

Brexit as a Lived Experience Leading to Conservative Opposition

I lived in the UK during the Brexit referendum, and have been watching the fallout ever since. My school held a mock referendum, in which 70% of us voted Remain (a fairly average distribution for our age range). None of us were allowed to vote in the actual referendum. The day of the referendum, classes stopped: we would walk into the classroom, and then sit and talk about what Brexit would mean as we watched the votes come in. After the count was confirmed, the school grieved. I had friends whose parents weren't British citizens, and were worried they would be deported; friends who had planned to move to the EU after highschool, who were worried they would be denied in the new VISA process. I had a lot of friends who were angry (including myself). We were supposed to start choosing our career in middle school, and finalize it in high school; how did it make sense that we could choose our career when we weren't allowed a say in what country it was in? Why were we expected to act like adults- planning long-term careers, working after school, figuring out our own budgets and transport- and yet we weren't allowed a say in potentially the most important decision of our lifetimes. It was infuriating.

But that's not the full story. I also knew people who felt EU regulations were stifling, and making life more difficult than necessary. My friend's mother, a first-generation immigrant, thought free EU immigration was a threat to English workers, of which she included herself. Brexit promised to help those in ever-worsening economic conditions. It promised to give power back to the people who needed it most.

Opinions about Brexit, and therefore the Conservative Party, are complicated. Some reactions can be expected. Other reactions, less so. Opposition to the Conservative Party originated from those most affected by Brexit: immigrants who were closer to the risk of deportation, and young people who felt they were in a world that wouldn't listen. As Brexit continued, more groups were negatively affected: gender issues widened and working class people didn't see the increase in prosperity they

were promised. Conservative scandals, like Boris Johnson's Christmas Parties and the promotion of Chris Pincher, created further backlash than even would have been expected.

Background

The groundwork for the Conservatives losing popularity was initially laid during Brexit. David Cameron, the Prime Minister at the time, agreed to hold a referendum in order to draw in more right-wing voters ("PM Pledges In/out Referendum on EU"). During the campaigning, most of the focus was on economics and immigration, with the Leave campaign commonly using misinformation to draw more people onto their side (Khan). Brexit quickly drew lines throughout social identities, age being the most prominent (Finlay). However, the debates seemingly existed within white, usually male, politicians, opting to completely ignore how Brexit may affect women or people of color (Hojić). Brexit also reflected the UK's xenophobia and racism, with many industrial towns voting due to being "left behind" or "skipped in the queue" (Shilliam, 161). The referendum concluded with a 52-48 vote to Leave, with England and Wales more strongly supporting Leave, and Scotland and Northern Ireland supporting Remain (Finlay, 20). In the following elections, Brexit would continue to be one of the most prominent issues voters focused on (Mortimore, 15).

After the referendum, Cameron stepped down as Prime Minister, since he personally advocated for the UK to Remain (Masters). Theresa May replaced him. Purposefully increasing the hostility towards immigrants in the UK, she increased deportations, as well as campaigns against undocumented immigrants (the most famous of which she put "go home" billboards on the sides of vans) ("From "go home" vans to Windrush scandal: a timeline of UK's hostile environment"). Due to this increasing hostility, the Windrush scandal occurred in 2018. Many Commonwealth-born long-term UK residents were detained or even deported (Gentleman). People who had been born in

the UK, and lived there their entire lives, had been forced out of the country due to lack of documents (Gentleman).

May also continued to cut back on social welfare, including housing. In 2017, the Grenfell fire was caused directly because of these budget cuts. Grenfell Tower was a 24-storey building, most of which was social housing. The fire began at 1am, and quickly spread due to flammable building exterior (a fact experts had warned about, but had been ignored in favor of cutting costs), all without the fire alarm sounding. The building continued to burn for days, with 71 people dying (“How the Grenfell Tower Disaster Unfolded”). The building stayed burned husk for years afterwards, and became a reminder of the very real harm caused by the government ignoring those it promised to protect (“Grenfell Tower Set to Be Demolished over Safety Concerns”).

