Labour's Campaign Comeback

A Policy Network Paper

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About the Author

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About this report

This report is an attempt to understand the dynamics of the dramatic shift in voting intention at the 2017 UK general election that took the Labour party from the brink of electoral disaster to denying the Conservatives an outright majority.

Using the main publicly available data resource on public opinion and elections, the 2014-18 British Election Study, voters are divided up into six groups based on shifting voting and voting intentions between the 2015 and 2017 elections. The demographic make-up, social and political attitudes and party perceptions of each group is examined, with particular emphasis on the groups that switched to Labour during the campaign.

1. Introduction

When Theresa May called her snap election back in April 2017, Labour appeared to be heading for a 1983-style landslide defeat, hovering at around 25 per cent in the polls. May's approval ratings were sky high, while Jeremy Corbyn's were through the floor.

Within the space of just a few weeks, Labour shot up to the 40 per cent share that it received on polling day in June, gaining 30 seats and denying the Conservatives an outright majority. One interpretation has been simply that the polls were wrong in the first place, but Labour's disappointing local election results in early May suggests otherwise, and that the party really was in poor shape at the start of the campaign. That such an astonishing turnaround still resulted in a Conservative government demonstrates just how bad things were looking for Labour just a few weeks before polling day. But something unusual happened during the campaign to produce such a surprise.

This report is an attempt to understand the dynamics of that shift. In doing so, it exposes a series of narratives that have risen around the election result in the service of certain political agendas. The election was not the referendum on Theresa May's Brexit plans that many arch-remainers would like it to have been, nor was it all about Jeremy Corbyn, as his most ardent supporters would have us believe. There is no evidence to support the idea that millions of people voted Labour because they thought the party wouldn't win, although few thought that it would. Nor can we put it all down to young people, private renters, austerity, immigration, or any other single issue or group that have been identified as being responsible for the rapid change in Labour's fortunes. Many of these trends are long-term phenomena that explain changing electoral divides, but cannot alone explain the sharp shift from April to June 2017. As we will see, the late comeback cannot be put down to any single or primary cause.

The British Election Study

This analysis uses the main publicly available data resource on public opinion and recent elections, the 2014-18 British Election Study (BES), which is developed and maintained by academics at the universities of Manchester, Nottingham and Oxford. The BES panel study is based on surveys conducted online across (so far) 13 waves, with many but not all of the questions repeated across successive waves so that changing attitudes can be measured and compared over time.

While each wave has approximately 30,000 respondents, this study mainly focuses on a nationally representative sample of 21,558 respondents that answered all three of the 2017 election waves conducted between April and June 2017. In the analysis of BES data, 'don't know' responses have been removed unless otherwise stated. In each case, it is specified whether the data is derived from the post-election (9-23 June), mid-campaign (5 May-7 June), pre-campaign (24 April-3 May), or an earlier wave of polling fieldwork. **All data is taken from the BES panel study unless otherwise specified.**

For this analysis, 2017 voters are divided into groups depending on three factors: how they cast their vote in the 2015 election; how they intended to vote when at the start of the 2017 general election campaign (wave 11 of the BES); and how they ended up voting in June 2017 (wave 13 of the BES). This is then translated into six groups that are large enough to be considered in our analysis shown in figure 1[1], divided up by whether they voted, or intended to vote Labour at the three different points in time.

1. The two other possible combinations ('Lab, Lab, Not Lab' and 'Not Lab, Lab, Not Lab') consist of very small groups which are negligible for the purposes of this analysis and are not included in the graphs below.

Figure 1: Categories of BES respondents based on voting and voting intention data

Group name	2015 vote[2]	Start of campaign voting intention[3]	2017 vote[4]	% of all respondents (% 2017 Labour voters)
The Loyalists	Labour	Labour	Labour	16% (41%)
The Homecomers	Labour	Not Labour	Labour	5% (13%)
The Non-Returners	Labour	Not Labour	Not Labour	4%
The New Die Hards	Not Labour	Labour	Labour	8% (20%)
The Johnny Come Latelys	Not Labour	Not Labour	Labour	11% (26%)
The Never Labs	Not Labour	Not Labour	Not Labour	54%

Of course, it is extremely difficult to ascertain what exactly motivates people to vote in a certain way or to switch their vote between elections. Polling data is always going to be insufficient in disentangling the complex mash of habits, values, interests, personal circumstances, party platforms, perceived competence, priorities, individual policies, personalities, emotions, tactical considerations and other factors that determine how we vote. All we can ask of the data is to provide an indication of some of the trends and correlations between certain demographic or attitudinal characteristics and particular patterns of voting.

