

1

Introduction

Observers of British politics have begun to expect the unexpected in British elections. The general elections of 2015 and 2017 were among the most volatile in British electoral history. The outcome of the 2015 General Election delivered the highest share of votes on record for parties other than the traditional big three (Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats). Only two years later, the 2017 General Election delivered the highest combined Labour and Conservative two-party share since 1970. Underlying these results, the electorate has become increasingly volatile at the individual level, as more and more people switch their party support between general elections.

Why have British politics and the British party system become destabilized? How can we explain the extraordinary election outcomes in Britain in 2015 and 2017 and the turbulent period of British politics in which we find ourselves? These are the questions we answer in this book.

Our explanation shows how long-term, gradual changes in voter volatility and the impact of electoral shocks have combined to radically transform the political landscape. We show that increased voter volatility is driven, in part, by a weakening of voters' partisan attachments—a process known as partisan dealignment—together with the growth of smaller parties (or 'party system fragmentation'). Party identities act as a stabilizing force. When voters interpret the political world through the lens of partisanship, they are less likely to be swayed and rocked by the political winds. The British party system now has less of this kind of ballast. Partisan dealignment means that, compared to previous decades, fewer people have strong identity-based attachments to political parties and are more likely to switch parties than voters in the past.

On its own, partisan dealignment does not explain the results of recent elections. Voters might be more likely to switch parties than in the past, but that does not tell us which voters are switching to which parties, and why. To properly understand political change, we need to consider the electoral shocks that have acted as catalysts for large-scale vote-switching in particular directions in the election outcomes we set out to explain. We focus on five electoral shocks, each of which had a major impact on either the 2015 or 2017 elections, or on both. These are: (i) the substantial rise in immigration after 2004, particularly immigration from Eastern Europe; (ii) the Global Financial Crisis prior to 2010; (iii) the coalition government of the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats between 2010 and 2015;

(iv) the Scottish independence referendum in 2014; and (v) the European Union (EU) referendum in 2016. Each of these electoral shocks leads us to revise our understanding of recent British elections and how different variables have shaped vote choices over time, and why.

Electoral shocks are having a remarkable impact on election outcomes *now* because they are happening within an electorate less constrained by strong party loyalties. This need not be the inevitable state of play in the future if new political divides—such as those around Brexit—anchor voters to political parties, or if levels of partisanship increase in the future. However, our analysis of trends in partisan dealignment suggests that the decline may be unrelenting, as older cohorts with strong identities are leaving the electorate and being replaced with newer cohorts with much weaker partisan attachments. Electoral shocks look set to continue to play a major role in British elections, and individual-level volatility is likely to remain high. These factors are also present in a large number of other countries, as well as in Britain. Our arguments and analysis are not just relevant to British electoral politics, although the specifics in British election outcomes are driven by the electoral shocks and the choices on offer in British politics.

Electoral shocks are not defined by their consequences. A major electoral shock could occur within a political system and its effects be absorbed by existing political divisions. Whether a shock disrupts politics depends on the way in which shocks are politicized and how parties compete over the fallout. Electoral shocks offer politicians opportunities to which they may—or may not—strategically respond, and respond in different ways. Shocks create political and strategic uncertainty, and allow, therefore, for unanticipated consequences and opportunities.

Each of the electoral shocks in this book shares the same features in common. We define them by the following characteristics:

Electoral shocks are an abrupt change to the status quo. They are not necessarily exogenous to the party system, but they are more than simply the outcomes of normal everyday politics. They represent a significant and often unanticipated change.

Electoral shocks are manifest over prolonged time periods and are highly salient: they have the potential to be noticed and recognized even by people who do not have much interest in politics, and by people who might otherwise select into information that fits their partisan beliefs and preconceptions. Electoral shocks are, therefore, very difficult for voters and politicians to ignore.

Electoral shocks are politically relevant and they have the potential to change how parties are perceived and therefore to reshape the party system.

Electoral shocks vary in the degree to which they are short-term and longer-term. A shock, as we define it and think about it, differs from how the term has often

been used in quantitative political science and economics. That is to say, we do not define a shock as a temporary and short-lived event that creates a sharp spike in a time-series which then quickly returns to its former equilibrium. We are interested in shocks that change a system—the British political system. Understanding the longer-term evolution and complex outcomes of electoral shocks is one of the contributions we offer in this book. None of the shocks we identify have had only short-lived consequences, and many are likely to last well into the future, and some have already had impacts spanning more than one election. This reflects the significance of electoral shocks, the varied ways in which voters and parties respond, and the way they are given attention in politics and in the media. Shocks may therefore alter the equilibrium.

