking to consolidate and extend their recent gains among working-class voters and people on low-incomes, [which we have documented in previous reports](#), the Conservatives devoted more attention to addressing economically struggling communities. They offered a combination of both cultural and economic messages, combining promises to deliver Brexit, a new immigration system and a tougher stance on crime, with new commitments to invest heavily in infrastructure, the NHS and tackling regional inequality. The new focus on appealing to voters in areas that had been marginalised relative to London and the south-east was reflected in a specific commitment to 'listen to people who have felt left behind by the last few decades of economic growth and want to have more control of their future'. The UK Shared Prosperity Fund, The Towns Fund, £100 billion in additional infrastructure spending and greater investment in bus networks and railways were designed to appeal to lower-wage 'left behind' communities. So too were promises to increase the National Living Wage, lift the National Insurance threshold, end the benefit freeze and continue Universal Credit, although the manifesto only mentioned 'poverty' on one occasion.

Labour, in contrast, combined promises to renegotiate Boris Johnson's Brexit deal and put it to a second referendum with the largest programme of wealth distribution and public sector investment seen in British politics. This included increased taxes for high earners and corporations, the nationalisation of key industries, big spending increases in public services, and a national transformation fund to pay for long-term infrastructure and spending. Labour also devoted attention to low-income voters and included more references to poverty in its manifesto, including the commitment to 'end foodbank Britain, and lift children and pensioners out of poverty'. Labour promised to extend workers' rights, launch a green industrial revolution, introduce free school meals for all primary school children, scrap Universal Credit, build 100,000 council homes, eradicate in-work poverty and introduce a Real Living Wage.

During the campaign, the Conservative Party led in every poll and in the final week averaged an almost 10-point lead over Labour. Crucially, three key factors worked in its favour and these were around Brexit, social class and public perceptions.

First, the decision taken by Conservatives to appeal directly to Brexit voters reaped dividends. Between the arrival of Boris Johnson as the new Conservative Party leader and Prime Minister in July 2019 and the final week of the general election campaign in December 2019, the percentage of people who had voted for Brexit in 2016 and who now planned to vote Conservative at the election surged from 34% to 71%.<sup>6</sup> In contrast, the Remain vote was more fragmented. Over the same period the

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percentage of people who had voted Remain in 2016 and now planned to vote Labour only increased from 27% to 48%. In other words, if the 2019 General Election marked a 'Brexit election' then only one Brexit side appeared to be mobilising accordingly.

Second, throughout the 2019 General Election campaign the Conservatives established significant leads over Labour among the working classes and low-income voters, both of whom had turned out in larger numbers for Brexit. By the final week of the campaign the Conservatives held a striking 17-point lead over Labour among the C2DE social grades. This suggested that the Conservatives were continuing a process that had been underway since 2017, with the party advancing most strongly among working class voters, pensioners and non-graduates while losing ground in areas that contained larger numbers of young voters, graduates and people from minority ethnic groups.<sup>7</sup>

Third, Labour appeared to suffer more than the Conservatives from negative public perceptions. Jeremy Corbyn's leadership ratings were weaker than they had been in 2017; 76% of voters felt dissatisfied with how Corbyn was doing his job, leaving the Labour leader with the worst 'net satisfaction' ratings of any opposition leader since modern polling began in the 1970s.<sup>8</sup> Large majorities of voters felt that Labour's position on Brexit was 'unclear', did not trust Corbyn to run the economy, felt that a Labour government would push Britain into recession and that Labour's big spending promises would require tax increases. These further undermined Labour's campaign.

## 2 The 2019 General Election results: aggregate-level

When all the votes had been counted the 2019 General Election delivered the Conservative Party its largest majority since 1987. Johnson and his party attracted 44% of the vote, their largest vote share since 1979, when Margaret Thatcher came to power. This meant that the Conservatives had increased their share of the national vote at every general election since 2001.

The result was especially striking given that the Conservative Party had been in power for nearly a decade. Despite his party having been in power through the fallout of the Great Recession, austerity and a divisive national debate over Brexit, Boris Johnson still became the third consecutive Conservative Prime Minister. Unless there is a snap election in the years to come, his party's uninterrupted period in office could now run to at least 15 years.

For Labour, in sharp contrast, the general election delivered a major defeat. The opposition party was reduced to 203 seats, a loss of 59 on the election just two years earlier and its lowest number of seats since 1935. The party attracted just 32% of the vote. Compared with 2017, the party's support in England fell back by 8 percentage points which means that Labour has still not beaten the Conservatives in England since 2001. Support also fell back nearly 9 points in Scotland, 8 points in Wales, 13 points in the North East, 10 points in Yorkshire, 9 points in the Midlands, and 6 points in London and southern England.

What explains the Conservative victory and what does it tell us about British politics? Before drilling into individual-level data we first consider three issues at the aggregate [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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level: the role of Brexit, income, and social class. In terms of Brexit, the Conservative Party was clearly helped by geography. As the political scientist Chris Hanretty pointed out before the general election, at the 2016 referendum the Leave side had won more than 60% of general election seats. This meant that at the 2019 General Election Leave voters were spread more evenly across England and Wales, and so a campaign that focused heavily on mobilising Leave voters had a crucial, inbuilt advantage. Remain, in contrast, was more strongly concentrated in cities and the university towns.

This advantage was reflected in the results. Of the 401 seats that were estimated to have voted Leave in 2016, the Conservatives won 73% (292 seats). Of the 50 seats that recorded the sharpest increases in public support for the Conservatives all but one had voted Leave in 2016. These gains did not come from nowhere.

Two years earlier, in 2017, Prime Minister May and the Conservative Party had won only six pro-Leave seats from Labour but they had also whittled down Labour majorities. Two years later, this made it easier for Boris Johnson and the Conservatives to break through; of the 54 seats that Conservatives took from Labour, 50 had voted to leave the EU.

Labour might have been able to compete with this had support for Remain been as consolidated as that for Leave. But it was not; Labour only won 41% of the 231 seats that were estimated to have voted Remain – 95 seats. Labour not only faced competition from the SNP and Liberal Democrats in these seats but also Conservatives, who managed to retain nearly one in three seats that are estimated to have voted Remain in 2016.

Given that working-class voters, people on low incomes and citizens with few educational qualifications were more likely than average to have voted to leave the EU, Brexit also helped Conservatives make serious inroads in seats that had large numbers of these voters. Most notably, it helped Boris Johnson and his party capture large parts of Labour's 'red wall'; a band of northern, working-class and low-wage seats that runs from the Vale of Clwyd in north Wales to Great Grimsby in Humberside.

