

# The Brexit realignment amid electoral volatility: The role of party blocs in the 2024 General Election

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Brexit accelerated the long-term realignment of how demographic groups vote in Britain. However, Europe is no longer salient to voters, support for the pro-Brexit Conservatives has collapsed, and the 2024 UK General Election was the most volatile on record. So, did the Brexit realignment persist? We address this question by examining the relationship between Brexit preferences and demographic groups with vote choice. We find that the demographic alignments that underpinned Brexit support continue to shape political behaviour through support for party blocs. Thus, while Brexit itself no longer drives party competition directly, the trends that it intensified are still crucial for understanding British politics.

**Keywords:** Brexit; British politics; demographic alignments; elections; realignments; voting.

Brexit reshaped the trajectory of British politics. Before the 2016 EU referendum, electoral politics had been trending in two directions. First, general elections were becoming increasingly unstable, as voters were more likely to switch parties

Received 2 December 2024; revised 27 February 2025; accepted 12 March 2025

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between elections, and the party system was fragmented by the growth of smaller parties (Fieldhouse et al. 2020). Second, social class was slowly becoming a weaker determinant of support for the two major parties (Evans and Tilley 2017; Cutts et al. 2020). The alignment of Brexit preferences and vote choice after the EU referendum impacted both these trends (Fieldhouse et al. 2020, 2023). Brexit-based sorting reduced volatility in the two elections that followed the referendum, and the party system became less fragmented because of the significant increase in support for the two major parties (Fieldhouse et al. 2020, 2023). In addition, this sorting led to a sharp realignment in how demographic groups voted, accelerating long-term trends by making the attributes that were associated with Brexit support—namely, age and education—important determinants of vote choice (Cutts et al. 2020; Fieldhouse et al. 2020, 2023).

Yet, the results of the 2024 UK General Election appear to represent a return to the instability and fragmentation of earlier elections (Prosser (2024), Miori and Green (2025)). After consolidating the pro-Brexit vote in 2019, support for the Conservative Party collapsed from 43.6% of the vote to a share only slightly more than half as large (23.7%). Labour won a landslide victory in Parliament, regaining many of the so-called “Red Wall” seats that they lost to the Conservatives in 2019, but they did so with only 33.6% of the vote—suggesting that Labour failed to unite anti-Brexit voters. Given the limited salience of Brexit in 2024, this renewed volatility and fragmentation raises the question of whether Brexit-based partisan sorting, and the resulting realignment of demographic voting patterns, have also unwound.

We find that, despite these headwinds, the Brexit realignment still structured vote choice in 2024. There were unprecedented levels of vote switching between 2019 and 2024, but political competition was still split on the same terms as it was in 2019. Specifically, vote choice was structured by two party blocs; right-conservative parties (the Conservatives and Reform UK) which had supported Brexit, and left-liberal parties which had mainly opposed Brexit (Labour, the Liberal Democrats, Greens, and the nationalist parties). Vote switching was concentrated within these party blocs, as most Conservative defectors switched to another right-conservative political party—Reform UK—whereas Labour’s gains and losses were primarily split between other left-liberal political parties. The consequence of these patterns of switching is that the demographics associated with Brexit support continue to underpin voting behaviour in Britain through support for the party blocs. This link between age and education and bloc support, as opposed to two-party support, was present pre-Brexit, but these Brexit-related demographics are now substantially stronger predictors of vote choice than they were before the EU referendum.

Our argument proceeds as follows. First, we outline the Brexit realignment by describing the structural changes that preceded the vote to Leave, as well as the EU

referendum's impact on party competition. We then document the volatility and fragmentation of vote choice in the 2024 UK General Election and the potential for the election to have weakened the Brexit realignment. Third, we introduce our conception of party blocs in Britain, quantify the extent of vote switching that took place within and between these blocs, and illustrate the relationships between age and education with support for these blocs over time. Finally, we note how the political context differs in Scotland, where independence interacts with Brexit preferences to alter the dynamics of party competition (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020; Henderson *et al.* 2022). Through the analysis of party blocs—which are discussed rarely in the British context—we contribute to the literature by documenting the bounded nature of vote switching between 2019 and 2024 and the persistence of the Brexit realignment after Britain's exit from the European Union. This structure, combined with the fragmentation of party support, has important implications for how we should understand vote choice in UK elections in the present and the future.

## 1. The Brexit realignment and its consequences

The alignment of Brexit preferences with vote choice is emblematic of long-term changes in British politics. Historically, social class structured politics in Britain (Butler and Stokes 1969), which manifested in competition over economic issues (Heath, Jowell and Curtice 1985). Over time, the major political parties then converged on these issues (Green and Hobolt 2008), and social class became a weaker determinant of their support because Labour lost working-class voters (Evans and Tilley 2017). Simultaneously, British voters—in line with those in many Western democracies—placed greater emphasis on “second dimension” issues that separate voters based on their liberal-authoritarian values (Ford and Jennings 2020) — i.e. whether someone prioritises individual liberties or prioritises order (Kitschelt 1994). Immigration is one of the key markers of this second dimension (Kriesi *et al.* 2012), positions on which are strongly associated with demographic attributes including education and age (Hainmueller and Hiscox 2007; McLaren and Paterson 2020).<sup>1</sup> Though the reasons why second-dimension issues became important is debated,<sup>2</sup> this trend created space for radical right parties like UKIP

<sup>1</sup>Though McLaren and Paterson (2020) found that this relationship was concentrated in contexts where the anti-immigration far-right parties had not been influential during a person's adolescence or young adulthood.

<sup>2</sup>Scholars have emphasized the role of growing economic security (Inglehart 1977), competition created by globalization (Kriesi *et al.* 2012), and demographic changes including ageing societies, educational expansion, migration, and declining manufacturing sectors (Ford and Jennings 2020; Sobolewska and Ford 2020).

to mobilise support (Ford and Goodwin 2014)—especially among the traditional working-class (Evans and Tilley 2017). UKIP increased the saliency of Britain's membership of the EU by connecting concerns over immigration with their opposition to the EU (Evans and Mellon 2019). As a result, positions on Europe became both more clearly related to the second dimension and more important to how people vote, cutting across traditional class lines, and therefore pitting younger and more educated voters on the pro-Europe Remain side against older and less educated voters who supported Leave (Fieldhouse et al. 2020).

Moreover, long-term party dealignment—lower rates of party identification and weaker identification—had produced a larger pool of unattached and changeable voters susceptible to party responses to the EU referendum. Dealignment matters for how people interpret electoral shocks because those who identify with a party tend to interpret new information in a way that is preferable to their chosen party (Fieldhouse et al. 2020). Thus, while some electoral shocks are strong enough to cut through voters' partisan biases (Chzhen, Evans and Pickup 2014; Green and Jennings 2017), party identities tend to stabilise party support over time (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004). However, as there are now fewer party identifiers in Britain, more voters are likely to respond to electoral shocks in a way which leads to changes in vote choice (Bailey 2019; Fieldhouse et al. 2020). As such, electoral volatility has grown in recent decades, with voters less likely to support the same party across multiple elections (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2017; Dalton 2018).

These long-term changes were accelerated after the EU referendum, in large part due to the Conservative Party's response to the result. By repositioning themselves as a pro-Brexit party who could handle immigration, the Conservatives mobilised the support of Leave voters, while Labour was more popular among Remain voters (Mellon et al. 2018; Cutts et al. 2020; Fieldhouse et al. 2020, 2023; Green 2021; Prosser 2021). This Brexit realignment meant that the factors that underpinned the Brexit vote—age, education, and region—also became strong predictors of party support, whereas class differences in support for Labour and the Conservatives disappeared (Fieldhouse et al. 2023). In this way, Brexit sped up long-term trends that began with the emergence of second dimension issues and culminated in sharp changes to the electoral geography of England and Wales in 2019, when Labour lost many of their working-class heartlands (Fieldhouse and Bailey 2023; Furlong and Jennings 2024).

Yet, the Brexit realignment stabilised the British electorate between 2017 and 2019—seeming to arrest the growing volatility and fragmentation. By reorganising party competition, as well as generating new “Brexit identities” that functioned like party identities (Fieldhouse et al. 2020; Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley 2021), Brexit meant that voters tended to back the same party in 2017 and 2019 (Fieldhouse et al. 2020, 2023). This stability of vote choice represented a sharp

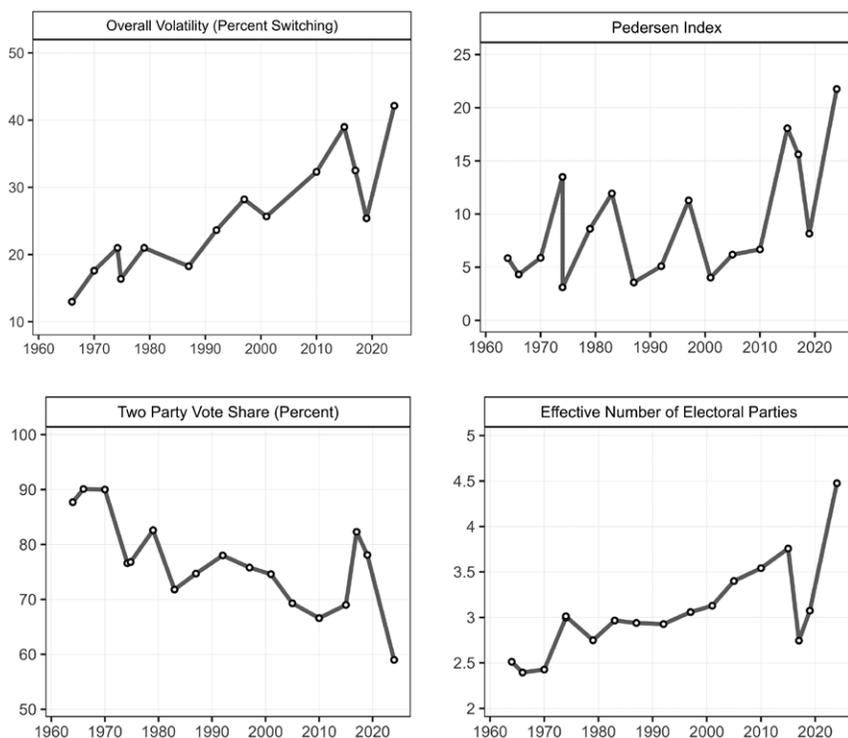
change from 2015, which was—at the time—the most volatile election in postwar British history (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2023). Furthermore, the monopolisation of Leave voters by the Conservatives, as well as Labour's appeal among Remain voters, led to levels of support for the two major parties that had not been seen for decades (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020, 2023). This two-party support also lowered electoral volatility because larger parties are better able to hold onto their vote than smaller parties (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020). As such, Brexit-based sorting increased voter stability in the period that immediately followed the referendum.

