

Is there a Conservative 'blue wall'?

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What we can glean from Chesham & Amersham

INTRODUCTION

The Liberal Democrat by-election victory in Chesham & Amersham in June 2021 has served to remind us of the potential electoral downside that Brexit could pose for the Conservatives. While the party consolidated its strength between 2015 and 2019 among Leave voters, its support fell back among Remain supporters.¹ As a result, it might well have been anticipated that the party would potentially be vulnerable in a seat like Chesham & Amersham, which, while traditionally a Conservative seat, was also one where well over half (55 per cent) of voters had backed Remain. Although all by-elections have their own particular features – and concerns about planning and High Speed 2 (HS2) appear to have had a particular resonance in Chesham & Amersham – the outcome appeared to lend some credibility to the claim that, in the wake of Brexit, the Conservatives might be at risk of losing a ‘blue wall’ of traditionally safe seats, much as Labour proved to be vulnerable in 2019 in a ‘red wall’ of onetime safe seats in the north of England and the Midlands that had, however, backed Leave.²

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But does such a ‘blue wall’ really exist? Might hitherto safe Tory-held seats that backed Remain prove to be Boris Johnson’s Achilles’ heel and deny

1 Curtice J (forthcoming) ‘A Brexit election?’ in Wring D, Mortimore R and Atkinson S (eds) *Political Communication in Britain: Campaigning, media and polling in the 2019 general election*, Palgrave Macmillan

2 Kangasooriam J (2019) ‘How the Labour party’s “red wall” turned blue’, *Financial Times*, 14 December 2019

him a second general election success? Or can the prime minister afford to brush off defeat in Chesham & Amersham as a little local difficulty that has little in the way of wider electoral significance?

BREXIT AND THE GEOGRAPHY OF PARTY SUPPORT

There is little doubt that Brexit has reshaped the geography of party support – and especially that of the Conservatives. Table 1 reveals that in those seats where over 60 per cent voted Remain in 2016, support for the party was five points lower in 2019 than it had been four years previously, whereas it was up by 16 points where over 60 per cent had backed Leave. In contrast, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats advanced most strongly in those seats where Remain had been well ahead, while both parties recorded their weakest performances in those constituencies that had been keenest on exiting the EU.

Crucially, these patterns are for the most part also present in the more Conservative half of Britain, that is, those seats that the party won (thereby securing a narrow overall majority) in 2015. Indeed, support for the party fell particularly heavily (on average by -9.9 points) in those seats that elected a Conservative MP in 2015 but then went on the following year to back Remain by 60 per cent or more. At the same time, it is in 2015 Conservative seats that the Liberal Democrats recorded their strongest advances – an average increase of +18.0 points in seats where over 60 per cent voted Remain and one of +10.6 points where between 50 per cent

Table 1. Mean change in party support 2015–2019 by estimated outcome of the 2016 EU referendum, England and Wales

2016 EU referendum vote	Mean change in % vote 2015–2019		
	Conservatives	Labour	Liberal Democrats
Remain >60%	-5.5	+6.3	+8.0
Remain 50–60%	-0.1	+4.4	+6.7
Leave 50–60%	+7.6	+3.0	+2.9
Leave >60%	+16.1	-2.0	+1.6

Source: Data on the 2016 EU referendum vote for each constituency are estimates by Hanretty (2017)³

³ Hanretty C (2017) 'Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion, and Parties* 27(4): 466–483. Note that Buckingham and Chorley are excluded from the table.

and 60 per cent did so. Chesham & Amersham was, in truth, simply an exaggerated reflection of a pattern that had already been clearly in evidence at the 2019 general election.

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But just how many such Tory Remain seats are there? Even in 2015 they were not that numerous. There were just 20 seats where voters voted Conservative that year and where more than 60 per cent backed Remain, though there were another 61 Tory seats where between 50 per cent and 60 per cent voted Remain. Between them these seats represented fewer than one in four of the seats that the Conservatives held in England and Wales. However, in the wake of the swing against the Conservatives between 2015 and 2019 in pro-Remain seats, they are now even fewer. More than half (11) of the 20 most pro-Remain Tory seats in 2015 are already in opposition hands, six of them in the Labour column and five in that of the Liberal Democrats. That means the Conservatives are left with just nine such seats to defend next time around. There are also now slightly fewer Conservative seats that voted between 50 per cent and 60 per cent for Remain, as four of these have also been lost since 2015. In combination with the strong Conservative advance at the last two elections in Leave-inclined constituencies, this means that well under one in five (18 per cent) of the seats won by Boris Johnson in 2019 are constituencies where there was a pro-Remain majority in 2016.

That said, if the Conservatives had not won at least some of the 66 pro-Remain seats that they held in 2019, Boris Johnson would not have secured his overall majority of 80 seats. These seats might thus be thought a potential quick route to denying the prime minister another election victory – capturing two-thirds of them would be sufficient. But just how vulnerable do the Conservatives appear to be in terms of the pro-Remain seats that the party still holds? And do they justify the description of representing a ‘blue wall’?