Throughout all of this, May began working towards a deal to leave the EU. Unfortunately, the Conservative Party did not have a majority, and so the government continuously failed to gain approval for an EU deal. While she held a snap general election in order to gain a majority, the Conservatives ended up losing 13 seats (“General Election 2017: Why Did Theresa May Call an Election?”, “Results of the 2017 General Election”). After continuously failing to create an EU deal, many in her party started to look elsewhere for a harsher Brexit, such as the Brexit Party. Eventually, she offered to hold a second referendum in order to gain support from Labour MPs (McGee). While this worked as intended for Labour, it also led to further Conservative Party outrage, ending with May’s resignation (“Theresa May Resigns over Brexit: What Happened?”).

Boris Johnson succeeded May in 2019, and immediately promised a final date on Brexit. Unlike May, who wanted a deal before leaving the EU, Boris took a more “do-or-die” approach. Calling another snap election, he won an 80 seat majority (“Results of the 2019 General Election”).

The EU and UK agreed to keep most of their trade agreements until the end of 2020, while in the meantime they began working on the new trade agreements. Unfortunately, 2020 was also the year the COVID pandemic started. Amidst the lockdowns, many felt betrayed by the Conservatives not delivering on promised trade negotiations and failing to support people struggling due to the pandemic (Coles, “Half of Women in UK Fear Equality Is Going back to 1970s”). From medicine restrictions to extra red tape on fishing industries, the implications of Brexit started to become very real for the general public (“Mother Fears Son Could Die as Brexit Stops Medical Cannabis Supply,” Outram).

In 2021, leaks began exposing a string of parties Johnson had held during COVID. The first of these, a Christmas party with most of Downing Street during a lockdown that prevented people seeing their families in person at all, quickly gained backlash. Johnson’s reaction only furthered this: he first insisted no party occurred (and if it did no COVID regulations were broken); then opened an investigation into whether parties had occurred; then insisted that although parties *had* occurred, it was all within COVID regulations. He was also pressured into both apologizing for holding a party during the mourning period of Prince Phillip (while COVID regulations prevented the Queen inviting people to the funeral), and paying a fine for breaking COVID regulations (“Boris Johnson and Lockdown Parties: The Story so Far”).

While Johnson’s popularity was not great, he continued to lead the Conservative Party until the summer of 2022. In February, Johnson appointed Chris Pincher as deputy chief whip. By June, two men had accused him of sexual assault and he was forced to resign; however, Johnson refused to suspend him from the party. Later, it was revealed that Johnson was aware of previous accusations of sexual assault against Pincher when he was promoted in February (“Did PM Use “Pincher by Name, Pincher by Nature” Phrase?”). Eventually, public and political pressure forced Johnson to resign as Prime Minister (Guy).

By the time Liz Truss was elected, many were angry with the Conservative Party's continued mismanagement of the government. Liz Truss almost immediately furthered this anger and distrust, proposing a mini-budget of extreme tax cuts (especially for the wealthy) in the middle of a housing crisis ("What Was in the Mini-Budget and What Is the Government's New Plan?"). With Truss' popularity plummeting, Labour proposed a vote on a widely-supported fracking ban ("Labour Urges Tories to Back Vote on Fracking Ban"). Truss responded by making the vote a confidence vote: in essence, any MP who voted for the bill would be declaring they didn't support the Conservative Party, and would likely face political repercussions for doing so. The MPs were then told it actually wasn't a confidence vote, and then that it was again. The vote was chaotic, with allegations (later disproven) of MPs being forcibly dragged into rooms to vote ("MPs Allege Bullying during Chaotic Fracking Vote").

Liz Truss resigned after 44 days, making her the shortest serving PM in British history (Picheta). Support for the Conservative Party fell to record lows, with some polls finding they would win only 22 seats if a general election was held immediately (and so would cease to even become The Opposition). While support has risen slightly, polls still show Labour taking a large majority if a general election is called ("2025 General Election Polls - Election Polling"). Predictably, there has also been an increase of support (stemming from Labour) to hold another general election, especially since Rishi Sunak will be the third Prime Minister elected without a general election ("Labour MP Calls for General Election by Mocking Tories with Christmas Carol").

