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“The centre must hold”

Partisan dealignment and the rise of the minor party at the 2015 general election

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MSc in Politics and Communication

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“The centre must hold”

Partisan dealignment and the rise of the minor party at the 2015 general election

Peter Carrol

ABSTRACT

For much of Britain’s post-war history, Labour or the Conservatives have formed a majority government, even when winning less than half of the popular vote. But the two parties combined vote share has steadily declined since its peak of 96.8% in 1951 to 67.3% at the 2015 general election, when ‘minor’ parties — UKIP, the SNP, and the Green party — collectively took 21.1%, in what was the most fragmented election in British history. This dissertation aims to answer the research question: *why are citizens voting for the minor parties?*

Using in-depth, qualitative methods this study obtains the perspectives from a purposive theoretical sample of N=24 citizens who changed their vote from Labour, the Conservatives or the Liberal Democrats, to UKIP ($n=8$), the SNP ($n=8$), and the Green party ($n=8$), between 2010 and 2015.

Guided by the relevant literature, the data was thematically analysed, revealing four major themes— voters making cognitive evaluations of major and minor parties, defined by post-materialist values; the failure of major parties voter-maximisation strategies to satisfy sections of the electorate; the politicisation of global, national and regional identity; and, multi-party identity in an era of seismic socio-economic changes.

This research concludes that reforming the electoral system to reflect Britain’s multi-party reality and the diversity within the electorate is vital. It also discusses further research into media reform to support democratic ends.

INTRODUCTION

“The political center has lost its power to persuade and its essential means of connection to the people it seeks to represent. Instead, we are seeing a convergence of the far left and far right... Underlying it all is a shared hostility to globalization.

The center must regain its political traction, rediscover its capacity to analyze the problems we all face and find solutions that rise above the populist anger... The center must hold.”

(Tony Blair, U.K. prime minister 1997-2007, 24 June 2016)

In Britain’s majoritarian electoral system, single-member plurality is meant to severely limit the representation of minor parties to give one party an overall majority, even when it wins less than half of the popular vote. For much of Britain’s post-war history, this is exactly how the system functioned, with voters choosing one of two alternative governments, led by either the Conservative party or the Labour party.

At first glance, the 2015 general election result appeared to be business as usual; despite winning only 36.9% of the vote share, the Conservatives returned to power with a slim majority of just 12 seats, following five years of governing in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. But while the familiar edifice of party politics was maintained, a closer examination revealed that the system’s foundations were beginning to crumble.

Although Labour and the Conservatives increased their share of the vote (by 2.2%), overall the governing parties lost 12.9% of their support, the largest swing against a British government since 1918 (Green and Prosser, 2016). This was largely due to the collapse of Britain’s hitherto third party, the Liberal Democrats, who lost 49 of their 57 seats, and the surge in support for the ‘minor’ parties.

The Scottish National party (SNP) won a dramatic landslide victory in Scotland, winning 56 of Scotland's 59 seats and a 4.7% share of the vote to become the third largest party in parliament. The United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) made remarkable gains, winning a 12.6% share of the vote to come third; but due to the majoritarian system, the party came equal 10th in terms of seats and gained only one MP in the House of Commons, alongside the Greens, who won a 3.8% share of the vote.

What made 2010-2015 remarkable is the speed and scale of minor party growth. The 2015 election was the most fragmented in British history (Green and Prosser, 2016); collectively, these three minor parties increased their share of the vote from 5.8% to 21.1%. This rise points

to the continuing likelihood of hung parliaments (Curtice, 2015b, Clarke, 2016), and points towards a greater role for minor parties in future coalition governments.

The consequences of the fragmentation of political support for the major parties have already had a significant impact. In the aftermath of the general election, the Liberal Democrats began to reimagine its purpose as part of a progressive center-left alliance as the party was crushed after supporting the Conservatives in coalition (Cowburn, 2016). In September 2015, Labour party members turned their backs decisively on the New Labour era by rejecting a group of centrist leadership candidates in favour of Jeremy Corbyn, a back-bench rebel and veteran socialist, who secured a landslide victory despite having support of only a handful of his parliamentary colleagues. Since Corbyn's election, Labour has been riven by infighting, with commentators arguing it has failed to provide an effective opposition (FT, 2016).

Most significantly, the Conservative's manifesto pledge to hold a vote on Britain's European Union (EU) membership was widely viewed as part of the party's strategy to retain voters tempted to support UKIP at the 2015 general election (Cowley, 2016b). At the June 2016 referendum, a coalition of major parties, businesses, and international institutions campaigning for Britain to remain in the EU failed to halt a populist uprising as Britain voted to leave by a small majority (Behr, 2016).

But these dramatic changes at the top of party politics are only part of the story. Across Britain, millions of voters are rejecting the major parties that many of them have voted for throughout their lives. This project aims to explore the backgrounds, stories and personal journeys that have led these voters to arrive at their decision. What do voters expect from a political system that is designed to exclude their party from power? Are voters committed to the minor parties in the long-term, and does this threaten the viability of the majoritarian democratic system? And can the political centre 'hold' together what is becoming an increasingly divided nation?

This study begins by canvassing the relevant literature on voter behaviour, focusing on how 'bottom-up' sociological transformation and 'top-down' change within the political party structure have interacted as the two-party system in Britain has fragmented. Using these theoretical insights, this study builds towards a conceptual framework and research question that asks: *why are citizens voting for the minor parties?*

Moving on to methodological considerations to answer this research question, this study reports the qualitative methods and thematic data analysis used to produce a series of insights into voter behaviour. It then offers its results and interpretation together, identifying four interrelated themes which have influenced the behaviour of voters: greater cognitive evaluations; how voter-maximisation strategies by the major parties have marginalised a

growing section of the electorate; new political allegiances mobilised by global, national and regional identities; and, multi-party identification in an era of significant socio-economic change.

Finally, this study concludes with suggestions about reforming Britain's democratic system to reflect Britain's political and social reality. It also offers thoughts on how the media can serve Britain's democratic ends, as well as some considerations for future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The following literature review critically assesses four prominent theoretical explanations of voter behaviour in the British political context. Reflecting on the stark decline in support for the major parties with reference to the class-partisanship model (Butler, 1974), it discusses how Britain's transition to a post-industrial society has meant old political conflicts based on social interests have been replaced by political allegiances that are increasingly defined by post-material values (Inglehart, 1990, 1997). These social changes have simultaneously led to an increase in voter's cognitive resources (Whiteley, 2012, Dalton, 2014), enabling voters to select parties that best fit their values and priorities. Finally, the party political context is discussed, and how Labour and the Conservatives ideological convergence in pursuit of the largest constituency (Evans and Tilley, 2012) has left them vulnerable to the minor parties, specifically UKIP, the SNP, and the Green party, who have significantly increased their support despite institutional barriers in Britain's political system (Norris, 1997a) and media (Hallin, 2004).

End of a duopoly

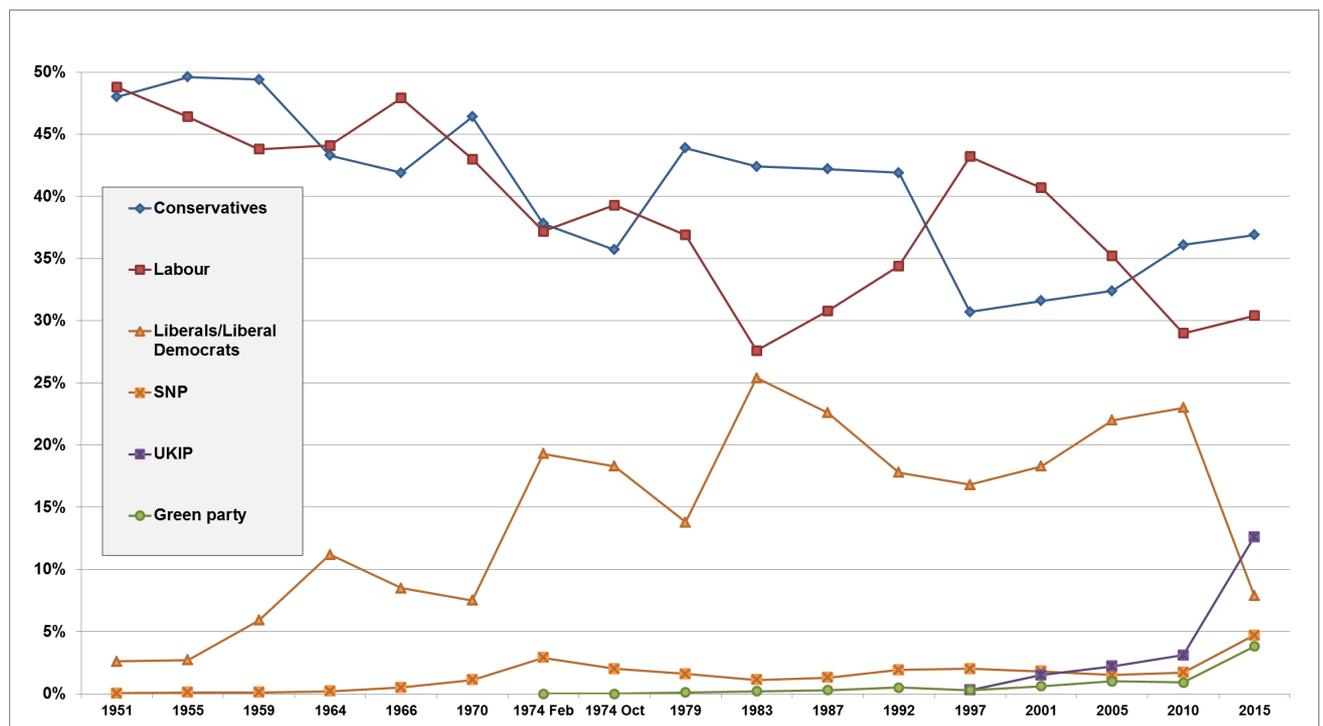
For much of the post-war period, electoral politics in Britain was effectively a duopoly; in 1951, 96.8% of the votes were cast for either one of the major parties that dominate local and national politics, the Conservative party or the Labour party (Norris, 1997b, Copus et al., 2009). The system's stability reflected the era of partisanship: "the tendency of voters to repeatedly vote for the same party" (Bartle and Bellucci, 2009: 5), where "the electoral strength of most parties... changed very little from election to election, from decade to decade, or within the lifespan of a generation" (Rose and Urwin, 1970: 295).

