

Opinion Polls and Populism in Modern British Elections

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Abstract

Opinion polls play a central role in modern British elections, being prominent in the media reporting of the campaign, increasingly so in recent years. Many of the voters seem to be interested in the polls, but whether they have a significant impact on voting behavior remains unresolved. Despite past suggestions that polls are inherently populist, they seem to have played only a limited role in the U.K.'s vote to leave the European Union ("Brexit"). Support for Brexit was rooted in existing political attitudes and brought to a peak by populist exploitation of discontent with the establishment.

Keywords: Elections, opinion polls, populism, U.K. politics.

Opinion polls are a central part of modern British elections, taking a prominent place in the media reporting of the campaign. Some dozen companies now publish polls during election campaigns; there was an average of almost two polls a day published in the most recent (2019) general election. There are no legal restrictions on polls except for a ban on the publication of exit polls before all voting has finished; in particular, unlike some other European countries, there is no moratorium on publication in the run-up to election day, and the final prediction polls are usually carried on newspaper front pages on the morning of the election itself.

The Scale and Scope of Polling

Polls frequently appear on the front pages throughout a campaign, are prominently discussed in broadcast news bulletins, and are widely shared on social media. Polls explore the public's view of party leaders; they cover attitudes toward the parties, their ideologies, and the way in which they are

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conducting their campaigns; and they look at a wide variety of election issues, measuring both their perceived importance and approval of the parties' policies to deal with them. Some elections also feature regional polls, polls of specific demographic subgroups, and polls of individual constituencies (electoral districts). But by far the greatest prominence in media reporting is given to national polls of voting intentions: reporters love to track the "horserace" and tell their audiences who is winning.

Polling voter preferences is a long-standing feature of British elections. Robert Worcester¹ identifies the 1970 general election as the first in which polls played a prominent role in the media's reporting of an election, which reflected a change in newspaper practice—previously, each newspaper commissioning polls had used a copyright to retain them as exclusives, but this practice was abandoned. "For the first time, polls dominated campaign coverage," Worcester writes, and notes that eight out of twenty-three front pages of *The Times* during the campaign led with a poll headline, and that months after the election 62 percent of the public remembered having seen poll reports.² The poll-led election in Britain is therefore half a century old.

The number of national voting intention polls conducted and published has increased substantially in recent years. As long ago as the 1983 election, when forty-nine voting intention polls were published during the campaign, the political scientist, Ivor Crewe, complained about "saturation polling";³ but by 2010, the number had risen to a peak of ninety-five, or about twenty-three a week.⁴ The number has been slightly lower in the subsequent three elections, but the voting intention polls have been supplemented by a higher volume of constituency polls and the introduction of new statistical modeling methods to estimate the number of seats which parties will win, using polls with much larger sample sizes.

Voting intentions are by no means the only content of most election polls. Companies poll on numerous other aspects of an election at the same time: Murray Goot found that in the thirty-nine days of the 2015 election campaign there were in total 138 published polls,⁵ encompassing more than 2,500 questions. More than half of these questions concentrated upon the leaders or the parties, and another quarter were about issues; only one in five was

¹ Robert M. Worcester, "Political Opinion Polling in Great Britain," in *Political Opinion Polling: An International Review*, ed. Robert M. Worcester (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983), 61-110.

² *Ibid.*, 74.

³ Ivor Crewe, "Saturation Polling, the Media and the 1983 Election," in *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1983*, ed. Ivor Crewe and Martin Harrop (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 233-253.

⁴ Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, "The Polls and Their Context," in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 22.

⁵ This number is considerably higher than that given in table 1 because it includes polls confined to Scotland, and others with no voting intention questions, although not constituency polls.

Table 1. Numbers of Published Voting Intention Polls, 1992–2019

Year	Final prediction polls						Campaign polls	
	Total	Face to face	Phone	Online	Mixed mode (phone and online)	MRP models	Total	Per week
1992	5	5	0	0	0	0	58	14.0
1997	5	2	3	0	0	0	62	10.3
2001	5	1	3	1	0	0	32	7.7
2005	6	0	4	2	0	0	64	15.4
2010	12	1	5	6	0	0	95	22.9
2015	11	0	4	7	0	0	92	17.4
2017	11	0	3	7	1	3	93	12.7
2019	11	0	3	8	0	3	76	13.0

Sources: Roger Mortimore and Anthony Wells, “The Polls and Their Context,” in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 19-38, and Mark Pack, “PollBase: British Voting Intention Opinion Polls since 1943,” *Mark Pack* (2020), <https://www.markpack.org.uk/opinion-polls/> (accessed May 21, 2020).

“Final polls” include all those known to have been published and making a prediction, with fieldwork wholly in the last week of the election. Except in 2015, the campaign is reckoned as beginning on the day the election date was announced; in 2015, on the day Parliament was dissolved. (MRP models are not included within the total of final polls as their fieldwork periods invariably begin before the final week.)

about voting. Moreover, there was considerable variety among the questions within each category: it was not simply a case of several pollsters replicating each other’s work, but a detailed and varied picture of the voters’ opinions built across all the companies’ offerings.⁶ The results were available from the polling companies and published on their websites; but these questions received, as they usually do, only a fraction of the media attention that was directed toward the ubiquitous voting intention polls tracking the horserace.

National voting intention polls can be a poor guide to results in each of the 650 constituencies or to the number of seats which each party will win. To fill this gap, constituency polls are sometimes conducted, and more recently complex statistical modeling of the constituency votes has been used to project

⁶ Murray Goot, “What the Polls Polled: Towards a Political Economy of British Election Polls,” in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 77-111.

the number of seats which will be won. The number of constituency polls fluctuates substantially from election to election: in 2015, 274 constituency polls were published,⁷ but this was quite unprecedented; in 2019, despite widespread discussion of tactical voting (for which constituency polls may provide useful local information), there were only about thirty.

A new development during the 2017 general election was the introduction of Multilevel Regression and Post-Stratification (MRP), combining voting intention polling with socio-geographic data in a complex statistical model, requiring a much larger sample size than a standard opinion poll. YouGov's MRP model correctly predicted an unexpected hung Parliament, with a number of apparently unlikely results in individual constituencies correctly forecast. Several companies produced MRP models in 2019, although on this occasion they were less conspicuously successful,⁸ whereas the national vote-share polls were, for the most part, very accurate (see below); nevertheless, it seems likely that MRP modeling will be an important part of the polling scene in future elections.

Dissemination of Poll Findings

In the past, most polls during elections were commissioned by newspapers, which reported them prominently and reached a wide audience. British newspapers are often stridently partisan, and this is sometimes reflected in their reporting or interpretation of the polls. Broadcasters, who are under a legal obligation to provide balanced coverage, have been more cautious. The BBC's policy is, and has been for many years, that "the result of an opinion poll should not be the lead or be headlined in broadcast or other output, unless it has prompted a story which itself merits being the lead or headlined and reference to the poll's findings is necessary to make sense of the story." The policy also states that "language should not give greater credibility to polls than they deserve. For example, polls 'suggest' and 'indicate', but never 'prove' or 'show'."⁹

Nevertheless, BBC news coverage includes a daily round-up of newspaper front pages, which ensures that all the latest polls are mentioned; and its political

⁷ Tomasz Mludzinski and Katharine Peacock, "Outside the Marginals: Constituency and Regional Polling at the 2015 General Election," in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 69.