Immigration

The first to reject the Conservative Party were immigrants, mostly due to the impact of the call for a Brexit referendum at all. Firstly, many immigrants felt "othered" by the Brexit referendum

occurring at all, with many feeling angry especially about the racism that affected who was “allowed to be British” (Lulle, 7). Many described feeling like British people personally hated them, a sad “You don't want us anymore...” (Lulle, 6). This othering was not only perpetuated by the Conservative Party via Brexit, but also in the years afterwards as well. Theresa May, for example, is well known for her van campaign telling immigrants to “go home” (Muir). The Conservative Party became a justification for xenophobia: if the government approved it, of course the general public was allowed to. The Conservative Party directly caused a more hostile social environment for immigrants, and so, expectedly, immigrants turned away from the Conservatives.

Immigrants also turned against the Conservative Party because of the uncertainty Brexit caused. Only 39% of immigrants held a British citizenship in 2019, with most likely fewer holding one in 2015 (“Citizenship and Naturalisation for Migrants in the UK”). This uncertainty and confusion was only increased by the inability of non-citizens to vote in the referendum (Lulle, 3). Instead, immigrants were shut out of a decision that had major ramifications on their lives. This turned a fair amount of immigrants against the Conservatives, with many either stressing to save up money for naturalization or leaving the country entirely (Benedi, 296).

This shift away from the Conservatives within the immigrant community was only further compounded by the Windrush scandal in 2018. As Windrush immigrants came forward with their stories, people banded behind immigrants against the Conservatives (“Today in Parliament - May and Corbyn Clash over Windrush at PMQs - BBC Sounds,” “The Guardian View on the Windrush Apology: Overdue and Inadequate | Editorial”). The common consensus was that the government had been cruel to those it had deported, and that it was proof of xenophobia in the UK going too far (Muir). This backlash, led primarily by those affected by the scandal itself, eventually led to further backlash against Theresa May and even caused resignations within the party itself (“Amber Rudd Resigns Hours after Guardian Publishes Deportation Targets Letter”). While immigrants had already

been pushing against the Conservative Party, the Windrush scandal dramatically increased their reach in terms of opposing the Conservatives. Whereas previously it had been refusing service to those who voted for Brexit, now it was protesting on a national stage with wide-reaching newspapers (Lulle, 7, “The Guardian View on the Windrush Apology: Overdue and Inadequate | Editorial”). Not only did the Windrush scandal give a specific issue for the immigrant community to band together, but it also resonated beyond their communities. Unexpectedly, Windrush pushed immigrants to the front and center of politics, and they used that power to continue opposing the Conservatives and convincing others to do the same.

However, the Windrush scandal wasn’t the end of xenophobia in the UK. Increasingly hostile environments led to further backlash as the Conservative Party continued to strip rights away. During the beginning of Brexit, the NHS began a system of reporting undocumented immigrants to immigration officers, preventing vulnerable communities from accessing healthcare (“From “go home” vans to Windrush scandal: a timeline of UK’s hostile environment”). These issues only worsened over COVID, since undocumented immigrants couldn’t access COVID treatment or vaccines without risk of deportation (“Covid-19 Worsening Plight of UK Migrants, Report Finds,” “Covid: “No deportation risk” for illegal migrants getting vaccination”). Because of the previously created immigrant community (which tended to focus on those most vulnerable), as well as coming off the tail end of calls against increasing xenophobia, these measures continued to increase backlash among immigrants and those supporting them. Once Boris Johnson took over, he began to increase rhetoric May had been forced to stop: once even saying that “immigrants have been treating Britain as their own for too long” (Bulman). Discussions that had been promoted during the Windrush scandal continued to increase as the Conservative Party seemed to return to its previous levels of hostility. Therefore, the unexpected oppositional power generated by the Windrush scandal blended

with the more expected backlash against xenophobia, creating a longer lasting movement against the Conservatives.