Scholars traced partisanship to historical processes in the national and industrial revolutions during the seventeenth century, which became the basis for enduring political cleavages (Rokkan and Lipset, 1967). These cleavages meant that high-income groups tended to vote for

parties on the right-wing of the political spectrum, while low-income groups tended to vote for parties on the left (Lipset, 1981). Conservative party success in Britain’s majority working-class population in the early twentieth-century was explained by the “noblesse oblige norms among the aristocracy” (Lipset, 1983: 4), with the ruling classes acting as a protective stratum for the industrial workforce through working reforms and welfare-state legislation, until it was challenged by the Labour party which grew out of the trade union movement.

Following its post-war peak in 1951, Labour and Conservative support declined to a record low of 65.1% share of the vote in 2010, and in 2015 the parties combined total was 67.3% (parliament.uk, 2016). The weakening of support for the major parties is known as ‘partisan dealignment’, where citizens are no longer attached to political parties (Crewe et al., 1977, Norris, 1997b), and is contrasted with the growing support for minor parties, such as the Green party, UKIP, and the SNP (Green and Prosser, 2016). Figure one illustrates the steady upward trajectory of these parties since 2001, with a dramatic rise from 5.8% to 21.1% between the 2010-2015 general elections (Commission, 2015). Definitions of what constitutes a minor party are contested (Smith, 1997, Copus et al., 2009); this study uses both Sartori (1976), who describes minor parties in terms of their blackmail or coalition potential, and Copus et al. (2009), who classify minor parties as having a relatively small electoral base which competes regularly at general and local elections.

Figure 1: Vote share of major and minor parties at general elections: 1951-2015 (Parliament.uk, 2016)



Partisan dealignment has been mirrored by falling turnout in parliamentary elections in Britain (Franklin, 2004, Mair, 2006, Clarke, 2016); in 1950, 82.5% of Britons voted in the general election, by 2015, that proportion had fallen to 66.1% (Clarke, 2016), with scholars linking voter abstention to dissatisfaction with both the political system and major parties (Bélanger, 2004, Whiteley, 2012). While decline has not been uniform, the long-term trajectory is clear; increasing numbers of voters have stopped voting for the main parties or have withdrawn from voting altogether.

The era of class-partisanship

Scholars have linked partisan dealignment to a decline in ‘party identification’ with major parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Dalton, 2004). Party identification was developed by Campbell et al. (1960: 121) from a longitudinal study of American voter behaviour, and is defined as “an effective attachment to an important group project in the environment”. It built on Lipset’s theory of how historical political cleavages provided the basis for the party system, but emphasised the psychological aspects of group membership. A key finding of Campbell et al.’s study was that party identification is formed during childhood, and shaped by family members and the individual’s social environment (also see Berelson, 1954, Lazarsfeld, 1968).

Party identification was introduced into the British context by Butler and Stokes (Butler, 1974). Using an adapted model from Campbell et al. (1960), they found similarities with the American system, stating that “most electors think of themselves as supporters of a given party in a lasting sense, developing what might be called a ‘partisan self-image’” (Butler, 1974: 39). Reflective of Campbell et al., Butler and Stokes also found that family and social class influenced voter behaviour, to create a bond with a party which was likely to remain stable throughout their lives.

Building on Lipset (also see Pulzer, 1968), Butler and Stokes found most middle-class voters supported the Conservatives, and most working-class voters supported Labour. Although they noted exceptions (McKenzie, 1968, Parkin, 1968), Butler and Stokes provided strong evidence for a class-basis of political support, citing British Election Study data from 1963 which showed 72% of voters who viewed themselves as working-class were Labour identifiers, while 79% of respondents who thought of themselves as middle-class were Conservative identifiers (1974: 77).

Butler and Stokes acknowledged that voters could vote against their usual party due to short-term influences, but most tended to display either a ‘homing’ tendency where they returned to

their original party (also see Harrop, 1987), or formed a lasting attachment to their new party. They found the most likely cause of a break in partisanship was a shift in the political climate, usually when voters entered the electorate, for example during a deep recession or a fundamental change in the ideology of government of the era (Butler, 1974).

New identities and values

Scholars have subsequently criticised Butler and Stokes' model of class-partisanship for its failure to anticipate the extent of the decline in party identification since it was first measured in 1964 (Crewe, 1974, Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Whiteley, 2013). As partisan dealignment became evident during the 1970s, scholars focused on the extent to which it was a reaction to 'bottom up' changes to Britain's social and economic structure (Franklin, 1985, Rose, 1986).

Britain's economic transformation from the 1970s led to a steep decline of traditional industrial jobs, with heavy industries replaced by the middle-class dominated service sector as Britain became a post-industrial society (Bell, 1974, Ford and Goodwin, 2014a). In 1964, almost half of the working age population were in working-class occupations; by 2010, the proportion had fallen to 30% (Ford and Goodwin, 2014b). During 1950s-1970s, a steady supply of skilled manual jobs meant that incomes increased for most of society (Atkinson and Piketty, 2007); this contrasts sharply with the decades after 1980, characterised by higher structural unemployment, stagnant incomes, and rising social and economic inequality (Streeck and Schäfer, 2013, Piketty, 2014). Trade union membership fell from a 13.3 million peak in 1979 to 6.4 million in 2014 (Gov.uk, 2015) and council housing occupancy dropped from 42% to 8% over the same period (Woodward, 2010, Gov.uk, 2016). The shift from public to private forms of ownership in the 1980s was the cornerstone of 'Thatcherism', a neoliberal economic model which promoted a smaller-state, free-markets, and possessive individualism (Saunders, 1990, Gamble, 1994, Johnson and Tanner, 1998, Macpherson, 2011). Britain's economic gravity moved away from port cities and industrial hubs towards its urban centres, symbolised by the emergence of "polycentric mega-cities" (Hall, 2006: 125).

Scholars have argued that as Britain's socio-economic structures have changed, class-partisanship has declined (Franklin, 1992, van der Eijk et al., 1992, Dogan, 2000) while "class overlap" increased (Dalton, 2008a: 156). This account has been criticised both for its sociological determinism and failure to account for parties positioning themselves to appeal to different sections of society (Evans, 2000).

In his influential work, Giddens (1991) proposed that the social changes in modern societies have brought the era of 'individualisation'. The argument flows that the process of individualisation weakens long-standing bonds of common interests, political allegiances, and national and class identities, as citizens enjoy expanded personal freedoms and more individualised forms of political participation (also see Dalton, 2008b). Dunleavy (2005: 31) asserted that new political positions have emerged from the ashes of Britain's social structures, cutting through social class cleavages to create 'six or seven ideologically... distinct positions in party politics'.

Inglehart (1977, 1990, 1997) argued that the social and economic changes have also led to a broader value shift, with the rise of a diverse and educated middle-class fuelling progressive, 'post-material' values, as younger generations who have entered adulthood in the globalised era emphasise their quality of life, self-expression, social justice and democratic participation, rather than 'materialist' concerns such as economic growth and national security. This is linked to the 'new politics' of social differentiation, such as environmental issues and gender, which have increasingly replaced the class-based interests and economic conflicts (Eder, 1993).

In this context, political solidarities are formed internationally, as globalisation— the "processes by which the peoples of the world are incorporated into a single world society" (Albrow et al., 1990: 9), enables the creation of a global consciousness (Robertson, 1992). Beck (1992, 2008) argued that global environmental concerns have emerged from this tradition, as citizens form long-distance political allegiances that transcend national identity.

'Left behind'

Importantly, processes of value change have not affected all parts of the population in the same way, with working-class voters who lack qualifications and skills finding themselves marginalised by the post-industrial economy and political mainstream (Ford, 2014, Ford and Goodwin, 2014b). These groups have been described as the "losers of modernisation" (Betz, 1994: 25) and the 'left behind' (Ford, 2014). Scholars have argued that the 'left behind' have formed a 'silent counter-revolution' (Ignazi, 1992: 3) against the rise of progressive, post-materialist values, symbolised by increasingly hostile attitudes towards immigration (Ivarsflaten, 2005) and resurgence of national identity (Ignatieff, 1993).