⁸ Benjamin Lauderdale and Jack Blumenau, "Initial Performance Review of YouGov's MRP for the 2019 UK General Election" (December 17, 2019), http://benjaminlauderdale.net/files/blog/2019_YouGov_MRP_Initial_Assessment.pdf (accessed December 18, 2019).

⁹ "Editorial Guidelines," BBC, sec. 10.3.30 (2021), <https://www.bbc.com/editorialguidelines/guidelines/politics/guidelines> (accessed January 26, 2021), and "Producers' Guidelines, 4th Edition" (2000), p. 224, http://downloads.bbc.co.uk/guidelines/editorialguidelines/Legacy_Guidelines/2000-producers-guidelines.pdf (accessed January 26, 2021).

research department regularly collates and reports a poll-of-polls.¹⁰ Nor are the editors of the news bulletins reluctant to judge that recently published polls merit a mention in their stories. During the 2015 general election, analysis found that, in the final week of the campaign, 72 percent of all broadcast news bulletins about the election mentioned opinion polls.¹¹

The traditional dominance of TV, radio, and the press as most voters' main sources of political news has meant that opinion polls have usually reached their consumers in stories written by professional journalists, and that the selection of polls that they see tends to reflect the news agenda. But Britain's media landscape is changing, and this may affect the way in which poll findings are brought to the public's attention. Newspapers are now a news source used only by a minority—38 percent of the whole adult public and just 20 percent of sixteen to twenty-four-year-olds.¹² Those aged under thirty-five are now significantly more likely to obtain their news from social media than direct from a news provider.¹³

On the other hand, the influence of new media remains limited for the moment. The online news market in Britain is strongly dominated by the internet offerings of the traditional media, and the BBC is easily the most-used source of online news among British web-users; web-only sources are viewed only by a minority.¹⁴ BBC1's average weekly reach, although falling, is still above 70 percent,¹⁵ and even the beleaguered "Fleet Street" press, taking account of their combined print and online readerships, can still claim to reach half of the adult population daily, and four in five at least once a week.¹⁶

There is natural concern that if social media are to play a greater role in the dissemination of the polls, the quality and reliability of the information will suffer. The reporting of polls by experienced professional journalists, frequently specialists and who often work in close cooperation with the

¹⁰ See, for example, Peter Barnes, "General Election Poll Tracker: How Do the Parties Compare?" *BBC News*, sec. Election 2019 (December 11, 2019), <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-49798197> (accessed May 22, 2020).

¹¹ Charlie Beckett, "The Battle for the Stage: Broadcasting," in *The British General Election of 2015*, ed. Philip Cowley and Dennis Kavanagh (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 294.

¹² Jigsaw Research, "News Consumption in the UK: 2019 (Report for Ofcom)," Ofcom (July 24, 2019), <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/research-and-data/tv-radio-and-on-demand/news-media/news-consumption> (accessed May 22, 2020).

¹³ Nic Newman et al., "Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2019" (Oxford: Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism, 2019), p. 16, https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/sites/default/files/inline-files/DNR_2019_FINAL.pdf (accessed April 21, 2020).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁵ "Weekly TV Set Viewing Summary (Jan 2010–Jan 2020)," *BARB* (2020), <https://www.barb.co.uk/viewing-data/weekly-viewing-summary/> (accessed May 18, 2020).

¹⁶ "Introduction to News Brands," *Newsworks* (2020), <https://www.newsworks.org.uk/resources/introduction-to-newsbrands> (accessed May 18, 2020).

pollsters themselves,¹⁷ offers some guarantee of accurate reporting and interpretation that allows for the statistical limitations, even if the story is likely to be framed to fit an editorial agenda. Recent scares about the prevalence of “fake news” online underline these fears: deliberate misinterpretations, or even entirely fictional polls, would be easy enough to spread in the assurance that only a tiny minority of their audience would ever become aware of subsequent corrections or repudiations.

But the performance of professional journalists has also been far from perfect. Pollsters in Britain have complained for many years about the reporting of the polls,¹⁸ and the standard of media coverage was severely criticized by the parliamentary committee which investigated opinion polling in 2018.¹⁹ Secondary reporting of polls, in particular, is often less accurate or pays less attention to the necessary statistical niceties. These misinterpretations can develop in at least two distinct directions. Polls may be reported selectively, or their implications exaggerated, to lend support to a current news trope or an editorial policy.²⁰ Alternatively, a poll may be judged as newsworthy because its findings are surprising, even though this very fact underlines the risk that it is inaccurate. After the 1979 election, Ivor Crewe stated three propositions about the reporting of polls, the third of which was, “However improbable a poll finding is, the media will always publish (broadcast) it. The more improbable a poll finding, the more likely the media will give it prominence.”²¹ This is, perhaps, an inevitable consequence of the way that the media interpret their function and judge news values.

The Influence of Polls

Many of the public report (in polls!) that they are interested in poll findings. MORI polls at past elections have explored this: during the 1992 election,

¹⁷ Anthony Wells, “Written Evidence Submitted to the House of Lords Committee,” in *Oral and Written Evidence*, ed. House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media (London: House of Lords, 2018), para. 18, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/political-polling-digital-media/news-parliament-2017/political-polling-report-published/> (accessed April 17, 2018), and Robert M. Worcester and Roger Mortimore, *Explaining Labour's Landslide* (London: Politico's, 1999), 190-191.

¹⁸ Robert M. Worcester, *British Public Opinion: A Guide to the History and Methodology of Political Opinion Polling* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 123-131.

¹⁹ House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, “The Politics of Polling,” HL Paper (London: House of Lords, April 17, 2018), pp. 31-41, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/political-polling-digital-media/news-parliament-2017/political-polling-report-published/> (accessed April 17, 2018).

²⁰ Roger Mortimore, Gideon Skinner, and Tomasz Mludzinski, “‘Cameron's Problem with Women’: The Reporting and the Reality of Gender-Based Trends in Attitudes to the Conservatives, 2010–2011,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 68, no. 1 (2015): 97-115, doi:10.1093/pa/gst031, and Wells, “Written Evidence Submitted to the House of Lords Committee,” para. 19.

²¹ Ivor Crewe, “‘Improving But Could Do Better’: The Media and the Polls in the 1979 General Election,” in *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1979*, ed. Robert M. Worcester and Martin Harrop (London: George Allen & Unwin, 1982).

8 percent said they were “very interested” and 32 percent “fairly interested” in what the opinion polls were saying about the election, and in 2005, an election when there was much less doubt about the anticipated result than in 1992, they found almost identical results, 8 percent “very interested” and 31 percent fairly interested.²² Some take a deeper interest: according to the 2019 British Election Study internet panel, as many as 11 percent of the public identify with a political party and agree that, “If this party does badly in opinion polls, my day is ruined.”²³

Does the publication of opinion polls influence voting behavior? It would be highly implausible to claim that polls can never, under any circumstances, affect the behavior of a single voter. However, it is less obvious whether there is any significant probability of the cumulative effect on individual voters being sufficient to have an impact on the outcome of an election, either at the national level or even within an individual constituency.

