Social Democratic Party Positions on the EU: The Case of Brexit

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Abstract: In recent years, social democratic parties have been confronted with the rise of second dimension issues. These issues often see social democratic parties facing a choice between competing portions of their own electorate. A particularly prominent second dimension issue is that of the EU: should social democratic parties take pro or anti-EU positions? I look at the case of the UK as an instructive example of this debate. In the build-up and aftermath of the 2019 UK General Election, a debate emerged regarding the optimal Brexit position for the Labour Party. This debate was ultimately without satisfactory conclusion as we do not observe counterfactual versions of reality - we witness only one version of events. I therefore estimate a narrow counterfactual, simulating how the Labour Party's vote share and seat count would have changed as its position on Brexit changes. I call this counterfactual narrow because I only consider the effect of these position changes on vote choice and turnout; and not any broader consequences. I run two simulations to compare the implications of pure proximity and proximity-categorisation models of vote choice. I generate seat predictions from the simulation results by using Uniform National Swing and Uniform Regional Swing. This allows me to assess the specific distributional claims made by those advocating for a more pro-Leave position for the Labour Party.

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1 Introduction

In recent years, traditional economic issues have reduced in salience as non-economic issues have increasingly emerged as the new issues of political contestation (Ford and Jennings, 2020). The strategic dilemma that emerges for established political parties is how to adapt to the new dimensions. This has been an issue in particular for social democratic parties, which have struggled to understand how best to respond to the emergence of second dimension issues (see Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019, 2020). I take as my case the UK, where a second dimension issue in the form of EU membership was the primary issue in the recent 2019 general election. In this election the Labour Party suffered a heavy electoral defeat. The interim between elections, the election itself, and the Labour party's defeat generated a debate on the party's position that remains unresolved.

Within the party, those favouring a more Remain-leaning stance have highlighted the Remain sympathies of the Labour Party's core voters and the existential threat losing these voters would pose. Those favouring a more centrist or Leave-leaning stance have emphasised the fact that the distribution of voters across Labour's safest seats versus more marginal seats meant there was considerably more benefit to winning over pro-Brexit voters. Self-evidentially, the difficulty involved in reaching a conclusion on optimal strategy is a consequence of the fact that we witness only one set of events in reality. In this paper, I therefore set out to simulate a narrow counterfactual of the 2019 general election, estimating Labour Party vote and seat share as its position on Brexit changes. In doing so, I aim to construct the best-available evidence to answer the question as to what the best strategy for the Labour Party with regards to its Brexit position would have been.

Historically, the core voter base for social democratic parties was the work-

ing class. However, the emergence of new dimensions of contestation presented an electoral challenge for social democratic parties (**?**). It was initially supposed that the subsequent electoral struggles of social democratic parties was an inability to win over the 'losers' of globalisation (**???**). With the rise of globalisation has come a rise in the salience of new dimensions. In particular for European politics, the growth and enlargement of the EU has brought issues of nation and immigration to the fore (**???**). However, in recent years the core electorate of social democratic parties has changed. The modern center-left increasingly depends on the votes of the highly educated (Gingrich and Häusermann, 2015), while the raw proportion of votes represented by the blue collar working class has declined (**?**). Moreover, these two segments of the electorate hold very different stances on the new dimensions: the working class favour socially conservative positions on immigration and the EU while the educated typically take a more cosmopolitan stance (**??**).

The rise of new dimensions of contestation thus present a clear strategic dilemma for social democratic parties. Initially it was widely supposed that social democratic parties would need to assume authoritarian and anti-EU positions to win over working class voters. However, recent research finds that that broadly social democratic parties do not improve their position by taking anti-EU stances (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2020). Moreover, research has further found that they perform best by adopting culturally liberal stances alongside investment-oriented economic stances (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019). The debate is however not yet settled. In the case of the radical left, recent research has found that far-left parties benefit from taking anti-EU positions (Wagner, 2021).

Moreover, the role that electoral systems play needs to be taken into account and doubly so with the context of the United Kingdom. Past research has shown

that single member plurality voting systems typically distort results in favour of right-wing parties (Döring and Manow, 2017). Similarly, evidence shows that in the past proportional representation has been associated with moderate parties adopting more pro-redistribution positions (Paulsen, 2022). These strategic aspects of single member plurality systems may therefore alter the strategic incentives for social democratic parties - as Labour's Brexit supporters suggested. All of this gives further impetus to the UK Labour Party as an interesting case study in how social democratic parties handle second dimension issues. On top of this, the specific context of the 2019 general election is valuable as in the UK non-economic issues such as the EU and immigration are very closely bundled together.

To answer this question, I use data from the 17th wave of the British Election Study internet panel (BESIP) and draw on a simulation approach popular in the spatial tradition of political science research. In this approach, a conditional logit model is run regressing vote choice on voter-party distances on the ideological dimensions of interest. Once the model has been estimated, new data are simulated by changing the party's position on a given variable and re-calculating party-voter distances. The simulated data are then turned into predicted vote shares by using the parameters estimated in the earlier stage. This allows for simulation of a narrow counterfactual of party vote shares as the party's position changes (Adams and Merrill III, 1999, 2000; Adams, Merrill III and Grofman, 2005). I call this a narrow counterfactual because I am only considering the effect of changes in the Labour Party's Brexit position on its vote and seat shares and not on anything else. To estimate seat share from the simulated counterfactual, I utilise both uniform national swing and regional national swing to generate predictions. By doing so, I am able to directly assess the particular strategic claims on both sides of the debate.