Then, as healthcare issues continued (with increasing opposition to the Conservatives), Windrush returned to center stage. The government had started a compensation plan, but cases were slow and compensation was broadly considered too little (“The Windrush Generation Deserves Justice – Not Video Chats with the Home Secretary”). In 2020, “Sitting in Limbo” was set to release. A TV drama inspired by the Windrush scandal, it drew attention to the lack of care from the government (“The Windrush Generation Deserves Justice – Not Video Chats with the Home Secretary”). Not only this, but the Home Office tried to get a pre-screening of the show, even offering the director interim compensation for the 5 weeks he had been detained (“The Windrush Generation Deserves Justice – Not Video Chats with the Home Secretary”). This followup scandal led to a slew of news articles about how the government was focusing on coverups, rather than actual change (“Windrush Scandal | UK News | the Guardian”). It also re-sparked discussions around the ongoing hostile environment, especially in regards to healthcare (“The Windrush Generation Deserves Justice – Not Video Chats with the Home Secretary”). Within a month, 130,000 people had signed a petition to speed up Windrush compensation, and it became even more widely searched than during the initial scandal (“Windrush Scandal Survivors Deliver Petition to No 10,” “Google Trends”). This second wave of backlash continued, with articles featuring Windrush victims being published monthly even now (“Windrush Scandal | UK News | the Guardian”). The revival of the Windrush scandal united people across various economic background against xenophobia, racism, and the hostile environment created by the Conservative Party, and through that it gave immigrants an opportunity to move against the Conservatives in meaningful ways.

Age

Like immigrants, young people were also much more likely to oppose the Conservative Party because of the initial Brexit referendum. Firstly, age was the largest predictor of voting in the Referendum, with young people voting 70% to Remain (Finlay, 19). The most likely cause of this divide is the change in view on “what it means to be British” that stems from the higher interconnected nature of the modern world (Finlay, 20). As people can interact with each other across borders or social backgrounds more easily, they stop seeing themselves as citizens of particular nations, and more as general areas or the world as a whole. For example, young people were more likely to view themselves as European rather than just British (Finlay, 20). Young voters also prioritized issues like climate change, which by necessity require multiple countries to come together (Harrabin). By prioritizing these issues, they saw bodies like the EU as more important than their older peers. By having a different view on British claims, young people were much less likely to agree with the xenophobic rhetoric surrounding Brexit. Not only this, but their higher prioritization of the EU meant they saw this as an issue that would greatly impact their lives. Because the Conservatives pushed for the referendum, many young people inevitably ascribe blame to them for irreversibly damaging a range of important issues.

This blame then mingled with anger at lack of representation. Many under-18s were barred from voting in the referendum, even though other referendums allowed anyone over 16 to vote (such as the Scottish independence referendum) (Finlay, 19.). By October of 2019, polls were showing a slight lead in Remain, mostly due to the fact that people who had recently turned 18 were so much more likely to support it over Leave (Mortimore). This anger was further increased by the British education system, which asks children to decide their future careers earlier than countries like the US (“A Levels in UK”). In between the referendum and Brexit, some parties promised to rehold the referendum, which in turn led to young voters turning to them in an attempt to redo the election they

were excluded from. While the Conservatives could have technically lowered the voting age, it's not surprising that they didn't (considering it would almost certainly damage their election margins). Therefore, this mixture of blame and anger was almost certainly going to be the reaction as soon as Cameron decided to host a referendum at all.

After Brexit, young people continued to vote against the Conservatives, due to their higher likelihood of being impacted by issues like the housing crisis. In 2020, 46% of young people from 20 to 34 were forced to return to their parents' homes due to rising housing costs (Rawlings). General Conservative views generally favor welfare cuts which are more likely to fall on younger people without stable housing. Not only this, but the Conservatives refused to adopt welfare even as the housing crisis continued (Rawlings). This can most clearly be seen in Liz Truss' economic budget, in which she proposed a slew of tax cuts for the wealthy ("What Was in the Mini-Budget and What Is the Government's New Plan?") While this may not have been so extreme in Conservative history, the worsening housing crisis meant Truss faced massive backlash. While this backlash may not have been publicly pushed by young people, considering the unequal wealth distributions among British generations, young people were more likely to consider Truss' budget outrageous. This anger at welfare cuts from young people is also mostly expected, considering the Conservatives have been making welfare cuts for years; however, Truss' budget did unexpectedly increase opposition to the Conservatives.

