COMMENTARY

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Coming full circle: The 2017 UK general election and the changing electoral map

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After a period of little change, the United Kingdom's electoral map changed markedly in the last decades of the twentieth century and the first decade of the twenty-first. The three most recent elections – in 2010, 2015 and 2017 – witnessed further very substantial change, in part reflecting changes to the party system and the geography of party competition. This commentary explores those recent changes, showing how changes in support for parties other than the two largest – Conservative and Labour – have resulted in major alterations to the country's electoral geography, with major implications for government formation.

KEYWORDS
2017, electoral geography, general elections, United Kingdom

The United Kingdom's electoral map changed relatively little for several decades in the latter half of the twentieth century. The Conservative and Labour parties dominated the electoral scene, each with its areas of strength. Their separate domains were starkest at the 1983 and 1987 elections, a pattern frequently referred to as a "north–south" divide (Johnston, Pattie, & Allsopp, 1988): the constituencies returning Labour MPs were concentrated in urban regions of the English Midlands and North, South Wales and Central Scotland, plus parts of London. Elsewhere, constituencies returning Conservative MPs were the norm. In detail, the geographical differences were slightly less stark: there were islands of Conservative representation in (mainly rural and suburban) parts of the north, and of Labour representation in some southern cities and towns.

That stability began to erode in the 1980s, however, and the subsequent three decades have seen substantial changes to the country's electoral geography, especially over the three elections held in 2010, 2015 and 2017. These reflect changes in both the party system and patterns of party support across the electorate in response to the major issues of successive campaigns. Geography is crucial to understanding how the British electoral system operated at those three elections, and the political consequences of how the pattern of votes for the various parties was translated into seats (as it has always been – Johnston & Pattie, 2006).

1 | THE END OF STABILITY

1.1 | Liberal Democrats and the partial dissolution of the north–south divide

Until 1970, the Labour and Conservative parties won the great majority of votes (89.4% then) and even more of the seats (618 out of 630).[1] From then on, three other parties began increasing their vote shares, but without commensurate increases in the number of constituencies returning their MPs – reflecting the operation of the first-past-the-post electoral system which generally produces disproportional outcomes disadvantaging smaller parties (Johnston, Pattie, Dorling, & Rossiter, 2001). The Liberal Party's vote share steadily increased from 7.5% in 1970 to 19.3 and 18.3 at the two 1974 elections

respectively, through 25.4 and 22.6% in 1983 and 1987, when it was in an alliance with the Social Democratic Party, and then declining somewhat to 17.8% in 1992 (by which time it had merged with its alliance partner to form the Liberal Democrats) – but it gained no more than 23 seats at any of those contests (just 3.5% of all MPs). Several of its seats were won at by-elections and retained at subsequent general elections; they had no particular geography and their location reflected the chance patterning of vacancies and the intensity of anti-government protest voting. But the party also developed a core of support in southwest England – mainly in Cornwall, Devon and Somerset. Success in a few constituencies formed cores from which increased voting for the party spread outwards (Dorling, Rallings, & Thrasher, 1998); a greater reward was gained through more focused targeting in 1997 when 16.8% of the votes resulted in the election of 46 MPs.

As a consequence of Labour's internal travails and unpopularity during the 1980s and early 1990s, increasingly the Liberal Democrats provided the main challengers to the Conservatives in many southern British rural and small town constituencies outside London, pushing Labour candidates into poor third places. In 1987, for example, Conservative and Labour candidates occupied the first two places in 331 constituencies, and there were 246 where those places were occupied by Conservative and Liberal Democrat candidates (Johnston & Pattie, 2011). The Liberal Democrats later extended their spheres of influence into some of the main cities. They gained substantial support from younger voters for their opposition to the second Iraq War and the imposition of (top-up) university fees in 2005, for example. Several constituencies were won, and then retained in 2010, displacing Labour incumbents and pushing Conservative candidates into poor third places; the Liberal Democrats became Labour's main challengers in several other northern urban seats.