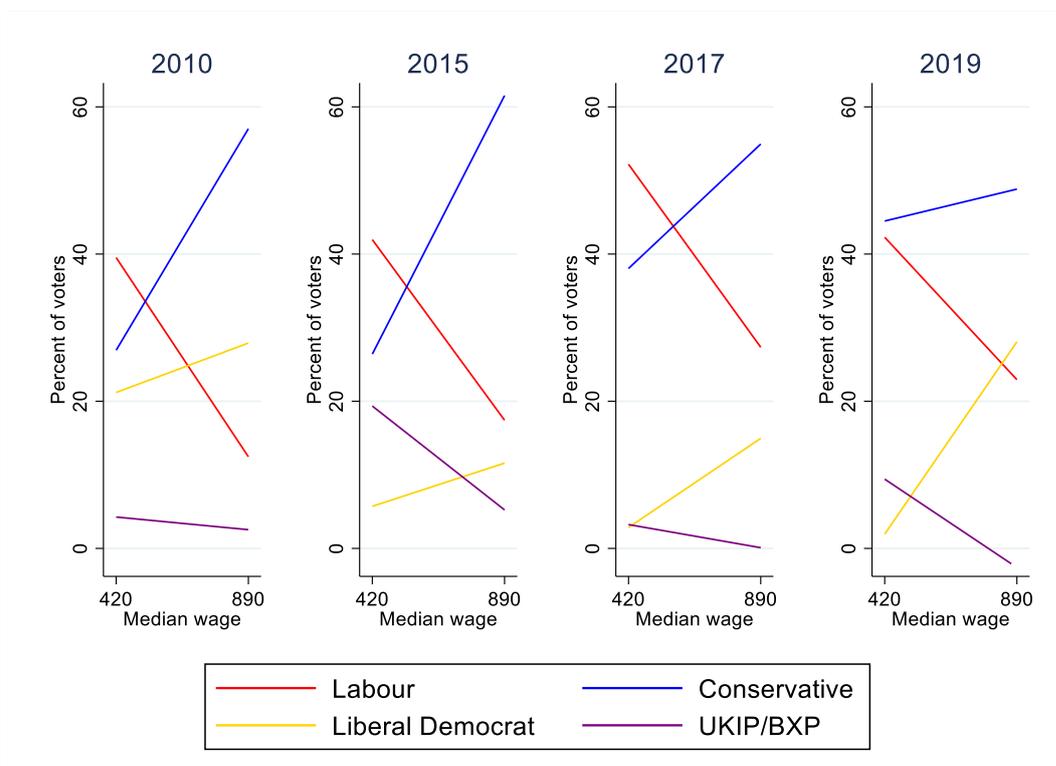
It was in these more working-class and usually more northern seats, which tend to have lower than average wages, where Labour recorded its sharpest losses. Of the 50 seats that recorded the sharpest declines of support for Labour more than half (29) were in the North East, North West or Yorkshire. Many of the seats that switched from red to blue had been represented by Labour for generations – seats like Great Grimsby (Labour since 1945), Bishop Auckland (1935), Bassetlaw (1935), Wakefield (1932), Leigh (1922) and Don Valley (1922).

This pointed to deeper shifts in the nature of support for Britain's two main parties. Conservatives emerged from the 2019 General Election with a much stronger hold in seats that contain larger than average numbers of working-class voters, people without degrees and those who struggle on lower than average wages. Compared with 2017, the Conservative Party enjoyed some of its strongest gains in these 'low-wage' seats.

The ONS publishes data on the median earnings in each seat based on the Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings. Using earnings data from 2019, we examine how constituency-level party support varies by average earnings, and how this has changed since 2010 (in England and Wales). Figure 1 shows the ‘line of best fit’ between average earnings in a constituency in 2019 and a party’s vote share. Historically, Labour always tended to perform much better in constituencies with low average earnings than in constituencies with high average earnings. In contrast, the Conservatives tended to do much better in well-off areas than places with low earnings. However, in 2019 the Conservatives advanced much more strongly into these low-wage areas, and were more popular than Labour. Whether we define these constituencies in terms of earnings, class or educational qualifications, a similar picture emerges. The Conservatives made great strides in places which historically voted Labour. This points to the realignment of British politics and important changes in the nature of support for both parties that we will explore further.

The Conservative Party’s growing presence in seats where average wages were lower than the regional and national average is reflected in its capture of seats like Blackpool South, Vale of Clwyd, Great Grimsby, Stoke-on-Trent North, Hyndburn, Redcar, Ashfield and Wolverhampton North East, all of which suffer from low median wages. But for the Conservatives these gains did not come without consequences; appealing to voters in low-wage seats also came at the expense of support in high-wage areas where people turned in greater numbers to the Liberal Democrats.

**Figure 1: Median constituency wage and party support, 2010–2019 (England and Wales)**



Source: ONS and NISRA, Annual Survey of Hours and Earnings, 2019. Data refers to median constituency wage in 2019.

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Labour, meanwhile, only saw its share of the vote increase in 14 seats and more than half (9) were in London or Southern England. Of Labour's 50 strongest results nearly half (22) were in London while many others were in large urban areas with sizeable minority ethnic and/or student populations, such as Bradford, Birmingham, Manchester and Sheffield. Whereas Labour has been falling back in its traditional and working-class territory, over the longer term it has advanced in seats that have larger numbers of middle-class professionals, graduates and/or people from minority ethnic groups.

The 2019 General Election, therefore, marked a continuation of trends that had been a long time in the making, with Labour continuing to poll strongest in the capital, big cities, university towns and more ethnically diverse areas while the Conservatives have polled stronger in more working-class, northern and less well-educated seats. Turnout also fell by a larger margin in Labour-held seats (by -2.6 points) than Conservative-held seats (-0.9 points) and declined even more sharply in Labour-held seats that had backed Brexit (-3.0 points). This suggests that Labour suffered from a turnout problem, especially in seats where large numbers of voters had turned out for Brexit.<sup>9</sup>

### 3 Poverty, income and the 2019 General Election

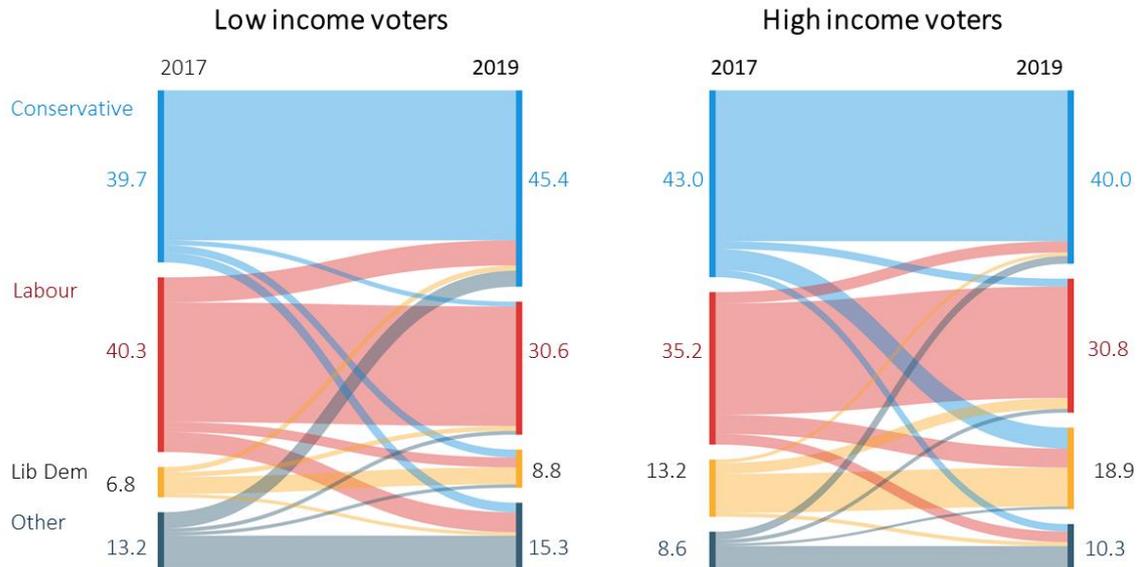
To further explore the general election result we can move past the aggregate-level to draw on new individual-level data from the British Election Study (BES) internet panel.<sup>10</sup> While an online survey is not as methodologically rigorous as face-to-face random probability surveys, the estimates of party vote shares were reasonably close to the election result. The BES survey is particularly valuable because it contains a panel component, whereby the same respondents are interviewed on multiple occasions, allowing us to investigate how their voting behaviour and political attitudes changed between elections. The survey is also helpful because the questionnaire on which it is based probes a wide range of topics, including people's attitudes toward austerity, immigration, Brexit, social and political values, as well as their backgrounds.

