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Who represents the British working class?

At the last UK election, many 'red wall' Labour seats went to the Tories. But the new Conservative coalition is more volatile than it may seem

Since the 2019 general election, the British political commentariat has puzzled over the crumbling of the so-called 'red wall'. These are seats that run East to West from the North East of England through to North Wales, making them and look like a wall on a map. These constituencies were formerly dominated by the Labour Party, but mostly fell to the Conservative Party in the last election.

The Conservatives gaining these seats has led to an intensified focus on issues of social class and the political preferences of the so-called 'left-behind', not because of the strength of the relationship between class and voting but because of the lack of it. Having voted to leave the European Union in 2016, these seats had already long been identified as being demographically likely to move to the Conservatives – with higher proportions of the population in manual occupations and without degree level qualifications.

But in the 2017 general election, directly in the aftermath of the referendum vote, this hadn't yet materialised. Along the lines of the saying that you could 'put a red rosette on a donkey and it would win' in these areas, the theory was that the Labour vote was stronger than expected because of generations of Labour supporting families. In 2019 then, the theory didn't hold true anymore. This has prompted the question of whether the Conservatives have become the new party of the British working class.

Beyond left and right in British politics

These changes, however, have been more gradual than the 'crumbling' narrative suggests. Many of the seats identified did see significant swings to the Conservatives in 2017, albeit not always enough to win seats where Labour majorities had been huge.

Although Brexit is a proximate cause, the underlying patterns and restructuring had been in the making for some time. Its first shoots were seen in the rise of first the Liberal Democrats in the 2005 and 2010 general elections and later the rise of UKIP in 2015. These two parties divided the British electorate along a new axis, less closely related to social class and more strongly related to levels of education. The Liberal Democrats won the highest share of the vote among the most highly educated voters in 2010, while UKIP won over 1 in 5 of the votes of the least well qualified voters in 2015.

Much has been made of the 'values gap' between loyal Labour voters and those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives, and it's clear this is a significant issue for Labour. But there are also dangers for the Conservatives.

These social positions are themselves strongly connected to political values. Until recently, it remained commonplace to talk of *the*left and right of British politics as if this were the only dimension along which voters and parties can be aligned, broadly reflecting the politics of economic redistribution and social class. However, the EU referendum vote was largely unrelated to this 'old' political dimension of left and right. While a 'second' dimension of social values in the electorate had been recognised for some time, in the UK it was the connection between the referendum vote with this new dimension that pushed 'social values' into the political spotlight.

The trick the Conservatives were able to pull off in 2019 was to unite the 'socially conservative' leave voters (who in most constituencies had no other 'leave' party to vote for), even though many of these voters were considerably to the left on economic issues compared to the 'loyal' Conservative voter. This can be illustrated with data from the British Election Study Internet Panel.

The Conservatives' volatile new coalition

Comparing the 2019 Conservative voters who had voted for Labour in 2017 with the 'loyal' Conservatives who voted for the party at both elections shows that both had a similar average placement on the social liberal-conservative scale. In this sense, these are a united group of voters with common ground. However, there is a much greater distance between these two groups in terms of their economic values. In fact, those who voted Conservative in 2019 but voted Labour in 2017 are roughly equally placed between the loyal Conservatives and the loyal

Labour voters in terms of economic preferences.

Much has been made of the 'values gap' between loyal Labour voters and those who switched from Labour to the Conservatives, and it's clear this is a significant issue for Labour. But there are also dangers for the Conservatives. The 'new' Conservative voter is much more comfortable with state intervention in the economy and government spending than the more traditional Conservative voter. This is reflected in tensions between Boris Johnson and his backbenchers on two sides: those representing these 'red wall' seats who are keen for the government to pursue a policy agenda that will resonate in these areas, and those who are more traditionally economically 'liberal', evident in the lockdown scepticism and push to reopen schools and the economy as quickly as possible.

All eyes are now on how every twist and turn in the political debate is received by those voters who switched from Labour to Conservative. That the 'left' has struggled to connect with them on social issues is well-established. But these voters are different from the rest of the Conservative coalition, they do not share a desire to roll back the state, remove workers' rights or deregulate markets.

In a system dominated by two parties the one who can find a way to bind disparate parts of its electoral coalition together will be able to from a government; be that Labour pulling together those on the economic left or the Conservatives pulling together those with less socially liberal outlooks. So far this has proved easier for the Conservatives than for Labour, but as Britain emerges from the Brexit transition period and the Covid-19 crisis it is likely that economics will become more central to political debate. Hence, there are warning signs for the Conservatives that holding together a coalition of voters is difficult when the issues that divide them take centre-stage.



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