Following this introduction, section two of this paper focuses on the demographic make-up of each of these groups. Section three looks at their broad ideological positioning and social attitudes. Section four examines attitudes to Labour and its leadership, and whether respondents expected Labour to win. Finally, section five considers the extent to which the parties and voters' positions on Brexit dictated swings that occurred during the campaign.

The six groups

In very broad terms we can characterise the six groups as follows:

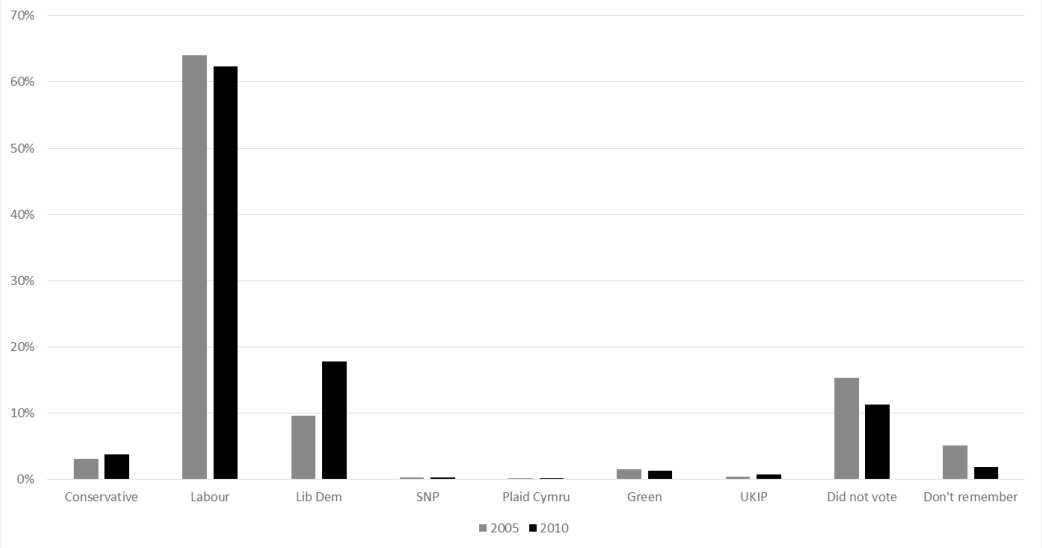
- **The Loyalists** tend to be solid Labour voters, having voted for the party both in 2015 and 2017, and with a majority having voted Labour in 2005 and 2010 as well. They are generally pro-immigration, pro-Corbyn and overwhelmingly voted to remain in the EU at the 2016 referendum. They are the most leftwing and anti-austerity group, preferring tax increases to spending cuts as a means of reducing the deficit. They are more likely to identify as working class, to be in social rented accommodation, and to live in the North of England or London than other groups.

2. 'Not Labour' includes 2015 non-voters, to account for the influx of new voters in 2017 as far as possible.

3. Voting intention data not filtered by likely turnout. 'Not Labour' includes 'don't knows' and those who responded 'would not vote'. Polling conducted between 24th April and 3rd May 2017 (day before local elections).

4. 2017 non-voters removed. Polling conducted between 9th-23rd June 2017.

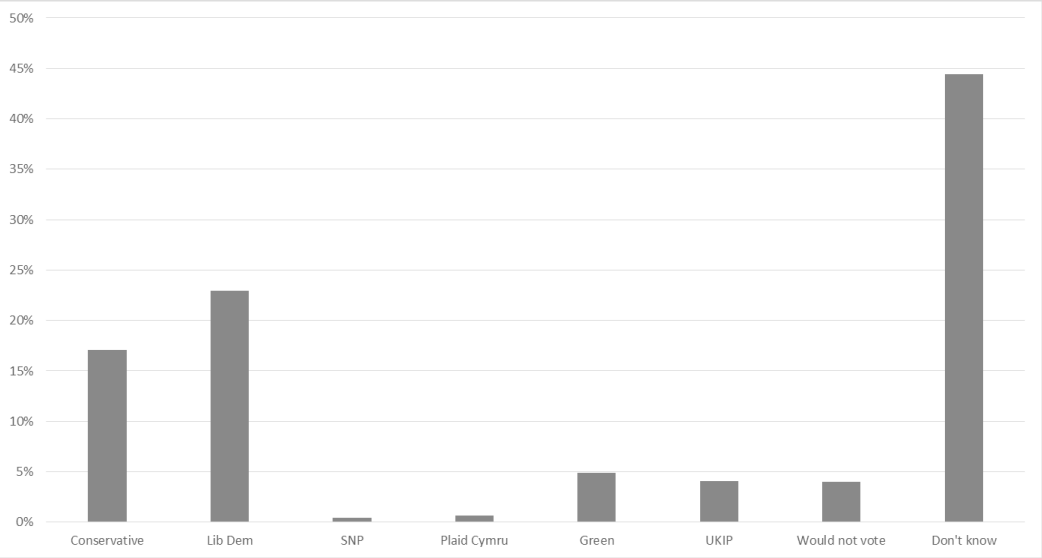
Figure 2: Vote shares in 2005 and 2010 elections among Labour Loyalists



