

The End of the Ethnic Bloc Vote? Ethnic Minority Leavers After the Brexit Referendum

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The 2016 referendum on UK membership in the European Union (EU) led to a realignment of voters along their referendum position (Fieldhouse et al. 2021; Sobolewska and Ford 2020). By December 2019, both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party received approximately 80% of their support from voters who had been on “their” side during the referendum (Fieldhouse et al. 2021). Brexit identities were akin to partisanship, with affective polarization and perceptual screening (Sobolewska and Ford 2020; Sorace and Hobolt 2021). Research also traces the Brexit vote to a growing values divide (Evans and Menon 2017), with ethnocentric attitudes found on opposing sides of the referendum (Sobolewska and Ford 2020). The views of ethnic minority voters, as traditional victims of white ethnocentrism, have been seen largely in this debate as the same as the identity of liberal Remainers. However, despite the assumption that minorities naturally would fall on the side opposing white ethnocentrism, the referendum marked the biggest departure from the traditional ethnic minorities bloc vote since 2005, when a substantial minority of Muslim voters deserted Labour over the Iraq War (Curtice, Fisher, and Steed 2005). The Leave side in the 2016 referendum received approximately one third of the votes of ethnic minorities (Martin, Sobolewska, and Begum 2020), despite Leave also drawing a majority of its support from “UKIP-curious” voters (Evans and Mellon 2019) who had voted for or considered supporting the anti-immigrant radical-right United Kingdom Independence Party.

This article asks whether ethnic minority voters realigned in the same way as white British voters after the referendum, thereby leading to a break in the traditional minority Labour bloc vote. This study concentrated on Leave voters, who could be cross-pressured in 2019 between support for Brexit and strong multigenerational Labour partisanship (Martin and Mellon 2018). Leave voters from ethnic minority backgrounds who wanted to support the Conservative Party’s promise to “Get Brexit Done” may have paused because of the party’s reputation as ethnocentric and racist (Anwar 1986; Heath et al. 2013; Saggar 2000). This reputation was established through historical events such as the racist slogan used in Smethwick at the 1964 general election.¹ However, it was remade for new

generations through political events such as the Windrush Scandal, in which (predominantly Black and Asian) British citizens were deprived of employment, health care, and housing, and—in some cases—deported due to a lack of documentation. This reputation was reinforced in 2019 by the prominence of the Conservative Prime Minister Boris Johnson, whose infamous remarks in newspaper columns were perceived widely as racist or Islamophobic. For example, he compared Muslim women who cover their face to a bank robber or a letterbox and described Black people in Africa as having “watermelon smiles.” For this reason, we think that ethnic minority Labour Leavers may not have followed their white counterparts, who resolved the contradiction between prior partisanship and Brexit by voting for the Conservatives (Curtice 2020). This was despite the Labour Party in 2019 being committed to a second referendum on the exit deal with the EU—widely considered anti-democratic by Leave voters (Curtice 2020).

This study also asks why the reputation of ethnocentrism deterred many ethnic minority Leavers from supporting the Conservatives in 2019 despite their Brexit-focused campaign, whereas the Leave campaign did not discourage as many minority voters. How did the Leave campaign reconcile actively appealing to ethnic minority Britons with the more ethnocentric and anti-immigrant part of its platform? Did minority voters who voted Leave perceive themselves as targeted by these messages? We expected that the Leave campaign mobilized ethnic minority voters with specific hostility toward Eastern European immigration (Begum 2019; Saunders 2020). In this way, minority voters can be included in the same political coalition as white ethnocentric voters, if the outgroup includes neither of them.

DATA AND METHODS

We used two types of data from *Understanding Society*—the UK Household Longitudinal Study (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research 2022). First, we analyzed data on vote choice in the 2015, 2017, and 2019 UK general elections among ethnic minority respondents, defined as those who describe their ethnicity as Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Black Caribbean, or Black African. We tested whether patterns of vote-switching along Brexit lines were replicated among minorities.

Second, we used semi-structured interviews conducted with ethnic minority participants of *Understanding Society* to examine their reasons for voting Leave and how they explained their 2019 vote choice. These 24 interviews were conducted via telephone from May to July 2020 with voters who had supported Leave in the 2016 referendum. To best understand the thinking between realignment of general election vote in line with the referendum choice (or lack thereof), we further limited our analysis to those who voted for the Labour Party or the Conservatives in 2019 (i.e., 11 for Labour and 10 for the Conservatives).