Electoral shocks vary in their form. For example, they may be political events, campaigns, referendums, institutional changes, or the consequences of particular policies. The way in which a shock affects electoral politics varies too. The effect of the Global Financial Crisis was not just a high-profile shock to the economy and to Labour's reputation for economic competence; it was also the beginning of a long-term policy shift towards austerity and continued political competition around the level of national debt, political responsibility and blame. The EU referendum and Scottish independence referendum differed in their outcomes—the former leading to the outcome of Brexit, the latter to a vote for the status quo. However, both led to the electoral expression of identities made salient by the referendums and the realignment of voters to parties on these divisions. The example of Scotland illustrates how shocks are not necessarily independent in their effects. In 2017 the Scottish independence referendum and the EU referendum combined to influence the outcome of the General Election in Scotland.

Electoral shocks provide an overarching explanation that departs in a significant way from a focus on a single causal assumption, a fixed set of variables, a specific type of statistical model, or one particular electoral outcome. This is not a book about one particular party's rise and fall, a single election outcome removed from its wider context, or an argument for the supremacy of one set of bottom-up or top-down processes, distant or proximate in the causal chain of electoral choice. That would, we believe, be a mistake, given the broader and longer-term changes to the British party system that need to be explained and understood. Instead, building on the foundations of the existing literature, we are seeking to understand why the party system has been exhibiting considerable volatility and instability, offering an explanation that can cover both the pre- and post-EU referendum periods, that can account for the divergent fortunes of political parties across the political spectrum, and that can be applied into the future as well as into the past. An explanation of electoral shocks—combined with our empirical analysis of how, and why, electoral shocks are shaping political behaviour—offers

an approach to understanding broad system-level change, and it applies across time, elections, and also across countries.

We offer a multitude of different insights into the routes to party choice in the two previous general elections within the broader context of volatility. We do not provide an exhaustive list of how electoral shocks may potentially shape electoral behaviour. We do not, after all, have a complete list of historic or future shocks on which to base our analysis. However, five broad important themes run throughout:

1 The broader electoral context has become significantly more volatile

There have been a number of long-term, gradual, social and political changes that have fundamentally changed the electoral context, making elections more volatile. The first key driver of volatility is partisan dealignment—the weakening of voters’ attachments to political parties. As we explain in a detailed chapter on partisan dealignment and volatility, partisan dealignment is itself a more general phenomenon of generational change. The second key driver is party system fragmentation (the rise of smaller parties) which has contributed to greater electoral volatility because of the tendency of voters of smaller parties to switch from one election to the next. However, we cannot properly understand the increase in volatility in British elections without appreciating the role of shocks.

2 Electoral shocks can alter party images, reputations, and perceived positions on issues

The 2010–15 Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition substantially reshaped voters’ perceptions of the Liberal Democrats. Our analysis shows that the decision to enter coalition government with the Conservatives was a reputational turning point for the Liberal Democrats that was to continue through the 2015 and 2017 general elections. The impact of coalition helps explain not only the Liberal Democrat collapse in 2015 but also why the Liberal Democrats failed to make significant inroads in the General Election of 2017 off the back of the EU referendum result in 2016.

The EU referendum changed the image of the Conservatives. Having been divided during the campaign, but ostensibly pro-Remain in terms of Conservative leadership, the Conservative response to the referendum was to embrace the result of Brexit, such that voters began to perceive the Conservative Party as much more opposed to EU integration than they had done before the referendum. This meant that they were seen as *the* party of Brexit, allowing them to increase support among Leave voters in 2017.

When the Global Financial Crisis hit Britain, the effect on Labour’s competence on the economy did not just influence vote choice in the immediate

general election that followed in 2010. It also influenced vote choice in 2015. One way in which economic crises have long-term effects on electoral behaviour is via their lasting effects on party competence. The Global Financial Crisis also provided an opportunity for parties to compete and win votes subsequently around austerity, competence, and responsibility and blame for the level of national debt.

3 Electoral shocks can shape the relevant dimensions of political choice

European immigration—and its politicization—contributed to the rise in electoral significance of immigration, an increase in its correlation with attitudes towards the European Union, and in the overall importance of the cultural dimension in British politics. We chart how non-left—right issues became increasingly salient to the British public alongside the rise in immigration and the increase in media attention to immigration. This new set of issues has become increasingly related to electoral choice. This change preceded the 2016 EU referendum, but was then significantly accentuated in 2017 as large numbers of voters chose between parties on the basis of this newly salient dimension. The EU referendum caused a substantial increase in the electoral significance of liberal—authoritarian values alongside immigration attitudes and attitudes about Europe, deepening demographic divides based on age and education, but softening those based on income. In a different way, Scottish nationalism became more important to Scottish general election vote choice in response to the Scottish independence referendum in 2014, shaping the 2015 and 2017 election outcomes.

4 Partisan dealignment conditions the effects of electoral shocks

Since electoral shocks are not defined by their consequences, we can understand their importance by the context in which they happen, as well as the ways in which political actors respond and compete around them. There are some contexts under which electoral shocks should have weaker effects, such as in periods of strong partisan alignment, and others in which their effects will be magnified, such as periods of weak partisan alignment. One reason that shocks are having such destabilizing consequences in contemporary British politics is the context of weakening partisan attachments. Partisan dealignment has weakened the ties between voters and parties and led to increasing between-election switching in the British electorate (individual-level volatility). The impact of electoral shocks is therefore amplified by volatility, as unattached voters are more easily moved by the force of a shock.