n=3,134 and 3,409

- **The Homecomers** had voted Labour in 2015, and eventually returned in time for polling day in June 2017, despite saying at the start of the campaign that they did not plan to back the party (most said they did not know who they would vote for). This group's perception of Corbyn improved most dramatically during the 2017 campaign, though even by the end only a third identified him as their preferred candidate for prime minister. They were the least likely among the Labour-voting groups to think the party would win a majority. Among the Labour voting groups, it is the oldest with an average age of 49, has the highest proportion of owner-occupiers, and the highest proportion of people in professional occupations.

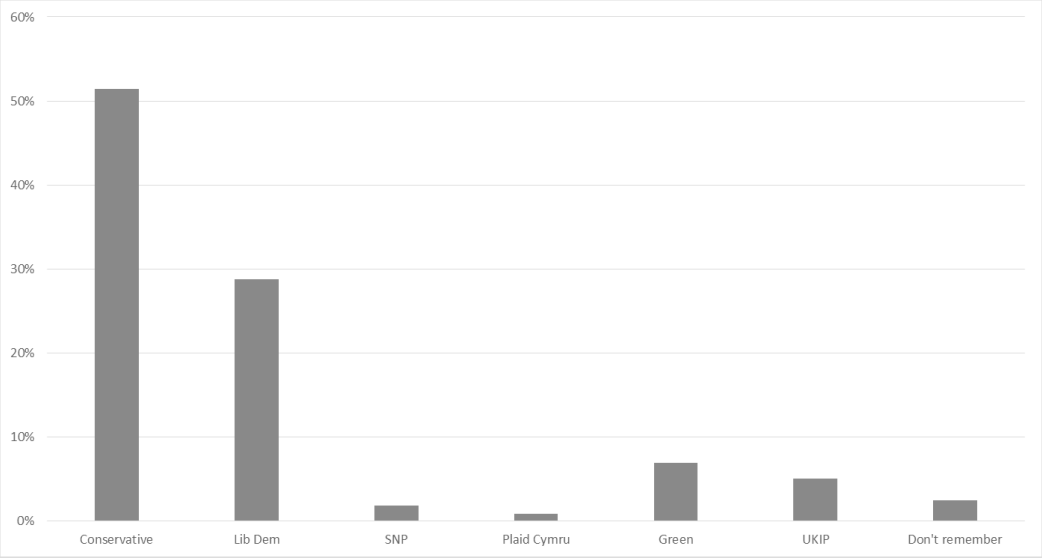
Figure 3: Pre-2017 campaign voting intention of Homecomers



n=1,126

- **The Non-returners** had voted Labour in 2015, but abandoned the party this time around, mostly to the Conservatives. They were broadly centrist – less leftwing and liberal than the Labour-voting groups but less rightwing and authoritarian than the Never Labs. On Brexit, their views more or less match the country as a whole, with 53 per cent voting to leave the EU. Their perceptions of Labour and Corbyn improved slightly during the campaign, but less so than the Labour-voting groups, and only 8 per cent preferred a Corbyn premiership. This group were the least likely of all to expect a Labour victory. With an average age of 52, they were more likely than Labour voters to own their home outright and to work in professional occupations.