These changes are illustrated in Table 1, which compares the situation in elections since 2010 with that in 1966. At the earliest of those elections, Conservative and Labour candidates occupied the first two places in 93% of constituencies. Forty-four years later, that percentage was 45; there were more constituencies with the Conservatives winning and a Liberal Democrat candidate coming second than there were where the Conservatives came first and Labour second.

1.2 | Nationalist advances

Parties representing the Scottish and Welsh national movements also became substantial players at general elections from 1974. Their support waxed and waned over the next three decades, and they only won a handful of seats. Plaid Cymru became well established in northwest Wales and the Scottish National Party in northeast Scotland, but in 2010 with 11.3% of Welsh votes Plaid Cymru returned just three of the 40 MPs; the SNP won 19.9% of the Scottish votes then, but just six of the country's 59 seats.

2 | NEW LABOUR AND A NEW MAP?

A major change to the map – which much softened though certainly did not eliminate the north–south divide – came with New Labour's 1997 and 2001 landslide victories, when it focused much of its campaigning effort on the middle classes who dominated many southern constituencies while counting on its traditional northern working-class supporters remaining loyal. In 1992, Labour won just 12 seats in the three southern regions outside London (East of England, Southeast and Southwest), plus 35 in London. Five years later, it won 59 in those three southern regions and 57 in London; in 2001 the figures were 58 and 55. Withdrawal from the south began with the 2005 election, and Labour's defeat in 2010 saw its

TABLE 1 The numbers of constituencies according to which parties occupied first and second places there at various elections

First-placed	Second-placed	1966	2010	2015	2017
Conservative	Labour	222	139	207	276
Labour	Conservative	352	147	169	246
Conservative	Liberal Democrat	19	167	46	28
Liberal Democrat	Conservative	10	38	4	8
Labour	Liberal Democrat	7	78	0	7
Liberal Democrat	Labour	2	16	2	0
Other[a]		5	46	203	66