### The 2024 UK General Election: a return to volatility

The stability of vote choice in the wake of Brexit did not last: according to data from the British Election Study Internet Panel (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2024), the 2024 British General Election was the most volatile ever.<sup>3</sup> Using all election panel surveys from the British Election Study, we plot the percentage of respondents whose reported vote choice switched between general elections since 1964 in the top-left panel of Fig. 1. These results demonstrate that vote switching in 2024 is the highest on record according to these calculations: over 40% of respondents voted for a different party in 2024 than in 2019. Moreover, 2024 also exhibits the highest aggregate volatility since 1964 (top-right panel of Fig. 1), which we measure through the Pedersen Index as the net change in party support between elections (Pedersen 1979). In this light, it seems that the two preceding “Brexit” elections had merely bucked the upward trend in individual-level volatility that had been evident since the 1990s.

The 2024 election was also the most fragmented election in British history (Prosser 2024). Assessing the combined vote share achieved by the two major parties between 1964 and 2024 (the bottom-left panel of Fig. 1), we can see that the combined support for the Conservative and Labour parties fell to 59% in 2024—their smallest share of the vote in that time period. This fall in two-party support reflects the collapse in support for the Conservative Party, as Labour received a similar share of the vote in 2024 as they did in 2019. However, as with trends in volatility, this low combined share is still consistent with a declining trend in two-party support over time—although it is still remarkable when compared to 2017 and 2019 when 82% and 76%, respectively, of voters backed the two major parties. Smaller parties profited from this fall in two-party support. We can see

<sup>3</sup>Results for 2024 are based on panel study data which overestimate turnout. Therefore, our claim that 2024 was the most volatile British election requires validating with the face-to-face post-election survey, once it is available, since this source of data better represents the nonvoting portion of the electorate (see Mellon 2024 for a complete discussion of these issues). There was no 1979–1983 panel study, which prevents the creation of a volatility measure for the 1983 election.



**Figure 1** Party volatility and fragmentation in General Elections since the 1960s

this through the effective number of electoral parties—which measures party fragmentation in terms of the number of parliamentary seats shared by the parties, calculated via [Laakso and Taagepera's \(1979\)](#) formulation (bottom-right panel of [Fig. 1](#))—which was at its highest level in 2024. Again, this shift reverses the deviation in 2017 and 2019 ([Prosser 2018, 2021](#); [Green 2021](#)), and brings the results of the 2024 election in line with longer-term trends in British politics.

### Did the Brexit realignment survive?

The general expectation for any electoral realignment is that its impacts will be long lasting. Otherwise, it is not much of a realignment. The electoral shocks that spark realignments can change the image and reputation of political parties, and these perceptions are difficult to shift ([Fieldhouse et al. 2020](#)). For example, people might adjust their perceptions of the social groups that they think a political party represents. This was the case after the passage of civil rights legislation in the USA, which changed the image of who the Democratic and Republican parties represented, and led to the long-term realignment of support among white Americans

in the South (Green, Palmquist and Schickler 2004). Alternatively, electoral shocks can also have persistent effects because of damage to a party's reputation for competence. One example of this is how the Conservatives lost their reputation for competent economic management following the Exchange Rate Mechanism crisis in the early 1990s; a perception which plagued them long after they left office (Green and Jennings 2017; Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020).

If British politics has returned to levels of volatility and fragmentation last observed in 2015, then how might the Brexit realignment have persisted? There are three main factors that could, on the surface, signal that the Brexit realignment might have stalled or, indeed, reversed. First, Brexit is no longer a salient political issue and has not been since the UK left the European Union in early 2020 (see Fig. A1 in the Appendix). Brexit was key to understanding the 2017 and 2019 elections (Mellon *et al.* 2018; Cutts *et al.* 2020), but the 2024 election campaign was marked by a different set of challenges: the long-term impacts of the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic, the invasion of Ukraine, high inflation, and a cost-of-living crisis—as well as concern about immigration. Neither the Conservatives nor the Labour Party devoted much of their manifesto to Brexit in 2024—though when they did, the Conservatives made sure to extol its virtues, and Labour emphasised their support for the staying out of the European Union (Conservative Party 2024; Labour Party 2024).

Second, support for the largest pro-Brexit party—the Conservatives—collapsed in 2024. Their losses were primarily due to a failure of competence; due to the COVID crisis and associated scandals, and then the inflationary crisis and the damage wrought by their 2022 'mini-budget' under then-Prime Minister Liz Truss. Given that much of the party sorting in the aftermath of the EU referendum was tied to Leave voters backing the Conservatives (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020; Prosser 2021), their collapse could indicate that voters were shifting away from this Brexit-based alignment. In other words, if the Conservatives lost the votes of older and less educated individuals who formed the backbone of their 2019 vote share, this shift may have changed the demographics of Conservative support.

Third, the policies promoted by Labour in 2024 did not consistently target the same demographic groups that had supported the party in 2019. Labour made direct attempts to attract voters from outside their young and educated core through their harder line on immigration (see Labour Party 2024). This was a different approach to the Conservatives, who continued to appeal to the same groups post-Brexit (Bale 2023), and focused their 2024 campaign on attracting older voters through policies like pledging to extend the triple lock on pensions and promising to introduce national service (Conservative Party 2024). Ultimately, while the Conservatives were attempting to shore up their base, Labour's approach was designed to win back many of the heartland Leave-voting constituencies that they had lost to the Conservatives in 2019. However, Labour's platform diverged from the priorities of Remain voters

who—despite competition from the Liberal Democrats—formed the bedrock of Labour’s 2019 support (Green 2021; Prosser 2021; Fieldhouse et al. 2023). Given the focus of Labour’s campaign, it is possible that Labour could have broadened its support across older demographic groups at the expense of younger voters.

## 2. Brexit realignment and party blocs

However, even if support has changed for the two major parties, party support in general may still be structured by the Brexit realignment. Ultimately, the two major parties are not the only options available to voters in a multi-party political system like Britain. Instead, political parties can be separated into party ‘blocs’ in the minds of voters, which represent the “principal electoral alternatives” that voters can choose between (Enyedi and Bértoa 2011 p. 118). In other words, a party bloc represents a collection of parties that are perceived to be similar in their ideological outlook and the types of voters that they seek to represent. One of the key findings in this literature is how electoral volatility is constrained by party blocs, with voters tending to switch to ideologically similar parties (van der Meer et al. 2015). While party blocs are discussed infrequently in Britain,<sup>4</sup> perhaps due to its historic two-party system, bloc-based voting is invoked frequently when assessing party competition in Western Europe, particularly in the context of the rise of Green parties on the left and the radical parties on the right (e.g., Bale 2003; van der Meer et al. 2015; Quinn 2023).

We argue that the existence of party blocs in Britain is key for understanding how the Brexit realignment persisted despite the extensive volatility present in 2024.<sup>5</sup> On the basis of the perceived ideological positions of the major parties, we argue that two party blocs have structured vote choice in recent elections: a left-liberal bloc and a right-conservative bloc, with Remain supporters being more likely to back the predominantly anti-Brexit left-liberal parties and Leave supporters backing the pro-Brexit right-conservative parties. While this alignment was, in large part, induced by Brexit, it has not necessarily been sustained by Brexit, which has declined in salience. Instead, voters may have prioritised other issues and changed parties, but they still tended to back parties within one specific bloc—leading Brexit-based demographic alignments to persist.

We group parties in the British political system into blocs based on voters’ perceptions of their ideological similarities. Party ideology is one method of grouping political parties, alongside approaches which compare their sociological origins (Mair and Mudde 1998) or the actions of party representatives (Enyedi and Bértoa

<sup>4</sup>Though Lerner (2019) has discussed the presence of left-Welsh and right-British party blocs in Wales.

<sup>5</sup>By focusing on public perceptions of similar political parties, our description of blocs should be differentiated from Clarke’s (2023) recent description of Brexit and Boris blocs, which instead referred to the social groups that were brought together to support Leave and the Conservatives (respectively).

2011). In general, researchers tend to measure the ideology of political parties in two ways—through expert surveys (e.g. von Beyme 1985; Deschouwer, Pilet and Van Haute 2017) or through party manifestos (e.g. Budge, Robertson and Hearl 1987). While these approaches have their merits (see Mair and Mudde 1998 for further discussion of both), they are less suitable for our purpose since there is no guarantee that voters see parties in the same way. For example, Adams, Ezrow and Somer-Topcu (2011) argue that voters often do not respond to official party platforms. Instead, the authors argue that voters rely on their perceptions of political parties to guide their behaviour.