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THE 'BLUE WALL'

Unsurprisingly, perhaps, most of the nine most heavily pro-Remain seats still held by the Conservatives are relatively marginal. All but one (Chelsea & Fulham) had majorities of fewer than 12 points at the last election. However, among those where support for Remain was between 50 per cent and 60 per cent, the average Tory lead was as much as 21 points. True, that figure is lower than the equivalent one for Leave-voting constituencies (29 points), but still means that relatively few look like easy plums for the opposition to pick. Only 16 have majorities of 12 points or less, while in 23 (excluding Chesham & Amersham) the Conservative majority is more than 24 points. It seems unlikely that the Conservatives' majority will be eradicated at the next election simply by the opposition parties winning Tory Remain seats.

However, a perusal of these seats does help explain why the Liberal Democrats were so heartened by their success in Chesham & Amersham in June. Of the 24 Conservative Remain seats where the 2019 majority was less than 12 points, as many as a half (12) are ones where the Liberal Democrats came second in 2019. This includes six where the Remain vote in 2016 was more than 60 per cent and seven where the Conservative majority was less than five points. Moreover, these Tory Remain seats provide nearly all of the Liberal Democrats' apparent best prospects at the next election – there are only three pro-Leave seats where a second-placed Liberal Democrat candidate was within 15 points of the Conservative victor in 2019. The 'blue wall' may not hold the key to Boris Johnson's defeat, but it is where Sir Ed Davey's hopes of expanding the size of his diminutive parliamentary party now primarily rest.

For Labour, in contrast, these Conservative Remain seats are much less important. There are just three where Labour was less than five points behind in 2019, and only another six where it was between five and 10 points adrift. In contrast, there were as many as 21 Tory Leave seats where Labour was within five points of a first-placed Conservative and another 20 where it was between five and 10 points behind. Whereas the 'red wall' provided the Conservatives with rich pickings in 2019, the collection of Tory Remain seats offers Labour the prospect of only limited gains.

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That said, there is one key similarity with the ‘red wall’. More or less all of the seats to which that term has commonly been applied are located northwards of Birmingham, that is, in the part of England where Labour has traditionally been strongest. Equally, most of the more vulnerable Conservative Remain seats are to be found in the south and east of England where the Conservatives have generally long been stronger. All but four of the Tory Remain seats where the Conservative majority in 2019 was less than 12 points are located south of a line from Cheltenham to Norwich (the four that are not are located on the middle-class edges of a major metropolitan area). Much like Labour’s ‘red wall’, they can be regarded as the first line of defence in what hitherto has been traditional Conservative territory.

However, unlike the Labour seats to which the term ‘red wall’ is commonly applied, the more vulnerable Tory Remain seats (that is, those where the 2019 majority was less than 12 points) are by no means all ones that have been in the hands of the same party continuously for decades. In 2005, for example, only 14 would have been won by the Conservatives on that occasion (according to estimates of what the outcome of that election would have been on the current constituency boundaries).⁴ The remainder comprise half a dozen seats that the Liberal Democrats have been able to win in the relatively recent past and four that have been marginal between Labour and the Conservatives for some time. Indeed, whereas Labour had been losing ground before 2015 (and thus before Brexit) in many of the ‘red wall’ pro-Leave seats in which the party struggled in 2019, there was no general sign before 2015 of a relative decline in the Conservatives’ fortunes in their party’s pro-Remain seats. Indeed, at +8.5 points, the increase in Conservative support between 2005 and 2015 in those pro-Remain seats that the party won in 2015 was a little above the +7.0 increase that it enjoyed in its pro-Leave seats. Thus, whereas Labour’s difficulties in its ‘red wall’ seats reflected a weakening of its hold on some working-class seats that was in evidence well before Brexit, the Conservatives’ vulnerability, in their pro-Remain seats, such as it is, seems to be primarily a consequence of the party’s pursuit of Brexit.

That said, there are among the now marginal Tory Remain seats the onetime safe seats of some prominent Conservative Brexiteers who either now face a strong Labour challenge (Sir Iain Duncan Smith in

4 Rallings C and Thrasher M (2007) *Media Guide to the New Parliamentary Constituencies*, Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre

Chingford & Wood Green, Theresa Villiers in Chipping Barnet) or occupy seats where the Liberal Democrats advanced strongly for the first time in 2019 (Dominic Raab in his Esher & Walton constituency and Sir John Redwood in Wokingham). So, in some instances at least, a Conservative loss would indeed represent a dramatic and totemic reversal of local fortune.

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DOES BREXIT STILL MATTER?