I proceed with this paper in four steps. First, I briefly outline the context of the 2019 UK general election, the context in which it occurred, and why the debate remains unresolved. Secondly, I discuss the spatial model of vote choice, and introduce the complications of ideological multidimensionality and the UK's party system. Third, I outline my methodological approach. I discuss the use of Aldrich-McKelvey scaling to deal with the twin problems of differential item functioning and placing survey respondents and parties on the same scale. I then proceed to discuss the conditional logit plus simulation approach popular in the spatial tradition of vote choice. I introduce the use of cross-validation methods from the world of machine learning to assess the predictive capabilities of the model. Finally, I discuss generation of seat predictions via uniform national swing and uniform regional swing. Fourth and finally, I present the results of the simulation.

I find that broadly, the evidence of the simulated counterfactual points towards a strategic need for the Labour Party to be a party of Remain. This is in line with past research on how social democratic parties should handle second dimension issues. Points near Labour's 'true' position maximise its vote share and minimise the vote share gap between the Conservatives and the Labour Party. Similarly, a range of points before the mid-point on the scale maximise the Party's seat share. However, some ambiguity does remain in the results in minimising the seat gap between the Labour Party and the Conservatives. This result joins results in past research papers that show once other components of the voting decision have been accounted for, parties can rarely drastically alter their overall results in terms of spatial positioning. The simulation also goes some way to confirming Downs' intuitions regarding the role of voter distributions in shaping optimal positioning, even after a large number of complications over and above Downs' model are introduced.

2 Background

With the dramatic pro-Leave result the 2016 EU referendum profoundly reshaped British politics for several years. Although not necessarily a major issue in electoral debates, Brexit nonetheless represented a clear watershed moment in a broader process of electoral realignment in the politics of the UK. In the 2017 general election, the Labour Party won a large percentage of remain voters while the Conservative party won a large percentage of leave voters (**?**). At the time the election was heralded as the return of a two-party dominated politics due to the large combined vote share of both parties after a long period of increasing third party strength in UK politics. The Conservative Party had taken a hardline pro-Brexit stance, while the Labour Party had opted for a more ambiguous and moderate stance rather than appealing directly to its pro-Remain base. Although many argued that the Labour Party's larger gain in vote share and the Conservatives' loss of their majority was a vindication of this strategy, this arguably ignored the fact that the Labour Party gained ground in pro-remain areas and lost ground in pro-leave areas (see discussion in Sobolewska and Ford, 2020, chapter 10).

By the summer of 2019 the picture had drastically changed for both parties. Several rounds of failed attempts at passing May's version of Brexit or to reach any kind of compromise in parliament had deeply damaged the Conservatives' image among Leave voters. The Labour Party meanwhile had lost much of the trust of Remain voters, with Jeremy Corbyn's personal popularity plummeting from its peak in 2017 - plausibly in part due to a lack of a firmly pro-Remain stance on his part. This culminated in the 2019 EU parliament elections which Britain originally should not have participated in. In these elections the Brexit party came first, while the Liberal Democrats came second and the Greens fourth but not too distant from the Labour Party. The election was

a disaster for both main parties, with Remain voters abandoning the Labour Party for the Liberal Democrats and the Greens and Leave voters abandoning the Conservative Party for the Brexit Party.

In response to these results, the two parties took different approaches. The Conservatives replaced Theresa May with Boris Johnson, who as the most prominent backer of Vote Leave had clear pro-Brexit credentials. The Labour Party by contrast was less drastic in the changes it pursued, adopting a more clearly pro-second referendum stance - albeit one where Jeremy Corbyn would not take a stance during the second referendum. Like May, Johnson failed to get his Brexit deal past the parliamentary deal past the arithmetic of the hung parliament, so instead called a general election to pass his deal. During the 2019 General Election, the primary issue at stake was Brexit, but economic issues remained important. As before the election, substantial debate during and after the election surrounded the Labour Party's pro second-referendum stance.

Those who favoured a more explicitly pro-Remain stance argued that the Labour Party had faced an existential threat by the summer of 2019 and whatever potential benefits that ambiguity may have had in 2017 no longer existed. For this side of the debate, failure to adopt a clearly pro-Remain stance represented at best a worse strategic position for the party and at worst an existential threat. By contrast, those who favoured a more centrist or pro-Leave position argued that the electoral geography of the UK meant the party needed to win over Leave voters in key constituencies and that it could afford to lose Remain voters in safe seats. Both stances carry a reasonable degree of plausibility to them, although both make many implicit assumptions around the weight of the party's Brexit position and the distribution of voters across the UK's electoral geography. To this day, the debate on the party's stance and the role in its defeat in the 2019 UK general election remains unresolved.

3 Theory

In this section I discuss the spatial model of vote choice which I use to build the counterfactual simulation around which this paper is centred. I begin by discussing the spatial model of vote choice in its simplest, two-party and one-dimensional form before introducing additional complications.