There is evidence of this trend in Britain; following increases in levels of immigration from the late 1990s, the proportion of the population favouring some reduction in migration increased from 63% to 78% between 1995 and 2008 (Park et al., 2012) with the sentiment more

common amongst groups who feel economically insecure (McLaren and Johnson, 2007, Fox et al., 2012, Ford et al., 2012b). And rather than experiencing a weakening of national identity theorised by ‘individualisation’, studies show that between 1996 and 2011 there was an increase in the proportion of people who describe themselves as English and Scottish rather than British (Ormston, 2012, Curtice, 2013a).

Social identity theory can offer a theoretical framework to understand individuals desire to affirm their national and regional identities in this way. Defined as ‘part of an individual’s self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group’ (Tajfel, 1974: 69), prejudice can stem from a desire to achieve or maintain a distinct or positive social identity (Sears, 1993). Beck’s (2001) research on identity offers further insight, arguing that the speed of change in the globalised era could lead to some groups reconnecting with their national and ethnic identities, while Ignatieff (1993) concluded that globalisation has brought a resurgence of ethnic nationalism, leading citizens who feel they lack welfare and safety to seek the security of national belonging (Ignatieff, 1993).

Cognitive mobilisation

At the individual level, scholars have argued that citizens have generally become more capable of engaging with political issues due to the spread of education and improved access to political information through the media (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Whiteley, 2012, Dalton, 2014).

In this context, citizens are increasingly likely to base their analytical criteria when they vote on subjective assessments of parties performance or ideology (Clarke, 2004, Clarke, 2009); these can be separated into two types of issue voting: ‘valence’ and ‘position’ issues (Stokes, 1992).

According to Stokes (1992) valence issues are voters most significant evaluative criteria, and relate to areas where there is widespread agreement amongst the electorate on what is best for the country, such as economic stability, education, and healthcare. Voter behaviour is therefore influenced by perceptions of which party can deliver these priorities the most competently and effectively. For example, studies have attributed Labour’s electoral failure in 2010 and 2015 to negative appraisals by voters of their handling of the economy (Evans and Chzhen, 2013, Clarke, 2016), while the coalition government suffered declines in popularity in 2012 due to perceptions of their inability to achieve a sustained economic recovery (Whiteley, 2013, Clarke, 2016).

Position issues are areas where the electorate may have differing opinions, such as levels of taxation, environmentalism or levels of immigration (Butler, 1974, Alt et al., 1976). On this reading, the defection of voters from the Conservative party to UKIP on the position of immigration can be explained by perceptions of Conservative failure to address the issue effectively (Ford et al., 2012a).

Furthermore, scholars have argued that the importance of leadership evaluations has increased, with political leaders increasingly personifying the policy platforms of their respective parties (Dalton and Wattenberg, 2000, Poguntke and Webb, 2005, McAllister, 2007). For example, the leadership ratings of former Labour leaders Tony Blair, Gordon Brown, and Ed Miliband, was cited as a factor in the decline in the party's overall support between 2005-2015 (Evans and Chzhen, 2013, Bale, 2015). But recent studies argue that the influence of leadership on voter behaviour has remained relatively constant (Karvonen, 2010), and is often a secondary factor for voters in the British system (Curtice and Lisi, 2015).

The dominant middle class and the status quo

An alternative thesis to sociological change contends that the 'top-down' effect of ideological convergence from the political parties is causing the fragmentation of social cleavages of political support (Evans and Tilley, 2012). As the working-class has shrunk as a proportion of the electorate, major parties have repositioned to direct their policies towards the concerns of the middle classes (Hay, 1997, Mair et al., 2004, Quinn, 2008) and marginalised special-interest constituencies (also see Downs, 1957, Przeworski, 1985, Merrill, 1999). This strategy relates to the concept of the 'catch-all' party; appealing to the widest audience with a centrist platform (Kirchheimer, 1966), with the political debate revolving around valence issues of competency and management, rather than ideology.

Scholars have argued that this model can be seen in the modern incarnations of Labour and the Conservatives (Evans et al., 1999, Webb, 2004, Smith, 2009). In the case of Labour, achieving electoral success after successive general election defeats meant moving to the 'centre ground' of British politics (Blair, 2010, Gould, 2011). From 1994, Tony Blair led New Labour's embrace of the 'liberal consensus' on immigration and support of market neoliberalism, targeting aspirational and ideologically moderate voters (Heath, 2001). While this strategy initially proved highly successful, the party eventually shed five million voters during its 13 years in power (Johnston and Pattie, 2011).

Following a similar formula, David Cameron's 'compassionate Conservatism' project from when he became Conservative leader in 2005 sought to recast the Conservative party as

economically centrist and at ease with rising social diversity in Britain (Bale, 2008). Although less electorally successful and a less substantive repositioning than Labour (Bale, 2009, Green, 2010, Byrne et al.), the strategy of both parties was clear— jettisoning 'marginal' constituencies in favour of the same group of available middle-class voters. One of the main problems with this interpretation is that it does not explain why partisanship remained strong during the 1960s and early 1970s, when there was also a high degree of ideological convergence between the two main parties (Heath, 2015).

Scholars have argued that the major party ideological convergence is also partly a product of the majoritarian system, which favours responsible, single-party government, with parties aiming to govern for the country as a whole rather than specific groups of the electorate (Lijphart, 1984, Norris, 1997a). In relation to the media, majoritarian government tends to be associated with the 'Liberal Model', with the media's normative role to act as a neutral servant of the public, free from state interference (Hallin, 2004). Scholars have argued that the British media has deviated from this role, with the mass audience, privately owned, adversarial, and strongly partisan press creating and sustaining the two-party system (Hallin, 2004). Similarly, scholars have debated how the neoliberal economic model leads to information being framed within the parameters of elite interests to exclude alternative ideas, to preserve the political and economic status-quo (Sassen, 1998, Couldry, 2010). An example of this relationship can be seen in New Labour's courting of the news media prior to the 1997 general election; after winning a majority with the endorsement of much of the press, the party announced that the neoliberal method of market competition would be the primary tool for regulating media ownership (Freedman, 2008).

Over the past century, the BBC, Britain's publicly owned state broadcaster, has arguably been a countervailing force, and avoided capture by the dominant political tendency to serve democracy (Humphreys, 1996). More recently, the growth of new and independent media in the 21st century has brought greater plurality, facilitating the rise of political movements and economic ideas that exist outside of the political and media mainstream (Jenkins et al., 2003, Castells, 2015). Britain's Liberal Model differs with the media systems which exist in European multi-party democracies, where the 'Democratic Corporatist Model' articulates between social groups to facilitate a series of political compromises, protecting the interests of the state and promoting the development of civil society (Hallin, 2004, also see Curran, 1991).

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Having discussed the relevant literature to understand partisan dealignment and the rising support for the minor parties, this section defines the conceptual framework that guides this study.

Drawing from Evans and Tilley (2012), this research posits that ideological convergence of the major parties has marginalised a growing section of the electorate, as political choices are largely defined by post-material values and cultural differentiation (Eder, 1993, Inglehart, 1997), with voters demonstrating an increasing ability to use their cognitive resources to vote according to their priorities (Dalton, 2014).

The increased salience of national and regional identity (Ignatieff, 1993), and global affiliations (Beck, 2008) in the globalised era have intensified political allegiances with minor political parties that have not positioned themselves to appeal to a wide cross-section of the British electorate.

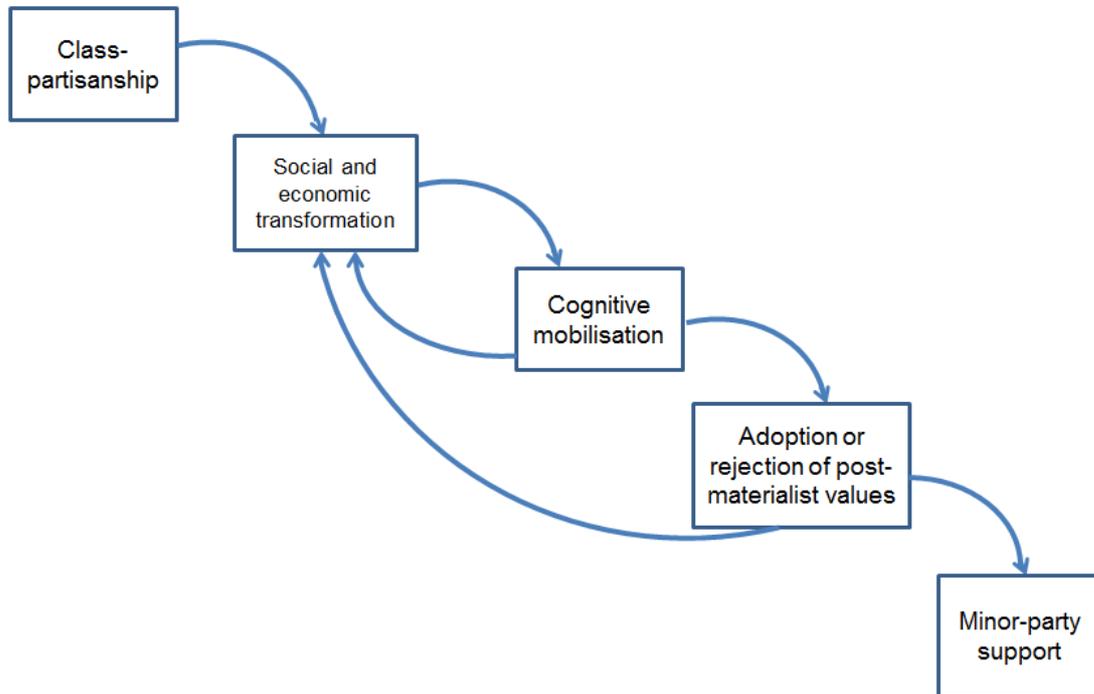
Despite institutional barriers such as the highly-centralised, majoritarian democratic system (Norris, 1997a) and mainstream media (Hallin, 2004), the factors discussed have placed increasing strain on the stable class-partisanship of the two-party era (Butler, 1974).