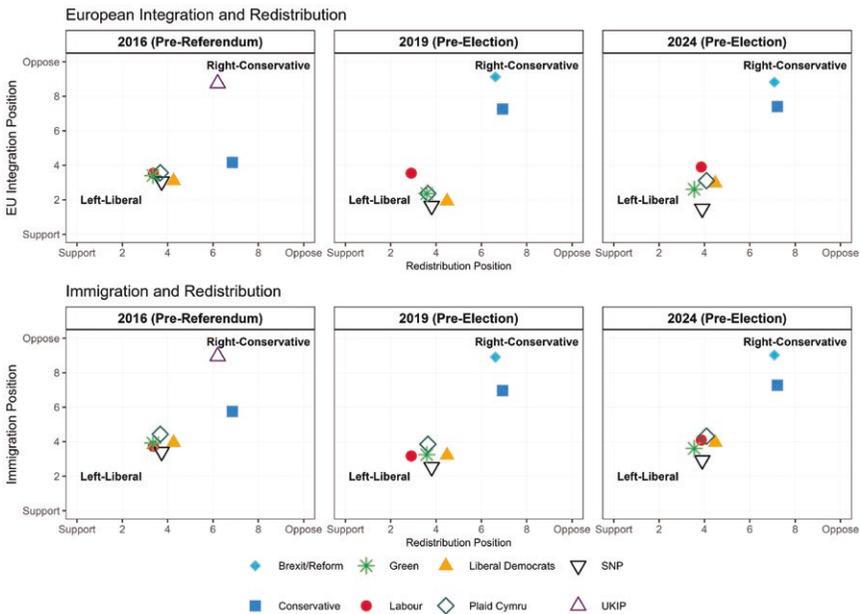
This is not to say that the expert or manifesto approaches do not have their benefits, nor that elite linkages have not taken place between British parties. For instance, in 2019 the Brexit Party did not stand in some constituencies with sitting Conservative candidates and the “Unite to Remain” pact represented cooperation between the Liberal Democrats, Greens, and Plaid Cymru (albeit with limited success, see Mellon 2022). Moreover, we recognise that these public perceptions may diverge<sup>6</sup> from expert or official accounts, either because voters are inattentive (Converse 1964) or influenced by partisan biases (see Achen and Bartels 2006). Yet, with these considerations in mind, we prefer voters’ own judgements because our argument centres on the voter behaviour, and as such we privilege the ways in which voters understand the political choices that they face.

We map the positions of the major political parties in two-dimensional ideological space, as they are perceived by voters, to show the clustering of the parties into these blocs. To do so, we use three scales, measuring positions on redistribution, immigration, and EU integration. We begin by reporting the mean scores for the major parties on redistribution and immigration in 2016<sup>7</sup> (before the EU referendum), 2019 (pre-election) and 2024 (pre-election), excluding those who could not place<sup>8</sup> the parties, in Fig. 2. We chose these two dimensions as respective

<sup>6</sup>In our case, we observe considerable similarity between public and expert assessments of British political parties. We compared responses in the 2024 British Election Study Expert Survey (Schmitt *et al.* 2024), which we report in our appendix (Fig. A12).

<sup>7</sup>This is the earliest available measurement for immigration, or any other suitable ‘second dimension’ item other than EU integration.

<sup>8</sup>We include the distributions of our party placement variables, including ‘don’t know’ responses, in the appendix. We acknowledge that nonresponse rates are high for smaller parties on their nondominant dimensions (e.g. Reform on redistribution, Plaid Cymru on immigration, see Tables A2–A8 in the Appendix). Ultimately, determining the policy positions of some parties may be difficult for some respondents, especially for those who are uninterested in politics. As a robustness check, we analyse relative like scores among Remain/Leave supporters (Fig. A5) and pre-election party supporters (Fig. A6). The results show that voters within a bloc, as we have defined it, see other parties in their bloc as more appealing alternatives than those outside it, reinforcing our claim that these parties are perceived as more closely connected.



**Figure 2** Mean perceived positions of political parties on redistribution, (left-right), EU integration, and immigration (liberal-authoritarian), in 2019 and 2024 in Britain. *Redistribution*: 0: Government should try to make incomes equal; 10: Government should be less concerned about equal incomes. *Immigration*: 0: Many fewer; 10: Many more (we flip the order so that both scales move from 0 = support, 10 = oppose). *EU Integration*: 0: Unite fully with the European Union; 10: Protect our independence.

representations of the traditional left-right and contemporary liberal-authoritarian dimensions of political competition in Britain.<sup>9</sup> We then compare the results for redistribution and immigration with graphs for redistribution and EU integration to illustrate the consistency of party placements in both circumstances. While we are defining the blocs based on their economic and social positions, these visualizations illustrate the stability of party perceptions in two-dimensional space on both immigration and EU integration, even as the saliency of Brexit has declined. Simply put, perceptions of party positions on EU and immigration have become almost indistinguishable from each other (Fieldhouse et al. 2020).

<sup>9</sup>Post-Brexit, the positioning of the parties is similar however this ideological space is operationalized—for example, using perceptions of the party positions on government taxation and spending or on European integration (see Fig. A7 in the appendix). Similarly, we examine perceptions of the parties’ policy positions among the supporters of Remain/Leave and the specific parties within each blocs - with the structure of the blocs reappearing continually (see Fig. A8 to Fig. A11). These results emphasise that voters in Britain do see the parties as ideologically split in the terms that we set out.

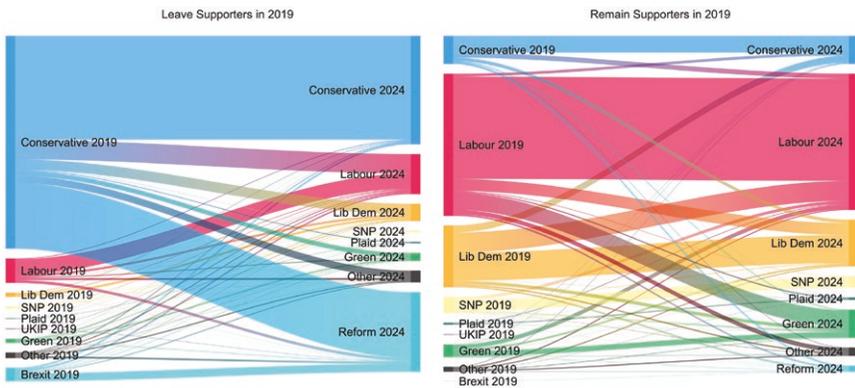
Through our approach, we can see that there were already clear economic differences between the major parties before the EU referendum, but the referendum led to the consolidation of two clear party blocs in the minds of voters by shifting the position of the Conservatives. While they were not seen as particularly anti-EU or anti-immigration before the referendum, Theresa May made a clear effort afterwards to redefine the party as a pro-Brexit party that could reduce immigration (Mellon *et al.* 2018). This image change made the Conservatives a much more viable option for socially conservative voters, which ultimately helped them to monopolize Leave supporters in 2017 and 2019 (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020, 2023). Therefore, while not entirely new, these blocs became more coherent and clearly defined by parties' EU and immigration positions after the referendum. These positions were then relatively consistent between 2019 and 2024, so there continued to be a right-conservative party bloc (in the mind of voters) even though Europe was no longer salient.

On the other side, the left-liberal bloc appears because voters perceive considerable similarity in the economic and social/EU positions of Labour, the Liberal Democrats, both nationalist parties, and the Greens. Labour was generally seen as more centrist across each dimension in 2024 than it was in 2019, but voters still perceived there to be a considerable gap between them and the parties within the right-conservative bloc. Consequently, the relative persistence of these perceived party positions between 2019 and 2024 means that there was still a clear economic and liberal/conservative divide between those parties that voters thought of as left-liberal and those that they thought of as right-conservative. These positions generally reflected those that the parties took in the aftermath of the EU referendum. Of course, a more comprehensive mapping of the perceptions of parties in Scotland requires a third dimension measuring positions on Scottish independence (see Henderson *et al.* 2022), which we address in our final section.

### 3. Structured vote switching

Now that we have demonstrated the existence of party blocs in the minds of voters, the next step in our argument is to show how the Brexit realignment persists through support for these party blocs. In this vein, we first compare voter flows between 2019 and 2024 for BES respondents, split by their Brexit preference in 2019 (i.e., whether they were on the Remain side or the Leave side). To emphasize, here Remain and Leave preferences represent the bundle of attitudes and perceptions that differentiate voters in the two blocs.

The systematic differences between the two plots in Fig. 3 reveal that 2019 Brexit preferences still structure party support, even though Brexit itself is no longer a salient political issue. On the Leave side, most 2019 Leave supporters still backed a right-conservative party in 2024, as most of the Conservatives' losses here went



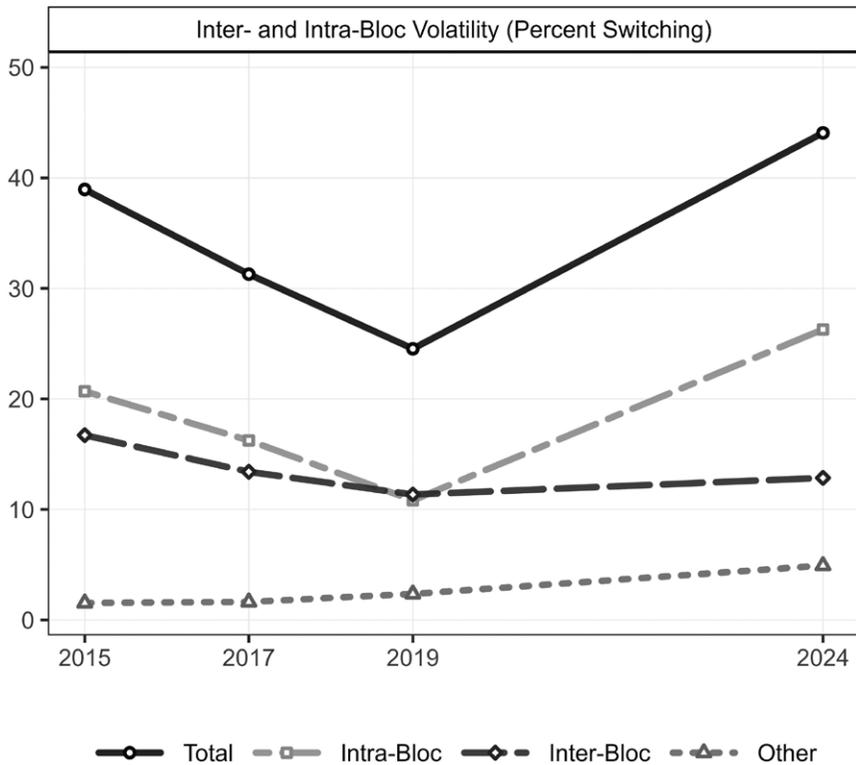
**Figure 3** Vote flows between 2019 and 2024 by 2019 Brexit preference

to Reform UK. The strength of the alignment did weaken somewhat, as some 2019 Leave supporters did move to Labour and the Liberal Democrats. However, the alignment with current Brexit preferences is stronger because many of these 2019 Leave supporters who backed a left-liberal party in 2024 had changed their position on Brexit in the intervening period—for example, 21% became anti-Brexit and 19% became undecided.