[a]These figures exclude the seat won by the Speaker of the House of Commons, traditionally not contested by the main parties.
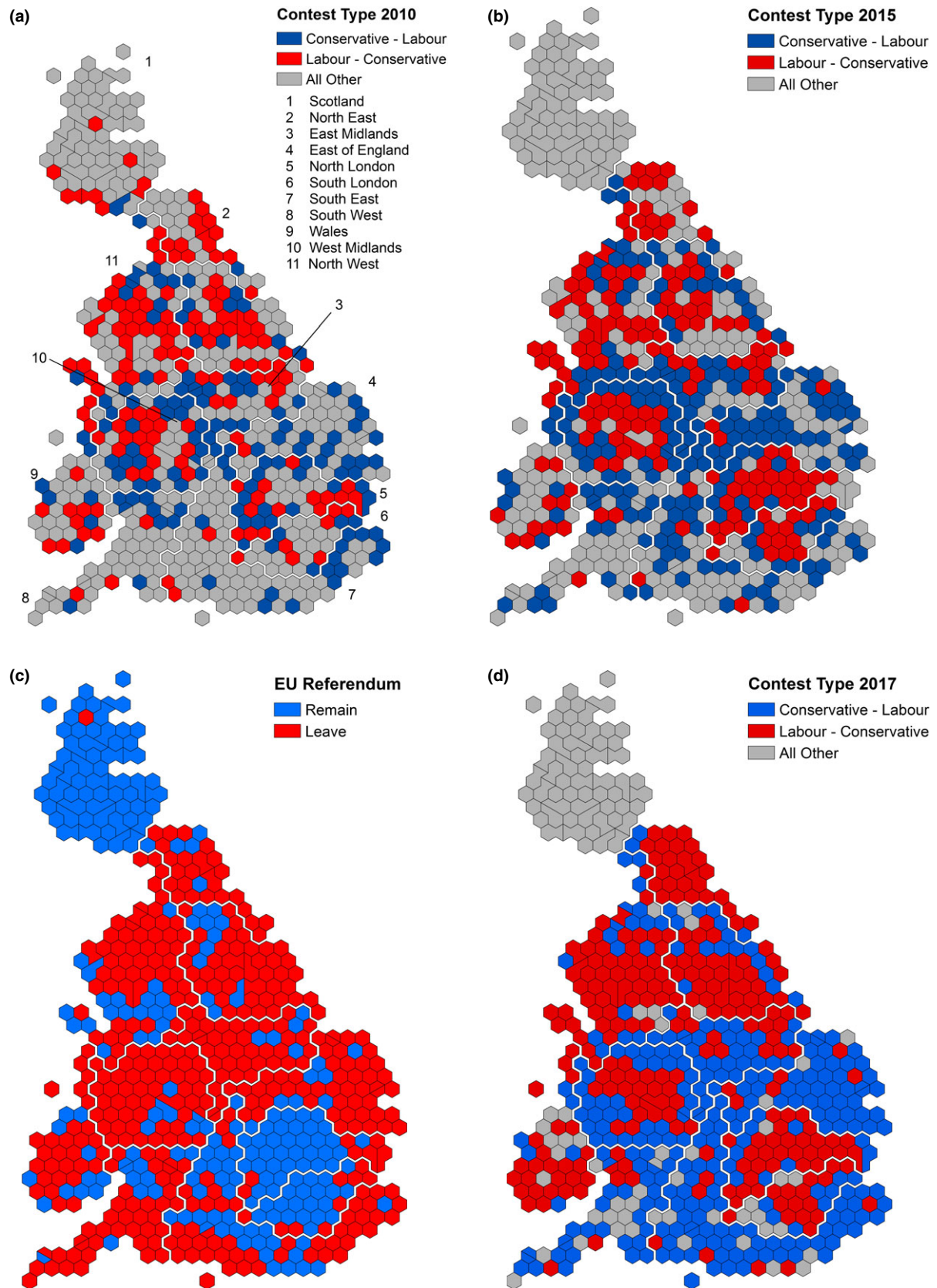
FIGURE 1 (a) Equal-area cartogram showing which parties occupied the first and second places in constituencies at the 2010 general election (b) Equal-area cartogram showing which parties occupied the first and second places in constituencies at the 2015 general election (c) Cartogram of the geography of majority support, by parliamentary constituency, for the two options at the 2016 EU referendum (d) Equal-area cartogram showing which parties occupied the first and second places in constituencies at the 2017 general election

southern successes outside London all but wiped out: just ten MPs in the three southern regions and its London complement reduced to 38. The north–south divide was being (partly) reinstated, with Labour on the retreat in southern England outside London, but the Conservatives made few gains in the northern regions – hence their failure to win a House of Commons majority in 2010.

The country's electoral geography in 2010 was not a straightforward return to the pre-New Labour pattern, however, as shown by the equal-area cartogram of constituencies in Figure 1, which has the boundaries of the major regions (plus that between north and south London) shown in white. Seats where the Conservative and Labour parties occupied the first and second places – shown in red and blue – formed a minority not only in the southern regions (East of England, 20 of 58; Southeast, 20 of 84; Southwest, 13 of 55), where the Liberal Democrats either won or came second in 144 of the 197 constituencies, but also in the Northeast, where the Liberal Democrats won two of the 29 seats and came second in a further 13 (to a Labour winner in 12). In Scotland, the Conservatives came second in only 15 of the 58 seats that they did not win. In more than half of the country's constituencies a party other than either the Conservatives or Labour filled one of the first two places at that election (Table 1).

