

Whiteley, Paul, Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin, and Marianne C. Stewart, *Brexit Britain: The Consequences of the Vote to Leave the European Union*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2023. £40.00 (hbk); £14.99 (pbk/ebook), xxiii + 354pp. ISBN 1108733794; 978-1108733793.

The period since the 2016 referendum on British membership of the European Union (EU) has been one of massive political upheaval in the UK, both in terms of its international relations and of its domestic political order. While that upheaval is still yet to fully play out, any attempt to try to pull together the various strands involved is to be welcomed.

This current work is best seen as an extension of the ideas set out by several of the authors in their 2017 volume *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union* (Clarke *et al.* 2017). Whereas that tried to unpick the dynamics around the referendum itself, here there is an exploration of the politics through the 2017 and 2019 general elections, grounded in both short- and longer-term perspectives. The authors bring their expertise in psephology and voter analysis to consider the different ways in which the referendum - and the European issue more generally - affected trends in socio-economic or territorial patterns of voting, as well as making some explorations into the economic impact of Brexit, not least in comparison to the Covid pandemic.

As should be clear from even this short summary, this is an ambitious remit, not least when combined with the laudable objective to communicate all of this in a form that is meant to be accessible to the non-specialist reader. At its best, the analysis of the two general elections situates those votes very well within their immediate contexts, providing a valuable resource to those trying to unpick what was happening at those moments in time. Likewise, as a

reflection on the findings of the previous volume, which was necessarily very close up to its subject matter, this offers some good lessons in how we can build our understanding over time.

However, even with some more space there remains a question about what matters and how. The extent to which the British House of Commons' 'First-Past-The-Post' electoral system will counteract the fissiparous tendencies exposed during this period is unclear as we head toward the next UK general election, as is the extent to which the age/education cleavage will stay in place as a strong sorting force. Precisely because so much is happening during this time, we lack clear answers about whether this was a rupture or a passing deviation from a homeostatic equilibrium.

Moreover, the impact of economic factors is also hard to judge from the evidence presented here. There is a critique of almost all modelling of leaving the EU, based on a 'backcast' that suggests insignificant negative impacts on Multi-Factor Productivity in the UK, but this uses the negotiation period prior to the UK's actual withdrawal in early 2020, making it an exercise in comparing apples and oranges. As much as the authors are right to point to the major and confounding effects of the pandemic, the absence of analysis of recovery after this time as a means of comparing relative performances feels like a missed opportunity, especially given their arguments about how objective and subjective measures of economic performance might impact voting behaviour.

All of which raises the question of: how much Brexit continues to be the most useful lens to understand contemporary British politics? While Leave and Remain identities continue to part of the political debate, the salience of the European issue has fallen ever lower since the

UK left the EU. The authors come back to the notion of a rejection of elitist ideas of internationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalisation at various points, but do not square this with the much more positive view of younger voters towards such concepts. Lower turnout for the young might attenuate the impact, but clearly not in the long-run, so whether the successors to Boris Johnson or Nigel Farage - who both get favourable write-ups for their catching of the *zeitgeist* - can connect in the same way or on the same terms is a moot point.

The strength of this book lies in its close analysis of the two general elections, but it is also of interest as an artefact of its time. If the referendum was an opportunity for people to articulate their frustrations with the state of things, which is the strong suggestion of the evidence we have, then we are still living in a period where there is no clear political programme that voters have latched onto as a solution to their woes. Getting out of the EU was never going to be a silver bullet, but the flux generated by that decision has left the field open to those who would claim it for their own project. This book captures some of that sense of instability and indeterminacy, as well as the power of political agents to shape and sell agendas.

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References

Clarke, Harold D., Matthew J. Goodwin, and Paul Whiteley (2017). *Brexit: Why Britain Voted to Leave the European Union*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

Bibliography

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