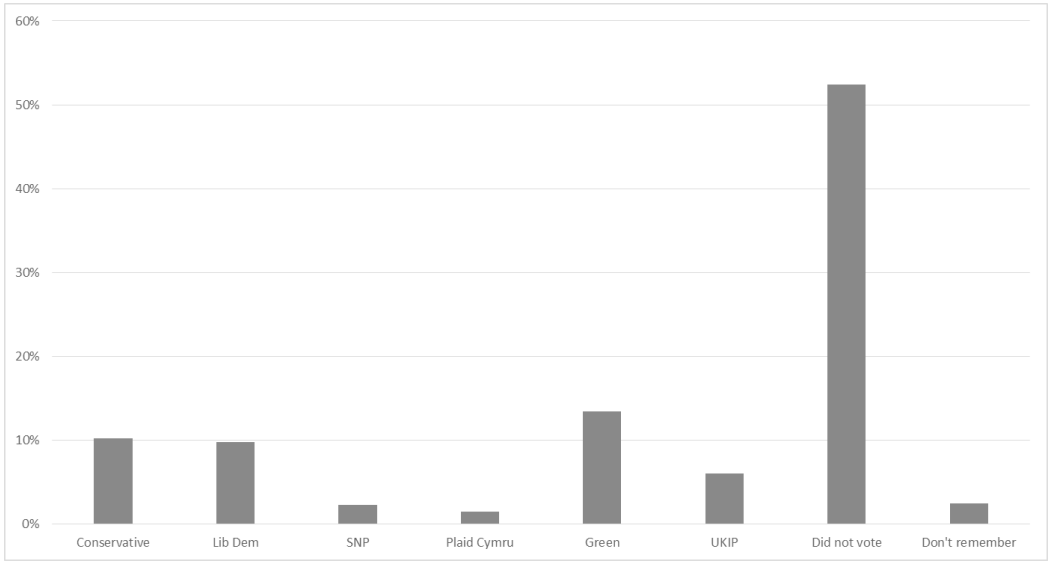
Figure 4: Vote shares at 2017 election among Non-returners



n=978

- **The New Die Hards** voted Labour in 2017 having not done so in 2015 (half did not vote at all). Unlike the Johnny Come Latelys (see below), the New Die Hards had already switched to the party by the start of the 2017 campaign and were the most confident of a Labour victory. They were the most liberal, pro-remain, pro-immigration and pro-Corbyn group, but slightly less traditionally leftwing and not quite so vehemently anti-austerity as the Loyalists. The New Die Hards were the youngest group with an average age of just 36 with a third of the cohort under 25, tended to identify as working class but were also most likely to have attended university (though this is largely a function of their youth). They were also most likely to live in the private rented sector or with their parents or other family members.

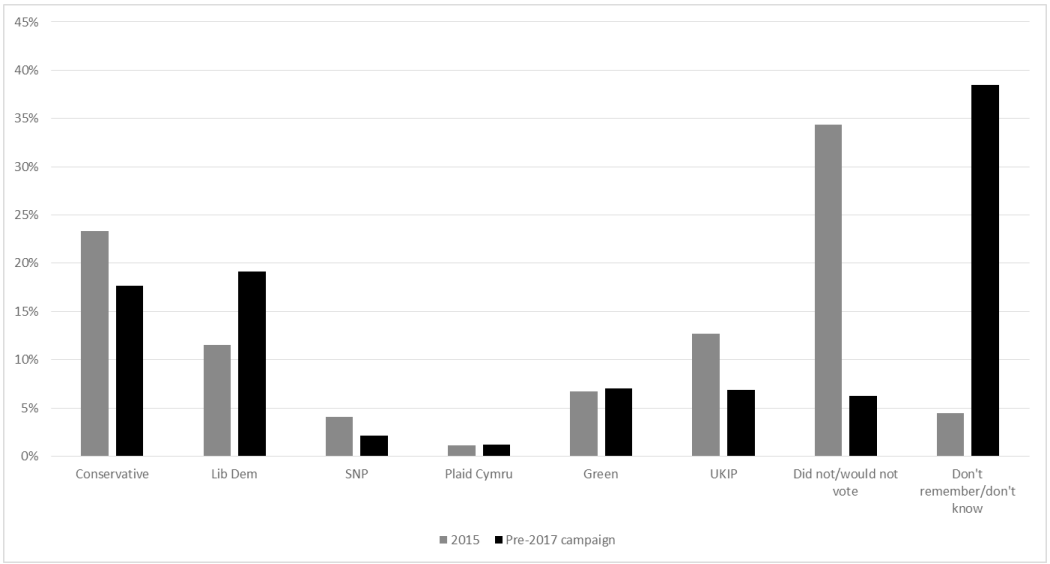
Figure 5: Vote shares at 2015 election among New Die Hards



n=1191

The Johnny Come Latelys voted Labour in 2017 having not done so in 2015 (over a third did not vote at all). Unlike the New Die Hards, they switched to the party during the campaign, but most did so not expecting the party to win. They were the least leftwing, least vehemently anti-austerity and most anti-immigration of the Labour-voting groups. Their perceptions of the Labour party and Corbyn improved substantially during the campaign, though only a third were in favour of a Corbyn premiership even by the eve of the election. They were also the least pro-European of the Labour-voting groups, with only 55 per cent voting remain at the 2016 referendum. With an average age of 42, they were less likely to identify as working class but also less likely to have attended university than the other Labour voting groups.