Evidence of a direct impact of the opinion polls in Britain on voting behavior is generally weak, and often conflicting. During the 1983 election, for example, Ian McAllister and Donley Studlar claimed to have found evidence of a bandwagon effect (voters swinging to the party they believed to be in the lead), while Paul Whiteley, Richard Rose, and Ivor Crewe all diagnosed the diametrically opposed underdog effect. But all were reluctant to suggest that these influences affected large numbers of votes.²⁴

Few voters admit that polls directly affect their voting choices. Over the three elections between 1997 and 2005, the proportion of voters who said that opinion polls had influenced the way they intended to vote ranged from 2 percent to 4 percent.²⁵

Perhaps the likeliest form of influence is on tactical voting: voters might use information from national or local polls to judge which of the candidates

²² “Interest in Opinion Polls during Elections 1992–2005,” *Ipsos MORI* (May 3, 2005), <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/interest-opinion-polls-during-elections-1992-2005> (accessed April 24, 2020).

²³ Analysis of data included in Ed Fieldhouse et al., “November 2019 (Pre-2019 Election) Wave of the 2014–2023 British Election Study Internet Panel (Wave 17)” (2020), <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/data-object/wave-19-of-the-2014-2023-british-election-study-internet-panel/> (accessed April 24, 2020).

²⁴ Ian McAllister and Donley T. Studlar, “Bandwagon, Underdog, or Projection? Opinion Polls and Electoral Choice in Britain, 1979–1987,” *Journal of Politics* 53, no. 3 (August 1991): 720–741, doi:10.2307/2131577; Paul Whiteley, “The Accuracy and Influence of the Polls in the 1983 General Election,” in *Political Communications: The General Election Campaign of 1983*, ed. Ivor Crewe and Martin Harrop (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 312–324; Richard Rose, “Opinion Polls as Feedback Mechanisms: From Cavalry Charge to Economic Warfare,” in *Britain at the Polls, 1983: A Study of the General Election*, ed. Austin Ranney (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1985); and Crewe, “Saturation Polling, the Media and the 1983 Election.”

²⁵ “Election Campaign Influences on Voting 1997–2005,” *Ipsos MORI* (June 5, 2005), <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/election-campaign-influences-voting-1997-2005> (accessed April 24, 2020).

they find acceptable is most likely to win. The level of tactical voting in Britain probably varies from election to election, but the 2019 British Election Study internet panel found 9 percent of voters explaining their vote by saying, “I really preferred another party but it had no chance of winning in this constituency.”²⁶ This estimate would imply that tactical voting has the potential to swing the outcome in many constituencies. (In 2019, 116 of the 650 constituencies had a victory margin smaller than 9 percent of the vote.)

To what extent are voters’ decisions whether to vote tactically informed by opinion polls? The national polls give only the vaguest indication of constituency standings, but voters may feel that tactical voting is more valuable when the national outcome looks likely to be close. Moreover, the polls also help to set the news agenda: if they are showing a tight race, there will tend to be more media discussion of possible tactical voting and more concentration upon the key marginal constituencies.

More local information would be useful, but constituency polls normally cover only a small minority of seats. By contrast, the MRP models which first appeared in 2017 offer projections from national polling data of the result for every constituency in the country. At least two popular websites giving tactical voting advice (getvoting.org and remainunited.org) relied on MRP projections as the basis of their recommendations in 2019.²⁷ This may have influenced the decisions of a significant number of voters: Chris Hanretty’s analysis suggests that the impact of a candidate being endorsed as the best tactical voting option by Best for Britain (the anti-Brexit organization behind the getvoting.org website) was around 4.5 percentage points, a very substantial effect and certainly sufficient to affect the result in some constituencies.²⁸

But the potential influence of polls is not limited to their direct impact on voting behavior. The perceived state of the parties plays an important role in setting the agenda and tone of the news reporting, and may affect the choices that the parties make in campaigning. Moreover, party members also read the polls, which may affect their choices in leadership elections, in candidate selection, or even on the direction of party policy.

The 2015 election offers a clear case of an agenda-setting effect. The Conservative Party based the main thrust of its campaigning on the risk of a hung Parliament in which a minority Labour government might be at the mercy of the Scottish National Party (SNP)—campaign advertisements showed the

²⁶ Analysis of data included in Fieldhouse et al., “December 2019 (Post-2019 Election) Wave of the 2014–2023 British Election Study Internet Panel (Wave 19).”

²⁷ Chris Hanretty, “Tactical Voting Advice Sites,” in *UK Election Analysis 2019: Media, Voters and the Campaign*, ed. Daniel Jackson et al. (Bournemouth: Centre for Comparative Politics and Media Research, 2019), pp. 34-35, http://eprints.bournemouth.ac.uk/33165/13/UK Election Analysis 2019_Jackson-Thorsen-Lilleker-and-Weidhase_v1.pdf (accessed April 22, 2020).

²⁸ *Ibid.*

Labour leader, Ed Miliband, being dominated by the SNP's leaders, stuffed into the top pocket of one and as a puppet whose strings were being pulled by another.²⁹ The credibility of this campaign depended upon a hung Parliament being seen as a real possibility, as the polls appeared to indicate; but it later became clear that the polls were wrong and that the Conservatives probably had been clearly ahead throughout the election. Arguably, therefore, the inaccuracy of the polling had a substantial impact on the campaign, although it is known that the Conservatives had planned to campaign on the SNP/hung Parliament issue long before the final few weeks.³⁰

Integrity and Accuracy

The integrity of the pollsters is not usually in doubt. Almost all British polls are conducted by full-service market research organizations; polling makes up only a tiny part of their turnover, is usually unprofitable, and is conducted mainly for the publicity, name recognition being beneficial to other parts of their business.³¹ Since inaccurate or incompetent polling risks damaging their corporate reputations, they have every incentive to strive for accuracy and high quality. Most pollsters belong to the British Polling Council (BPC), which enforces a high degree of transparency: questionnaires, computer tables of results, and details of methodology must be publicly posted on the companies' websites within forty-eight hours of a poll being conducted.³² The BPC has no power over research methodology, but most pollsters also belong to the Market Research Society (MRS), whose Code of Conduct imposes a requirement for sound methodology, accurate reporting of results, and conformity to strict ethical standards. Therefore, although the industry relies entirely on voluntary self-regulation, there are effective channels of complaint and strict controls which make it unlikely that dishonest or reckless pollsters could thrive for any length of time.

Unfortunately, integrity has not proved (and cannot be expected to prove) a guarantee of perfect polling accuracy. It is undeniable that during some recent elections the polls have been inaccurate, most notably in 2015 when the final

²⁹ Robert Worcester et al., *Explaining Cameron's Comeback* (London: IndieBooks, 2016).

³⁰ Jeremy Sinclair and Simon Atkinson, "An Interview with Jeremy Sinclair," in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 116.

³¹ Mortimore and Wells, "The Polls and Their Context."