These data are not fully representative of all British ethnic minorities but there are several advantages: the data include participants from a range of ethnic minority groups, including many who were born outside of the United Kingdom. This ensured good coverage of the views of older and immigrant voters who were most likely to support leaving the EU (Martin, Sobolewska, and Begum 2020). Although the generalizability of our results is therefore limited, these interviews were one of the best data sources to identify key themes and types of reasoning used by ethnic minority voters in 2019, in the absence of a traditional election study of minorities (Martin and Sobolewska 2023).

LEAVE REALIGNMENT AND THE LABOUR BLOC VOTE

First, we investigated the extent to which vote-switching along Brexit lines occurred among ethnic minority voters. Fieldhouse et al. (2021) showed that by the 2019 general election, Leave voters made up approximately 80% of Conservative voters and Remain voters 80% of Labour voters—in both cases, an increase from 50% to 55% in 2014. However, figure 1 reveals little evidence of any realignment among ethnic minority voters.² In 2015, approximately seven of 10 ethnic minority voters who later supported Remain voted for the Labour Party in the general election (69%) as did 62% of those who supported Leave. By 2019, this had changed little; seven of 10 Remainers still voted for Labour (73%) and 61% of Leavers voted Labour as well. For context, 69% of white British Leavers voted for the Conservatives in 2019 and only 16% for Labour. However, it may be that the Conservatives benefited at the margins from being perceived as the party of Leave: they increased their vote share among ethnic minorities who supported Leave from 31% in 2015 to 36% in 2019. The problem for the Conservatives was that even if they were able to attract ethnic minority Leave voters at the same rate as white British Leavers, far more ethnic minorities initially voted Remain. Therefore, any sorting of voters along Brexit lines would lead to a net transfer of voters away from the Conservatives.

VOTING FOR AN ETHNOCENTRIC SIDE?

This study demonstrates that there was limited voter realignment on Brexit lines among ethnic minority voters. Therefore, why did comparatively so many minority voters rally behind a supposedly ethnocentric referendum side—that is, Leave—but not behind an ethnocentric political party? How did these voters understand these choices?

Lacking detailed survey data to answer these questions, we review the qualitative semi-structured interviews in the following subsections.

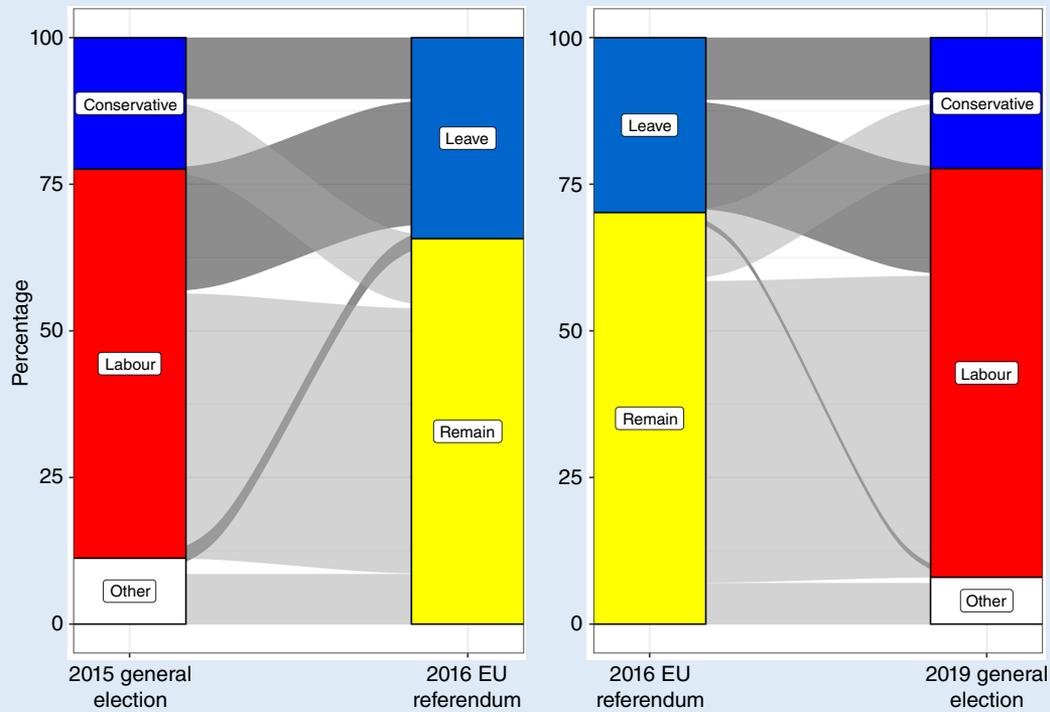
Why Did Ethnic Minority Voters Support Leave?