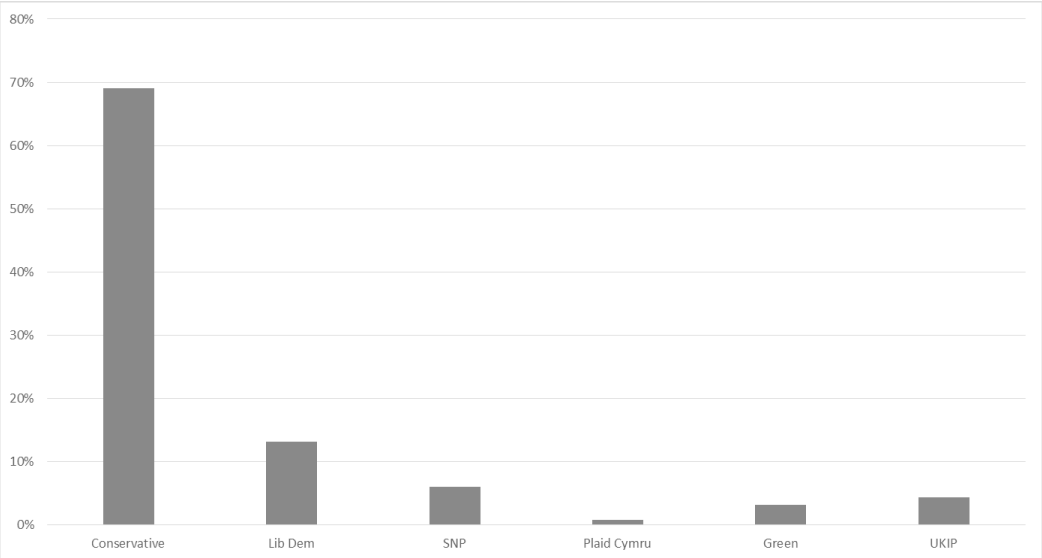
Figure 6: 2015 vote shares and pre-campaign 2017 voting intention among Johnny Come Latelys



n=1,643

- **The Never Labs** did not vote Labour in either of the most recent general elections, nor did they plan to do so at the start of the campaign. This group is the most rightwing, anti-immigration, anti-EU and authoritarian and largely consists of Conservatives although it also contains, in smaller numbers, those who voted for the Lib Dems, SNP and other parties. It was also the most sceptical of Labour, Corbyn and a Corbyn premiership (a May premiership held a 73-point lead at the time). The Never Labs were the oldest group with an average age of 53 and with a third over the age of 65. Mostly living in the South (excluding London) and Midlands, they were the most likely to own their home outright and to identify as middle class but also the least likely to have attended university.

Figure 7: 2017 vote shares among Never Labs



n=10,993

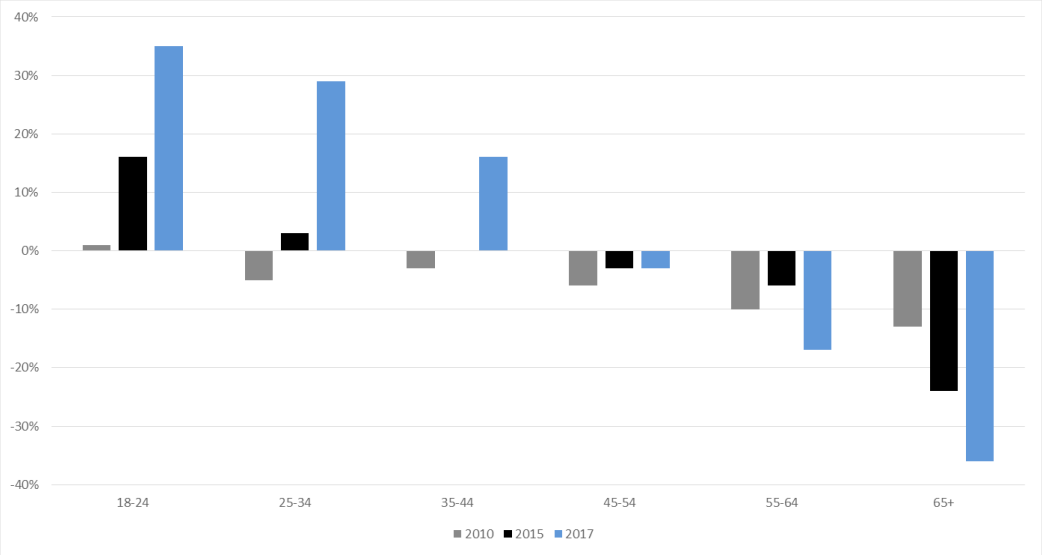
These categories allow us to better understand the nature of the Labour vote in the 2017 general election. To understand Labour's core vote and how secure it is, we need to examine the Loyalists and the New Die Hards. To look at how Labour could build on its performance, we might home in on the Non-Returners, while for a landslide victory, Labour would need to learn more about, and appeal to, the Never Labs. To explain how Labour went from 25 per cent to 40 per cent in the space of just a few weeks, we need to focus on the Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys.