3 | FROM COALITION GOVERNMENT TO BREXIT

A possibility of the map being modified further was initiated with the United Kingdom Independence Party's (UKIP) performances after 2010. Established in the 1990s in opposition to the UK's continued membership of the European Union, UKIP gained increased support following the very substantial migration from Eastern European countries to the UK following their accession to the EU in 2004, on which the Labour government placed no restriction (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015). UKIP came second, with 16.5% of the votes, at the 2009 European Parliament election (having gained a similar share in 2004 but only 7.0% in 1999). It then contested a majority of the constituencies at the 2010 general election but won only 3.1% of the votes. It was the largest party at the subsequent 2014 European Parliament elections, however, with 26.6% of the votes, after which it pressed even harder for an in–out referendum on EU membership. The Conservative Prime Minister, David Cameron, agreed to include a commitment to hold such a referendum in his party's 2015 general election manifesto, to assuage not only UKIP but also Eurosceptic MPs in his own party.

By 2015 UKIP was winning increased support not only in parts of Britain – other than Scotland – where its populist message regarding national sovereignty appealed to many traditional Conservative voters but also in many northern post-industrial towns where traditional Labour voters were disenchanted with New Labour's socially liberal and economically pro-globalisation policies. Large-scale immigration was presented as a major cause of pressure on working-class jobs and incomes, and on social services – and UKIP campaigners contended that New Labour's policies showed scant concern for the issues that most concerned the party's grassroots supporters (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015).

A vote for UKIP in 2015 was thus both a statement regarding a desired future for the UK outside the EU and, for many, a protest against the liberal economic and social policies associated with all of the major political parties – a protest against the "Westminster elite" (Gest, 2016; Goodhart, 2016). The traditional recipients of protest votes at recent elections – the Liberal Democrats – were no longer viable to most voters. They entered a Conservative-led coalition government and by 2015 were the focus of much of the opprobrium heaped on that coalition for its austerity programme – a negative position enhanced by Liberal Democrat MPs overturning some of the policies that won them support in 2010, not least the proposed abolition of university tuition fees: most of their MPs subsequently voted for them to be tripled.

Support for the Conservative and Labour parties hardly changed between the 2010 and 2015 elections; they won 36.1% and 29% of the votes respectively at the first and 36.9% and 30.4% at the second (Johnston, Pattie, & Manley, 2017a). But there was a major shift in support for other parties (including in Scotland, discussed below) that once again resulted in modifications to the electoral map (Figure 1b). The Liberal Democrats' vote share fell from 23% to 7.9%, and they lost all but eight of the 57 seats won in 2010. Countering this, UKIP's share increased from 3.1% to 12.6% – but it won only one seat. UKIP came second to the Conservatives in 76 constituencies, however, and to Labour in another 44, contributing substantially to the large number of seats shown in Table 1 as involving at least one party other than the Conservatives, Labour and the Liberal Democrats either winning or coming second. Most of the seats where UKIP came second to a Conservative candidate were in the three southern regions outside London; almost all of those where it came second to Labour were in the Northeast, Northwest and Yorkshire and the Humber regions. There was more red and blue in the 2015 than the 2010 map (compare Figures 1a and b), but still a great deal of grey – most seats in the Southwest region were not straight Conservative–Labour contests, for example, and there were none in Scotland.

The referendum on continued EU membership was held on 23 June 2016, with all main British political parties except UKIP, plus the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) in Northern Ireland, supporting a Remain vote – although the Conservative Party allowed its MPs a free vote: 184 voted for Remain and 146 for Leave (as did 11 Labour MPs). The pattern of majority voting for the two options (Figure 1c) differs very substantially from that of voting at the preceding general election. Apart from Scotland, where there was a majority for Remain in all but one of the 59 constituencies,[2] most of the country outside the main metropolitan centres voted to leave the EU (which became known as Brexit). Much of London and the affluent parts of the Home Counties provided majority support for Remain, as did the central cities of the country's main conurbations (Birmingham, Leeds, Liverpool, Manchester and Newcastle), but not their surrounding, former industrial, urban areas. Majority support for Remain was also won in places with large student populations – Cambridge and Oxford, Bristol and Canterbury, Bath, Brighton and York, for example. [For more detailed analyses of the voting pattern see Goodwin and Heath (2016), Manley, Johnston, and Jones (2017) and Clarke, Goodwin, and Whiteley (2017).] It was a clear metropolitan/the rest divide.