³² At recent elections, the few pollsters not belonging to the BPC have voluntarily followed the same rules: see John Curtice, "Evidence to the House of Lords Committee," in *Oral and Written Evidence*, ed. House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media (London: House of Lords, 2018), p. 92, <https://www.parliament.uk/business/committees/committees-a-z/lords-select/political-polling-digital-media/news-parliament-2017/political-polling-report-published/> (accessed April 17, 2018).

polls unanimously predicted a near dead heat between the two major parties rather than the clear Conservative win that ensued. On that occasion, the “poll of polls” underestimated the Conservative lead by 6.4 percentage points.³³ Plainly, it is a legitimate cause for concern if the polls are influencing the behavior of voters and the information that the polls are giving is misleading.

Nevertheless, the recent failings of the polls are often exaggerated. Will Jennings and Christopher Wlezien have analyzed the entire record of pre-election polling worldwide between 1943 and 2013 and found that the average error in measuring party vote shares in single-member-district parliamentary elections has been 2.4 percentage points.³⁴ During the last five British general elections, the two-party error has been almost exactly at that level on two occasions, and twice very much better; only once (in 2015, an exceptional election) was it significantly worse (see table 2). Jennings and Wlezien also found that there is no evidence that the polls are becoming systematically less accurate, either in Britain or globally.

In fact, even when the polls are seen to have gotten it wrong, they are often accurate in all but one important regard: in 2015, for example, they were wrong on the key statistic of the Conservative lead over Labour, yet were still remarkably accurate in detecting the collapse of the Liberal Democrat vote to a third of its previous level, the rise of the previously insignificant UK Independence Party (UKIP) to third place on 12 percent of the national vote, and the extraordinary expansion of SNP support in Scotland, from 20 percent of the vote to 50 percent. This was all useful information for the voter hoping to understand the political context of the election, which could not have been found from any source except polls and surveys.³⁵ The problem was that it was the Conservative lead over Labour that was the headline figure in most of the reporting, and hence the story told by the reporting of the polls was wrong. In 2010, by contrast, when almost all the polls measured the Conservative lead correctly but badly over-estimated the strength of the third party, the Liberal Democrats, they received little criticism.

There are periodic attempts in Parliament by opponents of polls to argue for legal restrictions or state regulation, but these have never received government

³³ Nick Moon, “The Performance of the Polls,” in *Political Communication in Britain: Polling, Campaigning and Media in the 2015 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 39-48, and Patrick Sturgis et al., “An Assessment of the Causes of the Errors in the 2015 UK General Election Opinion Polls,” *Journal of the Royal Statistical Society: Series A (Statistics in Society)* 181, no. 3 (June 2018): 757-781, doi:10.1111/rssa.12329.

³⁴ Will Jennings and Christopher Wlezien, “Election Polling Errors across Time and Space,” *Nature Human Behaviour* 2, no. 4 (April 2018): 276-283, doi:10.1038/s41562-018-0315-6, and Will Jennings, “The Polls in 2017,” in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 209-220.

³⁵ See Curtice, “Evidence to the House of Lords Committee,” 84-86.

Table 2. Accuracy of the Final Voting Intention Poll Predictions of Major Party Vote Shares

Year	Over-estimate or under-estimate of party share in “poll of polls”			Average error (three parties)	Average error (two parties)	Error in winning party’s lead
	Conservative	Labour	Liberal Democrat			
2005	-0.7	+1.3	-0.1	0.7	1.0	2.0
2010	-1.8	-2.7	+4.3	2.9	2.3	0.9
2015	-4.1	+2.3	+1.0	2.5	3.2	6.4
2017	-0.4	-4.5	+1.0	2.0	2.5	4.1
2019	-1.5	+0.5	+0.1	0.7	1.0	2.0
Average	-1.7	-0.6	+1.3	1.8	2.0	3.1

Sources: Data given in Roger Mortimore and Andrew Blick, eds., *Butler’s British Political Facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 443-444, and Pack, “PollBase.”

support; the recent House of Lords Select Committee inquiry, which decided against recommending any ban on polling in the run-up to elections, may have settled the issue for the moment. Nevertheless, the report darkly warned that, “if polls continue to be a poor predictor of the eventual outcomes of elections, and if the media reporting of such polls continues to influence public and political discourse in a misleading way, then arguments by supporters of a ban would be strengthened.”³⁶

Polls and Populism

Different writers on populism have suggested various ways in which opinion polls might have a populist impact. Harvey Mansfield sees opinion polls as an “extrapolitical form of populism” in themselves, which, by providing feedback on government popularity independent of elections and with much greater frequency, encourage reaction to short-term shifts in public opinion.³⁷ Similarly, parties using polling to help design their electoral strategies and political communications has sometimes been characterized as populism.³⁸

Arguably, there is a clear distinction between allowing public opinion to shape the presentation of policies and allowing it to determine the policies themselves. The latter would certainly seem to fit some theorists’ definitions

³⁶ House of Lords Select Committee on Political Polling and Digital Media, “The Politics of Polling,” 88.

³⁷ Harvey C. Mansfield, “Democracy and Populism,” *Society* 32 (1995): 30-32, doi:10.1007 / BF02693334.

³⁸ For example, John Clemens, *Polls, Politics and Populism* (Aldershot: Gower, 1983), 45-50.

of populism: “the purpose of institutions and leaders should be to find out what [the will of the majority] is and to put it into practice.”³⁹ In Britain, the party most frequently accused of allowing polling to dictate its policy stances, both in opposition and subsequently in government, is the Labour Party under Tony Blair’s leadership between 1994 and 2007 (“New Labour”), although its opinion research at this period relied more on qualitative focus groups than on quantitative opinion polling.⁴⁰ But Blair’s case demonstrates how—in the British context of an essentially two-party system— following the polls will not lead to the characteristic populist approach of appealing to the most alienated voters: the optimum electoral strategy is to satisfy the median voter. As Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath have pointed out, New Labour’s opinion research drove Blair toward “aggressive centrism,” neglecting and alienating the Labour Party’s historic working-class base; indeed, by doing so it “helped create space for [the] populist mobilization” that ended in the vote for Brexit.⁴¹

Recent concern about populism has centered less on governments in power seeking to be re-elected than on parties or political movements outside government hoping to gain power or influence decisions—notably, in Britain, the successful campaign in the 2016 referendum to achieve a vote for Brexit. Of course, opposition parties as well as those in government can read the public polls and commission their own private ones. Polling might inform the planning of a heresthetic maneuver by which the ideological battleground is reconfigured to the advantage of an opposition group.⁴² The creation of an association in voters’ minds between EU membership and immigration between 2010 and 2016 is a clear example of such a maneuver, but it is not clear whether UKIP, the party mainly responsible for achieving this, made much use of polling evidence in devising this strategy.

More relevant to the case of Brexit, perhaps, is the suggestion that polls help the media to advance a populist agenda. Frank Esser at al. cite Jean-Jacques Becker’s contention that “the media use the rhetorical stylistic device of the opinion poll to insert themselves into the political process as

³⁹ Elisabeth Ivarsson, “Siren Songs: Reflections on Contemporary Populism in Europe’s Old Democracies,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 50.