3.1 Spatial Theory

Spatial models of vote choice are a formalisation of a simple intuition, which is that voters prefer to vote for (and see elected) the political party 'closest' to their own views. In these models, ideological viewpoints are arranged along a numerical dimension (e.g. left-right) and parties and voters are placed along this dimension (see Downs, 1957*a*,*b*). To make their voting decision, voters then make a utility calculation, which can be expressed in a general form as

$$U_{ij} \propto \|X_i - P_j\| \tag{1}$$

where U_{ij} is the utility vote i receives from party j winning, X_i is voter i's position on the ideological dimension, and P_j is party j's position on the ideological dimension. The function $\| \|$ is the utility loss function, which shapes the effect of distances between voter i and party j to voter i's utility. A typical choice is the absolute-value norm

$$\| \| = | | \tag{2}$$

although competing choices for $\| \|$ include the squared distance (or quadratic loss) and a gaussian loss function (Armstrong et al., 2020). For my purposes in this paper, I am using the absolute-value norm because past research has suggested this is the better fit for modelling voter loss functions (see Merrill III, 1995).

An important early contribution to the spatial vote choice literature was a rejection of the median voter theorem by Downs. Early work on spatial vote choice had suggested that where two parties competed on the ideological dimension, as rational actors they would converge to the position of the median voter (Hotelling, 1929; Black, 1948). However, Downs rejected the median voter theorem by introducing the possibility of non-voting. In Downs' model, if both parties are far in distance from a given voter, then they have less reason to vote and thus will abstain (Downs, 1957*b*, 142). It follows from this that the best position for the two political parties is conditional on the distribution of voters along the ideological spectrum. If normally distributed, the parties will converge to the median voter. However, if bi-modally distributed, the parties will move away from each other and towards the two poles (Downs, 1957*a*,*b*). The result of the median voter theorem therefore does not hold. It follows that our expectations for the optimal Brexit position for the Labour party will be conditional on the distribution of voters along this ideological dimension.

In practice, several additional, overlapping complications for the model exist beyond merely the prospect of non-voting. I have broadly if somewhat arbitrarily divided these between extensions of spatial theory, specific theoretical considerations arising from the UK electoral system, and behavioural theory. The first of the extensions of spatial theory is the existence of multidimensional political ideology. A broad trend in political science over the past decades has dealt with various means of conceptualising new ideological cleavages in the electorate (see Ford and Jennings, 2020) and how challenger political parties have emphasised previously ignored issues (see Hobolt and De Vries, 2015). Including multiple dimensions within vote choice is straightforward, as parameters on the distances

can be included representing the salience of a given ideological dimension

$$U_{ij} \propto \sum_{d=1}^{D} \beta_d |X_{id} - P_{jd}| \tag{3}$$

where D is the number of dimensions in the voting decision and β_d is the salience parameter for the dth dimension.

More complicated to consider - especially in a simulation context - is the fact that parties may attempt to introduce previously ignored issues to destabilise a previously unfavourable equilibrium. A fundamental result in formal theory is that equilibrium cannot be guaranteed once parties are given this ability (McKelvey, 1976, 1979). However, the fact that it is not guaranteed does not mean that it is not common for equilibrium to exist (Armstrong et al., 2020). For the purposes of the simulation of this paper I therefore make the simplifying assumption that counterfactual changes in party positions in the 2019 UK general election would not have introduced any changes in issue salience. In other words, as discussed above the two ideological dimensions at play in the election were economic issues and Brexit.

The second extension of spatial theory to discuss is that of categorisation theory. While categorisation itself is a theory of mental processing with a long pedigree, a comparatively recent paper introduced it to the realm of voters' understanding of ideological space (Bølstad and Dinas, 2017). In short, voters perceive political ideology - and the relationship of political parties to it - through 'coarse categorisations'. One example would be left-right: most voters will see parties as 'left' or 'right', with finer spatial distinctions mattering more for choosing between multiple parties on the same side as the voter. There is strong evidence in the case of the UK that voters do have strong Brexit identities that likely shape voters' perception of political space (Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley, 2021). I therefore compare simulations of both straightforward proximity

models of spatial vote choice and models combining proximity and categorisation.

3.2 UK Electoral System

Like any other, the UK electoral system brings its own particular strategic considerations for both voters and political parties. First among these is the single-member plurality (SMP) voting system. In SMP, voters must weight their preferences against the probability of their preferred party actually winning. Often, voters vote strategically for a less-preferred party. It is therefore necessary to consider how likely a party is to win in a given constituency. For political parties however, SMP means that the best ideological position can be distorted by electoral geography. This is because if voters are not distributed randomly, but instead concentrated and dispersed in particular ways, this can separate the tasks of vote maximisation and seat maximisation. In practice, since center-left voters are typically concentrated in cities, electoral geography in SMP tends to skew results to the right (Döring and Manow, 2017). This is the abstract version of the argument made for a shift in a more pro-leave direction for the Labour party described above.

An additional consideration for party strategy in the UK context is the third parties. Until now my theoretical discussion has focussed on the two-party case and I have introduced additional complications to this straightforward competition. However, in the 2019 UK general election several additional parties represented additional key actors: the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, the Brexit Party, Plaid Cymru, and the SNP. In terms of the latter two, in the simulation I consider only English voters. This is because Wales and Scotland introduce an additional issue dimension in the form of nationalism vs unionism. This is especially pronounced in the case of Scotland, where the Labour Party is itself

a de-facto third party. England represents the largest constituent nation of the UK by far and elections are broadly decided there, meaning that ultimately the simualted counterfactual should remain reasonably informative. Broadly, these parties should make it harder for both of the main parties to move away from their core voters, as such a move becomes riskier as they no longer need only be concerned with the threat of non-voting. In this particular case, the Liberal Democrats and Greens put a pressure towards remain on the Labour Party, while the Brexit Party puts a leave pressure on the Conservatives.