Because our main group of interest in this report is people who live on low incomes we use a measure of equivalised household income before housing costs, which takes into account the total household income and adjusts it for the number of adults living in the household and whether or not there are any children living at home.<sup>11</sup> We then construct income groups based on quintiles, where we define those on low incomes as the bottom quintile (the bottom 20%) and those on high incomes as the top quintile (the highest 20%). While we are unable to match the most commonly used poverty measure in the UK which is based on equivalised net incomes after housing costs (AHC) because that is not recorded on the survey, analysis by JRF suggests that around 7 in 10 individuals in the lowest quintile will be in poverty on this measure, showing there is a sizeable overlap of individuals in the lowest quintile here and individuals in poverty.

We begin by considering how people on low incomes voted at the 2019 General Election, and how this differed from the previous general election in 2017. While these two elections were held only two years apart they produced two very different results; a hung parliament in 2017 followed by a decisive Conservative majority in 2019. Figure

2 uses the panel component of the British Election Study to show how people on low and high incomes voted at both these elections.

**Figure 2: Flow of low-income voters, 2017 to 2019**



If we explore people on low incomes who voted in both general elections then we can see how, in 2017, Labour enjoyed a narrow, though historically small, lead. However, two years later this lead is turned upside down; in 2019, Labour trailed the Conservatives by a striking 15 points. For the first time in recorded history the Conservatives outpolled Labour among low-income voters.

Moreover, and remarkably, at the 2019 General Election the Conservative Party was more popular among people on low incomes than it was among people on high incomes (45% compared with 40%). If we inspect the flow of the vote then we can see that the Conservative Party's extra votes among people on low incomes mostly came directly from Labour.

Among people on low incomes who had voted for Labour at the previous election in 2017, only 68% voted for them two years later. As the left-hand panel of Figure 2 shows, between 2017 and 2019 Labour's support among people on low incomes fell by nearly 10 percentage points. This suggests that Labour had a specific problem retaining the support of low-income voters at the 2019 general election. While Labour lost a sizeable chunk of these votes directly to the Conservatives (6 points), they also lost a smaller number of low-income voters to the Liberal Democrats (2 points) and other assorted parties (2 points).

The Conservatives, in stark contrast, did a much better job of retaining their support among these low-income voters; nearly 90% of the low-income voters who had voted for them in 2017 also voted for them two years later. This suggests that, in the aftermath of the 2016 referendum and the fallout over Brexit, the Conservatives had managed to build an increasingly durable relationship with low-income voters. It also

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suggests that Labour and its new leadership will have to work hard and revive its offer if it is to win these voters back.

By contrast, among people on high incomes, the Conservatives lost votes. Most of the people on higher incomes who abandoned Boris Johnson and his party defected to the Liberal Democrats. The Liberal Democrats increased their share of the vote among people on high incomes from 13% to 19%, also gaining votes from Labour. This may well help to explain how the Liberal Democrats managed to make gains in affluent constituencies such as Richmond.

These changes mean that, at least in terms of electoral politics, the Conservatives can no longer be described as the party of the well-off, while Labour is no longer the party of those on low incomes. The Conservatives are now more popular among those on low incomes than they are among those on high incomes. Labour is now just as popular among the very wealthy as it is among those on low incomes. Both parties have thus seen major changes in their traditional support base. This reflects how some of the founding 'rules' of British politics have been overturned. It also points to a more general 'realignment' of British politics, with low-income voters increasingly drifting into a new political home in response to a specific set of concerns – most clearly articulated around the issue of Brexit, though not necessarily confined to it.

As these findings suggest, the 2019 general election was also a contest that witnessed considerable volatility. Overall, approximately one quarter of all voters switched their votes between 2017 and 2019. As Figure 3 shows that about 25% of people on low incomes changed the party they voted for, and a similar percentage of people on high incomes did so. However, the parties that 'switchers' turned to varied considerably between different income groups.

Among people on low incomes who switched party, more than 40% backed the Conservatives in 2019 having supported other parties in 2017. By contrast, among those people on high incomes who switched party, nearly 40% backed the Liberal Democrats in 2019 having supported other parties in 2017. Thus, the Conservatives won many of their new voters from people on low incomes, whereas the Liberal Democrats won many of their new voters from people on higher incomes.

This too points to the wider realignment of British politics, with the Conservative Party becoming more dependent on low-income voters for support than it was in the past. We thus see a similar story at both the individual level and the aggregate level; the Conservatives gained votes among people on low incomes, and in places where average earnings were low, but they lost support among people who enjoy higher incomes and in seats where average earnings are higher, even if the latter losses were not sufficient to hurt the party electorally in terms of losing many seats.