4 | FROM BREXIT TO 2017

Many anticipated that this new map would also characterise the outcome of the 2017 general election, surprisingly called by the Conservative Prime Minister as an attempt to increase her party's House of Commons majority of 12, hoping to enhance her status in the Brexit negotiations due to start in mid-June and to muzzle her parliamentary critics. At the start of the campaign in late April the Conservatives had opinion poll leads of up to 20 percentage points over Labour, there was little sign of a substantial Liberal Democrat revival, and support for UKIP had slumped by as much as two-thirds. An overwhelming Conservative majority was forecast. This was reduced by later polls as Labour closed the gap with a strong campaign, but there was little change in support for the other two parties.

Translation of those forecast vote shares into the allocation of seats was largely built on an assumption – apparently accepted by the parties involved – that most who voted UKIP in 2015 would switch to the Conservatives in 2017. UKIP voters wanted Brexit and the Conservative government had undertaken not only to deliver it, but also to ensure what became known as a "hard Brexit" favoured by UKIP, involving withdrawal from the EU's single market and customs union, ending free migration into the UK from EU countries, and no longer being subject to the European Court of Justice. Labour, on the other hand, wished to negotiate a much "softer" exit, fearing the economic consequences of leaving the single market and customs union. UKIP's *raison d'être* had largely disappeared and so, it was argued, its former supporters would vote for the Conservatives to ensure final delivery of what the party had campaigned for over the previous two decades.

If that happened the Conservatives could gain a considerable number of marginal constituencies won by Labour in 2015. There were 42 where the Conservative candidate came second by less than ten percentage points, in most of which UKIP's 2015 vote share was greater than Labour's majority. (In Figure 2, the dotted vertical lines separate out the marginal
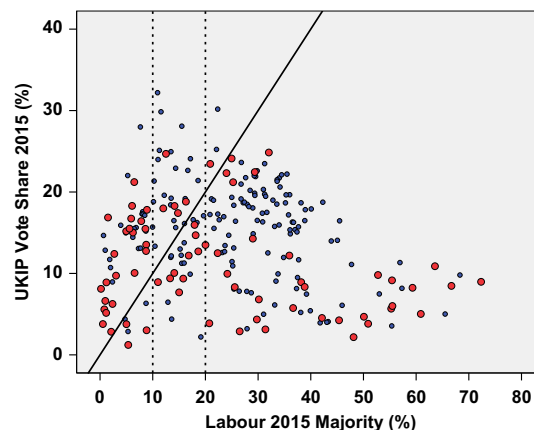

FIGURE 2 Graph showing the majority in seats won by Labour in 2015 and UKIP's vote share there, and whether UKIP fielded a candidate in 2017 (constituencies with a UKIP candidate are shown in blue, those without one are in red)

seats, won in 2015 with majorities of less than ten percentage points, and the very safe, won with margins greater than 20 points, while the solid diagonal line indicates where Labour's 2015 percentage majority exactly matched UKIP's 2015 vote share – to the left of the diagonal, UKIP's vote was larger than Labour's majority, while to the right it was smaller.) The more UKIP supporters who switched to the Conservatives in those seats in 2017, the greater the probability of a Conservative victory locally – and the larger the ensuing Conservative government's majority. The Conservatives targeted many of those seats, with several visited by the Prime Minister, who launched her party's manifesto in Halifax, where Labour had a majority of only one percentage point in 2015 and 59% voted for Leave in 2016. More importantly, UKIP decided not to field a candidate in 27 of those marginal seats (Figure 2), including most of those Labour was defending with small majorities, thereby enhancing the Conservatives' chances (though there was a UKIP candidate in Halifax).