3.3 Behavioural Theory

The spatial and behavioural traditions of vote choice have sometimes been considered as two opposing traditions. However, there are real benefits to integrating both traditions (Adams, Merrill III and Grofman, 2005). The voting decision in practice is deeply habitual. Even in times of increased voter volatility (Fieldhouse et al., 2021, see), most voters will still tend to vote for the same party as before. Similarly, party loyalty matters a great deal; and often identification with a party may overcome the fact that another party may be ideologically closer. Finally, spatial vote choice does not fully encompass all aspects of the voting decision. While it is reasonable enough to acknowledge that voters do prefer to vote when there is a party closer to their own views, and that voters do in fact vote strategically in SMP systems, neither of these phenomena are well-captured by the notions of utility gains. I therefore include these behavioural elements and dispense with the language of utility, instead simply focussing on the role of spatial proximity and categorisation in the voting decision in its own right.

4 Data and Methodology

With the contextual background and theoretical considerations for the simulation established, I now turn to the dataset and methodology for the counterfactual simulation.

4.1 Data

In this paper I use the 17th wave of the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) as a cross-sectional dataset (Fieldhouse et al., 2020). The English subsample of this wave contains 22,657 respondents. This wave was the pre-election wave for the 2019 general election collected in November 2019. I use this wave primarily to reduce of threat of reverse causality as for the dependent variable of the analysis I use vote choice in the actual election. To capture the two ideological dimensions of economics and Brexit at play in the election, I use two of the perceptual scales available in most BESIP waves in the form of the redistribution and EU integration scales. These are 0 to 10 self placements and placements of the political parties by respondents with the following item wordings:

- **Redistribution**: *Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself and the political parties on this scale?*
- **EU Integration**: *Some people feel that Britain should do all it can to unite fully with the European Union. Other people feel that Britain should do all it can to protect its independence from the European Union. Where would you place* ***yourself*** *on this scale?*

I choose these as reasonably close approximations to the ideological dimensions at play in the election. The redistribution variable should reliably capture economic differences in voters and parties, while the EU integration variable should proxy for Brexit positions. I do not use a traditional Left-Right variable because the interpretation of this likely does not so much capture a specifically economic dimension as a mix of the most salient dimensions. For the purposes of this paper, these dimensions are thus more usefully parameterised separately.

4.2 Methodology

To construct a simulated counterfactual of how the Labour Party would have performed with different Brexit positions, I proceed in four broad steps:

1. Scale voter and party positions
2. Run model for spatial vote choice
3. Simulate new results based on different Brexit positions for the Labour Party
4. Generalise the results from survey sample to England-wide

4.2.1 Scaling Voter and Party Positions

For the first step, I use Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling to rescale the voter and party placements (Hare et al., 2015). Aldrich-McKelvey scaling is a method used to correct differential item functioning and rationalisation bias in placements of external stimuli such as political parties along a given ideological dimension and thus to recover a corrected placement for each stimulus (Aldrich and McKelvey, 1977). The parameters recovered can then be applied to respondent self-placements to recover corrected respondent placements on the same

ideological dimension as the external stimuli. Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling improves on the previous iteration of the model by allowing missing data in respondent placements of political parties. This is because the model follows a Bayesian approach to missing data, wherein missing data are treated as parameters to be estimated (Jackman, 2000; Hare et al., 2015). I therefore retain all respondents who reported placements for at least 3 of the 5 parties in BESIP. This has the benefit of reducing data loss in the scaling stages, particularly as data loss here would skew the sample towards more political informed survey respondents. For each model, ten-thousand burn-in iterations were run across two chains. After that, five thousand draws were taken to construct the posterior distributions.

4.2.2 Spatial Vote Choice

To estimate a model of spatial vote choice, I take a conditional logit approach. The conditional logit model has a close relationship with multinomial models, but instead models a binary variable denoting whether chooser i opted for outcome j of J outcomes or not. It is invariant to chooser characteristics, instead modelling the outcome as a function of choice characteristics. Substantively, this means I am able to model vote choice (whether individual i voted party j) as a function of party characteristics (such as voter-party distance on a given dimension). This also constrains each variable to have a single parameter - the effect of distance on a given dimension will be the same across parties. Finally, because the model is invariant to chooser characteristics, voter demographics need not and indeed cannot be included in the model. This is analogous to a fixed effects model which removes a certain level of variation in the data to simplify the modelling process. It does not reject the notion that voter demographics have implications for voter behaviour, but rather renders the model invariant to this.