Before specifically addressing the 2019 election, we discuss the reasons that voters gave for supporting Leave. Many ethnic minority Leavers of both parties expressed the view that the referendum was fought on ethnocentric grounds, effectively legitimizing racism and xenophobia. A Conservative Leave voter explained the belief that Brexit “has brought out the disparity, you know, the racism card.” A Labour voter went further: “I mean, the more racist people thought that leaving the EU would mean getting rid of any brown person or any non-English person, which is obviously not what leaving the EU was about.” Other respondents expressed the feeling that the referendum was not about racism or ending all immigration but had been interpreted that way by others. One Conservative voter felt that racism “was a spin on the argument [for Brexit], as opposed to a true argument.” A Labour Leave voter regretted her vote because of how it has been interpreted: “Well, actually I didn’t vote for that....I didn’t vote to say throw all the immigrants out, I didn’t vote to say—you know, because obviously they are a benefit to the economy, it was just the uncontrolled immigration was what I was concerned about.” Another Labour voter also said he “kind of” regretted his vote, stating that “I think that most people voted for immigration...my main reason for voting was not about immigration because...my grandfather was obviously an immigrant, from the colonial countries.”

Despite these perceptions of Leave as an ethnocentric option, many ethnic minorities supported the main ethnocentric aim of this side: to stop unlimited immigration from the EU. Some ethnic minority Leave voters were motivated by concern that immigration was harming the British economy or putting undue pressure on housing and public services. Respondents expressed their views that “Britain was just becoming overcrowded” (Labour voter). What might explain minorities’ support for Leave is that some perceived the predominantly white European migration as in direct competition with themselves. A Labour voter linked the issues of overcrowded housing with competition in the labor market: “One house and you’ve got probably 10 members living there...and they’re sharing the costs, but it’s not their home country. They may be returning at some stage but people for ourselves are unable to get into jobs.” Similarly, Eastern European immigrants were perceived as putting pressure on the National Health Service (NHS) and accepting lower wages: “They came and worked for cheaper labor, we paid them for their portion of service of National Health, and everywhere now, the hospitals and the GP surgeries, all you find is Eastern Europeans.” In both cases, respondents referred explicitly to immigrants from Romania and Poland as the groups they believed were responsible for this situation. They perceived this behavior as unfair and having negative consequences for themselves and their families. Importantly, these perceptions were shared across partisan divides; although Leave supporters were fewer as a proportion of Labour’s voters

Figure 1

Vote Choices in 2015 and 2019 General Elections Among Ethnic Minority Voters, Compared to Support for Leave and Remain in 2016



Data are from "Understanding Society" (University of Essex, Institute for Social and Economic Research 2022) and are weighted. This figure omits the 2017 general election.

in all three general elections that we studied, those who did support Leave expressed similar views of European immigrants as those who voted Conservative.

This sense of unfairness was echoed by Leave voters who drew a distinction between their own experience of migration to the United Kingdom or that of their older relatives and the seemingly easier experience of European immigrants. A Labour voter recounted an experience with a European colleague who did not have sufficient English skills on arrival: "I remember a colleague [European] did not know how to speak English....As for us, we had to go through a test to prove we knew English." The extra barriers placed in the way of immigrants from outside of the EU seemed unfair. A Conservative voter made a similar distinction regarding receiving benefits from the welfare state, noting that "Even though I am from a different country as well, I have never claimed any benefits or anything like that....I didn't think it's fair when you can work and you're opting not to work because...you belong to the EU, you've got the rights and stuff." This seemed unjust due to both the perceived inequality in eligibility for state support and because it contravened strong norms in favor of employment and self-sufficiency.

Even those respondents who defended Romanians and Poles from what they perceived as unfair criticism sometimes repeated the same characterizations, making it clear that even those who attempted to resist the ethnocentric arguments against migration from Europe endorsed many

elements of the Leave campaign's narratives. For example: "Those sort of people [Romanian, Polish]—they're hard-working people. You know, they're prepared to come to the country and work hard...and maybe you could argue that actually, you know, that the typical sort of white English person maybe isn't prepared to do that." Another respondent made clear that the immigrants themselves were not the reason they supported Leave, explaining that "I have big respect for people who want to come and leave their country and come here with their families to the UK," but that the respondent "blame[s] the government for not investing adequately in the infrastructure we need, whether that's school or housing." Although ethnic minority voters may reject clearly nativist populist appeals that also may exclude them, the broader complaints that public services and quality employment opportunities were under pressure had broader resonance.

What Motivated Voters in the 2019 General Election?