There were also 44 seats won by the Conservatives in 2015 by a margin of less than ten percentage points over Labour, which would have been vulnerable to a relatively small swing to Labour. The polls did not suggest that was likely, however, and UKIP fielded a candidate in 27 of them, focusing on those being defended by Conservative MPs who voted for Remain, hoping to press them to support a "hard Brexit".

UKIP's strategy failed, however.[3] Its vote share collapsed across almost all contested constituencies, but insufficient of its former supporters switched to the Conservatives instead, either to help that party win many of the Labour-held marginals (the Conservatives gained just five, excluding Halifax) or to protect the marginals the Conservatives were defending; Labour won 21 of them. To many voters there, Brexit was not the key campaign issue – it was settled. They, including many who voted UKIP in 2015, were attracted by Labour's anti-austerity campaign, particularly after the launch of the Conservatives' manifesto which threatened both pensioners' well-being (a change to the guaranteed annual rise in state pensions, means testing of the winter fuel allowance, and a harsher regime for the costs of social care) and many young families (the abolition of free school meals for primary pupils, for example). Labour's policies on these issues were more attractive to many, as was their proposal to end university tuition fees. In addition, terrorist attacks in London and Manchester during the election campaign created feelings of insecurity, which the Conservatives' opponents linked to the government's cuts in police numbers. Labour attracted support from many younger voters, who turned out at the election in much larger numbers than at previous contests – an increase from c. 40% to c. 60% according to post-election polls. (Labour, for example, unseated the Conservative MP for Canterbury who had a 2015 majority of 9,798; the local university did much to encourage students to register and vote, both at the 2016 referendum and the 2017 general election).[4]

Although the Liberal Democrats won a few targeted seats their vote share fell (7.9% in 2015 and 7.4% in 2017). With UKIP performing very badly (1.8% of the votes only and over 10% in just three constituencies) there was a return to the pre-1970s situation – certainly so outside Scotland. Labour and the Conservatives together won 82.4% of the votes across the UK (compared with 67.3% just two years previously) and occupied first or second place in 522 constituencies. Geographically, the north–south and urban–rural divides were reinstated (Figure 1d).

Two further features of the electoral map were (at least partially) reinstated in 2017. The first concerns the number of marginal seats, those which the second-placed party could win with a relatively small shift in voter preferences. These had been declining in number, and at the 2015 election there were fewer than at any time since 1945 (Curtice, 2015), mainly because of the collapse in the Liberal Democrat vote share then (Johnston, Pattie, & Rossiter, 2017b). At the 2010 election, 194 seats were won with a majority of less than ten percentage points, and 87 with one of less than five points. Five years later, only 117 seats had a majority of less than ten points, and 51 less than five points. And then in 2017 there was a shift back, though not to the 2010 situation: 134 seats were won by majorities of less than ten points, and 76 with less than five. The return to a two-party system in 2017 and north–south, urban–rural divides in the electoral map were accompanied by an increase in the number of seats that were competitive, although as the Boundary Commissions are required to recommend new constituencies in 2018, with a reduced number of MPs (600 rather than 650), this aspect of the geography could be changed before the next election – assuming that the current parliament lasts at least until 2019.[5]

The second change concerns disproportionality and bias in the electoral system. The UK electoral system favours larger over smaller parties: of those that contest all or most of the seats, the largest two tend to get a bigger share of the seats than of the votes and their smaller competitors many fewer. This disproportionality of outcomes has for several decades been accompanied by bias: one of the biggest two parties tends to get a larger share of the seats proportionate to its vote share than the other. Until the mid-1960s this bias favoured the Conservatives and disadvantaged Labour, and then for the next two decades neither was significantly advantaged. The 1997 election saw a major change, however; a larger bias than ever before emerged, and favoured Labour (Johnston et al., 2001), a situation that continued in 2001 and 2005, but then fell back. By 2015 there was a substantial pro-Conservative bias again: if the two largest parties had tied in their share of the votes, the Conservatives would have won 47 more seats than Labour (Thrasher, Borisyuk, Rallings, Johnston, & Pattie, 2016). And at the 2017 election if the two parties each received 41.2% of the votes, the Conservatives would have won 11 more seats than Labour.