**Figure 3: Volatility and vote choice at the 2019 General Election**

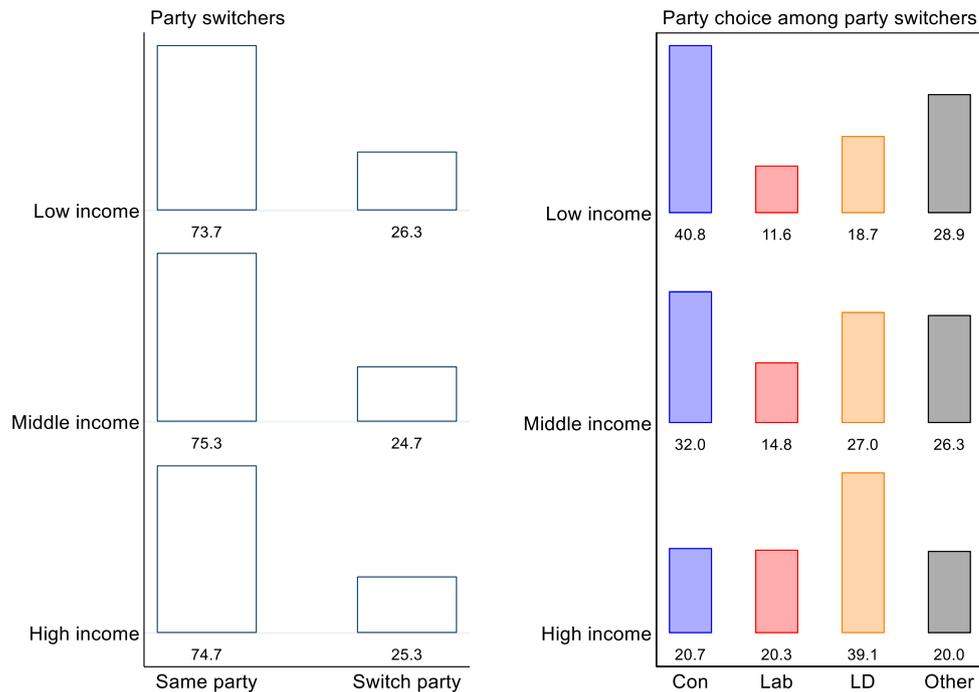
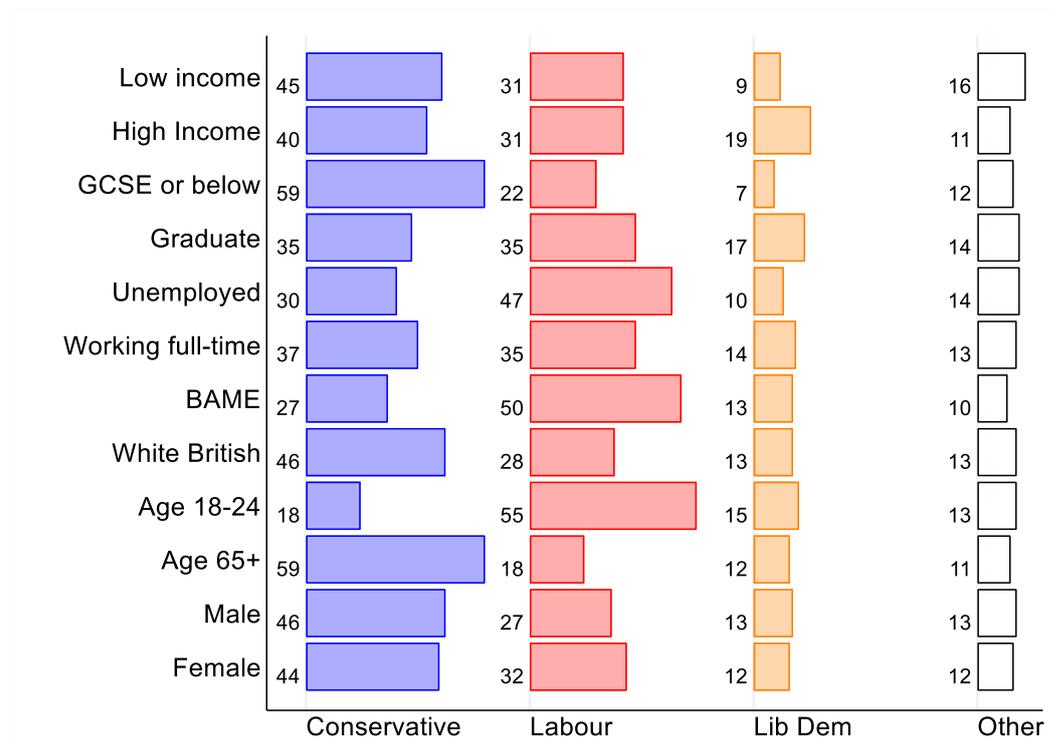


Figure 4 shows the level of support for the main parties among different ‘sub-groups’ in British society, including income, education, age and ethnicity. In 2019 people on low incomes were significantly more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (45% compared with 31%). The Conservatives were also much more popular than Labour among people with GCSE-level qualifications or below (59% compared with 22%). This educational divide is particularly stark. But it should also not be surprising. As our [previous report](#) for JRF showed, in 2016 people with few educational qualifications were much more likely to support Brexit than people who had higher qualifications. And whereas the Conservatives are now more popular among people with GCSE or below qualifications than graduates (59% compared with 35%) the reverse is true for Labour, which is more popular among graduates than people with fewer educational qualifications (35% compared with 22%).

People who are unemployed, however, were more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (47% compared with 30%), though there was not much of a difference in support for the two parties among those working full-time (35% compared with 37%, respectively). There are also clear age divides: people aged 65 years or older were much more likely to vote Conservative than Labour (59% compared with 18%) whereas younger people aged 18 to 24 years old were much more likely to vote Labour than Conservative (55% compared with 18%), although they were also less likely to turn out and vote. The Conservatives are also much more popular among White British voters than they are among minority ethnic groups (46% compared with 27%). There is not much of a gender divide: men are somewhat more likely than women to vote Conservative (46% compared with 44%) and women are somewhat more likely than men to vote Labour (32% compared with 27%).

**Figure 4: Party support among different 'sub-groups' in society (percentage)**



The profiles of Conservative and Labour voters thus look remarkably different to the past. The Conservative Party in particular has emerged from the 2019 General Election with an electorate that is much less economically secure than their traditional voters. This is evident both in terms of their voters, who are increasingly drawn from those on low incomes and who have few educational qualifications, but also in terms of the sort of seats that they now represent.

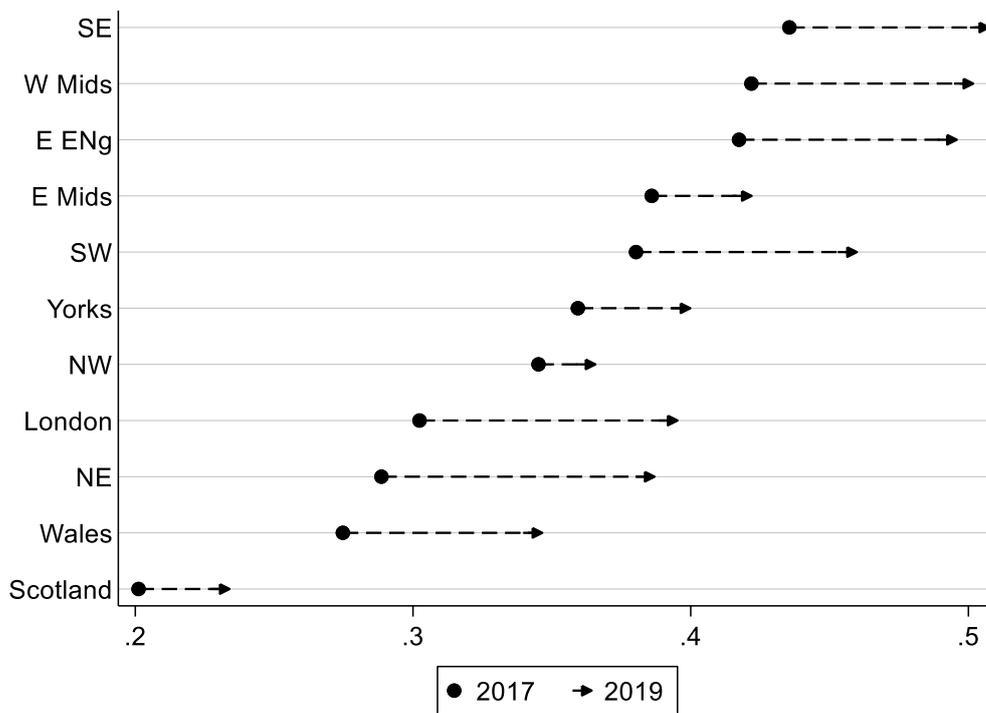
## 4 Poverty, income and place

As we have shown, in 2019 the Conservatives made large gains in constituencies with low average wages and made large gains among voters on low household incomes. But how did these two factors interact? Did the Conservatives make gains in low-wage areas simply because there were more individuals on low incomes who reside there? Or was it also something to do with the local economic context? The answers to these questions have important implications for debates around the 'levelling up' agenda and addressing regional inequalities.

First, to get a sense of how evenly distributed across the country Conservative gains among low-income voters were spread, Figure 5 shows the estimated level of support for the Conservatives in 2019 among low-income voters in different regions of the country, and how this compared with 2017 (while controlling for other demographic factors). The Conservatives made gains among low-income voters all across the country. People on low incomes were particularly likely to back the Conservatives in 2019 in the West Midlands, East of England, and South East but were least likely to support the Conservatives in Scotland and Wales, although even in Wales the Conservatives picked up some support. By contrast, the Conservatives tended to lose

votes among those on high incomes everywhere, except in the North West where they made some minor gains. For the most part, these losses were relatively modest, though they were somewhat more pronounced in Scotland, the West Midlands, and the Southeast.