A few weeks later, Truss again went against young people's interests by telling the Conservatives to support fracking. Young people are more likely to care about the environment, with under 45s viewing it as one of the nation's most important issues. According to some surveys in 2020, over 60% of young people are either worried or extremely worried about climate change, with the majority believing the government isn't doing enough to prevent it (Harrabin). Many view climate change as a personal issue, something they need to care about because they will be growing

up in whatever world is created by the ongoing climate crisis (Harrabin). Young people have been pushing environmentalism for years, from protests to pushing Labour into supporting climate issues ("Anti-fracking protest held in Lancashire over government plans"). As Truss' government ramped up the extraction of natural resources, young people banded together with trade unionists and poverty campaigners against it ("“A Broken System”: Campaigners Urge Liz Truss to Rethink Energy Plan"). Later, when the Conservatives voted against banning fracking, there was a massive backlash due to the climate issues it represents ("Tories Told Fracking Vote Should Be Seen as Vote of Confidence in Truss"). Supporting fracking plays directly into some of the anger held by young people: the feelings of betrayal and being ignored by politicians. Young people led protests, and because of their continued support, Labour continued to push for the anti-fracking ban ("Tories Told Fracking Vote Should Be Seen as Vote of Confidence in Truss"). Due to these protests and campaigns, the public came to see Truss' allowance of fracking as unacceptable, and with the no-confidence vote, the Conservative Party as well. Truss' decision to potentially turn a fracking vote into a confidence vote was completely unexpected, and the resulting activism (mostly led by young people) led to an unexpected country-wide backlash against the Conservatives.

Gender

Women were initially for Remain (albeit not as strongly as immigrants or young people), and this lean only increased as Brexit unraveled. Initially, the main fear was the decrease in women's rights and services (Topping). Many are enshrined in EU law, but didn't have a duplicate UK version. While the exit deal could include the protection of these rights, it didn't necessarily have to. This meant that the government could vote to strip crucial rights away, without any agreement from the people. The effects also had potential to be far reaching, with EU rights covering everything from

domestic survivor support to maternity leave (Topping). The Conservatives only further pushed women away by refusing to add women's rights to the withdrawal bill ("Women's Rights at Risk after Brexit | Letters"). This push against Brexit is difficult to see in terms of voting, since not much data was collected. However, after the referendum, the Women's Equality Party (a smaller feminist party) over doubled in members (Murray). Shifts like this show us how women were against Brexit, specifically through a gendered lens. Overall, the fear of furthering inequality made Brexit a riskier choice for women, and so they naturally turned against the Conservative Party in an attempt to avoid those repercussions.

Not only did Brexit ignore women's rights, it also ignored how immigration aids women's equality, and these negative impacts turned women against the Conservatives. During the initial debates, 85% of press time was focused on men, with women's issues rarely being mentioned (Hozic). One of these forgotten issues is how immigration impacted the care sector: with more women entering the workforce and birth rates declining, there has been a greater and greater need for immigrants, especially in healthcare and social care (Hozic). Without immigrants, it was inevitable that the extra workload would end up being unequally shouldered by women. Therefore, women unsurprisingly turned to parties that would better support child and social care.

No Deal Brexit also affected mothers by affecting the family unit. Many mothers worried about the food shortages, and specifically how that would affect their children. This led to increased anxiety and food stockpiling in an attempt to keep their children safe (Kerrane, 1155). Since mothers are expected to put their children above all else, this anxiety fell much more heavily on women than men. This stockpiling was also fairly common, with 20% of British people taking part after being warned about "major food disruptions" (Kerrane, 1155). Anxiety was also furthered by the stigma associated with stockpiling food, which caused many women to hide their behavior from their families (Kerrane, 1160). Not only this, but many were worried about the effects on their children if