4.1 | Scotland and Northern Ireland

For several decades, Scotland's electoral geography was a component of the north in the north–south divide, with the Labour Party dominant. The Conservatives became increasingly unpopular – notably under the 1980s Thatcher regime – and the Liberal Democrats captured several seats in rural and remote areas, winning 11 of the 59 constituencies in 2010, with Labour victorious in another 41. The Conservatives returned only one MP and the SNP, despite winning 19.9% of Scotland's votes, returned only six: the SNP did, however, come second in 30 other constituencies. The SNP advanced in Scottish Parliament elections, however, gaining 27 of the 129 seats in 2003 with 23.7% of the votes; in 2007, 32.9% of the votes and 47 seats made it the largest party and it formed a minority administration. Its vote share increased to 45.4% in 2011 and, unexpectedly given the quasi-proportional nature of the electoral system, a majority (69) of the seats. That enabled the party to hold its proposed referendum on Scottish independence in 2014, which was lost by a margin of ten percentage points. Despite that loss, the party's support increased, and it got half of Scotland's general election votes cast in 2015, winning all but three of the 59 seats, many by substantial majorities. Labour lost many previously safe seats to the SNP, the local party having been categorised by its previous leader as treated as nothing more than a branch of the UK party, and losing much support because of its association with the Conservatives in the campaign against independence.

The SNP looked almost unassailable before the 2017 election, but its popularity waned somewhat during the campaign. Its leader – Nicola Sturgeon – argued that the Brexit decision (62% in Scotland voted Remain) made it very likely that she would call a further independence referendum, probably after the result of the exit negotiations was known. This galvanised the other parties, which – notably the Conservatives – focused their campaigning on opposition to a second independence vote. In responding to that, some pro-union voters supported the candidate most likely to defeat the SNP in their constituency, irrespective of their usual partisan preferences ("tactical" voting). The SNP remained the largest party, with 35% of the Scottish vote, but lost 21 seats – most to the party that came second to them in 2015. The result is a complex map: alongside the SNP's 35 seats (25 with Labour in second place, nine the Conservatives and one the Liberal Democrats) there are 12 with Conservative MPs and the SNP in second place, seven with Labour MPs and the SNP second, and four with Liberal Democrat MPs and the SNP second. Further, there are many more marginal seats: in 2015 only six of the SNP's 56 seats were won by a margin of less than ten percentage points (as also were the three seats won by the other parties); in 2017, 30 of the SNP's 35 seats were won by margins of less than ten percentage points, and eight by less than one point – including Fife Northeast, where the incumbent SNP MP defeated the Liberal Democrat candidate by just two votes.

Whereas in Scotland consolidation of the electoral map in 2015 was followed by fragmentation in 2017, in Northern Ireland 2017 was characterised by the creation of a two-party system and the consolidation of a long-existing bipolar (basically east–west) electoral map.[6] As many as five parties have won seats there recently – Ulster Unionists, Democratic Unionists, Social Democratic and Labour (SDLP), Sinn Féin, and the Alliance – and independent candidates have also been successful. The two unionist parties won ten of the 18 seats in 2015 (eight for the Democratic Unionists and two for the Ulster Unionists) and the republican parties won seven (Sinn Féin four and the SDLP three), with one other, an Independent Unionist. She retained her seat in 2017, but the Ulster Unionists and the SDLP both lost all of their seats; the Democratic Unionists' complement of MPs increased to ten, primarily in the east of the Province, and Sinn Féin's to seven, mainly in the west. As the latter party's members do not take their seats in the House of Commons, however, the nationalist cause is not represented in debates and the western half of Northern Ireland has no spokespersons there (along with Belfast West, which also returns a Sinn Féin MP).[7]