Broadly, the literature review has identified two potential sources for partisan dealignment; 'bottom-up' changes; where social and economic changes have introduced post-materialist values, cognitive mobilisation and new political affiliations in the globalised, post-industrial economy; and 'top-down', where the 'catch-all' strategy to pursue the largest middle-class constituency has left sections of the electorate marginalised within Britain's nominal two-party system.

Framing my research around these theoretical insights will enable an analysis of the political transformation that has occurred within the temporal range of this study. As figure two makes clear, there is a cascading effect between the concepts which leads to minor-party support.

As the following chapters demonstrate, this work positions itself alongside Evans and Tilley (2012), who argue that the ideological convergence has led to a declining relevance of socio-economic differentiation, while Dalton (2014) offers important insights into voters' cognitively mobilisation largely defined by post-materialist political values (Inglehart, 1997), creating pressure on the stable two-party system and moving Britain into an era of multi-party politics.

Figure 2: Diagram of cascading interaction of partisan dealignment and minor-party support (adapted from Entman, 2003: 10)



RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objective of this research is to gain theoretically grounded insights into the perspectives of voters who have driven the transformation of British politics between 2010-2015.

This study focuses on voter's perceptions of social change, democracy, political parties, and the role of government, placing each individual's social context at the centre of the study, reflective of Couldry's (2012) contribution to the study of media and communication, whereby all practices, at their most basic level, should be understood socially.

This research responds to significant gaps within academic literature; the study of the rise of minor parties is both a relatively new area (Meguid, 2005, Johns et al., 2009) and often relies exclusively on large-scale qualitative data analysis (Ford and Goodwin, 2014a).

While these approaches offer valuable contributions to the field, this research is distinct by bringing a rich, descriptive and deliberative account directly from the voters who have made a recent transition to a minor party, both reflecting the complexity of voter behaviour in a

democratic system (Habermas, 1992) and providing original perspectives as they reflect on their own lives, values, and changing social circumstances.

This dissertation therefore aims to answer the following research question:

Why are citizens voting for the minor parties?

Having outlined this work's theoretical underpinnings, the coming pages now progress to how this study plans to answer this question.

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this study is to provide rich insights into the political views of a defined group of voters; therefore qualitative methods, primarily using focus groups and individual interviews, are the most appropriate. The focus group method originated in sociology (Merton et al., 1990), finding increasing use as a research tool in other social science disciplines from the late-1970s (Gamson, 1992, Wilkinson, 1998, Mattinson, 2010, Gould, 2011).

While there are numerous descriptions of focus groups within methodological literature (Wilkinson, 1997, Krueger, 2015), this study accepts Morgan's (1997: 6) definition that the method is a "research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic determined by the researcher". Focus groups allow access to group norms and shared cultural values (Hughes and Dumont, 1993, Kitzinger, 1995), reflective of the ontological position of social constructionism (Bryman, 2016). This tradition recognises that the emerging reality within the group, and the researchers interpretation, is in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction (Berger, 1966, Becker, 1982) with participants social behaviour a central analytical resource (Kitzinger, 1994).

I remained flexible to mixed-method modes of research in anticipation of the challenges around organising focus groups (Krueger, 2015), conducting individual interviews with voters who met the theoretical criteria of the research question, but were unavailable or unwilling to participate in focus group discussions (Michel, 1999). Following the basic format of the qualitative interview (Warren, 2001, Rubin, 2012, Kvale, 1996), the method is also suitable for investigating specific and tightly defined research questions to identify attitudes, feelings or beliefs (Berger, 1998). This research method has been used in comparable studies (Kvale, 1996, Warren, 2002) and was successfully tested during pilot interviews in April 2016; however, the influencing role of the moderator during the pilot meant that focus groups would

be preferable in situations when all participants could be organised. An advantage of using data from both focus groups and individual interviews is that it allows the comparison of the individual and contextual factors behind participants responses (Lambert and Loiselle, 2008).

Alternative qualitative methods such as ethnography could also provide “thick” descriptions of individuals’ daily social patterns (Geertz, 1975, Lofland, 2006), but are unsuitable in this research context as the temporal range is biographical, whereas ethnographic study focuses on the contemporaneous lived experience (Warren, 2002). While some critics of qualitative research argue that qualitative methods lead to “impressionistic, unsystematic or subjective” interpretations (Charmaz, 2006: 5) and provide ‘soft’, unverifiable data (Devine, 1995), pilot studies demonstrated valuable flexibility to explore complex issues and generate new theories in this research context. Quantitative methods, such as questionnaires, were also considered, but were deemed unsuitable in the context of voter behaviour due to the limits they can place on findings (Mishler, 1986, Habermas, 1992, Hay, 2002, Rubin, 2012).

RESEARCH DESIGN

Sampling

Theoretical sampling techniques were used to identify and seek participants that would epitomise the analytical criteria of the research question (Glaser, 1967, Warren, 2002). The theoretical criteria was guided by Copus et al. (2009) and Sartori’s (1976) minor party definitions and Britain’s political history (Norris, 1997b). For the purposes of this study Labour and the Conservatives are considered major parties, as are the Liberal Democrats, due to their consistent levels of support throughout the 1990s and 2000s, building to a 23% share of the vote in 2010 and a term in government (Evans and Sanderson-Nash, 2011). Analysis has shown that the majority of Liberal Democrat voters switched to either Labour or Conservative rather than a minor party at the 2015 general election (Baxter, 2015); therefore the sample is mostly formed of Labour and Conservative voters who have defected to a minor party.

UKIP and the Green party are considered minor parties due to their respective 3.1% and 0.9% share of the vote at the 2010 general election. The SNP are also classified as a minor party due to the party’s 1.7% share of the vote at the 2010 general election; this study does not focus on the party’s 2011 electoral success in the devolved Scottish parliament. See appendix 1 for a brief history of the SNP, Green party and UKIP, and profile of their support.

As this study is concerned with the rise of minor parties, it does not include minor parties such as Respect, the British National party, or Plaid Cymru, which either declined or had a small

rise in their popular vote share in 2015 (parliament.uk, 2016). Equally, the parties which dominate Northern Irish politics, Sinn Fein and the Democratic Unionist Party, were not included, as their stable performance is specific to political environment in Northern Ireland (Dixon, 2008, Commission, 2015).

Three constituencies were identified that have undergone rapid partisan dealignment from the major parties to a minor party between 2010-2015 – Romford and Gidea Park in Havering (UKIP), Edinburgh North and Leith (SNP) and Hackney North and Stoke Newington in east London (Green party). To achieve a degree of representativeness within the sample (Savage, 2005) of the national swing away from major parties to minor parties, these constituencies were chosen as they experienced high levels of vote switching between 2010-2015 (see figure three), and were typical of areas that have high concentrations of minor party support (see appendix 2 for brief description of the constituencies).

Figure three: National and constituency swing from major parties to minor parties (calculated using the 'Butler swing', cited in Denver, 2012).

Constituency	Major party combined (%)	Green (%)	UKIP (%)	SNP (%)	Constituency swing (%)
Hackney North	-10.8	10			-0.4
Romford	-12.7		18.4		2.85
Edinburgh North	-34.2			31.3	-1.45
National swing (%)	-12.9	2.8	9.5	3.1	

As scholars have found homogeneity within the sample can increase the likelihood of a social connection between the participants (Morgan, 1996, Warren, 2002, Wilkinson, 2004, Fairweather and Rinne, 2012), the age range within each focus group was limited to 30-44 years and 44-65 years, with an even gender balance, and participants were selected from C1/C2 social grades (Mattinson, 2010, NRS, 2016).

While the sample broadly reflected the average age of residents within each constituency (see appendix 3), the minimum respondent age was 30 to ensure that participants had voted for the same major party successively at the 2005 and 2010 general elections; this meant that the average age of the sample was slightly older than the average in each constituency due to the ineligibility of younger voters. To ensure participants met the theoretical criteria of the research question, a short pre-interview questionnaire was provided to potential participants based on a British Social Attitudes questionnaire (BSA, 2013).

The total sample size was $N=24$, reflective of methodological literature recommendation of a range between 12 and 60 (Adler and Adler, 2012), with $n=8$ per voter group. This sample size enabled the generation of valuable theoretical insights, without creating a dataset so large that undertaking a deep case-orientated analysis was unrealistic within the time and material constraints of this dissertation (Bryman, 2016).