they learned about their family's food insecurity (Kerrane, 1163). Testimonies of women stockpiling tended to be filled with fear over their children's futures, which was only exacerbated by the fact that women tend to be the primary caregiver for children (Kerrane). Not only this, but there were also issues in terms of medication access. Some mothers were warned that medication may be stopped completely due to restrictions, increasing risk of their child's death ("Mother Fears Son Could Die as Brexit Stops Medical Cannabis Supply"). All of this anxiety was very much about mothers trying to keep their children alive, which in turn was a major driving factor for them trying to prevent or mitigate the cause of that anxiety: Brexit. A No Deal Brexit wasn't necessarily sudden, but it was often assumed as a near-unreachable worst case scenario at the beginning of Brexit. Therefore, the food and medicine shortages came as a shock to many, and because of this newfound stress they turned against the Conservatives.

During the pandemic, the Conservatives also consistently failed to implement structures to help gender equality, leading to further pressure on women. During the pandemic, 49% of mothers said they took on more childcare responsibilities than their husbands, compared to 23% of fathers ("Half of Women in UK Fear Equality Is Going back to 1970s – Survey"). Not only this, but women are more likely to work in sectors with low pay and job insecurity, like social care and education. This means that women were disproportionately forced to leave their jobs, either because of childcare, being fired during budget cuts, or both ("Half of Women in UK Fear Equality Is Going back to 1970s – Survey"). The pandemic also hurt vulnerable women the most, with the government not providing enough funding to help abuse victims leave their homes (something only worsened by their inability to leave during isolation) ("Half of Women in UK Fear Equality Is Going back to 1970s – Survey"). The Conservatives' inaction was seen as a crucial failure in ensuring women's equality, as it left many women to suddenly struggle on their own without government support, and so many women turned against them due to it.

In the aftermath of this lack of support, the Conservatives knowingly hired someone who had committed sexual assault. Chris Pincher resigned in late June due to multiple allegations of sexual assault (“Nobody Believes Johnson Did Not Know about Pincher Claims, Says Labour Peer”). A few days later, it was revealed that Boris Johnson had known about previous accusations, and had promoted Pincher anyways (“Did PM Use “Pincher by Name, Pincher by Nature” Phrase?”). Pincher’s forced resignation reminded many of the #MeToo movement in Westminster, that had forced multiple cabinet ministers. After #MeToo, a new complaint system was added, but Johnson’s refusal to investigate exposed the system as ineffective (“Parliament an Unsafe Workplace due to Sexual Misconduct by MPs, Say Unions”). With opposing parties asking why Johnson had ignored the sexual assaults, and Johnson refusing to respond, the public widely started seeing Johnson as a liar who didn’t care about the severity of sexual assault (“Did PM Use “Pincher by Name, Pincher by Nature” Phrase?”). While the lying aspect resonated with people more widely, the references to MeToo and sexual assault are more likely to have impacted women and driven them away from the Conservative Party. This incident was the most unexpected, being completely and easily avoidable. Due to its unexpectedness, it quickly gained traction against the Conservatives, and eventually forced Johnson to resign because of the amount of backlash.

As women continued to feel neglected by the Conservative Party, Truss revealed her economic plan. Not only did it favor the wealthy, but its impact fell more heavily on women. In the plan, the Conservatives refused to increase childcare support (“What Was in the Mini-Budget and What Is the Government’s New Plan?”). Because of the housing crisis, there is more pressure on women to work more, and so many rely on childcare credits to be able to afford childcare at all. However, many places won’t accept the credits, and so women are often forced into a position of needing to work more, but also not having adequate childcare support that would allow them to do that (““Helping the Rich”: Mini-Budget Brings Fear and Anger to PM’s Home Patch”). This

shocking complete refusal to support equality movements during the housing crisis only furthered women's opposition to the Conservative Party.

Class and Race

Initially, white working class people and small business owners were in support of the Conservatives, but they eventually rejected them due to Brexit uncertainty . Before Brexit, they felt neglected by the Labour Party, with many towns economically stagnating for years due to Thatcher's deindustrialization and nicknamed the "Left Behind" towns (Shilliam, 154). The Conservatives promised Brexit, a chance to revitalize their economy. After the referendum, there were years of uncertainty as the UK attempted to make a deal to present to the EU. During this time, workers felt the impact, with a weaker pound making lives even more difficult (Burton, 223). By 2017, many small business owners had lost their positivity, with 39% believing Brexit would have a negative impact on their business moving forwards ("Worries about Brexit are mounting for the UK's small businesses"). Most of this uncertainty was expected, with a polarized government needing to cooperate to draft an agreement with the EU. However, events like May's snap election further increased this uncertainty beyond expected, with the government itself shifting unexpectedly.