I estimate two sets of models - one proximity model with distances on the redistribution and Brexit dimensions, and one proximity plus categorisation model. For the categorisation model, I use the 0 point on the rescaled data to determine whether a voter was on the same 'side' on a given distribution as the party or not. There is some arbitrariness in this as the rescaled data are interval and not ratio scale, meaning that the 0 point is not necessarily a meaningful one. However, the stimuli positions are constrained to be mean 0 and so the position should nonetheless be *close enough* to wherever the meaningful center point would be that this is a reasonably good approximation. I further include several controls in both models, including respondent perceived probabilities of the party winning in their constituency, whether the respondent previously voted for that party, whether the respondent identifies with that party, respondent likeability ratings for the party, respondent likeability ratings for the party leader, and party dummies. Most of these control variables follow on from the preceding discussion and as they are straightforward binary variables do not require further explanation. The use of party dummies has a long pedigree in the spatial tradition, fulfilling a definition of valence as 'everything that's not spatial'. I further included the like data and probabilities to better decompose this, with party dummies therefore acting as a baseline for the likelihoods of that party being chosen.

Some further notes should be made explicit for some of the control variables. For the like data, to prevent missingess a value of '5' was imputed into the 0-10 placement scales where missing data occurred. This value was chosen as a reasonably good guess as to how someone without a strong opinion on a given party or leader might have responded if forced. The like data were regressed on the recovered ideology values for respondents; and predicted errors from these regressions were used. This is because prior to this the like data will be driven in

part by spatial preferences - using the error terms from this regression partials the spatial component of like scores away. The like scores for the Green party leaders were averaged into a single score at the end of this process. For the Brexit Party, I treated past UKIP voters as past Brexit Party voters given the continuity between the two parties. Non-voting was included in the model as an additional choice alongside the five parties. For most variables, the value for this choice was set to 0. The exceptions were that respondents who did not identify with any party were set to identifying with non-voting as a choice and those who previously did not vote were set to this being their previous choice. With these two exceptions, the dummy for non-voting then becomes a sort of threshold which the other choices must overcome if the respondent is to turnout - meaning that turnout patterns will change as the Labour Party's Brexit position changes.

4.2.3 Brexit Position Simulation

Once the models were estimated in the previous step, I turned to the task of predicting choice probabilities across a range of positions for the Labour Party. While this prediction approach to counterfactuals has long existed in the spatial tradition, I adopted a cross-validation approach to modelling the data in the previous stage. I split 60% of the data into a training sample and 40% into a test sample. I ran the conditional logistic models on the training sample, then verified that both models reliably predict the correct vote shares for the test sample. Once this was verified, I proceeded with the simulation step. Here, I simulated new positions for the Labour Party from -2 to 2 on the Brexit dimension (covering the vast majority of respondent positions) over steps of 0.01, recalculated the relevant party-voter distances and categorisations, then predicted new results from both models.

4.2.4 Generalisation

While step 3 is sufficient to learn what position would have been best in terms of maximising vote share it does not answer questions regarding seat share maximisation. Resolving this is crucial to addressing arguments that suggested the Labour Party's best strategically optimal position would have been. I therefore generalise the simulated results from step 3 by utilising Uniform National Swing and Regional National Swing to predict seat shares based on these results.

5 Analysis

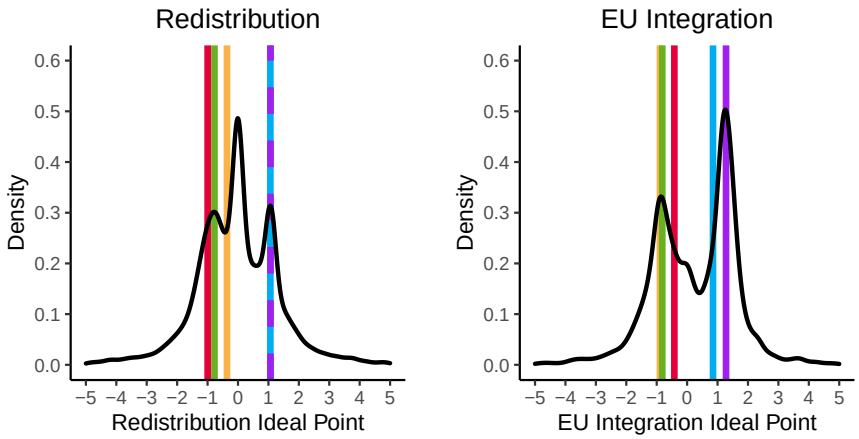
5.1 Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey Scaling

Figure 1 shows density plots of the rescaled redistribution and EU integration scales from BESIP wave 17. The vertical lines overlayed on the density plots represent the median positions of the political parties from their posterior distributions. These points were used to calculate the distances in the conditional logit model. For four of the the five parties, the lines were coloured using the party's colours[1]. The exception is the Brexit Party, for which purple was used to better differentiate it from the Conservative blue. On the redistribution plot, the Brexit Party line was dashed as its position was so close to the Conservatives' as to be overlapping on the plot.

Some clear differences between the distributions of the rescaled redistribution and EU integration variables are made visible by the plots. The redistribution variable has three peaks, but they are close to one another and there is a clear central tendency in-between the parties of left and right. By contrast,

[1]Conservatives as blue, Labour as red, Liberal Democrats as yellow, Greens as green

Figure 1: Ideology Distributions



The black line corresponds to the density of the estimated respondent ideal points. The vertical lines represented the estimated locations of the political parties on these scales and are coloured according to political party. The exception is the Brexit Party, which is coloured as purple to better differentiate it from the Conservative Party.