2. Who were the Labour switchers?

A 'Youthquake'?

Can the youth vote explain Labour's campaign comeback? Numerous pre- and post-election polls showed that Labour's lead among the youngest voters (18-24 year olds) was far higher in 2017 than in previous recent elections, helping to compensate for a larger deficit among older voters.

Figure 8: Labour lead over Conservatives by age group, general elections since 2010



Source: Ipsos MORI[5]

While the youngest clearly played their part, even more important – because there are almost three times as many of them – was the opening of a lead among older millennials and the younger half of generation X: the 25-44 age bracket, as shown in figure 9.

Increased turnout among that slightly older group may also have played a role. Analysis by the British Election Study team suggests that, contrary to previous estimates suggesting a 'youthquake' of 18-24 year olds flocking to the polls for the first time to vote for Corbyn, there were in fact large increases in turnout among the much larger group of 25-44 year olds, but not among the very youngest voters.[6]

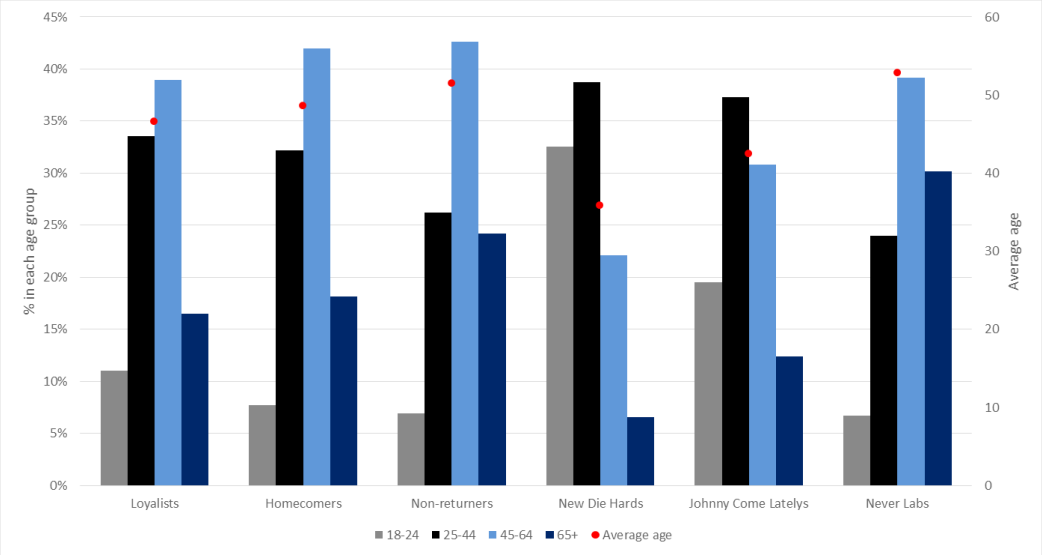
We can see from figure 9 that the groups that didn't vote Labour in 2015 but did in 2017 were the youngest, with more than half being under the age of 44. The New Die Hards were by far the youngest group, with an average age of 36. Of those who voted Labour in 2015, the non-returners were the oldest, with a quarter over the age of 65.[7]

5. Ipsos MORI (2017). How Britain Voted in the 2017 election. https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2017-election; Ipsos MORI (2015). How Britain Voted in 2015. https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2015; Ipsos MORI (2010) How Britain Voted in 2010. Available at: https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/how-britain-voted-2010

6. Prosser, C. et al (2018). Tremors but no Youthquake. British Election Study paper. http://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/the-myth-of-the-2017-youthquake-election/#.Wm73b_ll-Uk