5 The effects of electoral shocks are contingent

In all of our chapters and explanations about the effects of electoral shocks there is a story about the central role of politics: the ways in which parties

compete around shocks and offer voters a choice, and the degree to which the media contributes to the salience and politicization of new issues, identities, and party performance. This means that electoral shocks are not independent changes that always have the same potential to switch vote choices, or will do so in predictable or linear ways. Political actors may magnify the effects of a shock by competing around them, or they may not. Our story is therefore also about political supply: how the number of parties—and their policies, leaders, competence, and viability—offer voters a basis to choose based on a particular political issue. The effects of electoral shocks are contingent on the political response and competition around them.

1.1 Outline

The remainder of this book sets out to explain and demonstrate in detail how British politics has become more volatile, unpredictable, and turbulent.

Chapter 2 describes the key electoral outcomes we wish to explain and elaborates the changing patterns of volatility over consecutive elections, at both the aggregate and individual levels.

Chapter 3 sets out our concepts and expectations about electoral shocks in greater detail, how they work and the ways in which their effects are contingent on political competition and politicization.

Chapter 4 provides an explanation of how the wider context of voter volatility has come about over time. It demonstrates the role of partisan dealignment and the rise in voting for ‘other’ parties to account for the rise in individual-level volatility in British elections.

The remaining five empirical chapters each focus on one of the electoral shocks listed above: the rise in European immigration (Chapter 5), the Global Financial Crisis (Chapter 6), the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition (Chapter 7), the Scottish independence referendum (Chapter 8), and the referendum on Britain’s membership of the European Union (Chapter 9). Each chapter demonstrates how a particular electoral shock shaped political attitudes and vote choices in the 2015 and 2017 elections. The order of our chapters is broadly chronological, focusing on the effects of each shock as they occurred over time, each chapter examining the effects upon the relevant general election(s). Our book is, then, organized around our explanations, rather than on vote choices for different parties, or separately on the elections of 2015 and 2017.

Our final chapter considers the implications of our broad explanation and analysis for the future of British politics. We cannot predict what will happen in future general elections, but we can identify the factors that will matter: the degree to which electoral shocks may further destabilize the party system, and

the degree to which partisan—or perhaps Brexit loyalties—provide a context for greater stability or destabilization of the British party system into the future.

1.2 Conclusion

This book offers a novel perspective on the wider context of the British electorate, focusing as it does on the trend towards greater electoral volatility over time. It demonstrates how shocks have contributed to the level of electoral volatility, and also which parties have benefited from the ensuing volatility. As such this book follows in the tradition of British Election Study (BES) books. We provide a comprehensive account of specific election outcomes—in our case the elections of 2015 and 2017—and also a more general explanatory model for understanding electoral change.

Existing explanations of electoral behaviour in Britain have typically focused on explaining the outcome of one particular election or one party, the adoption of one particular variable-based explanation to assess against rival explanations, and pitting variables and explanations against each other to assess the primary importance of one explanation overall. Each of these approaches can give us valuable insights into different aspects of electoral behaviour, and each provides a foundation for an understanding and critique of the broad understanding of electoral behaviour. They have been a feature of research that is applied to periods of stability or ‘normal’ political competition. However, these kinds of analytic approaches are less well-equipped to explain wider features of the system and sharp changes in outcomes and electoral behaviour that span multiple vote-switching between different political parties over time. Our focus on electoral shocks offers an overarching explanation for the volatility in evidence in British elections, alongside the long-term trends that have led us to this point. It offers a way to understand the rise and fall of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), Labour’s disappointing 2015 performance and its later unexpected gains, the unexpected Conservative majority in 2015, the collapse in support for the Liberal Democrats, the dramatic gains of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in 2015, and the importance of the continuing period of tumultuous politics that has followed the General Election in 2017. It provides a new way of understanding electoral choice in Britain, and also beyond, and a greater understanding of the outcomes of recent elections.

As befitting a book from the BES team, we draw heavily on BES data, including not only data collected as part of the 2015–17 BES but data collected by previous BES teams going back to 1964. This long-running series of cross-sectional surveys provides invaluable evidence for measuring and analysing the long-term trends we refer to. For much of our analysis we rely on BES panel data, including data from our own thirteen-wave 2014–17 panel study, and also from inter-election

panels collected by previous BES teams (again going back to 1964). This reliance on panel data reflects the dynamic nature of electoral choice and the importance of electoral volatility in our story. At each election most voters do not arrive with a completely blank slate—they come with the baggage of a lifetime of political socialization and previous electoral choices. This book is about what drives voters to switch their electoral allegiances and more fundamentally about understanding profound electoral change in British politics; a topic that has central importance to an understanding of voters, elections, and the future of British political life.