Recruitment

In each constituency a 'snowball' approach was adopted, where one respondent who fulfilled the theoretical criteria was located who helped locate others (Glaser, 1967, Warren and Levy, 1991, Arksey, 1999). This allowed the study to follow the principles of the constructionist tradition, where researcher and subject are strangers with 'distance' at the start of the research process (Warren, 2002). Many of the participants in each focus group were known to each other, reflecting scholars experience of pre-existing groups creating a 'natural' experience (Kitzinger, 1994, Weiss, 1994).

Constituency branches of the Green party and SNP assisted with identifying participants, and in the case of UKIP, a local social club and library were used. UKIP voters were more likely to reject the opportunity to talk about their views, perhaps reflective of the negative social stigma that surrounds UKIP for some voters (YouGov, 2015), and more general difficulty to secure participation in research (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2016, Sturgis, 2016). On a practical level, offering financial incentives in future research in this field may save time during the recruitment stage of the research process (Krueger, 2015).

Ethics

Ethical approval for this project was received from my dissertation supervisor. I adopted the principle of informed consent (Warren, 2002, Bryman, 2004); with total transparency about the purposes of the research and my own role (Diener, 1978). Participants were offered non-financial incentives, such as refreshments during the focus groups or interviews, and informed that they would be able to receive a copy of the completed research (Krueger, 2015).

Before each interview participants were asked to sign a consent form (Krueger, 2015), verbally informed about the nature of the research, instructed that their participation was voluntary, and that there were no sources of external funding (Diener, 1978). To protect participant's

confidentiality, audio-files, transcripts, and participants contact details were stored separately in password-protected computer files (Holmes, 2005).

Participants were advised that I would do my utmost to uphold confidentiality and their anonymity throughout the project. Pseudonyms were used in the transcriptions and non-essential details such as locations were removed, the data was only accessible to me and my academic supervisors, and would be deleted following my expected graduation date at LSE in December 2016, as per the departments research guidelines (LSE, 2015).

Topic guide

The topic guide followed a semi-structured format, creating flexibility alongside consistency and coherence (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) and ensuring comparability with the subgroups while pursuing a tightly defined research question and topic (Burgess, 1984, Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). The topic guide was piloted during April 2016; when it was noted that interviewees were not always comfortable with discussing politics immediately, a section was introduced at the start to discuss local issues, with respondents encouraged to think of the interview as a conversation (Warren, 2002). In order to achieve a high-degree of objectivity (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), the topic guide was finalised through consultation with fellow students from the Media and Communications Department and in consultation with professionals from the field of qualitative political research.

The final structured topic guide consisted of five distinct themes and 20 questions, reflecting the literature review and acting as a memory aid during the research (Marshall, 1989, Kvale, 1996, Lofland, 2006).

Conducting the focus groups and interviews

Focus groups consisted of three or four participants, reflecting scholars' experiences that smaller groups are more realistic to organise and would allow me, as a relatively inexperienced researcher, to be a more effective moderator (Bloor et al., 2001, Barbour, 2008, Peek and Fothergill, 2009).

A total of six focus groups and five individual semi-structured interviews were conducted during June and July 2016, at public cafés in Hackney and Bethnal Green, east London, Romford, and Edinburgh, with each participant interviewed once. All interviews were audio-

recorded to enable secondary analysis (Heritage, 1984); the average duration of focus group interviews was 47m:32s; the average duration for each individual interview was 27m:42s.

Conducting the analysis

I personally transcribed all the data immediately after each focus group and interview. Interviews were listened to multiple-times to ensure accuracy (Rubin, 2012), with the analysis guided by my conceptual framework and research question. The data was then 'open coded' with my own interpretation shaping the emergent codes (Strauss, 1990); this process created scores of codes which were then refined to identify themes (Flick, 2009) using ATLAS.ti software, and broken down into component parts. Informed by grounded theory (Glaser, 1967, Merton, 1967), I developed close connections between the data and conceptualisation, with the data driving the interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998) until “emerging themes became the categories for analysis” (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006: 4).

Ultimately, four dominant themes emerged from the analysis process: voter evaluations, catch-all elite, identity in the globalised era, and multi-party identification. These were then synthesised into a coherent narrative which informed this work’s results and interpretation chapter (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

The coming pages outline the analysis of the data collected from the methods reported in this section.

RESULTS AND INTERPRETATION

Having discussed the relevant literature, conceptual framework, research objectives and methodological procedures, this research now presents the empirical findings.

Although in qualitative research results and analysis are often presented separately (Bryman, 2016), Mattinson’s (2010) study of voter behaviour demonstrated that reporting results and interpretation together allows for a close analysis of representative quotes chosen to reflect the theoretical insights.

The section presents four main themes: voter evaluations; catch-all elite; identity in the globalised era; and, multi-party identification, to explain why citizens are voting for the minor parties.

This is followed by a brief section of critical self-analysis, and the conclusions of this study.

Voter evaluations

In terms of voter's cognitive evaluations of the major parties, SNP voters expressed negative sentiments towards Labour's performance in government on 'valence' issues, specifically towards the party's management of the economy. For SNP voters, the sense that Labour failed to deliver value for money during their time in office at a time of relatively high levels of public spending had eroded trust in the party's overall competency and ability to manage a stable economy. While many SNP voters expressed support for Labour's position of investment in public services, when this position was accompanied by perceptions of incompetence, shared values with the party were superseded.

SNP R6: "If you look at Edinburgh... when they tried to build the new trams the whole project was hugely corrupt, it wasn't on time... all the time they were cosyng up to big business."

SNP R3: "In the last four or five years the SNP have developed from a sort of Mickey Mouse kind of party to being taken much more seriously."

As these responses from two SNP voters indicate, negative appraisals of Labour on valence issues contrasts with mainly positive assessments of the SNP's performance as a majority government in Scottish parliament between 2011 and 2016.

SNP voters contrasted with Green party and UKIP voters on the degree of emphasis they placed on valence issues, rather than any ideological differences they had with Labour. Unlike the other minor parties in this study, SNP voters had an extra dimension of evaluative criteria to assess the party, due to the SNP's term as the majority government within the devolved parliament.¹

A number of SNP voters also suggested that leadership had been a factor in their decision to vote for the party. In case of the SNP, positive evaluations of Nicola Sturgeon, SNP leader at the 2015 general election, was cited by many SNP voters as a significant part of the parties

¹ At the time of this study (June and July 2016) both UKIP and the Green party had limited governing experience in Scottish parliament.

appeal, using adjectives like ‘strong’, ‘confident’, ‘impressive’ to describe her. This contrasts with negative descriptions of Labour’s leader at the 2015 general election, Ed Miliband, such as ‘weak’, ‘useless’ and ‘pathetic’. As these responses from two SNP voters show, similar adjectives were used to describe past and present leaders of the Labour party, suggesting that Labour lost support to the SNP due to unfavourable comparisons of its leadership.

SNP R7: “I think all the Labour leaders have just been a complete joke.”

SNP R5: “Ed Miliband was just rubbish when you compared him to Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, who seemed to be confident and know what they were talking about.”

The focus on leadership by SNP voters contrasts with how Nigel Farage, UKIP leader at the 2015 general election, and Natalie Bennett, the Green party leader, were rarely cited as significant mobilising factors by their party’s voters. Nigel Farage was viewed favourably by some UKIP voters, and was positively described as “straight”, and “direct”, but was not cited as key to UKIP’s appeal, a somewhat surprising finding considering his status as one of the most recognisable figures in British politics (YouGov, 2013). Natalie Bennett was rarely discussed by Green party members, perhaps reflecting her relatively low national profile (Cowley, 2016c). This supports studies that show that leadership evaluations tend to have a minimal influence compared to other influences on electoral behaviour in British politics (Curtice and Lisi, 2015).

SNP voters were more likely to use valence issues and, to a lesser extent, perceptions of leadership, as part of their evaluative criteria. This is likely to be a reflection of the SNP’s ideological proximity to Labour, their main rival at the 2015 general election, with commentators noting the similarities between the two parties manifestos (Eaton, 2015, Kavanagh and Cowley, 2016). This finding supports the work of Johnston (2011) and Stokes (1992), that valence issues are highly influential on voter behaviour when voters can assess performance in government, particularly when parties appear to lack sufficiently distinctive ideological positions.

Many Green party voters were critical of Labour — but not for their management of the economy. Much of their frustration derived from the party’s political handling of the aftermath of the global financial crisis, where the Conservatives relentlessly accused Labour of profligate public spending (Bale, 2015, Cowley, 2016a). Similarly, former Liberal Democrat voters who switched to the Green party viewed their role in the post-financial crisis austerity programme during their period governing in coalition (Cowley, 2016b) as motivation to withdraw their

support. In allowing the political agenda to be defined by their political opponents in this way, and failing to make the case for investment in public services, many Green party voters felt that Labour and the Liberal Democrats had damaged progressive causes and negatively impacted society as a whole. This finding supports Inglehart's (1997) work on the importance of the post-materialist quality of life to citizens, reflected in these responses from two Green party voters.

Green R4: "The final straw was how Labour responded after the global financial crisis. Refusing to stand up for itself... I just thought that they lost the will to fight."

Green R7: "They (Liberal Democrats) were very, very careless to allow the Tories to dictate the terms and do real damage."