In contrast, there were smaller shifts on the Remain side, but the changes that did occur tended to be between the left-liberal parties. The Liberal Democrats and Labour traded a similar number of voters, most likely due to the tactical voting that occurred between both sets of parties. Labour's biggest losses were to the Greens—another left-liberal, pro-EU party. As a result, most 2019 Leave voters still backed a pro-Brexit, right-conservative party in 2024 (70% versus 85% in 2019), while most 2019 Remain voters still backed an anti-Brexit, left-liberal party (84% versus 87% in 2019). What this means is that if we decompose overall volatility into switching between and within party blocs, we can see that the bulk of switching in 2024 came from people changing to parties *within* their bloc.

The prevalence of switching to parties in the same party bloc in 2024 is clearer when we decompose overall volatility into inter-bloc, intra-bloc, and other switching (Fig. 4). Here intra-bloc switching refers to movement within our two party blocs—such as a Liberal Democrat voter in 2019 turning to Labour in 2024—whereas inter-bloc switching refers to movement between our two party blocs—such as someone who switched from Conservative to Liberal Democrats, for example, or from Labour to Reform UK. Finally, switches from major parties to other nonbloc parties or independent candidates are captured in the “other” category.

Overall, we find high rates of intra-bloc switching in 2024. In 2024 over 25% of voters switched parties within one of the two blocs, while only around 10%

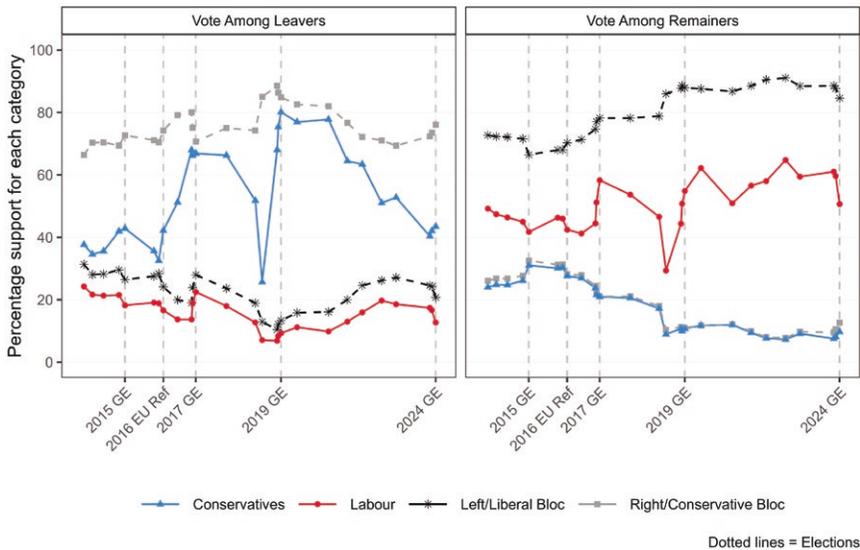


**Figure 4** Volatility within and between Brexit party blocs

had done so in 2019, which represents a marked change to the last three elections in Britain. In contrast, inter-bloc switching remained constant between 2019 and 2024 (and was marginally lower than between 2015 and 2017). Between 11% and 13% of voters switched between left-liberal and right-conservative bloc parties in this period. There has also been an increase in switching between major parties and smaller parties or independent candidates, which doubled between 2017 and 2024, though it still only accounted for vote choice in 5% of observations. Thus, while there was an unprecedented level of volatility in the latest general election, much of this volatility was bounded within party blocs.

We can then extend our approach to examine how the bounded nature of vote switching has influenced party choice in the periods between elections, which helps to illustrate how this clustering of party alternatives has structured vote intention since the EU referendum.<sup>10</sup> To illustrate this point, Fig. 5 displays the vote intention for Remain and Leave voters—measured at the time of each

<sup>10</sup>See Zuckerman *et al* (2007) for longer-term analysis of the bounded nature of partisanship in the UK.



**Figure 5** Vote choice among pro-Brexit (Leavers) and anti-Brexit (Remainers) voters over time

survey—between 2014 and 2024, split into support for the two major parties and the left-liberal/right-conservative blocs. The granularity of this time series reveals the substantial fluctuations in two-party support, which is otherwise hidden by the relative stability of the 2017 and 2019 elections. For instance, support for the Conservatives among those who voted to leave the EU oscillated by almost 50 percentage points over the period—with a low of around 30% in the 2019 European elections and a high of 80% at the 2019 General Election. Similarly, support for Labour among those who voted to remain in the EU shifted by over 20 percentage points. Yet, in both cases, Leavers were loyal to the right-conservative bloc, while Remainers stuck with left-liberal parties. These trends illustrate, in particular, the consistency of support within the right-conservative bloc. For example, when the Conservatives were ambivalent on Brexit prior to the EU referendum (Lynch and Whitaker 2018), Leave voters backed another right-conservative party (i.e. UKIP). These Leave voters then backed the Conservatives after the EU referendum, but then moved to another right-conservative party (i.e. the Brexit Party/Reform UK) in early 2019 and post-2019 when they departed the Conservatives. As such, support for the left-liberal and right-conservative party blocs has structured vote switching over the past decade.

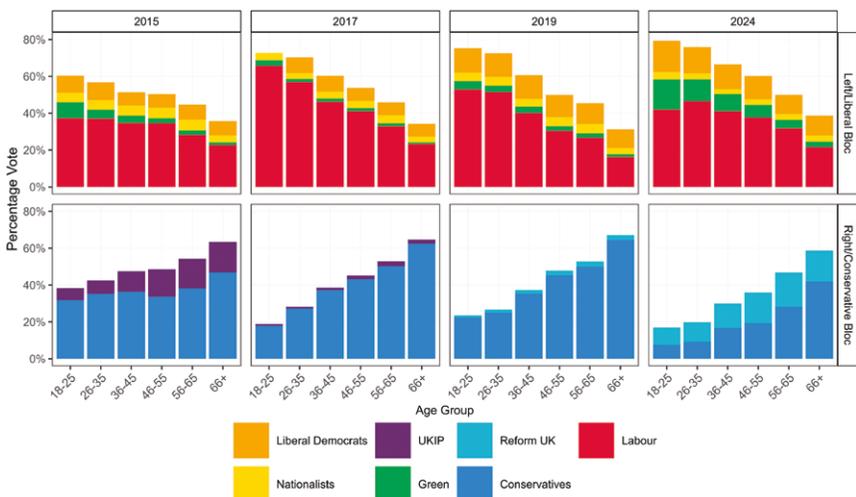
#### 4. The persistence of demographic alignments

Given that party, blocs have structured voting behaviour over the past decade, the next step in our argument is to demonstrate how these blocs increasingly mobilized

support from demographic groups that characterized the Brexit realignment. To make this point, we compare the connection between vote choice and the main demographic variables that were associated with Brexit preference (age and education) since 2015, excluding nonvoters in both elections. We present the results for age and education in Figs. 6 and 7, respectively, with the top two panels in each figure visualizing support for parties in the left-liberal bloc, while the bottom panels show support for the parties in the right-conservative bloc.

Starting with age, this is still a strong predictor of support for party blocs in 2024, although there has been some unwinding of the age gradient in support for the two major parties. On the left-liberal side, Labour lost support in 2024 among younger voters (particularly those aged 18–25), but these losses were offset by substantial gains for the Greens and the Liberal Democrats. On the right-conservative side, the Conservatives lost considerable support among all age groups (in line with their election performance), which left them with remarkably low levels of support among young voters. Reform UK profited from the Conservatives’ lost vote share, particularly among those aged 46 and above. Consequently, the relationship between age and party bloc support characteristic of the Brexit realignment has persisted even though the two major parties lost support among key groups.

In one sense, this return to support for party blocs is characteristic of the fragmentation that we last saw in 2015, but that does not mean that the dynamics of party competition have regressed. It is true that age was a predictor of support for party blocs in 2015, as older voters tended to back either the Conservatives or UKIP in 2015, whereas younger voters tended to back Labour or the Greens.



**Figure 6** Vote by age group and party bloc 2015–2024

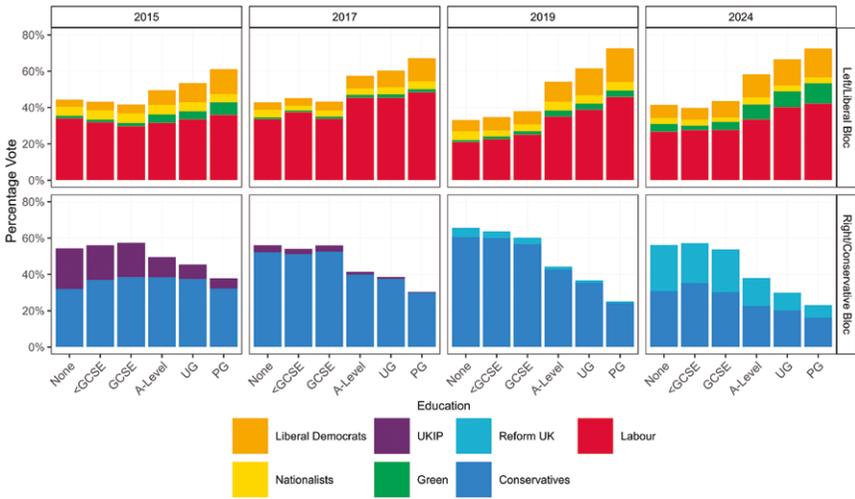


Figure 7 Vote by level of education and party bloc in 2019 and 2024

However, this relationship was far weaker before the EU referendum than it was afterwards. Due to the Brexit-based sorting of voters after the EU referendum, age became a key predictor of voting behaviour—first through support for Labour and the Conservatives in 2017 and 2019, and then through support for the left-liberal and right-conservative party blocs in 2024.