⁴⁰ Philip Gould, *The Unfinished Revolution: How the Modernisers Saved the Labour Party* (London: Little, Brown, 1998); John Hills, “Following or Leading Public Opinion? Social Security Policy and Public Attitudes Since 1997,” *Fiscal Studies* 23, no. 4 (2002): 539-558, doi:10.1111/j.1475-5890.2002.tb00072.x; and Heather Savigny, “Focus Groups and Political Marketing: Science and Democracy as Axiomatic?” *British Journal of Politics & International Relations* 9, no. 1 (February 2007): 122-137, doi:10.1111/j.1467-856X.2007.00253.x.

⁴¹ Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, “Brexit, Populism, and the 2016 UK Referendum to Leave the EU,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 114.

⁴² As described by William H. Riker, *Liberalism against Populism: A Confrontation between the Theory of Democracy and the Theory of Social Choice* (San Francisco: W. H. Freeman, 1982).

presumed public representatives.”⁴³ Certainly, from as long ago as the 1990s, the Euro-skeptic press frequently commissioned opinion polls showing that the majority of the public opposed joining the single European currency and that there was widespread disquiet about other parts of the European project (for example, see the many polls on the subject commissioned by the *Sun*, the *Mail on Sunday*, and the *Sunday Telegraph* in MORI’s archives⁴⁴). Perhaps these helped those newspapers articulate a convincing anti-EU message. The evidence that polling on attitudes toward political issues can sometimes sway the views of some of the audience that learns about them is more convincing than the evidence for bandwagon effects from voting intention polls,⁴⁵ and this was demonstrated in the specific case of British attitudes toward the European Economic Community, as it then was;⁴⁶ but the consistently Euro-skeptic attitudes that those polls reported from the start suggest that the newspapers were pushing at an open door.

It also can be argued that polls play a part, if only a minor one, in preparing the ground more generally for a populist upsurge. Many scholars contend that the media’s predominant framing of electoral politics as a strategic game⁴⁷ fuels disillusionment with politicians and the political system.⁴⁸ The commissioning and reporting of opinion polls, especially “horserace” voting intention polls, is a central part of this framing.

Public Opinion and Populism in Brexit Britain

The question of populism in British politics has received much international attention since the 2016 referendum vote to Leave the European Union.

⁴³ Frank Esser, Agnieszka Stepińska, and David Nicolas Hopmann, “Populism and the Media: Cross-National Findings and Perspectives,” in *Populist Political Communication in Europe*, ed. Toril Aalberg et al. (2017), <https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9781317224747> (accessed October 29, 2020), and Jean-Jacques Becker, “L’opinion Publique: Un Populisme?” [Public opinion: Populism?], *Vingtieme Siecle. Revue d’histoire* [Twentieth century: Historical review] 56 (1997): 92-98.

⁴⁴ “Europe, the EU and the Euro,” *Ipsos MORI* (October 21, 2011), <https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/europe-eu-and-euro> (accessed October 29, 2020).

⁴⁵ Catherine Marsh, “Back on the Bandwagon: The Effect of Opinion Polls on Public Opinion,” *British Journal of Political Science* 15, no. 1 (1984): 51-74, doi:10.1017/S0007123400004063.

⁴⁶ Catherine Marsh and John O’Brien, “Opinion Bandwagons in Attitudes towards the Common Market,” *Journal of the Market Research Society* 31 (1989): 295-305.

⁴⁷ Toril Aalberg, Jesper Strömbäck, and Claes H. de Vreese, “The Framing of Politics as Strategy and Game: A Review of Concepts, Operationalizations and Key Findings,” *Journalism: Theory, Practice & Criticism* 13, no. 2 (February 2012): 162-178, doi:10.1177/1464884911427799, and Mike Wayne and Craig Murray, “U.K. Television News: Monopoly Politics and Cynical Populism,” *Television & New Media* 10, no. 5 (2009): 416-433, doi:10.1177/1527476409334020.

⁴⁸ Joseph N. Cappella and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, “News Frames, Political Cynicism, and Media Cynicism,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 546 (1996): 71-84, and Jay G. Blumler and Stephen Coleman, “Political Communication in Freefall: The British Case—and Others?” *The International Journal of Press/Politics* 15, no. 2 (April 2010): 139-154, doi:10.1177/1940161210362263.

The campaign for Brexit displayed many of the typical signs of a populist movement: rhetoric demonizing establishment elites; involvement of charismatic leaders whose popularity seemed independent of their parties and of their policy stances; and a mobilization of voters previously disillusioned with and disengaged from the political system. Nevertheless, Stephanie Rickard has argued that the Leave campaign failed to conform to the classic pattern of populism in important ways: its leaders were not outsiders, but part of the establishment, and the referendum was not triggered by rising popular discontent, being instead a (misjudged) party political maneuver by a Conservative prime minister who wished to defend the status quo.⁴⁹

In considering the role that populism may have played in delivering a vote for Brexit, it is important to understand that this support was not conjured from nothing in the immediate period before the referendum: there has always been a substantial element of hostility toward the European Union and its predecessors in British public opinion, ever since Britain joined the European Communities in 1973. Even at the time of the 1975 referendum (when the U.K. voted two-to-one to remain in Europe, two-and-a-half years after joining), “Support for membership was wide but it did not run deep.”⁵⁰ The EU never succeeded in engendering any widespread affection for the institution in Britain, nor did most Britons ever regard themselves as being “European”; Eurobarometer surveys consistently found that public opinion in Britain was less supportive than in almost all other member states.⁵¹ The Brexit campaign successfully harnessed new arguments to an existing lack of commitment to the European ideal rather than turning around positive opinions.

Euro-skepticism has periodically been a theme in election campaigns by the main opposition party at general elections. At the time of both elections in 1974, the Labour Party’s policy was to withdraw, although once elected, its leader, Harold Wilson, renegotiated Britain’s terms of membership and then held a referendum in which—in defiance of his party’s policy—he urged the public to vote for continued membership, which it did. In 1983 and 1987, Labour once more made withdrawal from the Community a manifesto commitment. In 2001, the Conservatives campaigned against Britain joining the Euro, arguing that a vote against the government was the “last chance to save the pound.” Moreover, for much of the period between 1975 and 2016, most of the national press was vocally Euro-skeptic. Therefore, outright opposition to EU membership, while usually (apparently) a minority opinion, was very much within the mainstream of respectable political debate.

⁴⁹ Stephanie Rickard, “Populism and the Brexit Vote,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 120-122.

⁵⁰ David Butler and Uwe W. Kitzinger, *The 1975 Referendum* (London: Macmillan, 1976), 280.

⁵¹ Eurobarometer, “Eurobarometer Interactive,” *European Commission—Public Opinion*, <https://ec.europa.eu/commfrontoffice/publicopinion/index.cfm/Chart/getChart/themeKy/3/groupKy/3> (accessed November 24, 2020).