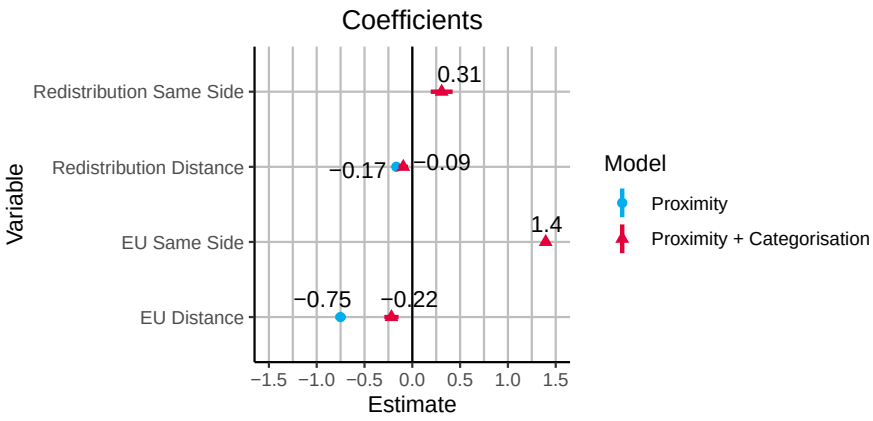
there is a clear dip in-between the Remain and Leave parties on the EU integration scale. In the redistribution plot, the Labour Party emerges as the most pro-redistribution, closely followed by the Greens. The Liberal Democrats are reasonably centrist (albeit appearing center-left), while the Conservatives and Brexit Party are equally anti-redistribution. By contrast, the Liberal Democrats and Labour Party essentially switch places in terms of centrism (although still pro-Remain). On the Leave side, the Brexit Party are clearly more pro-Brexit than the Conservatives. Both rank orderings carry a great deal of face validity in terms of the party placements. Similarly, it is unsurprising that the EU integration scale implies a larger divide between voters than the redistribution scale. One implication of this may be that given Downs' theory, there is more benefit in taking a centrist stance on economics and a more pro-Remain stance on Brexit. Of course, such a prediction can only be made prior to fully ac-

counting for the myriad complications discussed above. In the next sections the survivability of Downs' claim through increased levels of complexity is therefore tested.

5.2 Conditional Logit

In figure 2 I present a coefficient plot from the two conditional logit models estimated. The blue coefficient estimates on the plot relate to the model containing only a proximity component. The red coefficient estimates on the plot relate to the model containing both proximity and categorisation components. 95% confidence intervals are included in the plot. A full table of regression results with all controls is included in the supplementary material.

Figure 2: Conditional Logit Coefficients



In both models the proximity coefficients for both scales are significant at the 95% confidence level and are negative. The proximity coefficient for the EU integration scale is larger, in line with the fact that the main issue in the election was Brexit. However, the size of the EU integration proximity coefficient varies

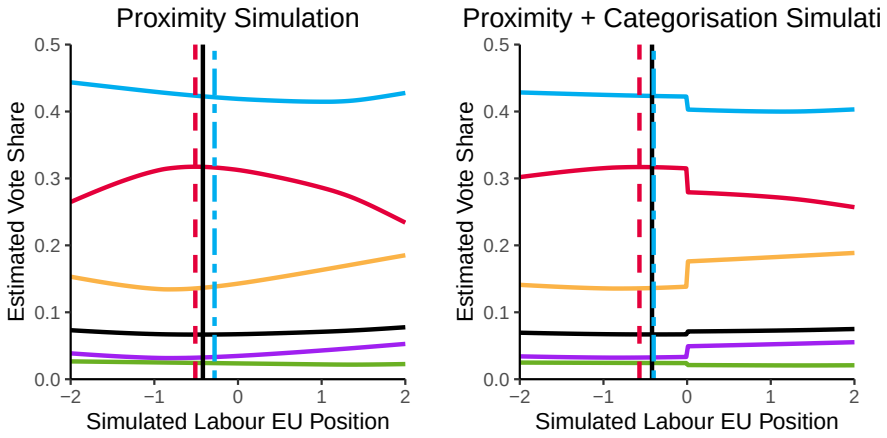
considerably with the inclusion of categorisation effects. Without categorisation effects, the coefficient is roughly 0.5 larger in the proximity-alone model. The categorisation effects in the second model for both scales are significant at the 95% level and positive, although again in line with the previous model the EU integration categorisation effect is considerably larger than the redistribution categorisation effect. Where these models corroborate one another is in confirming that the primary issue of the election was Brexit. I do not attempt to choose between the models through any formal testing as their comparison is itself useful, but I do highlight that recent results lie in favour of categorisation theory. The categorisation model is thus likely the closer approximation to reality. Cross-validation results for both models are available in the supplementary material.

5.3 Simulation

Figure 3 contains plots showing how the party and non-voter shares of the sample change as the simulated value for Labour Party vote share changes. The x-axis shows the simulated Labour Party positions along the BESIP EU integration scale, while the y-axis shows the proportion of respondents. The lines along the plot as before are in the party colours and show how the proportion of choices changes with simulated Labour party positions. The black line represents non-voters. The vertical lines represent 3 separate points. The solid black line visualises the 'true' Labour Party position extracted from the Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling. The red dashed line visualises the simulated position that maximises the Labour Party's vote share. The blue dot-dash line visualises the position that minimises the difference in the Labour-Conservative vote share. The left plot visualises simulation results for the proximity-only model, while the right plot visualises simulation results for the proximity plus

categorisation model.