We see a very similar story when assessing the relationship between education and vote choice. In 2015, education was not a discriminator of support for the two major parties, but it was already a predictor of support for the party blocs. UKIP support was strongest among less educated voters, and Green/Liberal Democrat support stronger among more educated voters. However, as with the trends for age, education became a much stronger predictor of party support after the EU referendum, first as a predictor of Labour and Conservative support in 2017 and 2019, and then as a strong predictor of party bloc support in 2024.

As with age, the persistence of the education divide in party bloc support coincides with a slight unwinding of education’s association with Labour and Conservative support. On the left-liberal side, a higher proportion of voters with no qualifications or with GCSEs or below voted for Labour in 2024 than in 2019, whereas their support declined among the more highly educated. But, again, education remained a predictor of left-liberal bloc support because Labour’s losses were compensated for by gains for the Green Party among those with A-Levels or higher. Moving to the right-conservative bloc, the Conservatives lost considerable support from across education levels, but their losses were largest among those with lower levels of education, groups, which had formed the core of their support in 2019. Though the educational divide in Conservative support also flattened, it

was replaced by support for Reform UK—thus maintaining the considerable educational gradient in support for right-conservative parties.

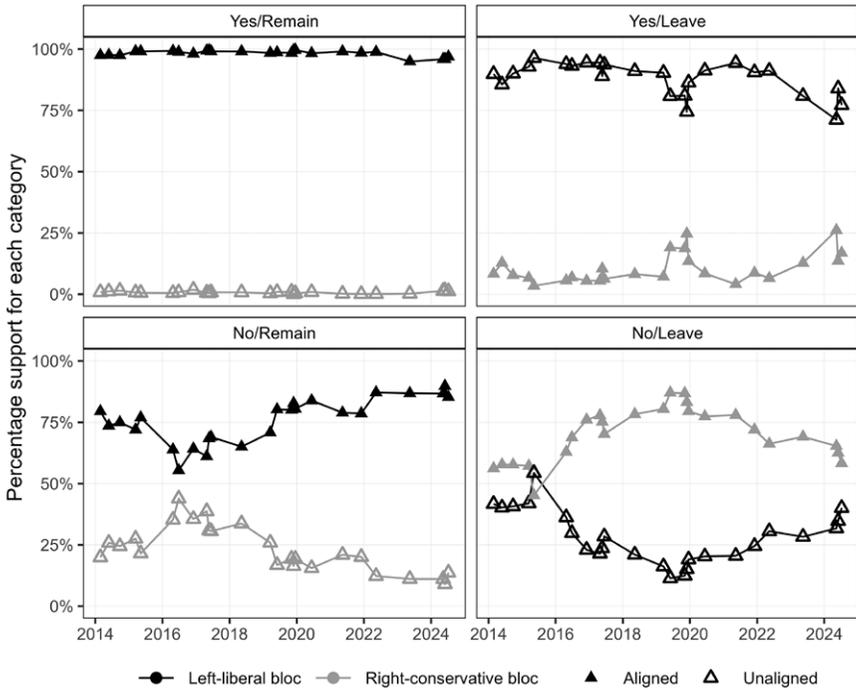
We should also note at this point that, just as these demographic alignments persisted in 2024 through support for party blocs, social class also remained an inconsistent predictor of party support in Britain (see Fig. A2 in Appendix). Though class was associated with support for the two major parties in 2015, this association weakened dramatically post-Brexit. In 2024, the Conservatives received a similar level of support among all occupation groups (outside of large employers), whereas fluctuations in Labour support by class do not follow a consistent pattern. Interestingly, Reform UK's support has increased the most among those in routine occupations, although many of the differences in Reform voting between routine occupations and other social classes become smaller once we account for the differences in education levels (see Table A1 in Appendix).

In sum, we find that the association between age and education on the one hand and bloc support on the other strengthened after the EU referendum. This realignment manifested first in differential support for the two major parties, which weakened in 2024 (although it was still stronger than in 2015) as the demographic alignments that underpinned the Brexit realignment became better predictors of support for party blocs in Britain. While the 2024 election saw a return to the volatility and fragmentation that we last saw pre-Brexit, the demographic alignments that characterized the Brexit realignment persist because vote switching was structured by support for these party blocs.

## 5. What about Scotland?

Our argument concerns the persistence of the Brexit realignment. However, this realignment is more complicated in Scotland, where political competition has been segmented by Brexit *and* Scottish independence (Fieldhouse *et al.* 2020; Henderson *et al.* 2022). Independence is a core political issue for many Scottish voters and, therefore, vote switching often reflects preferences on independence. Consequently, the alignment of Leave voting and party support has been somewhat weaker in Scotland than in England and Wales (see Fig. A3 in Appendix), as some Leave voters have backed a party that matches their independence preference when it conflicts with their Brexit preference (see also Fig. A4 in Appendix). Simply put, the electoral alternatives of Scottish voters are different from those in England and Wales.

However, Brexit has still played an important role in structuring vote choice in Scotland. To demonstrate this point, we examine the strength of the Brexit alignment among the four different configurations of Brexit and independence support in Scotland: Yes/Remain, Yes/Leave, No/Remain, and No/Leave (Henderson *et al.* 2022). We focus on support for parties in the left-liberal and right-conservative



**Figure 8** Percentage of each constitutional camp that voted for a left-liberal or right-conservative party in Scotland between 2014 and 2024. These values do not necessarily sum to 100 because we have not displayed the ‘other’ category, which contains vote intention for the British National Party, The Independent Group/Change UK, and small parties denoted as ‘other’ in the vote intention/choice variable.

blocs over the last decade in Fig. 8 (and we report the support for pro- and anti-independence parties in Figure A4 in Appendix).

Yes/Remain voters were the largest constitutional camp in Scotland in 2024,<sup>11</sup> and these voters have consistently supported a party that matches both their Brexit and independence preferences over the past decade. A large part of this alignment is due to the main pro-independence party in Scotland, the Scottish National Party, also being a left-liberal party that backed Remain (Henderson et al. 2022). However, even when support for the SNP has been lower, these voters have tended to back another left-liberal party. For example, some of these voters tended to back Labour before the 2014 independence referendum, before moving to the SNP in the aftermath (Fieldhouse et al. 2020; Henderson et al. 2022). Similarly, support for the SNP has fallen among Yes/Remain voters since 2019, but these defectors

<sup>11</sup>The sizes of the four constitutional camps after the 2024 General Election were: No/Remain (29%, excluding nonrespondents), Yes/Remain (39%), No/Leave (28%), and Yes/Leave (4%).

have tended to move to another left-liberal party (either Labour or the Scottish Greens). Thus, while the independence alignment has weakened slightly for Yes/Remain voters, the Brexit alignment remains strong.

In the No camp, most voters have backed a party in Scotland that matched their position on the Brexit alignment. Of course, independence weakened this alignment at times. For example, many No/Remain voters backed the pro-Leave Conservatives in 2017 and (to a lesser extent) in 2019, which likely reflects how the Conservatives' strong unionist position won them many Labour voters during this period (Henderson *et al.* 2020). Similarly, many No/Leave voters have shifted away from a right-conservative party since 2019. Labour, often the party best placed to defeat the Scottish National Party in 2024, gained among this group. These latest independence-based shifts likely explain why a greater proportion of 2019 Conservatives have switched to Labour in 2024 in Scotland (33%) than in England and Wales (around 10 and 9% respectively). Labour also benefited from a "double anti-incumbent" vote, reflecting the unpopularity of both the Westminster government and the Scottish devolved government (Miori and Green 2025). However, even in these circumstances, most No/Remain and No/Leave voters have still (so far) backed a party that matched their position on the Brexit alignment since the 2016 EU referendum.

With that said the results for Yes/Leave require some further elaboration. While on the surface, the results for Yes/Leave do appear to suggest that these voters did not conform to the Brexit alignment, these results need to be interpreted with much caution because Yes/Leave became a considerably smaller segment of the Scottish electorate post-Brexit.<sup>12</sup> The reason for this decline in size is that most Yes/Leave voters changed their constitutional preferences after the EU referendum, with 43% of those who were Yes/Leave in 2015 becoming No/Leave by 2017 (with a further 16% becoming Yes/Remain). As a result, those who continue to be Yes/Leave voters are often unaligned on Brexit (and in some cases independence too since 2019 due to their greater support for Labour), but they no longer contribute significantly to the overall alignment of Brexit and independence preferences in Scotland because they are such a small part of the Scottish electorate.

## 6. What next for the Brexit realignment?

The 2024 UK General Election, in which support for the two major parties in Britain collapsed to its lowest level in the post-war period, was a return to the pre-Brexit trends of party system fragmentation and electoral volatility. However, the longer-term demographic alignments, which were accelerated by Brexit, have

<sup>12</sup>Yes/Leave shrunk from 16% of Scotland in 2015 to 7-8% in 2017 and 2019, and then 4% in 2024 (excluding nonrespondents on both constitutional questions).

persisted in the face of recent electoral turbulence through support for party blocs. While a record proportion of voters changed parties in 2024, we estimate that around two-thirds of vote switching was constrained by party bloc and hence Brexit position. Indeed, almost all the rise in volatility between 2019 and 2024 came from intra-bloc switching. This underlying structure has governed political choice despite multiple sources of instability, including the COVID-19 pandemic and high inflation, changes in party leadership, and the growth of new parties. In 2024, the preferences and demographic attributes associated with Brexit vote choice translated into support for smaller parties rather than, as had been the case in 2017 and 2019, support for one of the two major parties. This does not imply that Brexit was the proximate cause of vote switching between 2019 and 2024, but that the alignments that were magnified due to the effects of Brexit have persisted through to 2024. Namely, the strategic positioning of parties on ‘second dimension’ issues like immigration since 2016—which are closely related to Brexit preferences—means that support for party blocs continue to align with Brexit preferences, despite the lower salience of Brexit among voters and in political discourse.