An additional mobilising factor for all Green party voters was their party's prioritisation of environmental issues and addressing climate change, reflective of the relationship between post-materialism and awareness of environmental issues (Inglehart, 1990). But while many Green party voters reported their strong commitment to environmental issues, and linked their support to the party's environmentalism, the majority reported that Green support for public services was the most salient cause which had drawn them to the party.

UKIP voters showed evidence that they were influenced by post-materialist values; their vote was a way of registering their objection towards the progressive, post-material agenda of the major parties. Voters attributed blame to both Labour and the Conservatives for their perceived failure to reduce immigration, which many UKIP voters felt had negatively impacted their quality of life. UKIP voters also expressed a high degree of position difference with Labour on the issue of immigration, associating the party's commitment to EU membership with population increases (Evans and Chzhen, 2013), while the Conservative party was criticised for a failure to deliver on their pledge to reduce net migration (Cowley, 2016b). This led to feelings disappointment and distrust towards the major parties for these UKIP voters.

UKIP R7: "He (David Cameron) said he would do something about it, but we've still got half a million coming in each year."

UKIP R6: "I want to see controlled migration. We've got too many people around here now, not just in Havering but everywhere."

For many UKIP voters, immigration and the effect it has had on their community was the main political consideration, towering above all other positional issues and consuming much of the discussion within focus groups and interviews. As this study will show, UKIP voters framed most political issues through their hostility towards rising immigration levels and cultural diversity, supporting quantitative studies of the party's voters that have found these issues are often their primary political concern (Ford and Goodwin, 2014a).

Catch-all elite

Across all voter groups, the major parties were criticised by voters for perceived ideological convergence. As these voters from each minor party show, the policies of the major parties left them both dissatisfied with their agenda and unable to distinguish between the parties.

UKIP R4: "Some of the big parties are just too scared to talk about things, because they're too down the middle... They try to please everyone, but ultimately, they just please no one apart from themselves."

SNP R6: "They (Labour) were too busy trying to draw in those who might vote SNP or who might vote for the Scottish Conservatives, without actually deciding who they want to be."

Green R4: "There hasn't been enough distancing from New Labour, who I saw as pretty much Tory... There was just nothing new."

Of all the major parties, Labour was singled out for the most criticism. This is likely to reflect New Labour's adoption of the Thatcherite neoliberal consensus (Heath et al., 2001); for many of the voters in this study, the party is seen as less competent imitators of the Conservatives, who are the originators and owners of this economic model (Gamble, 1994). Developments within Labour since the 2015 general election, with Jeremy Corbyn, a candidate from the left who campaigned against many of the policies from the New Labour era (Prince, 2016), securing a solid victory to become party leader, suggest that a majority of Labour party members also feel that the party needs to offer a more distinctive agenda.

There was also a high degree of hostility evident amongst minor party voters towards politicians from all the major parties. Voters described these politicians as "the elite", "distant" and "identikit", in terms of their background and political careers. This may reflect the

changes in Britain's class structure since the 1970s (Dalton, 2008a); while upper-class patronage may have secured the Conservative party electoral advantages in previous eras (Lipset, 1983), perceptions of class-distance for these two voters had become an electoral liability for Labour by 2015.

SNP R8: "The sort of Chuka Umunna types of soundbites and suits... there is a massive disconnect there."

Green R8: "It feels to me that the Labour party has been taken over by a load of careerist spads... I think it should be open to more people."

Of all the groups studied, UKIP voters expressed the greatest degree of frustration and disappointment with the political system, with many voters frequently stating that the parties were "all the same" and expressed a view that no governing party would work address their concerns. This supports the work of Ford and Goodwin (2014), whose study of UKIP's support found political dissatisfaction common amongst their supporters and reflects evidence that political disenchantment is common amongst radical-right voters in other Western democracies (Norris, 2005).

Much of the media was also held in low-esteem by SNP and Green party voters, with many viewing the media as working with the major parties to further private interests and failing to fulfil its normative democratic role (Hallin, 2004). A number of Green voters held the view that the media were not offering fair coverage to the environmental movement, stating that they preferred independent media sources (Castells, 2015), and cited the threatened exclusion of the Green party from the 2015 general election television debates (Beckett, 2016) as symbolising media bias against the party. A number of Green voters also supported a greater role for the state within the media, in order to serve the "needs of society" rather than private interests. Referring to Couldry's (2010) work on the dominance of the neoliberal values in the mainstream media is instructive; according to these Green voters, the incompatibility of elements of the environmental agenda with the neoliberal model of sustained economic growth (Robbins, 1999) has led to their party's voice being marginalised from the mainstream media discourse.

Green R1: “When I am on the tube I pick up the Evening Standard and put on my full propaganda filter to see what they’re saying.”

Green R6: “I try to read from as many sources as possible and critically. But the whole idea of newspapers endorsing their favourite candidates is disgusting to me.”

Many SNP voters accused the media, specifically the BBC, of bias during the Scottish referendum campaign in 2014, and reflected a commonly held view that the organisation represented the views of a Westminster-centric political consensus, rather than Scotland’s interests. For many SNP voters, media criticism was framed as Scotland being distinct and separate from England, with the media acting to withhold power and autonomy from Scotland. While scholars have argued that Britain’s liberal tradition has protected Britain’s state broadcaster from excessive government influence (Humphreys, 1996), this reading is strongly disputed by these SNP voters, who saw the media and political elites working together to maintain the status quo.

SNP R3: “I try to avoid the BBC after the shocking way they covered the referendum, it was awful. They were so biased... I think they presented the view from down south rather than what was happening in Scotland.”

SNP R8: “Definitely your average Scot is a lot more sceptical of the mainstream media after the referendum in 2014 and are thinking, well, maybe what we are reading in the newspaper isn’t necessarily true, or maybe what we are seeing on the news isn’t true.”

In contrast, most UKIP voters showed little interest in the media as a source of political information, preferring to rely on experiential knowledge to make sense of their values and political choices, or express indifference or dissatisfaction with the political process. While scholars have noted that personal story-telling is a common feature of focus groups (Gamson, 1992), UKIP voters tended towards this approach in both individual interviews and the focus groups relatively more often. This may be reflective of studies that have found a relationship between levels of news consumption and democratic satisfaction (Norris, 2000).

Similar to their view of the media, a number of Green voters accused the major parties of supporting an unfair democratic system, which they felt was intentionally excluding a growing share of the electorate from representation. Many Green voters felt that their party should have a greater role in government, and were knowledgeable about the party’s long-standing commitment to electoral reform (Green party, 2015), linking their own support to this policy.

While they expressed deep unhappiness with the electoral system, these Green voters viewed their support as an important step to secure greater influence within national politics and apply pressure on the major parties to reform the democratic system, reflecting the blackmail role minor parties can have within the wider political system (Sartori, 1976).

Green R2: “I think you have to show you are gaining support for other people to give you support, so for the Greens to keep increasing their vote share... But it’s only when smaller parties are getting 10 or 20% of the vote that the people start to take notice of them.”

Green R1: “If you care about and are interested in democracy, which I do, proportional representation has to be important and I’ll only support a party that is committed to it.”

The interest in democratic reform evident amongst Green party voters, who tend to be relatively well-educated compared to other voter groups (Birch, 2009), is consistent with Inglehart’s work (1997) that post-material values compel citizens to demand a greater say in government.

Identity in the globalised era

Despite only forming a small part of the thematic guide, identity formed a significant part of many of the discussions, particularly amongst SNP and UKIP voters. SNP voters regularly referred to Scotland as a both a distinct national identity and separate electorate within the British political system, while UKIP voters preferred to frame political issues around their local area, Romford.

SNP R2: “I just feel that the SNP are the best party for Scotland. That’s one of the benefits of having a party which is willing to fight for Scottish people’s interests.”

UKIP R8: “It annoys me when I see them given housing, benefits and all this just for turning up. I’m on maternity and I don’t get any help with my children, we need to put people round here first.”

As these responses from UKIP and SNP voters show, there was often homogeneity in the language used to discuss regional and national identity, as voters spoke of how Scottish citizens or Romford's residents deserved to be prioritised by the government. SNP voters defined Scottish citizen's needs against England, while UKIP voters defined themselves against non-British immigrants— occasionally using mildly xenophobic terms to describe this group. While who exactly “Scottish” and “local” people are was often left undefined during the discussions, as both Edinburgh and Havering are majority white-British populations (NRS, 2012, Census, 2014) the implication is of these comments is all citizens who are not part of the majority group.

This finding supports the work of Sears (1993), that positive social identity is often sustained through negativity towards another group. In the SNP's case, this finding challenges the argument made by commentators who have identified ‘civic nationalism’ (see Ignatieff, 1993, for definition) as central to the SNP's appeal (Green, 2014). Despite the SNP's efforts to present itself as ‘wholly civic’ (Mycock, 2012), the ethnic undertones of the prioritisation of Scottish citizens shows that their supporters have not always interpreted their policies in this way. And while UKIP's xenophobic populism (Dye, 2015) tends to be more explicitly linked with ethnic nationalism (Nairn, 1997), for voters both parties, defining themselves against ‘other’ groups appears to be an important source of their appeal.

In contrast, these Green party voters did not frame their political views in terms of national or local identity, and instead tended to view their support of the party in the global context of environmental campaigning.