Perhaps the most significant role in turning this minority into a majority was played by the UK Independence Party, founded in 1993 to campaign for Britain to leave the EU. UKIP won only 3 percent of the vote in the 2010 general election, but its support then rose so rapidly that it won the 2014 European Parliament election in Britain with 27 percent of the vote and took third place and 13 percent of the vote in the 2015 general election.⁵²

The rise in UKIP's support was partly explained by its success in linking for the first time the issue of EU membership to the public's existing opposition to immigration, although the media also gave some of the credit to the personal popularity of its leader, Nigel Farage.⁵³ UKIP's agenda was framed in explicitly populist terms: a 2012 Farage election message argued, "Why vote for UKIP in your local elections? Because UKIP stands for bringing government back to where it belongs—with the people. We believe in power for local people over the councils, and for local councils over central government."⁵⁴ This appeal was particularly successful "among sections of the electorate that felt economically 'left behind' by the country's rapid economic transformation and also culturally under threat from inward migration." Demographically, UKIP's vote was predominantly old, male, white, and working-class. Neither UKIP support alone nor the personal appeal of Nigel Farage can explain more than a fraction of the vote for Brexit, but "the sort of places that were most likely to support Brexit were the same ones that had previously given support to UKIP."⁵⁵ (Farage was not part of the official Vote Leave campaign during the referendum, instead heading an independent, unofficial campaign, LeaveEU.)

Another prominent campaigner in the 2016 referendum was Boris Johnson, now prime minister of the U.K. Johnson has built his career on being "the celebrity politician par excellence, whose charismatic and eccentric public persona appears to provide an antidote to the technocratic managerial style of party politicians today."⁵⁶ Despite his hyper-establishment Eton-and-Oxford background, he cultivated an image of being an outsider, different from other

⁵² Roger Mortimore and Andrew Blick, eds., *Butler's British Political Facts* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 382, 826.

⁵³ James Dennison and Matthew Goodwin, "Immigration, Issue Ownership and the Rise of UKIP," *Parliamentary Affairs* 68, no. supplement 1 (September 2015): 168-187, doi:10.1093/pa/gsv034; Geoffrey Evans and Jonathan Mellon, "Immigration, Euroscepticism, and the Rise and Fall of UKIP," *Party Politics* 25, no. 1 (January 2019): 76-87, doi:10.1177/1354068818816969; and Alex Hunt, "UKIP: The Story of the UK Independence Party's Rise," *BBC News* (November 21, 2014), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-21614073> (accessed November 24, 2020).

⁵⁴ Nigel Farage, "Power to Local People," in *Shaping the Future: UKIP's Straight-Talking Manifesto for the Local Government Elections 2012*, UKIP (2012), p. 3, <http://ukipmidsussex.org/wp-content/uploads/2011/04/Local-Manifesto-2012.pdf> (accessed October 26, 2020).

⁵⁵ Goodwin and Heath, "Brexit, Populism and the 2016 Referendum," 114-115.

⁵⁶ Candida Yates, "Political Sport and the Sport of Politics: A Psycho-Cultural Study of Play, the Antics of Boris Johnson and the London 2012 Olympic Games," in *Media and the Inner World: Psycho-Cultural Approaches to Emotion, Media and Popular Culture*, ed. Caroline Bainbridge and Candida Yates (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 34, doi:10.1057/9781137345547_3.

politicians, and succeeded in projecting an image of “authenticity” to many voters.⁵⁷ He was elected and re-elected as Conservative mayor of London at a time when the Conservative vote in all other elections in London was in sharp decline. At the time of the referendum, he was probably one of the best-known Conservative MPs, but had never been even a junior minister. He became a leader of the Vote Leave campaign and was the only one to be featured in some of its more prominent social media advertisements, although only a minority of its advertisements referenced any politician.⁵⁸

The populist logic of the Vote Leave campaign was perhaps most clearly expressed by another of its leaders, Michael Gove, the most senior minister supporting Brexit. In a television interview during the referendum campaign, he was asked why the public should trust himself, Boris Johnson, and Nigel Farage, rather than “every single one of our allies, the Bank of England, the IFS, the IMF, the CBI, five former NATO secretary-generals [sic], the chief exec of the NHS [National Health Service] and most of the leaders of the trade unions in Britain.” He replied, “I’m not asking the public to trust me. I’m asking the public to trust themselves. I’m asking the British public to take back control of our destiny from those organizations which are distant, unaccountable, elitist... . The people who are backing the Remain campaign are people who have done very-well-thank-you out of the European Union.” Later he added, “I think the people of this country have had enough of experts with organizations with acronyms saying that they know what is best and getting it consistently wrong,” and ended that section of the interview by telling the interviewer, “You’re on the side, Faisal, of the elites, I’m on the side of the people.”⁵⁹

“Take Back Control” became the principal campaign slogan of the Brexit supporters, and it “meant all things to all people—for some it meant a reassertion of parliamentary sovereignty, for others the ability to stop paying money to ‘Brussels’, and for others an end to uncontrolled immigration from elsewhere in the EU.”⁶⁰ It spoke especially to those who rejected Remain’s

⁵⁷ Andy Ruddock, “Invisible Centers: Boris Johnson, Authenticity, Cultural Citizenship and a Centrifugal Model of Media Power,” *Social Semiotics* 16, no. 2 (June 1, 2006): 263-282, doi:10.1080/10350330600664847, and Katharine Dommett, “The Oratory of Boris Johnson,” in *Conservative Orators from Baldwin to Cameron*, ed. Richard Hayton and Andrew S. Crines (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 166-181.

⁵⁸ Andrew Griffin, “Brexit Adverts Used by Leave Campaign Revealed by Facebook,” *The Independent* (July 26, 2018), <https://www.independent.co.uk/life-style/gadgets-and-tech/news/brexit-facebook-ads-leave-campaign-nhs-immigration-boris-johnson-a8465516.html> (accessed November 3, 2020), and BBC News, “Vote Leave’s Targeted Brexit Ads Released by Facebook,” *BBC News* (July 26, 2018), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-politics-44966969> (accessed November 3, 2020).

⁵⁹ Faisal Islam and Michael Gove, “Interview with Michael Gove,” *EU: In Or Out? Sky News* (June 3, 2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t8D8AoC-5i8> (accessed October 20, 2020); passages quoted are at 5:49, 6:50, and 8:37 minutes into the video.

⁶⁰ Anand Menon, “Taking Control: Before and After the British EU Referendum,” *Comparative Politics Newsletter* 26, no. 2 (Fall 2016): 117.

message of a risk to economic prosperity because they felt they had never had any benefit from that prosperity.⁶¹

British Election Study data showed that voting for Brexit was much higher in lower-income households than higher-income ones, higher among those out of work than among those employed, higher in the lower-skilled manual occupations than among professionals, and higher among people with no educational qualifications than among post-graduates.⁶² Working-class voters in areas once dependent on heavy industry proved particularly significant, and their situation has been explained in terms of grievances that might make them susceptible to populist arguments. On the whole, the British economy has proved resilient in the face of global competition; however, in these areas “there is often work... but it’s unsatisfying, insecure and low-paid. This new work doesn’t do what the old work did: it doesn’t offer a sense of identity or community or self-worth...[P]arts of the country have simply been left behind.”⁶³ This was blamed on neglect by the political establishment: “It is citizens who have long felt excluded from the mainstream consensus who used the referendum to voice their distinctive views not only about EU membership but a wider array of perceived threats to their national identity, values and ways of life.”⁶⁴

But the vote for Brexit cannot be explained by a single factor or by the support of a single demographic group: it had many causes. Attitudes toward immigration were highly influential on support for Brexit, and were a much stronger predictor of vote in the referendum than was economic status: among people who thought that Britain should admit fewer immigrants, 88 percent voted for Brexit; among those who preferred to keep immigration as it was, 21 percent did so.⁶⁵ Attitudes toward Boris Johnson and Nigel Farage were also significant, but had a weaker effect than either immigration or economic perceptions, weaker also than emotional reactions to the European Union;⁶⁶ moreover, such attitudes cut both ways and as Farage, in particular, was viewed negatively by many more voters than viewed him positively, this relationship between leader image and voting behavior may indicate that the leaders did more harm than good to the Leave cause.