By assessing the structure of party support at the level of blocs we can reconcile the extensive volatility in 2024 with the persistence of the ‘Brexit realignment.’ Voters’ perceptions of party alternatives constrained voting behaviour even as the issue environment evolved and party competition over Brexit receded. In short, the switching present between 2019 and 2024 tended to be within the left-liberal and right-conservative blocs rather than between them. This in turn meant that younger and more educated voters supported left-liberal parties, whereas older and less educated voters still backed right-conservative parties. These demographics were important predictors of party bloc support pre-Brexit, but the difference now is that their influence is far stronger between blocs. Indeed, vote switching between 2019 and 2024 demonstrates that the Brexit realignment runs deeper than party loyalties: many voters jettisoned their support for the Conservatives while maintaining their support for their bloc.

In the increasingly fragmented British party system, our approach demonstrates that there are significant analytic benefits to conceptualizing party support in terms of blocs. This type of approach has, so far, been less common in Britain when compared to research on other European states, but we recommend its use for understanding volatility in future British elections. Though voters are increasingly likely to switch parties between elections, such switching is not arbitrary or at random. Instead, this volatility is often systematic, as the demographic divides that underpin the Brexit realignment are associated with different political preferences, and these preferences constrain the choice set available to voters. The existence of two blocs has important implications for other aspects of vote choice in Britain, such as sincere versus tactical voting. Furthermore, the importance of

party blocs is still of immediate relevance to Scotland, and there is scope to further explore how the intersection of Scottish independence and Brexit-based divisions complicates the two-bloc picture.

### **Acknowledgements**

The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the Economic and Social Research Council in funding this research (Grant No. ES/S015671). The views expressed herein are those of the authors and do not reflect the position of the United States Military Academy, the Department of the Army, or the Department of Defense. The authors would like to thank the attendees at the 2024 Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties conference in Manchester for their helpful comments.

### **Conflict of Interest**

The authors have no conflicts of interest to disclose.

### **Funding**

This work was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council, grant number: ES/S015671/1

### **Appendix**

Addressing the persistence of the Brexit-induced realignment is important not only to understand political choice in 2024 but also as the basis for party support in the future. Our findings have important implications for the types of strategies and appeals that elites may successfully use in this post-Brexit party system. For instance, it may be difficult for parties to reach across the divide between the two party blocs without changing their party platform entirely, especially if the association between demographics and bloc support continues to strengthen.

Appendix

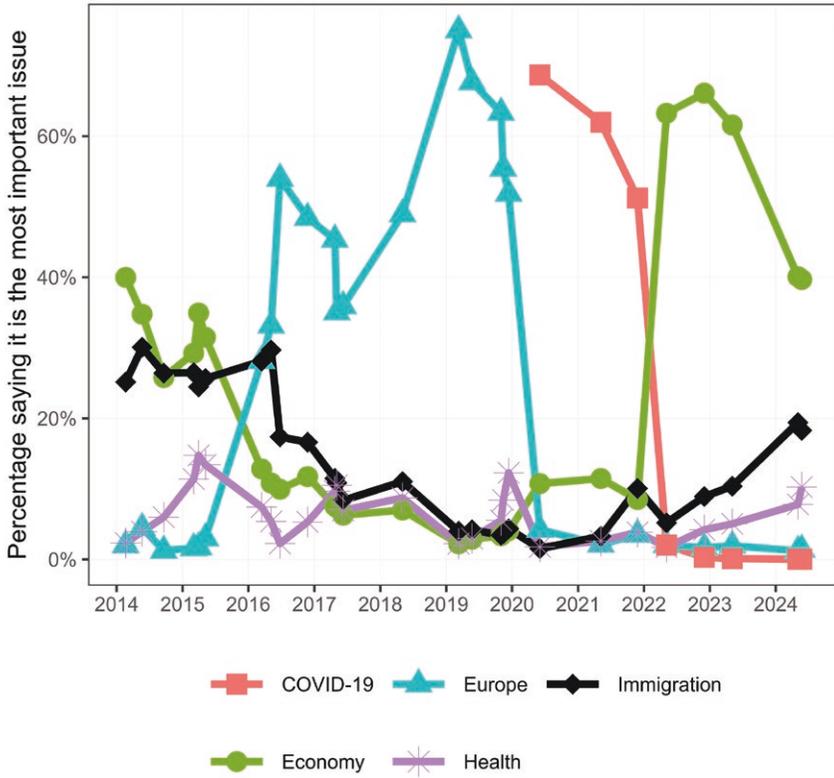


Figure A1 Single most important issue facing Britain (percentage)

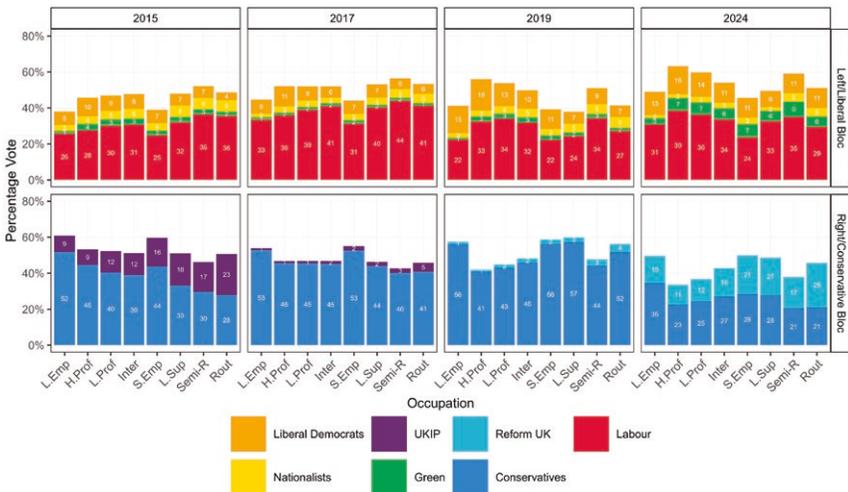
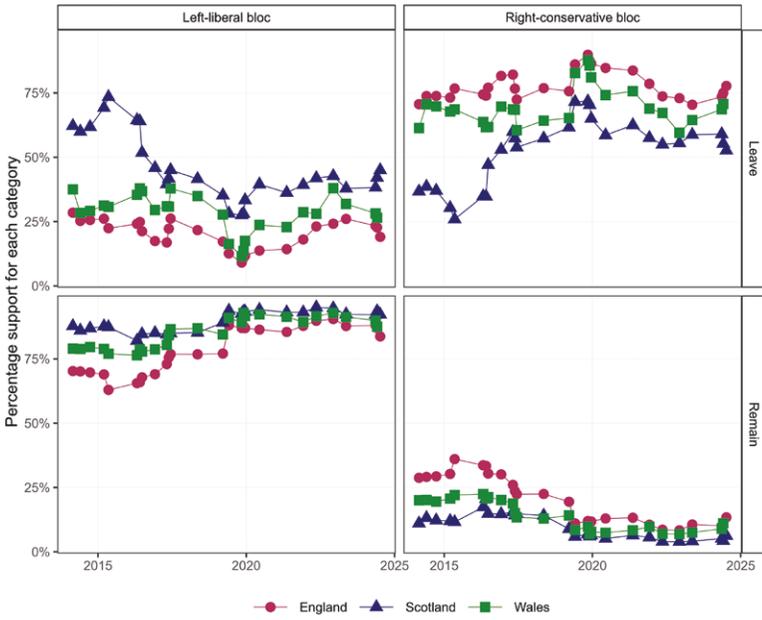


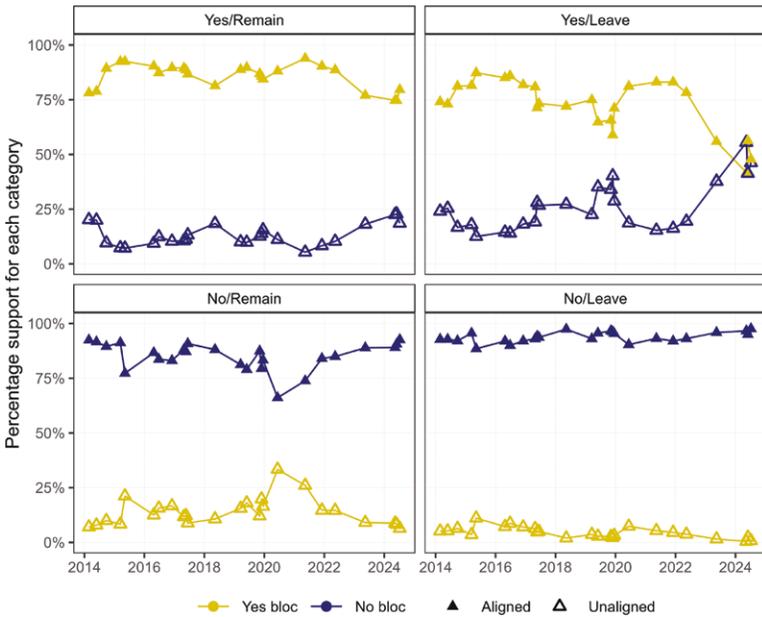
Figure A2 Relationship between vote choice and social class over time

**Table A1** Reform UK voting by class and education

	Large employers	Higher professionals	Lower professionals	Intermediate	Small employers	Lower supervisory	Semi-routine	Routine
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Overall	14.86	10.83	12.17	15.72	21.45	20.83	17.32	24.67
No Degree	21.22	19.32	18.3	19.06	27.2	23.35	20.96	27.11
Degree	13.16	9.38	9.82	11.84	15.01	15.56	10.1	17.3