**Figure 5: Predicted probability of people on low incomes voting Conservative, by region**

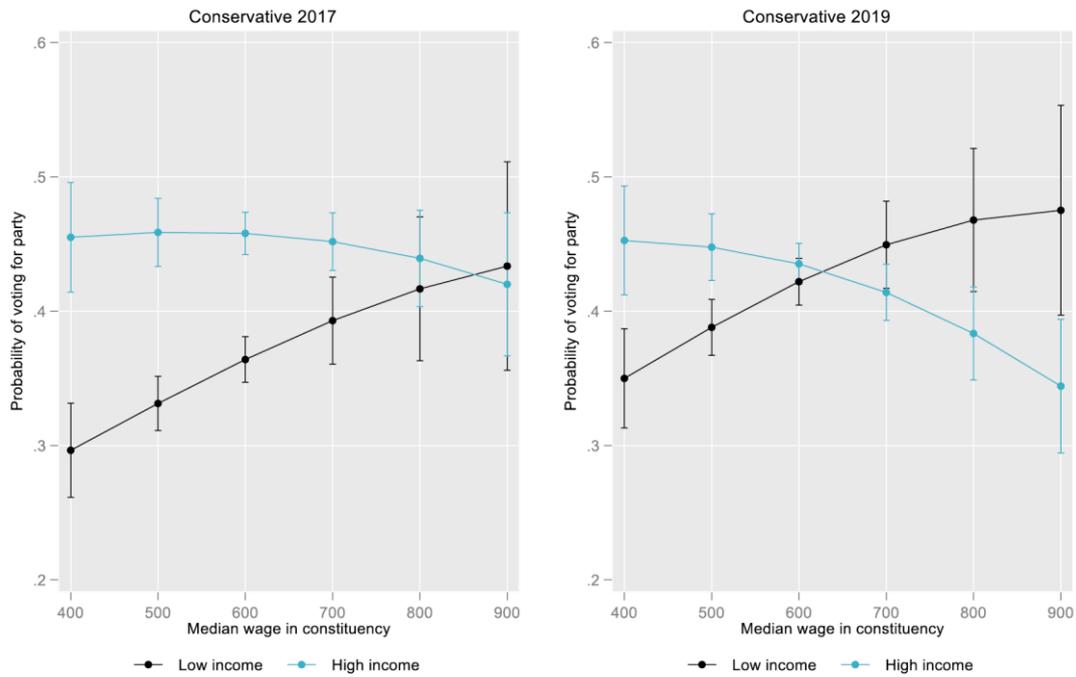


To examine in more detail how the local economic context shapes the voting behaviour of people on low incomes, we simultaneously examine the influence on vote choice of people’s backgrounds, such as their income, age and gender, as well as the characteristics of the area in which they live, such as whether they reside in a constituency that has high average earnings.

We first consider support for the Conservative Party. The left-hand panel of Figure 6 shows how, in 2017, people on high incomes tended to vote Conservative at much the same rate regardless of the economic characteristics of where they lived. By contrast, people on low incomes were more likely to vote Conservative if they lived in more affluent areas. This implies that local economic conditions shaped the voting behaviour of people on low incomes much more than they did the behaviour of people on high incomes. And when people are on low incomes in an area that also had few high paying jobs they were particularly unlikely to vote Conservative. However, as the right-hand panel of Figure 6 shows, in 2019 the Conservatives made gains across the board among people on low incomes while they lost votes among those on high incomes in affluent areas. This is part of the reason why the Conservatives were able to make such striking gains in Labour heartlands; they increased their share of the vote among low-income voters who comprise a relatively large share of the electorate in such places, without losing support among those on high incomes who stayed loyal to the party. But part of the reason why the Conservatives lost votes in more affluent areas is

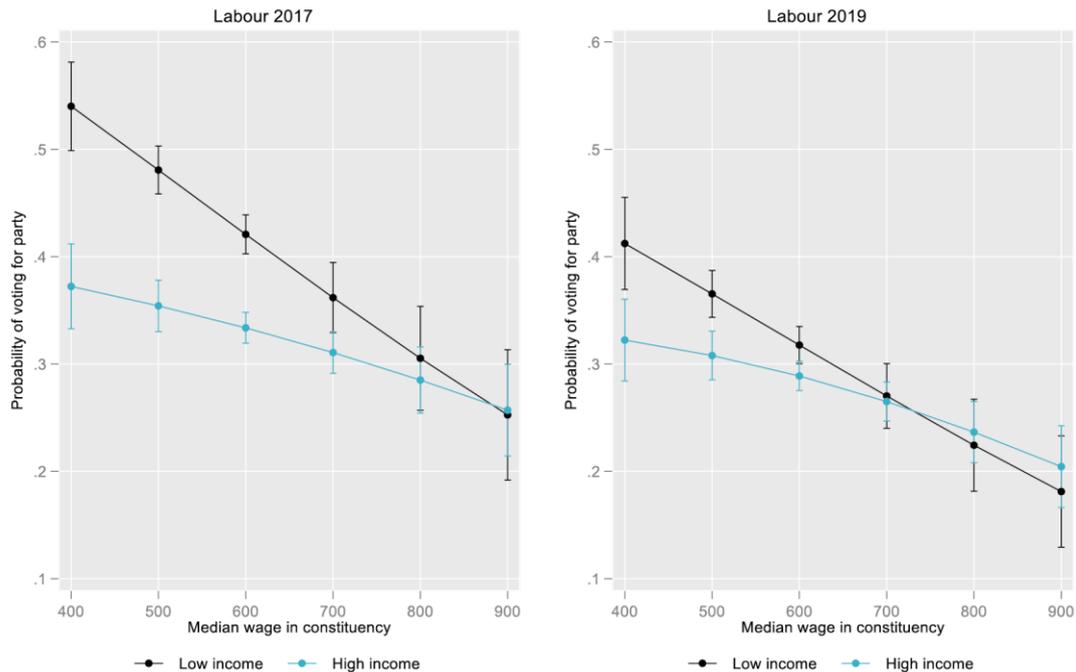
because people on higher incomes in these seats were somewhat less likely to vote for them than in 2017, perhaps turning to the Liberal Democrats instead, who were a more competitive alternative in such places.

**Figure 6: Income, median wage in constituency and the Conservative vote 2017 and 2019**



The picture for the Labour Party, meanwhile, is even starker. As Figure 7 shows, in 2017 Labour enjoyed substantial support among people on low incomes in places with low average earnings. However, just two years later in 2019, their support among low-income voters in low-wage seats dropped significantly. For example, in a place with a median weekly wage of £500 for a full-time employee (one standard deviation below the national average), Labour received 48% of the vote among those on low incomes in 2017. However, in 2019 it was just 37%, a drop of 11 points. This put them behind the Conservatives in many low-wage areas.

**Figure 7: Income, median wage in constituency and Labour vote 2017 and 2019**



These findings reveal that there is a complex relationship between regional wage inequalities and individual-level income inequalities on voter choice. The Conservatives made large gains in seats in areas with low wages, and these gains came primarily from people on low incomes. It was thus people on low incomes in low-wage areas that spearheaded Boris Johnson and the Conservative Party to their clear victory over Labour. The Conservatives not only went deep into Labour’s heartlands, but did so by appealing to Labour’s formerly loyal voters. For Labour, this represented a double loss. Labour not only lost its heartlands but did so because its once core voters abandoned them for their direct rival. This illustrates the scale of the challenge that faces Labour if it wants to win back support and retake these sorts of seats.