With the No Deal Brexit, many worker issues began to arise in "Left Behind" towns, such as with the fishing industry. For fisheries, Brexit became additional red tape, losing income or forcing them out of the business entirely. This is especially true for smaller fishing businesses, who often felt out-competed by the large ones with better EU access (Outram). While Brexit initially promised economic prosperity, including much better rights for fishing access, many felt betrayed by the same or worsened conditions. These issues with worker rights extended to other sectors as well: truckers felt a massive decrease in imports and exports, as well as long waiting times to cross the border , and

farmers were less able to export to other countries, and so weren't able to sell as much ("The On-Going Impact of Brexit on the UK Trucking Industry," Coles). These people often felt neglected by Labour, and so voted for the Conservatives and Brexit in an attempt to fight back against the trend of worsening conditions. Unfortunately, Brexit only further decreased their ability to work well and compete with bigger, international businesses. The resulting feelings of betrayal turned smaller businesses and the people working in them away from the Conservatives again. These feelings of betrayal were almost inevitable: the misinformation in the Brexit campaign focused heavily on economic benefits, and when those inevitably fell through, the Left Behind towns were in a worse position than ever (Khan). Left Behind towns and small business owners unsurprisingly turned away from the Conservatives after their inevitable betrayal, and this continued to be a focus of opposition to the Conservatives for years.

However, the Left Behind towns were not representative of all working class people, with a large distinction between white people and POC within class lines. Shilliam argues that race and class are inherently intertwined within the UK, and that the narrative of "Left Behind" towns allows people to focus on what is seen as the "deserving poor." Working class people in "Left Behind" towns often carried comparative views to the American South: they believed they had been waiting in line, and now immigrants were coming in and making their job harder (Shilliam, 161; Hochschild, 137). But more urban working class people, those who tended to be marginalized either racially or religiously, tended to support Remain initially. While they felt the same neglect from the government (with government houses becoming worse quality and more difficult to find), they didn't jump to blaming the EU. Instead, the working class people who were racially or religiously marginalized continuously supported Remain and opposed the Conservative Party.

In 2017, POC working class people were pushed even further away from the Conservatives due to the Grenfell Tower fire. Understandably, there was a lot of outrage over the refusal of the

government to take basic safety precautions for those it clearly considered expendable (Fidler). Not only this, but government officials were so delayed in their response that it was almost entirely coordinated by volunteers (“Locals’ Anger and Frustration Spills out after Grenfell Tower Fire”). When they did arrive, May refused to even speak to the residents of the building, preferring to stay with the firefighters and local government officials instead (Shilliams, 171). The anger at the government’s refusal to help in even basic ways continued, with calls for justice continuing for years after the fire itself (“Grenfell Tower Fire | UK News | the Guardian”). The Grenfell Tower fire was seen as proof of the government’s inability to both address systemic racism and also extend basic empathy, and so many continued to campaign against the Conservatives and their cuts to welfare. The suddenness of the event quickly prompted backlash, and the existence of the tower for years afterwards provided a reminder to oppose the Conservatives in order to secure rights for those the government often neglects.

The pandemic not only fell heavily on working class people, it also blurred the lines between classes. Many issues became worse during the pandemic, from food shortages to the housing crisis. People who were used to living comfortably suddenly had to learn how to ration food and gas. This shift caused many to feel a greater divide between them and the top few percent, which in turn drove a wedge between the Conservative Party and their voters (“This Tory Crisis Reveals a Party That Has Lost Touch with Reality”). Often, the Conservatives appeal to middle class people. With the class shifts, cuts to welfare and tax cuts for the wealthy became a lot more worrying, and many felt left behind by their own party. The feelings from the working class had spread to more people, and so working and middle class people banded together against the Conservative goals for the wealthy. While the foundations for the reactions to the pandemic were laid years before it occurred, the effects were fairly sudden for most people- one moment they were living comfortably, the next they faced

food shortages. This sudden loss of stability allowed better unity between working and middle class people, and so the opposition to the Conservatives grew stronger.