5 | CONCLUSIONS

After a long period of relative stability, the United Kingdom's electoral map has changed markedly at recent elections; after several decades in which "third parties" came to the fore – at least as challengers to the Conservative and Labour parties – the 2017 contest saw a return to the pattern that characterised the 1950s–1960s (other than in Scotland and Northern Ireland): a much clearer north–south plus urban–rural divide. Those changes – as illustrated in the cartograms here – have come about not so much because of changes in the geography of support for the two largest parties but rather because of the growth and subsequent decline of support for other challengers. A regression of Labour's vote share in 2017 against that in 2010 across all English and Welsh constituencies had an associated r^2 of .86, and the comparable figure for the Conservatives' vote shares was .80. With some exceptions, most reflecting particular local circumstances such as the six

seats that the Conservatives captured from Labour in 2017,[8] where each of those parties was strong in 2010 it was again seven years later. Much of the flux took place around their core, but it had important impacts on the map, on the patterns of party competition in different UK regions.

In many ways the map reflects the electoral scene, the parties' relative strengths. But those strengths are created within the maps. Parties build and then sustain their support bases locally, through structured activities and campaigning at the constituency scale and within it – in ward organisations, for example. Such campaigning – its intensity and relative success, especially though not only in marginal seats targeted by opponents (Barwell, 2016; Pattie, Hartman, & Johnston, 2017) – is crucial to the continued restructuring of the electoral map's parameters: geography is deeply implicated in how the UK electoral system operates and its governments are formed.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ENDNOTES

[1] Most of the data cited in this paper have been taken from the compilations included in the Nuffield election series (e.g. Cowley & Kavanagh, 2015). The 2017 data were published by the House of Commons Library (2017).

[2] The referendum results were reported by local authority: the figures for constituencies are estimates developed by Chris Hanretty of the University of East Anglia (https://secondreading.uk/brexit/brexit-votes-by-constituency/ accessed 21 June 2017).

[3] On this see also Heath and Goodwin (2017).

[4] See www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/28/canterbury-we-made-a-difference-election-labour-tory (accessed 29 June 2017).

[5] Initial estimates by Electoral Calculus (www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/homepage.html accessed 21 June 2017) suggest that if the 2017 election had been fought in the Commissions' initially recommended new 600 seats, the Conservatives would have won 43 seats more than Labour, rather than the 56 in the current 650 seats. That said, reports in September 2017 suggested the Conservative government might abandon their plan to cut the size of the Commons, which would delay the boundary review, potentially until after the next general election (see https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/sep/06/theresa-may-to-ditch-plans-to-cut-number-of-mps-from-650-to-600).

[6] The 2017 general election was held in a period of considerable uncertainty and instability in Northern Ireland. Sinn Féin had withdrawn from the power-sharing Executive in the Northern Ireland Assembly following a scandal involving a DUP minister who had since been appointed First Minister and an election was held on 2 March 2017. The DUP and Sinn Féin won 28.1% and 27.9% of the votes and 28 and 27 seats (out of a total of 90) respectively. The parties were unable to reach agreement, however, and by July 2017 a new Executive had not been formed.

[7] Intriguingly, the Electoral Calculus estimates suggest that if the 2017 election had been fought in the proposed new 17 Northern Ireland seats, Sinn Féin would have won nine and the DUP seven.

[8] All six were in Labour's northern "heartlands" – Stoke-on-Trent South, Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland, Mansfield, Copeland (won by the Conservatives from Labour at a by-election in February 2017, and retained at the subsequent general election), North East Derbyshire, and Walsall North, but they had little else in common; nor were they some of the most marginal Labour-held seats. Four of Labour's 28 gains from the Conservatives were in London, four in the Southeast, three in the Southwest and three in the East of England – half of them in the southern part of the north–south divide, therefore, and once again illustrating that the divide is far from exclusive.

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