## 5 Brexit and redistribution: low-income voters in modern Britain

What explains these dramatic shifts? In our earlier report on the 2017 General Election we showed how low-income voters in modern Britain were being pulled in different directions (or were ‘cross-pressured’); while they were attracted to Labour because of economic reasons, like wanting to curb inequality, they were also attracted to the Conservatives for identity and cultural reasons, such as delivering on Brexit and wanting to reform immigration. To what extent can changes in support for Labour and the Conservatives be explained by this tension?

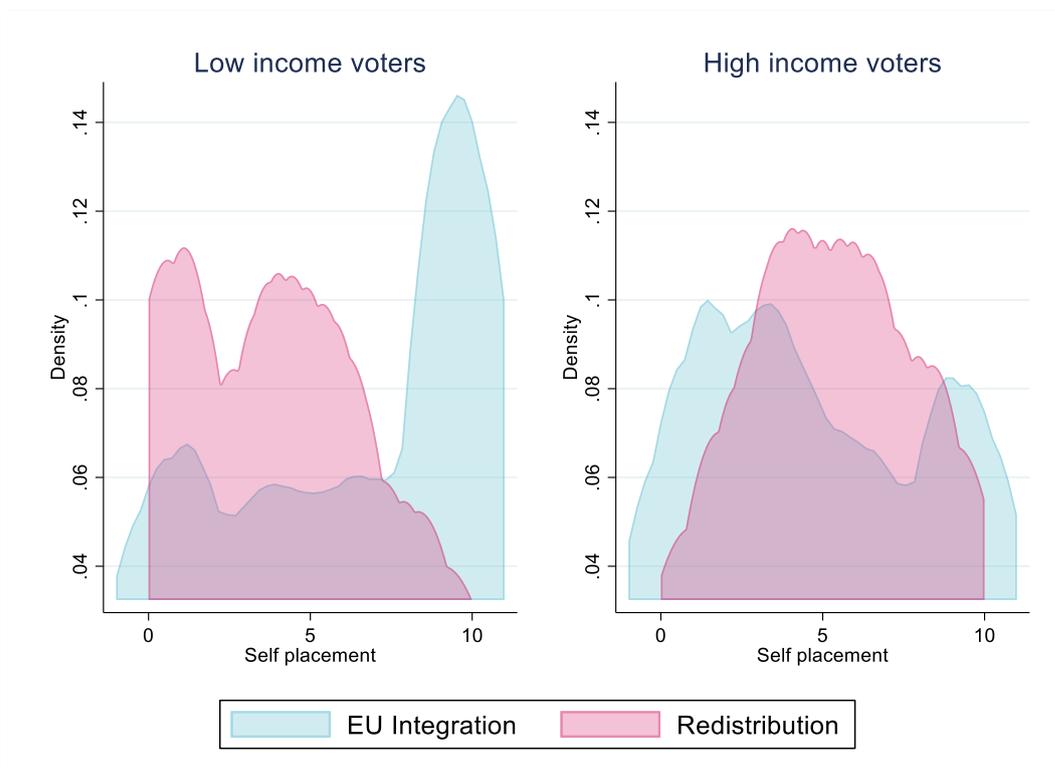
To answer this question, we can examine responses to two important survey questions. The first taps into ‘left versus right’ economic issues and preferences for redistribution (that is whether incomes should be made more equal or not). The second taps into cultural issues like Britain’s relationship with the European Union (whether Britain should unite fully with the EU or not).<sup>12</sup> We first examine what voters

thought about each issue. We then examine where voters thought each of the two main parties stood on each issue.

Figure 8 shows how low-income voters are pulled in different directions. From the distribution of responses we can see that while they lean left on economic issues, favouring greater economic redistribution, they lean right on cultural issues, favouring greater independence from Europe. From a demand-side point of view this reveals how there is a large amount of support among people on low incomes for a party that is economically on the left, promising to tackle economic injustice and inequality, but which is also pro-Brexit, promising to honour the result of the referendum and reform immigration.

However, from a supply-side point of view there was, until recently, no ready-made party that clearly represented this value space, although the nascent Brexit Party did briefly try to occupy it. By contrast, high-income voters are much more centrist on economic issues, and much more pro-European on cultural issues. From a demand-side point of view, there is thus a large constituency among high-income voters who would be drawn to an economically centrist, pro-European party. From a supply-side point of view, the Liberal Democrats would seem well-placed to capture these votes (which as we saw earlier to a certain extent they did). But the appeal of the Liberal Democrats as a viable option is perhaps hampered by the first-past-the-post system, which renders them uncompetitive in many seats.

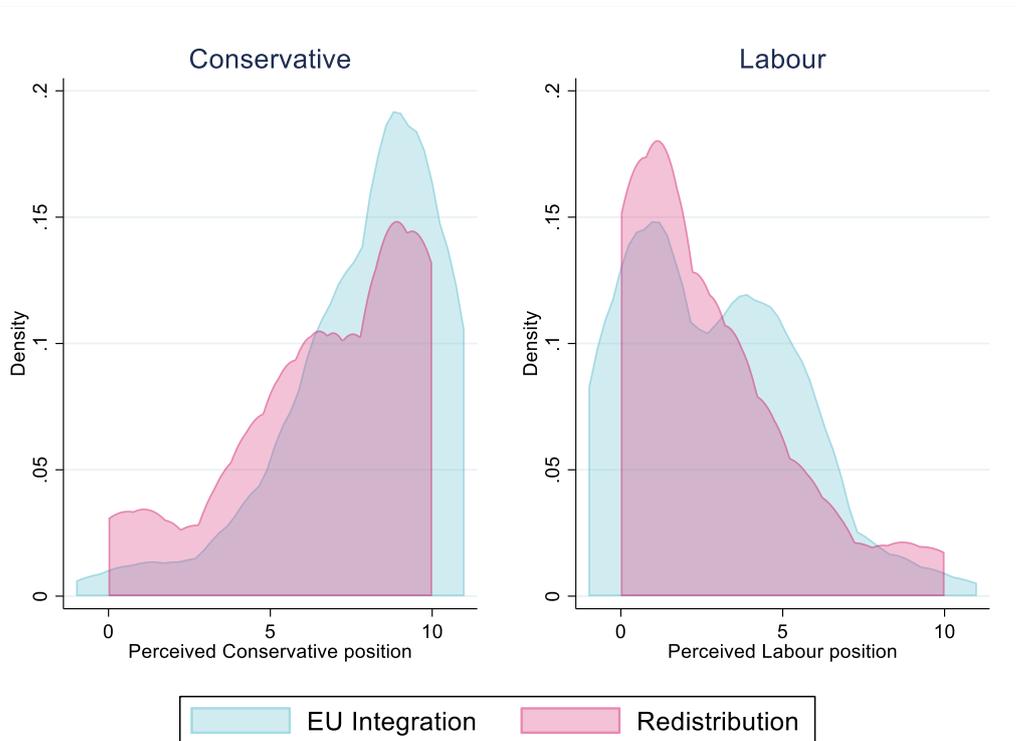
**Figure 8: Self placement on left-right issues and Europe by income group, kernel density plot**



Notes: The EU integration scale runs from 0 'Unite fully with the European Union' to 10 'Protect our Independence'. The Redistribution scale runs from 0 'Government should try to make incomes equal' to 10 'Government should be less concerned about equal incomes'.