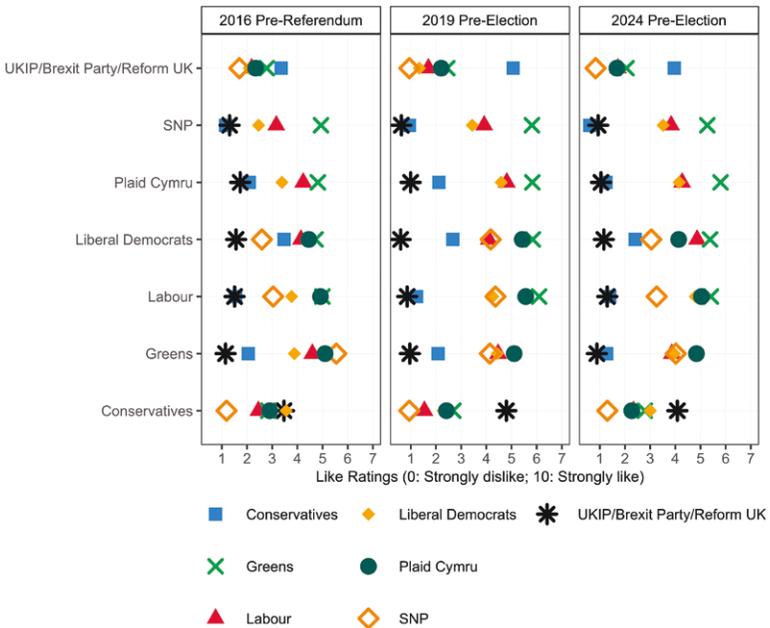
**Figure A3** Contemporaneous vote/vote intention for Brexit-blocs by Brexit support in England, Scotland, and Wales



**Figure A4** Vote for Yes and No parties among constitutional camps in Scotland between 2014 and 2024



**Figure A5** Like ratings for the major political parties by pre-referendum/pre-election Brexit preferences in 2016, 2019, and 2024



**Figure A6** Like ratings for the major political parties by pre-referendum/pre-election vote intention in 2016, 2019, and 2024

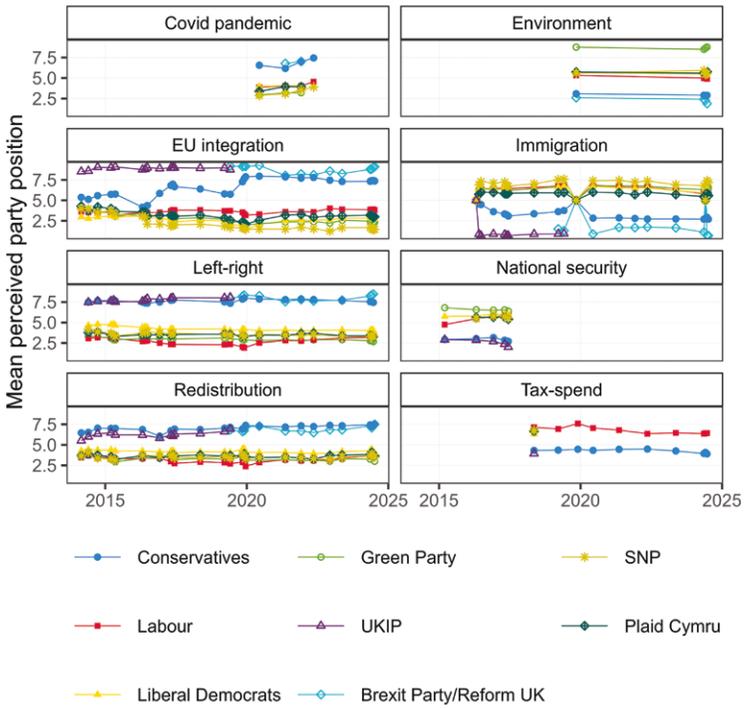


Figure A7 Party evaluations over time

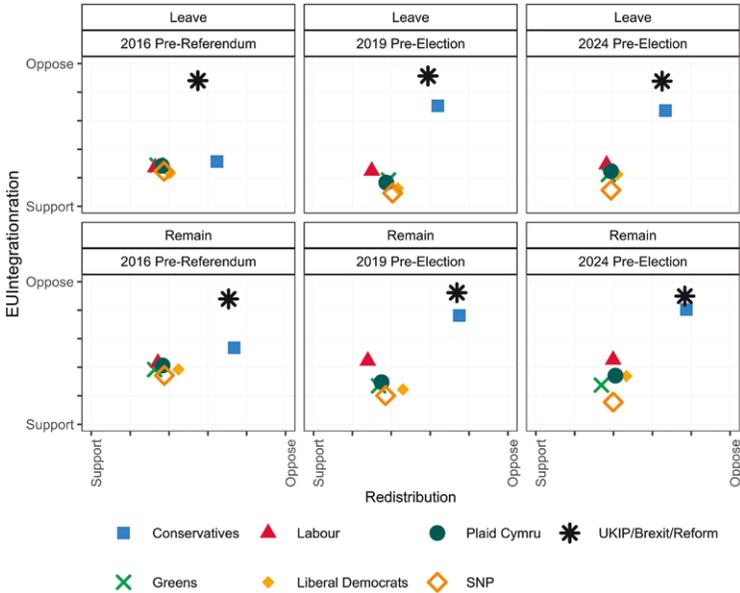
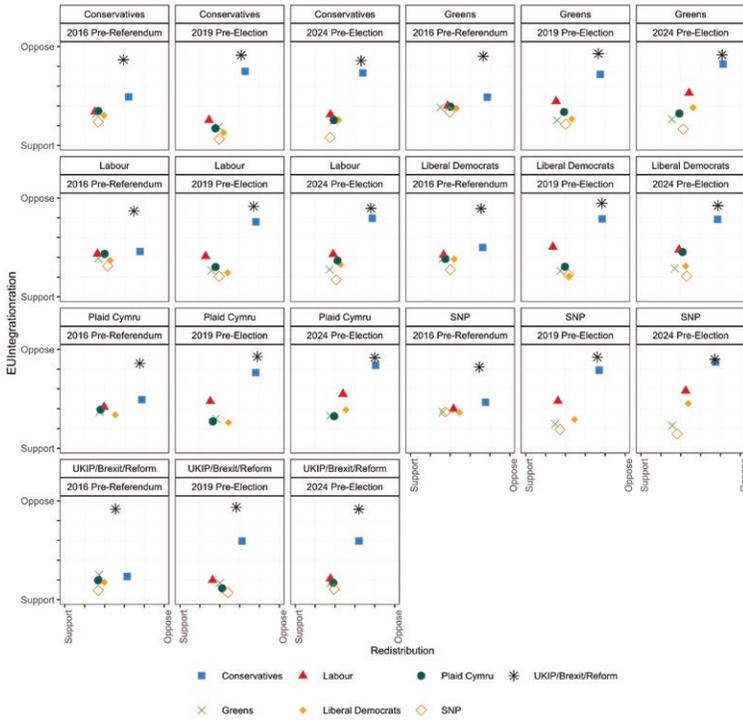
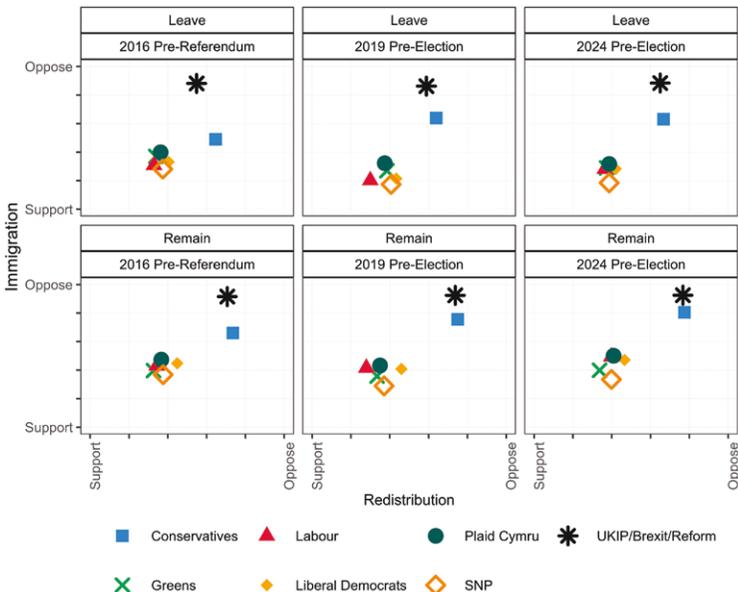


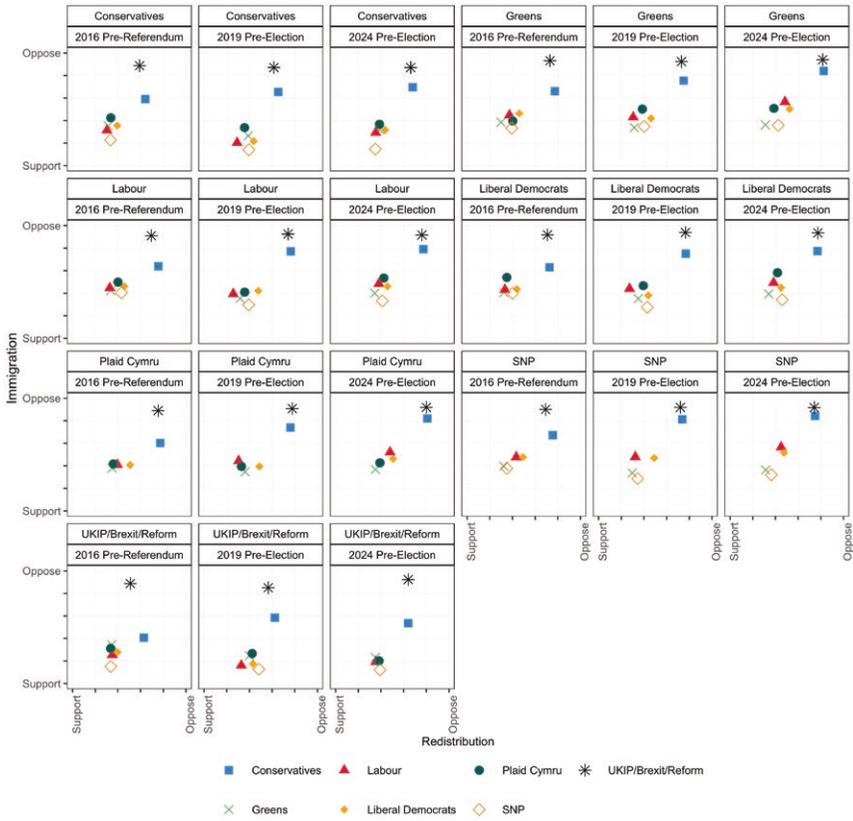
Figure A8 Mean party placements by pre-referendum/pre-election Brexit preferences in 2016, 2019, and 2024 (with redistribution and EU integration)