⁶¹ Goodwin and Heath, “Brexit, Populism and the 2016 Referendum,” 116.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 115.

⁶³ John Lanchester, “Brexit Blues,” *London Review of Books* (July 27, 2016), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n15/john-lanchester/brexit-blues> (accessed October 20, 2020).

⁶⁴ Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath, “Brexit and the Left Behind: A Tale of Two Countries,” *LSE Brexit* (July 22, 2016), blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2016/07/22/brexit-and-the-left-behind-a-tale-of-two-countries/ (accessed October 20, 2020).

⁶⁵ Goodwin and Heath, “Brexit, Populism and the 2016 Referendum,” 115.

⁶⁶ Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, “Why Britain Voted for Brexit: An Individual-Level Analysis of the 2016 Referendum Vote,” *Parliamentary Affairs* 70, no. 3 (July 1, 2017): 439–464, doi:10.1093/pa/gsx005.

It should be understood that Brexit is not the only populist movement to have been prominent recently in Britain. Both the SNP and Plaid Cymru (Welsh nationalists) have framed their opposition to government austerity policies over the last decade in left-wing populist terms.⁶⁷ In the referendum on Scottish independence, held in 2014, campaigners argued (unsuccessfully) for independence to escape the dominance of the English political establishment and England's propensity for electing Conservative governments. (In this narrative, Europe is seen as Scotland's ally against exploitation by England, and the SNP is a firm opponent of Brexit.) Meanwhile, the Labour Party under Jeremy Corbyn's leadership also pursued a left-wing populist strategy in the general election of 2017: this relied heavily on mobilization of support through social media and activism by Momentum, a Labour-supporting (or Corbyn-supporting) organization outside the party,⁶⁸ and verged on the creation of a personality-cult around Corbyn; Labour's unexpectedly strong showing was partly attributed to a high turnout among groups which rarely vote.⁶⁹ Two years later, as discussed below, the Conservatives under Boris Johnson fought in a general election on the slogan of "Get Brexit Done," and made substantial gains of seats in previously solid Labour areas which had voted for Brexit.

All of these populist campaigns have drawn on the same underlying dissatisfaction with the political system and distrust of the establishment, although in different demographic groups: Brexit appealed especially to the older white working class in England, particularly men, in areas traditionally dominated by heavy industry; Scottish nationalism was most popular with the younger working-class voters in the corresponding areas of Scotland; Labour's campaign in 2017 was more successful with the young and with members of ethnic minorities (who are disproportionately concentrated in London). These groups are all, in general terms, a substantial part of the natural and traditional support base of the Labour Party. Boris Johnson achieved gains from Labour in 2019 among the English working class outside London, using Brexit as his

⁶⁷ Emanuele Massetti, "Left-Wing Regionalist Populism in the 'Celtic' Peripheries: Plaid Cymru and the Scottish National Party's Anti-Austerity Challenge against the British Elites," *Comparative European Politics* 16, no. 6 (November 2018): 937-953, doi:10.1057/s41295-018-0136-z.

⁶⁸ Declan McDowell-Naylor, "#GE2017: Digital Media and the Campaigns," in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 187-205, and Abi Rhodes, "Movement-Led Electoral Campaigning: Momentum in the 2017 General Election," in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 171-186.

⁶⁹ James Sloam and Matt Henn, *Youthquake 2017: The Rise of Young Cosmopolitans in Britain* (Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2019), chap. 3, doi:10.1007/978-3-319-97469-9, and Greg Cook, "The Labour Campaign," in *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, Media and Polling in the 2017 General Election*, ed. Dominic Wring, Roger Mortimore, and Simon Atkinson (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 154-157.

lever; but the crumbling of Labour support was very similar to that already achieved in Scotland by the SNP, attacking Labour from the left rather than the right, and in 2019 only a minority of Labour's lost voters switched to the Conservatives. These divisions were not created by Brexit agitation, although some of them were exploited by it.

Brexit, Populism, and the Polls

What role, if any, did the opinion polls play in causing the referendum or in swaying its result, whether or not as a populist tool? One trigger for David Cameron's promise to hold a referendum on EU membership, made in a speech at Bloomberg's U.K. headquarters on January 23, 2013, seems to have been the threat that Cameron believed UKIP posed to Conservative chances at a future general election, although rising discontent among Conservative MPs under pressure from Euro-skeptic members of their constituency associations was also a factor. Cameron's judgment that UKIP might be strong enough to be a danger to the Conservatives was based much more on opinion polls than on concrete achievements at the ballot box;⁷⁰ the Bloomberg commitment came before UKIP's sweeping gains in the May 2013 local government elections and in the 2014 European Parliament elections. In the last twenty published polls before Cameron's Bloomberg speech, UKIP had averaged a 9.7 percent share of voting intentions,⁷¹ compared to the 3 percent it had won in the previous general election.

Yet published polls at the same time were also indicating that if there were a referendum, Britain would vote to Leave.⁷² There seems no doubt that Cameron believed that in any such referendum the British public would vote by a comfortable margin to Remain in the EU, and genuinely intended that it should give an endorsement of the U.K.'s membership in the EU, not put an end to it. If his decision was driven by opinion polls, therefore, he must have been giving more weight to those measuring parliamentary voting intentions than to those measuring hypothetical voting intentions in an EU membership referendum, or simply trusting in his ability to defy the polls and sway public opinion in his favor.

There seems no reason to suppose that the voting intention polls during the referendum campaign had any impact on the result. The supposed bandwagon and underdog effects of polls depend on them clearly showing one side or the other to be in the lead. But the British Election Study survey found that "both Remain and Leave voters generally expected that their side would win or that it

⁷⁰ Tim Bale, "Who Leads and Who Follows? The Symbiotic Relationship between UKIP and the Conservatives—and Populism and Euroscepticism," *Politics* 38, no. 3 (August 1, 2018): 271-272, doi:10.1177/0263395718754718.