Given that many ethnic minority voters agreed with the ethnocentric basis of the Leave side in the referendum, we address the question of why many subsequently rejected the ethnocentric Conservative Party campaign to become the party of Brexit in the 2019 general election.

There was broad agreement among Leave respondents that racism exists to some extent in the United Kingdom, and those who identified it as a problem were clearly in

agreement that it is unjust. A Conservative voter observed that “I mean, racism is a big card and it’s still there and I think in this country it does hold you back if you’re an ethnic minority in many ways.” Similarly, a Labour voter explained that “all the foreigners get [abuse] because they’re not from this country. I don’t think it’s fair they get that abuse.” However, the most significant difference between those who voted Conservative and Labour in 2019 was that Conservative Leavers often expressed the view that race and discrimination were not central to how they see politics or make their decisions. Conservative voters made statements such as “I think [race and politics] are quite separate” and that race and religion should have “nothing to do with government whether that be Labour or Conservatives.” One voter described his dislike when politicians try to appeal to voters only on the basis of ethnicity: “Keep on talking about one subject when you’re talking to ethnic people, when they come and give a lecture...they always talk about the color; you should be talking about different things: education, business, and everything.” He later expressed his frustration when politicians talk about “color” only to “ethnic people,” stating that it is lecturing voters—presumably, instead of listening to them. Other voters made comments suggesting that they were circumspect about the existence of racism in the Conservative Party. For instance, one Conservative voter explained that “I think they’re all equally as bad as each other,” stating that Tony Blair’s Labour government did not stand up for Muslims after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, or on July 7, 2005. Another voter accepted that the Conservatives “also make mistakes but then nobody can say they are perfect.” Perhaps because of these impressions, awareness of racism did not prevent them from supporting the party—other issues were more important to them.

In contrast, some Labour voters perceived addressing racism and ethnic disparities as a key condition for whether they would support a party: “It’s really about, are they recognizing the Black and ethnic minorities within their policies....They haven’t really addressed anything such as systemic racism.” However, respondents spoke about supporting Labour most often because it was perceived as a party for the working class: “We’ve always voted for Labour and the reason being is they are for the working people. I don’t think the Tories are for the working people at all.” This was particularly the case for voters who said they habitually voted Labour. Moreover, voters made clear connections between Labour being the party for working-class people and the party for ethnic minorities—these two groups often were seen as being one and the same. For instance, one voter explained her impression of the party as: “Labour, I think they support the working class, the ethnic groups, so they’re more supportive of everyone, I think.” Referring to the fact that his social circle supports Labour, another voter said: “I haven’t researched it. It’s just the one that I hear from my family and friends which is better for working-class people.”

Respondents who did vote Conservative clearly cared most about Brexit and even used phrases similar to the party’s

campaign slogan: “To get Brexit done and dusted” and “Brexit was the main thing.” Conservative voters also wanted to help the party secure a sufficiently large majority to avoid the parliamentary gridlock that had plagued Theresa May’s minority government: “It was important...for the Conservatives to win...by a good majority to be able to do anything.” For Leavers who voted Conservative for the first time (post-referendum), the relative importance of Brexit compared to other political issues therefore may have been sufficient to convince them to support the Conservatives.

Labour Leavers sometimes commented on the fact that although they saw a slight conflict with Labour due to the party’s relative support for Remain, other issues were more important to them. One voter highlighted that “obviously, Labour, they really sort of wanted to stay, so that went a little bit against the grain of what I wanted to do.” However, many Labour Leave voters did not mention Brexit at all, emphasizing instead the habitual, class, and ethnic basis for their vote. For instance, one voter supported Labour “because I’m from a working-class background so I think that they support the working-class people more than the Conservatives would.”

Overall, Labour voters (among the interviewees, at least) often were habitual Labour supporters who explained their support partly with reference to class and partly with reference to their view of Labour as more pro-minority. For these voters, other issues (e.g., the NHS and education) were more salient than Brexit in the 2019 general election, so they resolved the potential cross-pressure by staying with their preexisting Labour support. Conversely, Conservative Leavers were able to prioritize supporting the party that promised to “Get Brexit Done.” They either initially did not feel cross-pressured by the Conservative Party’s reputation as ethnocentric (i.e., the “nasty party”) or were able to resolve this cross-pressure in favor of voting on Brexit because they believed race was not relevant to politics.