Figure 3: Sample Changes in Vote Share



The horizontal lines represent the estimated vote shares of the political parties in the sample, with the black line being the percentage of non-voters. The vertical lines are various Labour Party positions. The solid black vertical line is the Labour Party's original position, the dashed red vertical line is the Labour Party's vote-maximising position, while the dot-dash blue line is the position minimizing the gap between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

For my primary purpose in this paper, the most salient feature in figure 3 is the convergence of evidence showing that the Labour Party optimises its vote share broadly by being a party of Remain. In both plots evidence suggests that Labour Party maximises its vote share by being to a small degree more pro-Remain than it was in the election. There is less convergence in the two models regarding the position that minimises the Labour-Conservative difference in vote share with the proximity-only model favouring a marginally more pro-Leave position (though still overall pro-Remain) and the proximity plus categorisation model suggesting that the 'true' position was in fact approximately best for the party. However, in all cases the 'true' position was not far from the position

implied by the simulation to be best for the party's results.

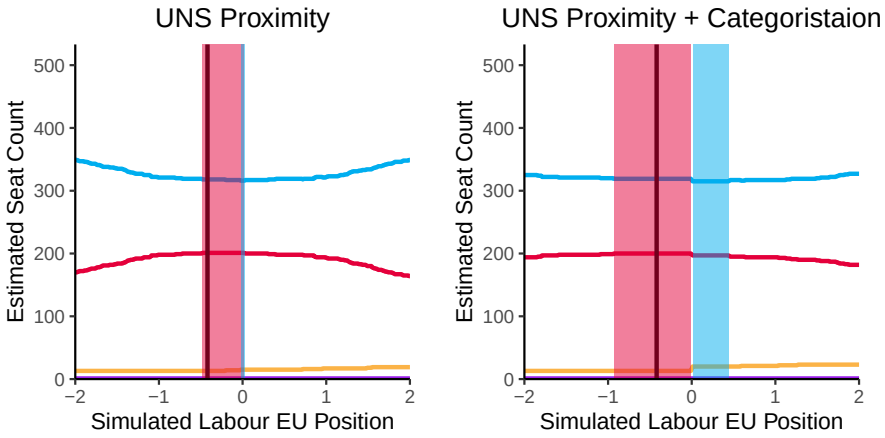
This is a result that cuts in both directions - both simulations also strongly imply that the party would not have benefited from taking a more pro-Remain position than it had already taken. Some degree of moderation was necessary. Matching the Liberal Democrats' position on Brexit would not have been beneficial to the Labour Party. Although this point does vindicate the overall position taken by the party, it also suggests that those looking to Brexit policy to improve the party's vote share were mistaken. In line with recent results regarding centrist parties (see Zur, 2019, 2021), changing the party's spatial position does not drastically improve performance. A wider implication of my results here given others may in fact be that despite common interpretations of politics in terms of ideology, once other components in the voting decision are included changes in party position do not necessarily change electoral results to the degree we might expect. In both cases, the rank order of party vote shares remains the same throughout the simulations.

5.4 Generalisation

While the simulation results broadly confirm Downsian intuitions around a polarised electorate requiring the Labour Party to lean Remain (if not on the mode of that side of the distribution), arguments suggesting the party needed to move in a more Leave direction must be addressed. I utilise both uniform national swing (UNS) and uniform regional swing (URS) to this purpose, so as to again check the extent to which results converge. It is however likely that URS will pick up on regional nuances that UNS does not, so insofar as results diverge it may well be the more accurate reference point for discussion. Figure 4 contains the UNS results. As before, the x-axis contains the simulated Labour Party positions. The y-axis the seats shares of the parties and the lines show the number

of seats that party has won. One again the black solid vertical line shows the 'true' Labour Party position from the Bayesian Aldrich-McKelvey scaling. The red shaded area shows the range of positions where the Labour Party maximises its seat share while the blue shaded area shows the range of values where the Conservative-Labour seat difference is minimised. The left plot shows results for the proximity model while the right plot shows results for the proximity plus categorisation model.

Figure 4: UNS Changes in Seat Count

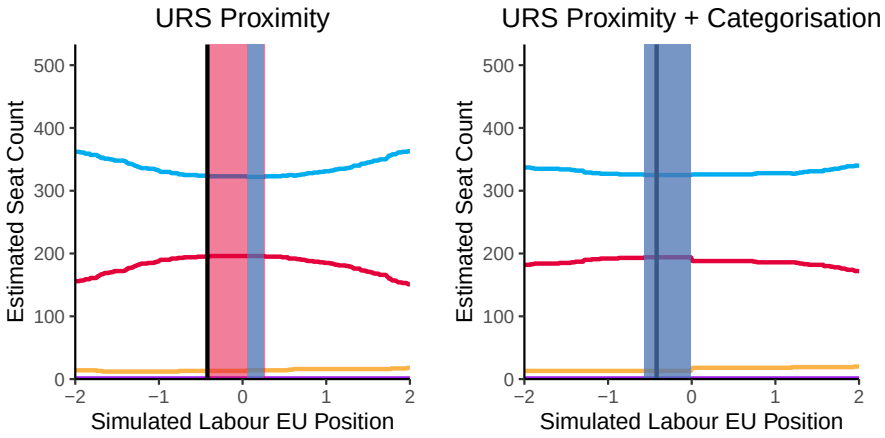


The horizontal lines represent the estimated seat counts of the political parties in the sample, with the black line being the percentage of non-voters. The vertical lines are various Labour Party positions. The solid black vertical line is the Labour Party's original position. The red shaded area is the Labour Party's seat maximising range, while the blue shaded area is the range for minizing the seat gap between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