In 2017, Labour’s ‘fudge’ on Brexit meant that many low-income voters stayed with the party and supported it for economic reasons (Goodwin and Heath, 2017; Vaccari et al, 2020).<sup>13</sup> But how did people on low incomes view the two main parties in 2019? Figure 9 shows that people on low incomes clearly saw Labour as a pro-European party. It was thus regarded as far more pro-European than where low-income voters placed themselves. Labour was also viewed by people on low incomes as being very left-wing (even more left-wing than where the voters placed themselves). And so even if low-income voters may have been attracted to Labour on matters of economic redistribution, they were in stark opposition to what they saw as Labour’s anti-Brexit position. By contrast, people on low incomes saw the Conservatives as clearly pro-Brexit, and as being closer to their own position on European issues, even if they still regarded the party as being to the right on economic issues.

**Figure 9: Perception of party positions among low-income voters, kernel density plot**



Notes: The perceived party position on the EU integration scale runs from 0 ‘Unite fully with the European Union’ to 10 ‘Protect our Independence’. The perceived party position on the Redistribution scale runs from 0 ‘Government should try to make incomes equal’ to 10 ‘Government should be less concerned about equal incomes’.

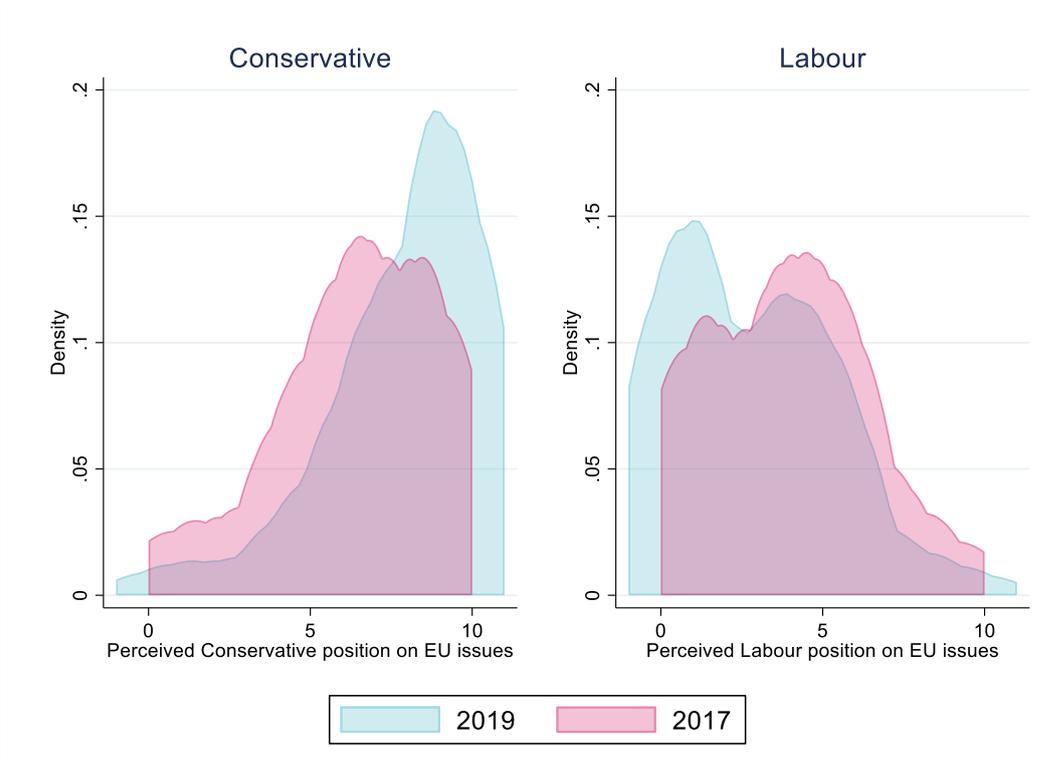
To a certain extent, therefore, low-income voters were therefore still pulled in different directions by the two main parties in 2019. They faced a choice between a very left-wing Labour Party that favoured Europe and a very right-wing Conservative Party that supported Brexit. But whereas in 2017 these push-and-pull factors were softened by Labour’s muted support for a soft Brexit, two years later, in 2019, Labour’s more pro-Remain position may have pushed low-income voters away.

To illustrate how low-income voters’ views of the main parties’ positions on Europe changed between elections, Figure 10 shows how pro-European they thought each party was in 2017 and 2019. We can see how low-income voters thought that both

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parties had shifted their positions. On one hand, in 2019, Labour was seen as being more pro-European than it had been in 2017, which may have pushed low-income voters away from the party. On the other hand, the Conservatives were seen as more pro-Brexit, which may have helped to attract people on low incomes.

**Figure 10: Perception of party positions on EU issues among low-income voters, kernel density plot**



Notes: The perceived party position on the EU integration scale runs from 0 'Unite fully with the European Union' to 10 'Protect our independence'.

To explore these issues even further we can also investigate how attitudes towards Europe shaped people's voting behaviour between 2017 and 2019, and how they are related to changes in party support. In doing so, we focus on three groups of voters:

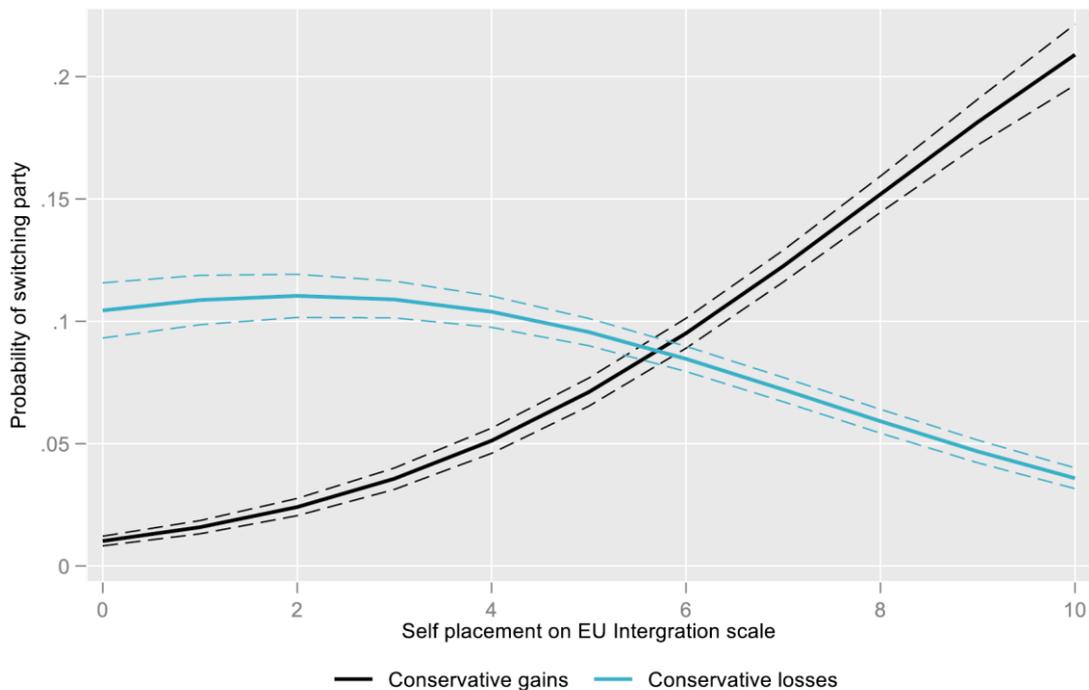
- People who consistently supported the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019 (stable Conservatives).
- People who voted for the Conservatives in 2017 but then voted for a different party in 2019 (Conservative lost).
- People who voted for another party in 2017 but then switched over to Boris Johnson and the Conservatives in 2019 (Conservative gained).