Green R2: “We're facing an environmental crisis, and the Green party are the only ones who understand that what we need is a complete overthrow of global capitalism.”

Green R7: “I live by a lot of the things the Green party campaigns on, I don't just vote for them. So for me it's a natural thing to do.”

Green R6: “Creating a sustainable future for the planet to reduce our consumption are all very important to me.”

The work of Beck (2008) is instructive here; Green voters view themselves as part of a ‘global generation’, forming political allegiances and long-distance affiliations beyond the nation-state. In this context, Green voters often defined their political priorities in global terms, with some referring to the Green party as part of an international campaign, rather than a national

political party, and viewed their political allegiance as a broader representation of their environmental values and civic objectives (Norris, 2002).

If the values of Green party voters can be understood as an extension of international solidarities, UKIP voters viewed their support of the party as a means to express their opposition to the forces of globalisation that have brought migration and multiculturalism. This resistance was expressed by UKIP voters in two ways; half of the UKIP sub-sample ($n=4$) opposed the effect migration was having on their local community, while half ($n=4$) complained of the strain immigration has placed on public services, particularly the National Health Service, as these responses from UKIP voters indicate.

UKIP R4: “It (immigration) is about quality of life for me... It’s school places, its hospital places, getting an appointment at the dentist, the roads are all solid.”

UKIP R7: “When all these people, from these different countries: Romania, Poland, the Serbs, you can’t tell me they were brought up the same way I was.”

The local context of the study is likely to be significant; of all of the minor party voters included in this study, UKIP voters were by far the most likely to complain about their economic prospects and declining quality of life. Of the three areas which comprised the sample, Havering has the oldest average age, experienced a relatively small rise in ethnic diversity, and saw relatively low salary increases between 2001-2011 (see figure four). Ignatieff (1993) argued that when citizens feel economically insecure, they may seek the refuge in the security of national or ethnic identity, and exude prejudice against non-native citizens in their political behaviour.

Figure four. Demographic data comparison for each constituency area.

Demographic data	Hackney	Havering	Edinburgh North
Ethnic minority population 2001	41%	17%	4%
Ethnic minority population 2011	45%	20%	8%
Median salary 2001	£ 15,800	£ 17,100	£ 21,526
Median salary 2011	£ 22,300	£ 22,500	£ 26,203
Average age 2011	32.0	40.4	35.1

Sources: (Edinburgh.gov, 2013, Hackney.gov, 2013, Havering, 2014, London.gov, 2016).

UKIP R4: “The changes I have seen in last seven or eight years in Romford, it’s just a mass of people. We’re just on this runaway train heading in a direction we don’t necessarily want to go, but you’re not given a choice and aren’t in control.”

This UKIP voter expressed feelings of powerlessness in the face of population rises in his local area. The regular use of the word “control”— “controlled migration”, “control the situation” was common amongst UKIP voters, and is likely to be related to the local economic context. The long-term effects of financial adversity are documented in Clark’s (2014) study of post-financial crisis civic life in Britain, citing the Marienthal study (Jahoda et al., 1973) where sustained hardship led to feelings of helplessness and loss of control. In the context of perceptions of economic disadvantage, abstract notions of regaining control of their lives and social sphere appeared to resonate strongly with UKIP voters.

SNP R4: “The purpose of a government is to make people’s lives better and you should measure society by how it treats its most vulnerable people. We’ve got millions of people who are really struggling, going to food banks; it’s not the kind of society I want to live in.”

This SNP voter expressed a common understanding amongst all voters of the government’s core function; to provide a degree of welfare for its citizens. But despite the consensus on this issue, the voters differed markedly on which groups should qualify and benefit from the support of government.

In general, SNP’s voters described Scotland as a compassionate country, and viewed their perceived national commitment to social justice as a source of pride, supporting Inglehart’s (1977) post-materialism thesis that material security imbues a sense of social justice amongst citizens. For SNP voters, a group dynamic on extreme inequality was evident during the focus groups that was not apparent during the individual interviews, with members positively reinforcing ideals of social justice until a socialised consensus emerged, expressed succinctly in these responses from two SNP voters.

SNP R3: “I feel like it’s just a bit unfair, this divide is getting bigger and bigger and people are feeling hard done by. I kind of feel like I want, not a socialist government, but just a government that would come in and help everyone.”

SNP R8: “With things like the bedroom tax, there was a Scottish response to it, which I would term as positive. And I do think that there is increasingly a feeling of difference (to England).”

The discourse around public spending and redistributive economic policies of SNP voters was usually framed as a response to English unfairness, and used as a means of positively defining Scottish values. For many SNP voters, being Scottish meant being in favour of redistributive policies that would reduce inequality; this normative ideal contrasted with negative perceptions of ‘English’ welfare policies, effectively proposing a Scottish solution (greater social equality) to an English created situation (government austerity). In this instance, nationalistic sentiments are facilitated by the SNP’s social policies; this reflects studies that show nationalism can be a subtle sustainer of ideologies and political parties (Freedon, 1998). Drawing again from Ignatieff (1993), citizens can seek the security and belonging of the nation-state when they feel their welfare is threatened. The connection SNP voters make between Scottish citizens welfare and the threat posed by Conservative policies is one that is actively cultivated by the SNP (Swinney, 2016). By linking these themes, the SNP is likely to strengthen Scottish citizens allegiance to the state, and by extension, support for the SNP’s core objective of securing independence from the U.K. (SNP, 2016).

As noted earlier, immigration was reported to be the primary position issue drawing UKIP voters to the party, and was expressed in both voters opposition to multiculturalism and the view that population growth has put pressure on public services. But UKIP voters often held contradictory positions of supporting additional investment in public services while claiming that Labour had overspent during its period in government from 1997-2010. Combining these mutually exclusive positions suggests that for some UKIP voters, support for public services may not be a deeply held belief, and merely a more socially acceptable means of expressing their hostility towards immigration. This finding supports the finding that UKIP voters are motivated by the single issue of immigration, and suggests that this issue is a highly sensitive area for UKIP voters; when surrounded by political peers and when being interviewed individually, they were cautious and guarded throughout the discussion.

Multi-party identification

The vast majority of voters interviewed appeared to be happy with their decision to support a minor party in 2015, indicating partisan stability in the sense that they were likely to vote for the party again at the next general election. But in terms of the minor parties longer-term prospects, a number of Green party and SNP voters expressed residual loyalty to Labour or the Liberal Democrats, and could foresee circumstances when they would vote for these parties in future elections.

SNP R4: “I’m not a militant SNP supporter by any means. I could definitely be tempted back to Labour.”

Green R8: “I think the Corbyn-effect has tempted a few people back. I’m waiting to see if it’s a long-term shift in the party.”

Green R2: “I still consider myself to be a supporter of the people who are trying to do good in the Liberal Democrats.”

As these voter’s responses show, this may be evidence of the ‘homing’ effect, where voters register a protest vote but eventually return to their former party (Butler, 1974, Harrop, 1987). It also provides evidence that voters may hold ‘multiple party-identifications’ (Schmitt, 2009), and are prepared to make a range of cognitive assessments before supporting the party they feel would best deliver on their priorities (Dalton, 2014).

By contrast, UKIP voters seemed to express the most distrust and disappointment towards major parties, with many refusing to countenance voting for them again in future elections, relating to the wider political dissatisfaction noted earlier. The risk that UKIP voter’s disillusionment may lead them to withdraw from democratic engagement presents a challenge to the party to retain their long-term support.

While this study has identified a number of factors that help explain voters switching to a minor party, during the course of the research the catalyst for many voters to change parties emerged. This relates to Butler and Stokes (1974) finding that a significant political experience or change in the political climate can end voter partisanship.

For SNP voters, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum appears to be a pivotal and significant moment in Scotland’s history, with early studies showing political engagement increased following the vote (Commission, 2014, Committee, 2015). The emergence of the

SNP as a credible and experienced political party, combined with the perceptions of Labour as relatively less interested in promoting Scotland's interests, appears to have mobilised voters to support the SNP, as these two SNP voters responses indicate.

SNP R8: "In Scotland, I think Labour were definitely guilty of complacency, they just thought they could put anyone up and they would get elected."

SNP R3: "After the referendum... I think a lot of people realised there was an alternative and the SNP are putting Scottish people first."

As noted earlier, former Labour and Liberal Democrat voters who supported the Green party felt the coalition's austerity agenda in the aftermath of the global financial crisis, and the weak political response from the major parties, appears to have mobilised voters against them. And for UKIP voters, perceptions of the gradual effects of immigration over the past decade, and the associated shift towards a more multicultural society, compelled them to support the party which they believed would prioritise their concerns.

At the conclusion of the results and interpretation section, my own position requires scrutiny. While I aimed to be self-aware of my own personal biases throughout the research process (see for example Becker, 1967), as a relatively privileged white male and Labour party member, studying at a Russell-group university, my ideas and values are likely to have been shaped by my life and experiences. As demonstrated throughout this work, I aimed to be conscious of my subject position and tried to remain vigilant and reflexive during this study.

CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation has consisted of an in-depth, qualitative study based on a purposive sample of N=24 voters who switched their vote from a major party to UKIP, the SNP, or the Green party between 2010 and 2015. Set against the long-term decline in support for the major parties and a period of extreme political volatility, this research sought to explain why citizens are voting for the minor parties, and build upon the quantitative studies of minor party support, to make an original contribution to the field.