Boris Johnson then further alienated working class people during COVID with his COVID parties. While most of the country was in lockdown, Johnson hosted multiple parties that broke COVID guidelines (“Boris Johnson and Lockdown Parties: The Story so Far”). Many viewed this as proof of Johnson’s disrespect for the people, and that he believed he could follow a separate set of guidelines (““How Did He Get Away with This?” What the Papers Say about New Johnson Partygate Photos”). The delay in getting Johnson fined, and the fact it wasn't a worse punishment, only furthered this perception of Johnson as someone who didn’t care about the lives or rules of “ordinary people” (“Boris Johnson and Lockdown Parties: The Story so Far”). In essence, Johnson cemented his image as an elite politician with little in common with the everyday worker. The backlash was fast and far reaching, with his popularity falling to all time lows and the beginning calls for resignation.

The perception of the Conservatives as elites who didn’t care about the people was only furthered by the introduction of Truss’ economic plan a few months later. In the midst of a housing crisis, the Conservatives were proposing cuts to taxes on the rich and slimming down welfare (“What Was in the Mini-Budget and What Is the Government’s New Plan?”). The Conservatives were labeled out of touch with the general public due to class divide. The budget also proposed adding requirements to benefits, such as reducing benefits if people don’t meet job search quotas (“Mini-Budget Favours Wealthy over Workers, Says Murphy”). Because of the ongoing housing crisis, many people were struggling financially, which meant that they were drawn to class as a predominant identity to focus on. Since the Conservatives clearly placed themselves opposed to the everyday, working class citizen, they faced greater backlash as people united along class lines. While

previous actions had already begun to cement this position, the proposed budget was the nail in the coffin for many, and so it led to a sharp increase in opposition to the Conservatives.

Finally, the fracking vote cemented the Conservatives as the “other” along class lines. Fracking introduced a lot of fear among living conditions, especially in terms of water safety and earthquakes (“Water Shortages May Make Fracking Impractical, Industry Says,” “Fracking Caused Daily Earthquakes at UK’s Only Active Site”). Many of the potential fracking sites are also in an area of the UK known as “the Red Wall”: constituents that previously consistently voted Labour, but switched the Conservative Party in order to enact Brexit. Many of the towns are already struggling economically, and damages caused by fracking would only add to a worsening situation (“Fracking Caused Daily Earthquakes at UK’s Only Active Site”). Even after Sunak reversed Truss’ plan on fracking, the Conservatives continued to be painted as an unreliable party that doesn’t uphold ordinary people’s interests. Again, while this elite-people dichotomy existed before the vote, the unexpected rejection of a popular safety limit once again caused a sharp increase in opposition to the Conservatives.

Conclusion

Overall, many identities impacted how people reacted to the Conservative Party. Immigrants and young people were the first to turn against the Conservatives during Brexit, many of whom continued to campaign against them throughout the following years. Women also turned against the Conservatives pre-Brexit, but didn’t really push as much until issues with childcare and inequality that appeared during Brexit. Working class people were the last major group to turn against the Conservatives, mostly due to feelings of betrayal over unfulfilled Brexit promises or the government refusing to help them. Many of these shifts were fairly expected: Brexit rested on xenophobia, young

people were denied the right to vote, the pandemic fell heavily on women in many countries, and Brexit would inevitably cause economical issues. However, some of these shifts could have been avoided if the Conservatives stopped having scandals: the Windrush scandal, Truss' fracking vote, the Pincher scandal and Johnson's parties to name but a few. These scandals greatly deepened divides between voters and the Conservatives, with marginalized communities banding together around them to continue campaigning against the Conservatives on a broader scale. Without these marginalized groups leading the way against the Conservatives, it's unlikely the backlash would have been as great as it has been.

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