CONCLUSIONS

This article focuses on explaining the electoral choices of ethnic minority Leave voters in the 2019 general election, often described as the Brexit election. We demonstrate that whereas many ethnic minority voters were willing to support the ethnocentric Leave project in which the outgroup was white European migrants, they were much less likely to follow through in the 2019 general election by voting Conservative. The Conservatives’ reputation as the white ethnocentric party whose policies and narratives are directed against ethnic minorities clearly held them back. Yet, we also think the willingness to support ethnocentric political projects that are not aimed at ethnic minorities per se shows that they are—as Sobolewska and Ford (2020) stated—“necessity” identity liberals, aligning with the liberal electoral coalition if and when racism is being contested. The impact of this “necessity” coalition is pronounced particularly among Muslim voters, who have had almost no support for the Conservative Party since 2017 (Martin and Khan 2019). This may be related to the party’s reputation as especially Islamophobic.³

What are the lessons for political parties in the United Kingdom? First, the Conservatives can take heart that they received support from some minority voters for whom getting the referendum result implemented was a key issue in 2019.

We demonstrate that whereas many ethnic minority voters were willing to support the ethnocentric Leave project in which the outgroup was white European migrants, they were much less likely to follow through in the 2019 general election by voting Conservative.

Although some of these voters often saw issues with racism in society, they did not perceive it as relevant to their vote choice, choosing instead to vote for the party on the basis of Brexit. However, it remains to be seen whether these new(ish) voters will remain now that Brexit is no longer salient and receding due to the pandemic and looming economic crises. Sobolewska and Ford (2020) noted that first-time Conservative “identity conservative” voters may not be reliable new partisans if economic issues return to dominate the political debate in the future. We believe that this also applies to ethnic minority Leavers who voted on the issue of Brexit in 2019 but well may prioritize other issues in the future. The Labour Party seems more poised to benefit from its reputation as the party not only of immigrants and minorities but also of the working class. This echoes the concept of “linked fate,” which Heath et al. (2013) argued explains the variation in support for Labour and Conservatives among minority voters. This also suggests that Labour may have less of a problem reconciling ethnic minority Leave and Remain voters within its coalition than it has had in retaining former Labour Leavers in general.

Finally, what does this reveal about how political movements have drawn support from both minorities and nativist or ethnocentric voters? Our data demonstrate that some ethnic minority voters express concerns about immigration and sometimes mirror the anti-immigrant rhetoric that historically has been mobilized against them by nativist political actors. This should not be surprising; Storm, Sobolewska, and Ford (2017) showed that the relative status hierarchy of different ethnic groups in British public opinion is shared across different ethnic minority groups. Moreover, in 2010, the Ethnic Minority British Election Study also demonstrated substantial opposition among minorities to the resettlement of asylum seekers in the United Kingdom (Heath et al. 2013). Other scholars have noted that the different immigration rules applicable to EU and non-EU immigrants in the decade before the vote allowed Leave campaigners to posit arguments that highlighted how specifically Black and Asian minorities were disadvantaged by EU membership (Begum 2019; Saunders 2020). However, the results after the 2016 referendum show that political parties on the Leave side of the argument did not reach the same voters as the referendum. The difference may be related to necessity. Parties that seek a minimal winning coalition of voters have less need for a

broad coalition than a referendum campaign. The Conservatives or the Brexit Party arguably had more to gain by mobilizing white ethnocentric voters than by trying to appeal to voters with family experience of migration. The

referendum was able to successfully target different messages to different voters, and the campaign did not have to form a government and implement these different campaign promises. However, after the referendum, minority voters were not needed for the Conservatives to win elections; therefore, the campaign promises made to these groups receded in importance.

SUPPLEMENTARY MATERIALS

To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/S1049096523000288>.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This research was funded by the UK Economic and Social Research Council Research Grant No. ES/T015616/1 (“Ethnic Minority Voters in 2019: Brexitland, or Business as Usual?”) and by a COVID Research Recovery Grant from the University of Manchester.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Research documentation and data that support the quantitative findings of this study are openly available at the *PS: Political Science & Politics* Harvard Dataverse at <https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/UOYAFO>. Transcripts of the qualitative interviews that support the findings of the study are available from the UK Data Service, Study No. 855947 (<https://doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-855947>).

CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

NOTES

1. In 1964, the Labour Party won the election nationally but in Smethwick, there was a large swing in the opposite direction. The campaign in Smethwick was racially charged to the extreme and occurred in the context of a proposal from the Conservatives on Smethwick Council to compulsorily purchase vacant houses and rent them only to white families. The Conservative candidate Peter Griffith's success was attributed to his strong opposition to Commonwealth immigration, including his refusal to disown an extremely offensive slogan used by his supporters.
2. Further details are in the online appendix.
3. An investigation into Islamophobia in the Conservative Party reported in 2021 that some respondents mentioned Johnson's inflammatory column comparing women wearing full face veils to letterboxes.

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