An immediate but clear issue from these results is that the results from both models only half-agree. There is consensus that the Labour Party maximises its seat share on the remain side of the scale, but there is less consensus on minimising the gap between the Conservatives and the Labour Party. On the

proximity model, this is very near the 0 point and on the remain side. In the proximity plus categorisation model however, this is after the 0 point. The issue seems in part to be driven by the question of the extent to which the Liberal Democrats benefit from the Labour Party's pro-Leave shift. The move is less drastic in the proximity model, so the difference may be driven by this fact. However, when we turn to the URS results, this becomes less clear. Figure 5 visualises these results, following the same structure as figure 4.

Figure 5: URS Changes in Seat Count



The horizontal lines represent the estimated seat counts of the political parties in the sample, with the black line being the percentage of non-voters. The vertical lines are various Labour Party positions. The solid black vertical line is the Labour Party's original position. The red shaded area is the Labour Party's seat maximising range, while the blue shaded area is the range for minizing the seat gap between the Labour Party and the Conservative Party.

Once again, there is convergent evidence in favour of a pro-Remain stance maximising the Labour Party's seat share. So long as the party stays on the Remain side of the 0 point, it is able to maximise its vote share. However, there is divergent evidence regarding the minimisation of the Conservative-Labour seat

gap in the opposite direction. Here, the proximity model favours a Leave stance while the proximity plus categorisation model favours a Remain stance. Following the guidelines set above, one way to approach this issue may be to highlight that the proximity plus categorisation model is a theoretically better approximation to vote choice, while the URS generalisation is a theoretically better approach. Overall though, there is clear convergent evidence of a pro-Remain stance maximising the Labour vote share, minimising the Conservative-Labour vote gap, and maximising Labour's seat share. It is therefore probably the best approach given the available evidence, albeit with some remaining ambiguity around minimising the seat gap between Labour and the Conservatives.

6 Conclusion

The clear conclusion of my counterfactual simulation is that the Labour Party is best off as a party of Remain. This evidence is in line with recent more general research on the positions of social democratic parties with respect to second dimension issues (Abou-Chadi and Wagner, 2019, 2020). On the whole, the party clearly had its stance about right in the election - the vote-maximisation and vote gap-minimisation points from both models were all near the 'true' Labour Party position. Becoming as firmly Remain as the Liberal Democrats or Greens would have been a mistake. Similarly, the range of positions in which the party maximises its seats is on the Remain side of the 0 point - even in the proximity-alone models where this point is not explicitly used in the variables of the model. Some ambiguity remains around the range of values where seat gap-minimisation occurs, but broadly it would be inadvisable to build a strategy around this ambiguous result instead of the firmer conclusions set out above.

There are several wider implications for the simulation beyond confirming recent research on social democratic party placement. The first is that it appears

once enough aspects of the voting decision are considered that there is little room for political parties to drastically alter electoral results through changes in their spatial position. Although the vote and seat shares could shift in sometimes large amounts, the overall rank order of the parties did not change at any point. There does appear to be some distortion being introduced by the UK's SMP electoral system in that a range of positions produces the same seat count, but the ambiguity in this set of results means that the Labour Party was best off focussing on votes alone.

However, the counterfactual simulation does have some limitations which require discussion. First and most obvious is that I only consider the effect of changes in Labour Party position on vote choice. In practice, such changes would likely produce new information and arguments in the form of media reactions, and new incentives for political actors. It is not even necessarily clear if Johnson would have been willing to call the election had the Labour Party taken a different stance. However, on this front I argue that the purpose of the simulated counterfactual is not to be a full simulation of reality in all its complexity but rather to be sufficiently informative to a particular political debate. I argue that in terms of this goal it has succeeded.

Some further general limitations should also be acknowledged. First, I do not fully account for all the quirks of the election. I do not account for the fact that the Brexit Party stood down in Conservative incumbent seats. The arbitrariness of the 0 point in Bayesian Aldrich McKelvey scaling is a theoretically important point to acknowledge. It is set by assuming the mean point of the political parties to be approximately 0. In practice, insofar as the scale is a reasonably good approximation to a hypothetical 'true' ratio scale with a meaningful 0 point, the distance (once unit size is accounted for) is probably a reasonably close match by merit of the fact it will be somewhere between the two groups

of parties. The fact that the proximity-alone models do seem to capture this in some of the seat share predictions would seem to lend confirmation to this point. Finally, a theoretical point of Downs' that I do not model is the notion of party brands. Downs taxes as axiomatic that where a party moves to the other 'side' of the center point, no one will wish to vote for it because it can no longer be trusted. Insofar as this is true, a move past the center point of the EU integration scale would have resulted in fairly drastic collapse in the Labour Party vote share. If true, this point lends further credence to my conclusion regarding the optimal point for the Labour Party on the scale.

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