Still, this analysis points to one very clear conclusion: that the opposition parties’ prospects of gaining Tory Remain seats probably rest heavily on Brexit continuing to be a key factor in shaping how people vote at the next election – and that, consequently, former Conservative voters who backed Remain do not now return to the Tory fold. This is, inevitably, highly uncertain. Perhaps now that Brexit has been done, the issue will recede in voters’ minds, not least because Remain voters are coming to accept that Brexit has been done.

Table 2 addresses this question by examining how the level of support for the parties has evolved in the polls since the 2019 general election. It suggests (as did the outcome of the local elections in May) that how people voted in the EU referendum is still strongly associated with people’s party preference.⁵ During the past year, support for the Conservatives has been around three times higher among Leave voters than it has been among Remain supporters. Meanwhile, both Labour and the Liberal Democrats continue to be far more popular among those who voted Remain than they are among supporters of Leave. That said, however, it is also the case that the support the Conservatives still have among Remain voters has proven to be relatively robust, while the decline in the overall level of Liberal Democrat support since the general election has – almost inevitably given the pattern of the party’s support in 2019 – occurred primarily among those who voted Remain, a decline only partly reversed in the immediate wake of the Chesham & Amersham by-election. Meanwhile, even Labour’s

5 Curtice J (2021) ‘It is not yet over – Brexit and the May 6 elections’. <https://whatukthinks.org/eu/it-is-not-over-yet-brexite-and-the-may-6-elections/>

Table 2. Support for the parties by the 2016 EU referendum vote, 2019–2021

All voters	2019 election	July 2020	October 2020	March 2021	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%
Conservatives	45	43	40	42	43
Labour	33	37	40	36	34
Liberal Democrats	12	7	7	7	9
Greens	3	4	4	5	6
Brexit/UKIP/ Reform	2	3	3	3	3
2016 Remain voters	2019 election	July 2020	October 2020	March 2021	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%
Conservatives	20	22	21	24	24
Labour	48	52	54	50	45
Liberal Democrats	21	11	11	11	14
Greens	4	5	5	6	7
Brexit/UKIP/ Reform	0	0	0	0	1
2016 Leave voters	2019 Election	July 2020	October 2020	March 2021	June 2021
	%	%	%	%	%
Conservatives	74	68	64	65	66
Labour	15	17	20	18	18
Liberal Democrats	3	3	2	3	4
Greens	2	2	3	2	3
Brexit/UKIP/ Reform	4	4	7	6	5

Sources: 2019: average of post-election polls by YouGov and Lord Ashcroft; July 2020 to June 2021: average of polls conducted closest to the end of the month by BMG, Deltapoll, Kantar, Number Cruncher Politics, Opinium, Savanta ComRes and YouGov. Not all companies published in each of these months. Figures for nationalist and other parties not shown.

grip on the support of Remain voters proved to be particularly fragile in the wake of the decline in the party's support following its largely poor performance in the 'super-Thursday' round of elections at the beginning of May.

In short, at the levels of support for the opposition parties registered during the past 12 months, there is by no means any guarantee that even the more marginal Conservative Remain seats will prove to be particularly vulnerable. Meanwhile, we should also remember that in most of the Conservative Remain seats that are now marginal between the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats for the first time, there was typically a spectacular increase in Liberal Democrat support, in some instances (on average + 23.6 points) thanks to the local candidacy of a defecting former Conservative or Labour MP. It remains to be seen whether the party proves able to put down deeper local roots in these constituencies – and also be able to squeeze what in most cases is still a substantial but now third-placed Labour vote locally (on average, 16.9 per cent) – or whether the tide that brought the party such an unusually high level of support recedes as rapidly as it rose.

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CONCLUSION

It is clear why the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Ed Davey, would want to promote the idea of a ‘blue wall’. The decline in Conservative support in pro-Remain seats has opened up new opportunities for his party, and indeed the party’s hopes of increasing its representation at Westminster would appear to rest heavily on the party’s ability to exploit those opportunities. Moreover, there is some similarity with the concept of the ‘red wall’ – most of the pro-Remain seats where the Conservatives are most vulnerable are located in the southern half of England where the party has traditionally been relatively strong.

However, not all of the analogy works. Whereas support for Labour was in decline in ‘red wall’ seats even before the EU referendum, the same was not true of the Conservatives in their pro-Remain seats. The Conservatives may well be able to hold their own in these seats if Brexit becomes less of an electorally divisive issue. Equally, not all Tory Remain seats have been in Conservative hands for generations – some have previously been won by the Liberal Democrats prior to the collapse in their support in 2015.

But, perhaps most importantly, the phalanx of vulnerable Conservative Remain seats is relatively small. Success among them alone is unlikely to be sufficient to deny Boris Johnson another term. Meanwhile, although

bringing down the ‘blue wall’ might be crucial for the Liberal Democrats, it is unlikely to bring Labour much reward. Sir Keir Starmer needs a much broader electoral strategy than Sir Ed Davey.

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