7. Note that those who were too young to vote in the 2015 election are categorised as 'not Labour'.

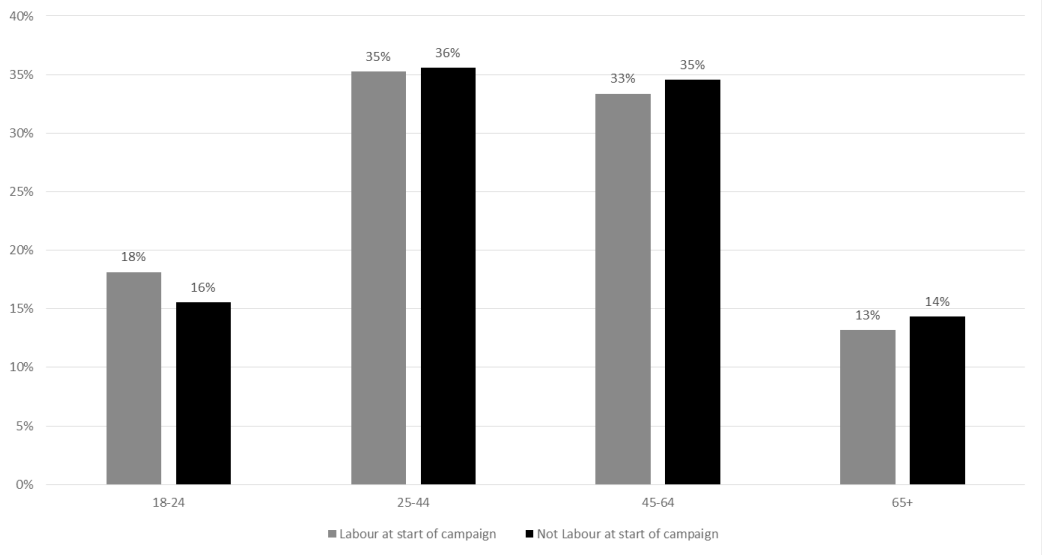
Figure 9: Respondent age by group



Post-election wave (n=19,673)

Overall, in age terms, 2017 Labour voters who already planned to vote Labour at the start of the campaign look very similar to the group who switched to Labour late. Labour's late switchers were young, with a majority under the age of 45, but so was its existing base (see figure 10).

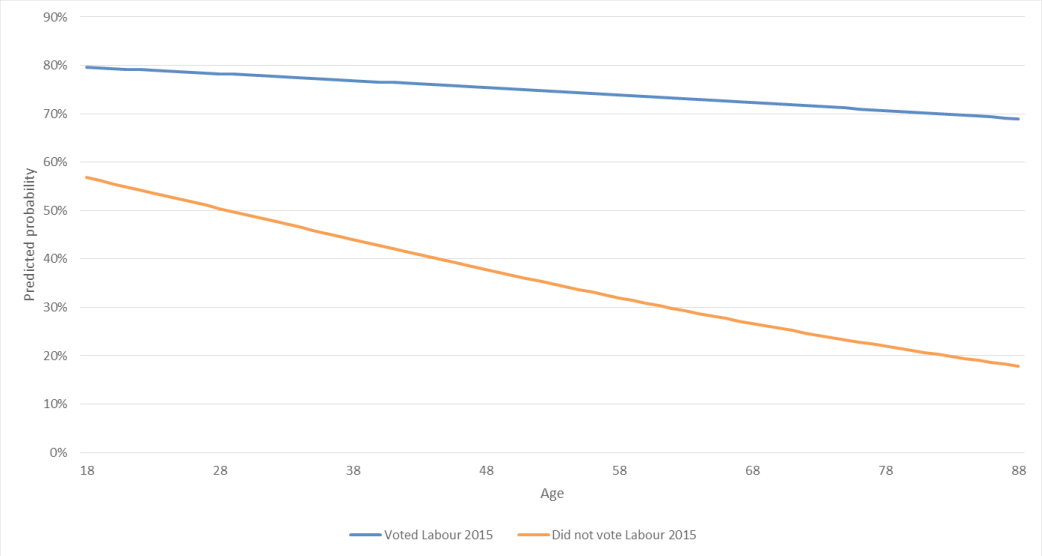
Figure 10: Labour 2017 voters, by voting intention at start of campaign



Post-election wave (n=7,451)

In fact, as shown in figure 11, younger Labour voters were actually slightly more likely to already be with the party by the start of the campaign than older Labour voters were. The younger a 2017 Labour voter is, the more likely they were to be a New Die Hard or a Loyalist who was already backing the party at the start of the campaign. This trend is stronger among those who had not backed Labour in 2015.