Overall, among people who voted at both the 2017 and 2019 general elections, 34% voted for the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019; 11% voted for other parties in 2017 and then for the Conservatives in 2019; and 6% voted for the Conservatives in 2017 and then other parties in 2019. The remaining 49% voted for other parties in both elections (though not necessarily the same one on each occasion).

By contrast, among people that voted in both elections, 24% voted for Labour in 2017 and 2019; 6% voted for other parties in 2017 and for Labour in 2019; and 10% voted for Labour in 2017 and other parties in 2019. The remaining 61%<sup>14</sup> voted for other parties in both elections (though again, not necessarily the same one on each occasion).

Figure 11 illustrates how this pattern of vote gains and losses for the Conservatives varied according to people’s view on Europe. In 2019, the Conservatives were much more likely to pick up support from voters who supported Brexit, and somewhat more likely to lose votes among those who backed Remain. However, their success in consolidating Brexit voters outweighed their losses among Remain supporters. This further helps to explain how and why the Conservative Party was able to attract such a strong level of support at the 2019 general election.

**Figure 11: Conservative vote gains and losses, 2017–2019**



Notes: the EU Integration scale runs from 0 ‘Unite fully with the European Union’ to 10 ‘Protect our independence’.

## 6 Conclusions

British politics remains in a state of flux. The vote for Brexit and the two general elections that followed have produced seismic political change. As we have shown in this report, a realignment of British politics is now underway.

The Conservative Party has made its strongest gains among people on low incomes, those who are at risk of poverty and who often live in communities that suffer from low average incomes. The Conservative Party is no longer exclusively the ‘party of the

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rich'. For the first time in recorded history, it now holds a clear lead over Labour among people who are struggling to make ends meet.

In previous reports for JRF, we showed why these low-income voters had become 'up-for-grabs', revealing how many were 'cross-pressured' by their strong desire for greater economic redistribution but also support for leaving the European Union. This was an outlook that did not fit neatly onto the existing political map. In this report, we have shown how Conservatives became the main beneficiary of this tension. Their call to 'level-up' the nation and redistribute resources away from London to the regions, combined with a clear line on support for Brexit, appealed strongly to voters who had traditionally aligned themselves with Labour.

The Labour Party's drift, under Jeremy Corbyn, to a stronger pro-Remain position, while holding the line on economic redistribution, has weakened its relationship with low-income voters. Against this backdrop, Labour lost its historic lead among low-income voters. The new leadership team around Sir Keir Starmer would do well to explore ways of reconnecting with these voters, not only through economic policies but also through measures that tap into their concerns about Britain's place in the world, immigration, law and order and rapid social change.

Looking to the future, it also seems likely that these voters will remain up for grabs as further flux sweeps through British politics. At the time of writing, low-income voters are being hit the hardest by the outbreak of yet another crisis: COVID-19. Unlike the post-2008 Great Recession that cut across economics and politics, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the lockdown presents a crisis that cuts across three dimensions: politics, economics and health.

Research by JRF has already demonstrated that many of the industries with the highest levels of furloughed workers are those that have high proportions of workers on low incomes, while the Office for National Statistics estimates that among the working-age population it is 'elementary workers' who are most at risk of dying from the virus.

This crisis, therefore, looks set to exacerbate some of the underlying social divides that we have pointed to in this and our previous reports. In the early stages of the lockdown self-isolation was largely compulsory. But over time it will become voluntary, and then an economic luxury. Different social groups will continue to have fundamentally different experiences of this crisis, and that may yet have profound political consequences. It is low-income workers, who have been central to driving recent political change in the country, who are on the frontline of this crisis. Labour, the Conservatives and all our political parties thus have good reason to keep the focus of the debate on this pivotal group.

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## Notes

1 On the Brexit vote in 2016 see Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath (2016) 'The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: An aggregate-level analysis of the result.' *The Political Quarterly*, Vol.87, No.3, pp. 323–332.

2 On national populism see Roger Eatwell and Matthew Goodwin (2018) *National Populism: The Revolt Against Liberal Democracy*. London: Pelican.

3 Fieldhouse, E. Green, J. Evans, G. Mellon, J. Prosser, C. Schmitt, H and van der Eijk, C (2019) *Electoral shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

4 As of July 16–17 2019, shortly before Boris Johnson was appointed leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, and Jo Swinson became leader of the Liberal Democrats.

5 Data on perceptions of Brexit management from YouGov/The Times data October 20–21 2019. All other attitudinal data from the final Ipsos-MORI political monitor in December 2019.

6 Data taken from YouGov polls on July 16–17 and December 5–6 2019.

7 Goodwin, M. and Heath, O. (2017) 'The 2017 general election, Brexit and the return to two-party politics: An aggregate-level analysis of the result', *Political Quarterly*, Vol. 88, No. 3, pp.345–358.

8 'Jeremy Corbyn has lowest leadership satisfaction rating for any opposition leader since 1977', Ipsos-MORI, 20 September 2019. [Online] Available at: [www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/jeremy-corbyn-has-lowest-leadership-satisfaction-rating-any-opposition-leader-1977](http://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/jeremy-corbyn-has-lowest-leadership-satisfaction-rating-any-opposition-leader-1977) [Accessed 27 May 2020].

9 We do not address turnout in a major way in this report. For further information see David Cutts, Matthew Goodwin, Oliver Heath and Paula Surridge (2019). 'Brexit, the 2019 General Election and the realignment of British Politics', *Political Quarterly*. (Early view) [Online] Available at: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/1467-923X.12815> [Accessed: 8 June 2020].

10 All British Election Study (BES) data is available at: [www.britishelectionstudy.com](http://www.britishelectionstudy.com). We thank the British Election Study team for organising and compiling the data.

11 We adopt the modified OECD equivalence weights, which are rescaled to a couple without children = 1. Each additional adult = 0.33 and a child living at home = 0.20.

12 The exact question wordings are: Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself and the political parties on this scale? (Where 0 is

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‘Government should try to make incomes equal’ and 10 is ‘Government should be less concerned about equal incomes’).

Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Where would you place yourself on this scale? And where would you place the political parties on this scale? (Where 0 is ‘Unite fully with the European Union’ and 10 is ‘Protect our independence’).

13 Vaccari, C. Smets, K. and Heath, O. (2020) ‘The United Kingdom 2017 election: polarisation in a split issue space’, *West European Politics*, Vol. 43, No. 3, pp. 587–609.

14 These percentages add up to 101% due to the rounding-up of figures to the nearest whole number.

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## About the Joseph Rowntree Foundation

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation is an independent social change organisation working to solve UK poverty. Through research, policy, collaboration and practical solutions, we aim to inspire action and change that will create a prosperous UK without poverty.

We are working with private, public and voluntary sectors, and people with lived experience of poverty, to build on the recommendations in our comprehensive strategy – [We can solve poverty in the UK](#) – and loosen poverty’s grip on people who are struggling to get by. It contains analysis and recommendations aimed at the four UK governments.

All research published by JRF, including publications in the references, is available to download from [www.jrf.org.uk](http://www.jrf.org.uk)

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