**Figure A9** Mean party placements by pre-referendum/pre-election vote intention in 2016, 2019, and 2024 (with redistribution and EU integration)



**Figure A10** Mean party placements by pre-referendum/pre-election Brexit preferences in 2016, 2019, and 2024 (with redistribution and immigration)



**Figure A11** Mean party placements by pre-referendum/pre-election vote intention in 2016, 2019, and 2024 (with redistribution and immigration)

**Table A2** Distribution of policy placements for Labour: pre-referendum/election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	8.37	18.5	8.51	Many fewer	2.73	1.83	3.79
	5.34	9.13	5.23		0.73	0.78	1.06
	10.09	11.51	8.93		1.66	1.64	2.74
	12.24	9.17	11.71		3.06	2.65	4.97
	8.48	4.69	10.19		4.77	3.56	7.24
	7.86	6.66	11.38		11.38	11.26	14.44
	3.63	2.33	4.87		9.59	9.13	10.51
	2.83	2.8	4.1		9.96	10.4	8.65
	1.63	2.36	2.47		7.73	8.11	6.15
Oppose	0.73	1.27	1.16	Many more	3.93	4.3	2.97
	1.43	3.26	3.35		9.14	16.51	11.49
Don't know	37.37	28.3	28.1	Don't know	35.31	29.83	25.99

**Table A3** Distribution of policy placements for Conservatives: pre-referendum/election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	3.36	4.54	3.83	Many fewer	6.7	13.85	22.76
	1.36	1.62	1.35		2.78	5.55	7.18
	1.61	2.05	1.87		6.73	11.58	11.92
	2.18	2.51	2.36		10.33	13.37	11.44
	2.44	2.59	2.57		9.86	9.03	7.07
	6.03	7.49	6.75		11.53	10.19	6.97
	5.28	4.73	4.66		5.85	3.14	2.84
	10.98	8.46	8.45		4.73	2.17	2.54
	10.03	9.91	10.16		2.89	1.24	1.72
Oppose	5.64	6.76	7.76	Many more	1.18	0.55	0.58
	14.25	20.47	23.23		3.43	1.35	3
Don't know	36.85	28.86	27	Don't know	33.99	27.99	21.98

**Table A4** Distribution of policy placements for Liberal Democrats: pre-referendum/election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	4.24	5.41	4.97	Many fewer	2.67	1.59	2.98
	2.32	2.6	2.5		0.56	0.59	0.67
	4.51	4.42	4.93		1.3	0.98	1.42
	7.76	7.91	7.43		2.4	1.78	2.86
	9.71	8.87	8.43		4.16	2.73	4.84
	15.53	15.6	15.5		13.96	12.09	13.64
	5.21	5.95	6.29		8.89	8.63	8.32
	3.17	4.43	4.18		8.17	9.43	7.27
	1.64	2.25	2.16		5.65	7.07	5.06
	0.79	0.99	0.89		3.43	3.93	2.7
Oppose	1.58	3.58	3.31	Many more	6.65	13.1	8.91
Don't know	43.53	37.98	39.42	Don't know	42.17	38.06	41.35

**Table A5** Distribution of policy placements for SNP: pre-referendum/election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	7.1	9.84	8.47	Many fewer	2.37	1.4	2.9
	4.06	4.14	4.11		0.58	1	0.6
	7.89	6.89	8.16		1.01	0.88	0.86
	11.03	10.43	10.62		2.25	1.12	1.57
	8.98	8.49	9.3		3.23	1.67	2.41
	10.96	12.85	12.25		9.11	5.95	7.78
	4.41	4.53	4.63		9.32	7.43	9.34
	3.26	3.55	2.49		11.77	12.68	12.97
	1.44	1.6	2.76		8.7	11.3	10.74
	0.68	0.93	0.94		5.55	6.71	4.58
Oppose	2.02	3.24	3.63	Many more	8.6	18.86	17.3
Don't know	38.16	33.5	32.64	Don't know	37.48	31	28.94

**Table A6** Distribution of policy placements for Plaid Cymru: pre-referendum/election waves.

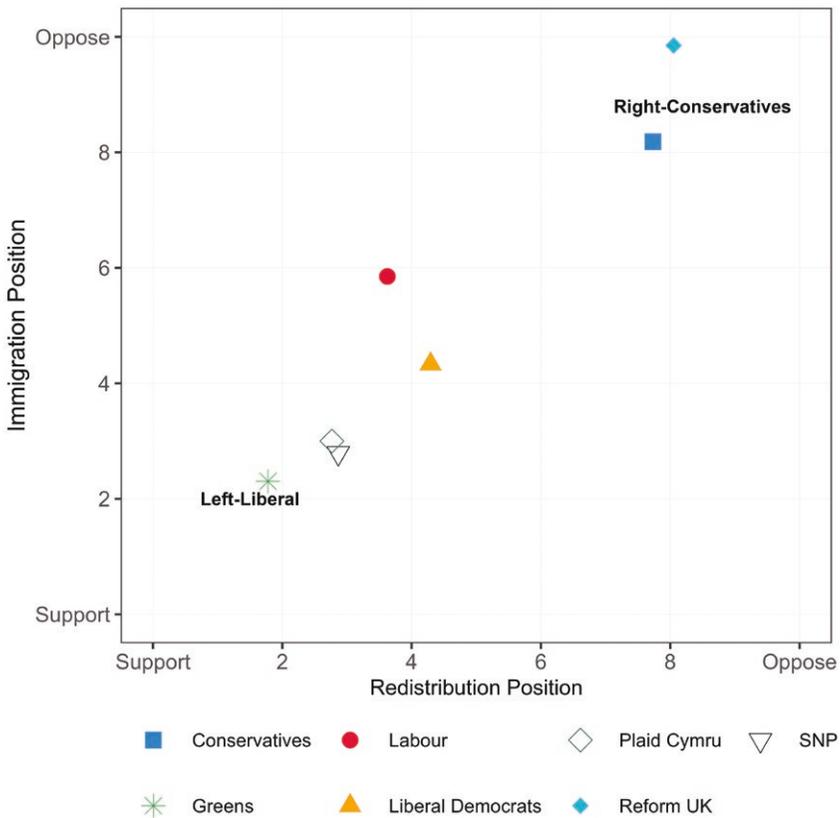
	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	4.36	6.79	5.8	Many fewer	2.77	1.63	3.58
	2.92	4.47	3.56		1.26	0.54	0.81
	6.77	7.49	6.11		1.56	2.03	2.6
	9.46	7.94	9.11		2.47	2.14	3.94
	8.23	7.19	7		3.78	3.56	4.26
	9.69	10.95	11.36		13.53	12.1	10.4
	3.62	2.42	5.05		7.54	7.39	5.27
	1.94	2.34	2.37		5.89	7.31	5.48
	1.09	1.2	1.67		3.72	4.07	3.52
Oppose	0.22	0.84	1.18	2.25	2.04	2.16	
	0.81	2.06	3.17	4.08	7.99	7.89	
Don't know	50.88	46.31	43.62	Don't know	51.16	49.2	50.07

**Table A7** Distribution of policy placements for Greens: pre-referendum/election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27		Wave 7	Wave 17	Wave 27
Support	7.96	8.91	9.19	Many fewer	2.94	1.55	2.56
	4.74	5.06	5.22		0.76	0.48	0.59
	6.64	7.48	7.88		1.4	0.8	1.12
	6.98	8.33	7.76		2.2	1.29	1.95
	6.17	5.79	6.05		3.44	2.21	3.01
	10.12	10.43	10.25		11.22	10.74	11.25
	2.5	2.94	3.01		6.32	6.84	6.74
	1.65	2.65	2.24		5.92	7.92	6.87
	0.87	1.61	1.5		5.21	6.41	5.42
Oppose	0.61	0.82	0.73	3.11	3.79	3	
	1.24	2.67	2.92	7.5	10.33	9.93	
Don't know	50.51	43.31	43.24	Don't know	49.97	47.65	47.56

**Table A8** Distribution of policy placements for UKIP/Brexit Party/Reform: pre-referendum/ election waves.

	Redistribution				Immigration		
	Wave 7 (UKIP)	Wave 17 (Brexit)	Wave 27 (Reform)		Wave 7 (UKIP)	Wave 17 (Brexit)	Wave 27 (Reform)
Support	2.85	4.13	3.35	Many fewer	43.03	45.6	47.81
	1.32	1.44	1.22		10.18	8.65	7.43
	1.84	1.6	1.69		6.27	5.99	4.8
	2.71	2.29	2.23		2.93	3.51	2.77
	3.35	2.4	2.36		1.48	1.87	1.69
	9.48	8.75	6.82		2.46	2.87	2.7
	5.18	3.4	3.37		0.93	0.96	0.82
	6.22	5.07	4.6		0.73	0.74	0.66
	5.58	5.28	5.47		0.42	0.56	0.51
	3.95	4.01	5.11		0.33	0.35	0.29
Oppose	9.2	16.22	20.41	Many more	0.57	0.71	0.69
Don't know	48.31	45.4	43.36	Don't know	30.67	28.19	29.82



**Figure A12** Mean party placements on the redistribution and immigration scale in the 2024 British Election Study Expert Survey  
 Source: Schmitt et al. (2024)

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