Thematic analysis revealed four major themes that answer the research question: voters are using cognitive resources to evaluate their political options, largely defined by post-materialist

values; the failure of major parties' voter-maximisation strategies to include all voters; heightened feelings of global, local or national identity in the globalised era; and, a fundamental change in the voter's external environment.

SNP voters were mobilised by feelings of major party complacency, positive appraisals of the SNP on valence issues, alongside the heightened salience of Scottish identity following the independence referendum. For Green party voters, motivation came from a long-standing ideological commitment to global environmental challenges, and the perceived failure of Labour and the Liberal Democrats to defend public services, reinforcing the view that both parties were unsure about their values. And for UKIP's voters, a sense of collective failure by the major parties to address their concerns about immigration levels, and a perception of indifference about how this issue had affected their local community and quality of life, were central factors.

The majoritarian political system has proved resilient throughout much of the post-war period, but increased levels of immigration, the global financial crisis, and an independence referendum have been the catalyst for voters to turn their backs on the parties many had supported throughout their lives. Many of the voters that featured in this study were already reporting frustration with a democratic system that denies their party direct representation in government, and a media which they feel excludes their agenda.

The electoral instability in Britain is mirrored by the rise of extremists in many advanced democracies across the world as they deal with challenges linked to globalisation (Rachman, 2015); further research using the methodology reported in this study would help understand this trend internationally. Additionally, a common complaint from minor party voters was that the media excluded their party and agenda, or was biased against their political objectives or social group. Further study into developing a media system that draws from the Democratic Corporatist Model (Hallin, 2004) — and accounts for the practical challenges related to implementation within Britain's liberal tradition — would be of value in Britain's emerging multi-party political reality.

Finally, this work provides evidence that reforming the electoral system to introduce a proportional democratic system (Lijphart, 1984, Norris, 1997a) — to reflect Britain's multi-party politics and the diversity within the electorate — is vital. As recent political history has shown with Labour's election of Jeremy Corbyn and the Conservative's decision to hold a referendum on EU membership, if the electoral system excludes sections of the electorate, minority groups will circumvent parliamentary democracy and use alternative democratic means to affect political change. The political system needs to adapt to the lives, values, and

multi-party reality of 21st century Britain. To adapt a phrase and end this study with a reflection on how it began, *consensus must hold*.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Minor party history and voter profile

The Green party

Since the Green party's foundation in the mid-1970s under the guise of 'The People Party', their support has gradually risen, with the party securing its first and currently only MP in Brighton Pavilion in 2010 (Carter, 2008, Kavanagh and Cowley, 2016). The party is ideologically left-wing, and is defined by its firm ideological commitment to environmental issues (Birch, 2009). Studies trace the party's support to urban areas, where younger, well-educated supporters are more likely to endorse their progressive social and environmental policies (Pattie et al., 1991, Young, 1993, Birch, 2009, Carter, 2015).

Scholars have argued a large degree of Green party's recent success is attributable to former Labour party voters unhappy with the party's relatively weak stance on environmentalism (Birch, 2009), and that in 2015, its radical anti-austerity manifesto had a broader appeal to disillusioned Labour and Liberal Democrat voters (Carter, 2015).

The SNP

Founded in 1934, the SNP was founded on the commitment to 'restore Scottish independence'(SNP, 2016). The SNP's electoral fortunes have fluctuated over time, experiencing minor surges in the late 1960s and mid-1970s until their spectacular performance at the 2015 election (Curtice, 2015b) transformed them from a "largely irrelevant minority party, to one with a major influence on British politics" (Rose, 2016: 126). Ideologically, the SNP has adopted a centre-left, social democratic position, which probably reflects Scotland's status as a marginally more egalitarian society than England (Saren and McCormick, 2004, Curtice and Ormston, 2011), increasingly so since the 2007-10 recession (Curtice, 2013b).

Throughout much of its history the SNP has been competing against a Labour party that had dominated every general election in Scotland since 1959, with the pivotal moment for both parties fortunes arriving in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish Independence referendum (Rose, 2016). Studies have shown that the SNP's support is evenly dispersed geographically and socially (Curtice, 2012), with many of the former Labour voters who had switched to the

SNP in 2015 did so for ideological reasons, reporting themselves in favour of a more equal society and ideologically closer to the SNP (Curtice, 2015a).

UKIP

Since its formation in 1993 as a single-issue party committed to British independence from the EU, UKIP's popular vote share has gradually improved at each election, with the party surging between 2010-2015 to become the third largest party in Britain by vote share. But the combination of the first-past-the-post electoral system and their geographically dispersed support meant that in 2015 UKIP only won a single seat (Kavanagh and Cowley, 2016).

Ideologically, the party is on the radical-centre-right; studies have shown their support derives from middle-class 'strategic' Conservative Party defectors who are registering their opposition to EU membership and older, working class 'left behind' voters, who live in former industrial areas and are attracted to UKIP from both Labour and the Conservatives by the party's anti-immigration policies and anti-establishment, outsider appeal (Ford et al., 2012a, Ford and Goodwin, 2014a).

APPENDIX 2: CONSTITUENCY INFORMATION

Romford and Gidea Park

The Romford and Gidea Park constituency is situated approximately 14.1 miles east of central London. The population of the constituency is 70,953 (Commission, 2016), it is situated in the London borough of Havering, the least diverse (white British population of 83%) with the highest average age of all London borough's (Havering, 2014). The constituency has been represented in parliament by the Conservative party since 2001 (Parliament, 2016).

General election 2015 result: Romford and Gidea Park		
Party	%	±
Conservative	51	-5.0
UKIP	22.8	18.4
Labour	20.9	1.4
Liberal Democrat	2.9	-9.1
Green	2.5	1.5

Source: (parliament.uk, 2016)

Hackney North and Stoke Newington

The Hackney North and Stoke Newington constituency is situated approximately 5.0 miles north-east of central London. The population of the constituency is 75,758 (Commission, 2016), and is situated in the London borough of Hackney, the 6th most diverse borough in London (Hackney). The area has been represented in parliament by the Labour party since 1950 (Hackney.gov, 2016).

General election 2015 result: Hackney North and Stoke Newington		
Party	%	±
Labour	62.9	7.9
Conservative	14.7	0.2
Green	14.6	10
Liberal Democrat	5	-18.9
UKIP	2.2	2.2

Source: (parliament.uk, 2016)

Edinburgh North and Leith

Edinburgh North and Leith is situated approximately 2.0 miles north of central Edinburgh. The population in the constituency is 91,958 (NRS, 2014), and it is 91.7% white British (Edinburgh.gov, 2013) making it the third most diverse city in Scotland. The constituency was represented in parliament by Labour since its creation in 1997 to 2015, when the SNP won the seat (edinburgh.gov, 2016).

General Election 2015 result: Edinburgh North and Leith		
Party	%	±
SNP	40.9	31.3
Labour	31.3	-6.2
Conservative	16.2	1.3
Scottish Green	5.4	3.2
Liberal Democrat	4.5	-29.3

Source: (parliament.uk, 2016)

APPENDIX 3: SAMPLE INFORMATION

Respondent (R)	Former party	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
Individual interviews: UKIP voters, Romford					
UKIP R1	Conservatives	33	Male	White British	Administrative
UKIP R2	Labour	30	Female	White British	Administrative
Focus group 1: UKIP voters, Romford					
UKIP R3	Conservatives	34	Male	White British	Skilled manual occupation
UKIP R4	Conservatives	42	Male	White British	Skilled manual occupation
UKIP R5	Labour	44	Female	White British	Administrative
Focus group 2: UKIP voters, Romford					
UKIP R6	Labour	63	Female	White British	Junior managerial
UKIP R7	Conservatives	64	Male	White British	Skilled manual occupations
UKIP R8	Conservatives	65	Female	White British	Professional occupation
Average age within sample		48			

Respondent (R)	Former party	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
Individual interviews: Green party voters, Hackney					
Green R1	Liberal Democrats	30	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Focus group 3: Green party voters, Hackney					
Green R2	Liberal Democrats	33	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Green R3	Labour	32	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Green R4	Labour	36	Female	White British	Junior managerial
Green R5	Labour	31	Female	White mixed	Professional occupation
Focus group 4: Green party voters, Hackney					
Green R6	Labour	43	Male	White mixed	Junior managerial
Green R7	Liberal Democrats	32	Female	Black Caribbean	Professional occupation
Green R8	Labour	31	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Average age within sample		34			

Respondent (R)	Former party	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Occupation
Individual interviews: SNP, Edinburgh					
SNP R1	Labour	31	Female	White British	Professional occupation
SNP R2	Labour	32	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Focus group 5: SNP, Edinburgh					
SNP R3	Labour	55	Male	White British	Junior managerial
SNP R4	Labour	45	Male	White British	Skilled manual occupations
SNP R5	Liberal Democrats	50	Female	White British	Administrative
Focus group 6: SNP, Edinburgh					
SNP R6	Labour	30	Female	White British	Professional occupation
SNP R7	Labour	31	Female	White British	Professional occupation
SNP R8	Liberal Democrats	35	Male	White British	Professional occupation
Average age within sample		39			

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