⁷¹ Robert Worcester et al., *Explaining Cameron's Catastrophe* (London: IndieBooks, 2017), 58.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 59-60.

was completely uncertain In fact, Leave voters were more likely to expect a Leave victory (64%) than Remain voters were to expect a Remain victory (62%).⁷³ It is true that the majority of the final polls showed Remain ahead, but this does not seem to be evidence of a last-minute swing to Leave, only of a measurement error by the polls: Leave was probably ahead throughout the campaign, with its lead shrinking in the last few days.⁷⁴

Epilogue

The aftermath of the referendum brought political stalemate. The crux of the problem was that, although the public had voted (narrowly) in favor of Brexit, a clear majority of Members of Parliament were against it (as, indeed, had been all the major parties represented in the House of Commons before the referendum). The governing Conservative Party now felt itself committed to implement Brexit, but a vocal minority of its MPs remained determined to resist. It soon became clear that there were at least four distinct possible outcomes: (1) a “soft Brexit,” minimizing the economic impact but at the expense of allowing the EU to maintain control over the U.K. in many areas, for example by remaining within the European single market (which would have required retaining the EU’s free movement rules rather than allowing the U.K. freedom to decide its own immigration policies); (2) a “hard Brexit,” based upon details to be negotiated and agreed with the EU and requiring some concessions on both sides; (3) a “no deal Brexit,” in which the U.K. effectively withdrew unilaterally with no agreement reached on future trading or political relationships; and (4) no Brexit at all (with or without a second referendum to ratify the decision). All of these options were fervently supported by some MPs but, fatally, none had majority support.⁷⁵

Polls showed that the public was also split, with no option clearly the most popular.⁷⁶ An atmosphere of mutual incomprehension and mistrust probably helped to harden opinions, although Leavers had a better understanding of

⁷³ British Election Study Team, “Brexit Britain: British Election Study Insights from the Post-EU Referendum Wave of the BES Internet Panel,” *British Election Study* (October 6, 2016), <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-resources/brexit-britain-british-election-study-insights-from-the-post-eu-referendum-wave-of-the-bes-internet-panel/> (accessed November 13, 2020).

⁷⁴ Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley, “Leave Was Always in the Lead: Why the Polls Got the Referendum Result Wrong,” *British Politics and Policy at LSE* (July 5, 2016), <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/eu-referendum-polls/> (accessed November 1, 2016).

⁷⁵ Elise Uberoi, “Indicative Votes 2.0: Where Did Support Lie?” *UK Parliament: House of Commons Library* (April 3, 2019), <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/indicative-votes-2-0-where-did-support-lie/> (accessed November 30, 2020). Based on MPs’ personal preferences, there was probably a majority for no Brexit, but many who would have preferred that outcome felt morally bound to respect the referendum result.

⁷⁶ John Curtice, “MPs Decide? Four Key Messages from the Polls,” *What UK Thinks: EU* (December 10, 2018), <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/mps-decide-four-key-messages-from-the-polls/> (accessed November 13, 2020).

Remainers' motivations than vice versa.⁷⁷ Remainers justified their continued opposition to Brexit by a belief that the referendum result had been obtained dishonestly, and that buyer's remorse was swinging public opinion decisively in their favor; yet, in fact, there had been little movement in public opinion and the result of a second referendum, had one been called, was entirely uncertain.⁷⁸ At the same time, Leavers believed that Remainers were trying to redefine the vote for Brexit as having been about anything except Brexit, so as to justify their attempts to ignore or reverse it,⁷⁹ and that the politicians were once more trying to thwart the popular will; and many saw a "soft Brexit" as being Brexit in name but not in substance, and so unacceptable.

Moreover, the public had a much more populist view of the role of Parliament than did most MPs. YouGov polls in August 2019 asked whether MPs are elected to act according to "their own judgment, even when this goes against the wishes of their constituents" or "the wishes of their constituents, even when this goes against their own judgment." The public believed by 63 percent to 7 percent that the views of constituents should take priority, MPs by 80 percent to 13 percent that they should trust their own judgment.⁸⁰ Anger was further stoked by the pro-Brexit newspapers, as for example when the *Daily Mail* responded to a High Court judgment delaying the process by depicting the judges on the front page over the headline, "Enemies of the People."⁸¹ At the time, the *Daily Mail* was Britain's most-read newspaper brand, with 29 million readers a month across print and website.⁸²

The logjam was broken by a new general election in December 2019, at which the Conservatives (now led by Boris Johnson) won a comfortable

⁷⁷ Noah Carl, "Leavers Have a Better Understanding of Remainers' Motivations than Vice Versa," *LSE* (May 4, 2018), <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/brexit/2018/05/04/leavers-have-a-better-understanding-of-remainers-motivations-than-vice-versa/> (accessed November 24, 2020).

⁷⁸ John Curtice, "Has There Been a Shift in Support for Brexit?" *What UK Thinks: EU* (February 8, 2019), <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/has-there-been-a-shift-in-support-for-brexit/> (accessed November 13, 2020).

⁷⁹ Noel Malcolm, "Brexit Is about Sovereignty and Parliament Must Respect That," *Financial Times* (January 25, 2019), <https://www.ft.com/content/e0b30912-1fff-11e9-a46f-08f9738d6b2b> (accessed November 24, 2020).

⁸⁰ Matthew Smith, "Are MPs Elected to Exercise Their Own Judgement or Do Their Constituents' Bidding?" *YouGov* (August 13, 2019), <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/08/13/are-mps-elected-exercise-their-own-judgement-or-do> (accessed November 30, 2020).

⁸¹ Claire Phipps, "British Newspapers React to Judges' Brexit Ruling: 'Enemies of the People,'" *The Guardian* (November 4, 2016), sec. Politics, <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2016/nov/04/enemies-of-the-people-british-newspapers-react-judges-brexit-ruling> (accessed November 30, 2020).

⁸² Dominic Ponsford, "NRS: The Sun Now Second Most Read UK Newspaper in Print/Online—Metro Has Most Readers per Month in Print," *Press Gazette* (March 1, 2017), sec. Audience Data, <https://www.pressgazette.co.uk/nrs-the-sun-moves-up-to-become-second-most-read-uk-newspaper-in-print-and-online-with-mail-still-top-on-29m-a-month/> (accessed November 30, 2020).

majority of seats. Analysis of the voting suggested that attitudes toward Brexit were closely aligned with voting choices and most of the seats gained by the Conservatives from Labour came in constituencies which had supported Brexit, although this owed more to the collapse in Labour's vote than to the much smaller increase in Conservative support.⁸³ What is less clear is how far the Conservative slogan, "Get Brexit Done," motivated supporters purely on the basis of their support for Brexit as such, and how far it drew on resentment of opposition obstructionism and on the political establishment's having failed to deliver on the verdict of the referendum after three-and-a-half years. It seems likely that at least part of the Conservative gains and of the Labour losses came from a populist backlash against the "Remoaners."

It should also be noted, however, that the Conservatives' success was achieved on a minority vote. Under Britain's "first-past-the-post" electoral system, the most successful party usually wins a majority of constituencies without achieving a majority in the national vote, and in 2019, although easily ahead of the other competing parties, the Conservatives took only 43.6 percent of the vote. Even combining that with the votes for other, smaller, pro-Brexit parties brings the total to only 48 percent.⁸⁴

⁸³ Jonathan Tonge, Stuart Wilks-Heeg, and Louise Thompson, "Introduction: A Conservative Victory Like No Other?" *Parliamentary Affairs* 73, no. supplement 1 (September 1, 2020): 1-6, doi:10.1093/pa/gsaa020, and John Curtice, "Brave New World: Understanding the 2019 General Election," *Political Insight* 11, no. 1 (March 1, 2020): 8-12, doi:10.1177/2041905820911739.

⁸⁴ Carl Baker, Richard Cracknell, and Elise Uberoi, "General Election 2019: Results and Analysis," House of Commons Library Briefing Paper (London: House of Commons Library, December 19, 2019), <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8749#fullreport> (accessed December 30, 2019).