Figure 11: Predicted probability of being a Labour supporter at the start of the 2017 campaign, by age (2017 Labour voters only)



Bivariate logistic regression analysis, post-election wave (n=7,451)

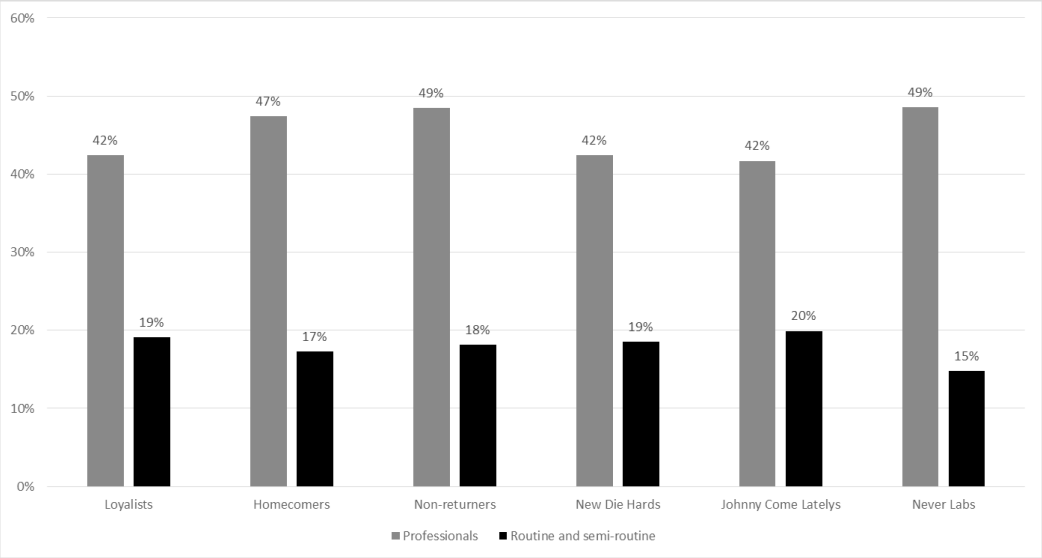
Overall, compared to 2015, Labour's 2017 performance was significantly boosted by an influx of young people. Similarly, of those who switched to Labour during the campaign, a majority were under the age of 45. However, in age terms those who drove Labour's campaign comeback look very similar to those who were already with the party. In fact, older Labour voters were actually slightly more likely to be late switchers than younger ones, though the difference is small.

A middle class revolt?

Labour performed surprisingly well in many of the more affluent parts of the country that have traditionally been held by the Conservatives, such as Kensington and Canterbury. Was it a wave of richer, middle-class voters that turned Labour's fortunes around during the campaign?

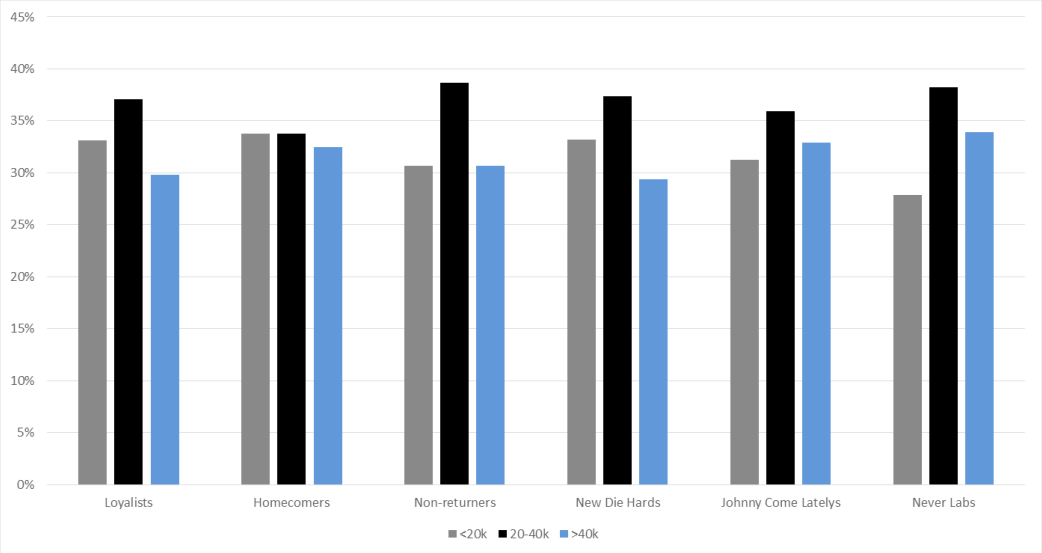
When we look at the groups according to occupational class and income, no clear patterns emerge (figures 12 and 13), except that there are more professionals among the Homecomers than the other Labour voting groups. However, there are important differences concerning the respondent's own subjective class identity (figure 14). The two groups that intended to vote Labour at the start of the campaign look very similar, with a clear majority identifying as working class. Those who switched to Labour later on were generally less likely to identify as working class, and more likely to identify as middle class or to not identify with any class at all.

Figure 12: Make-up of groups by occupational class



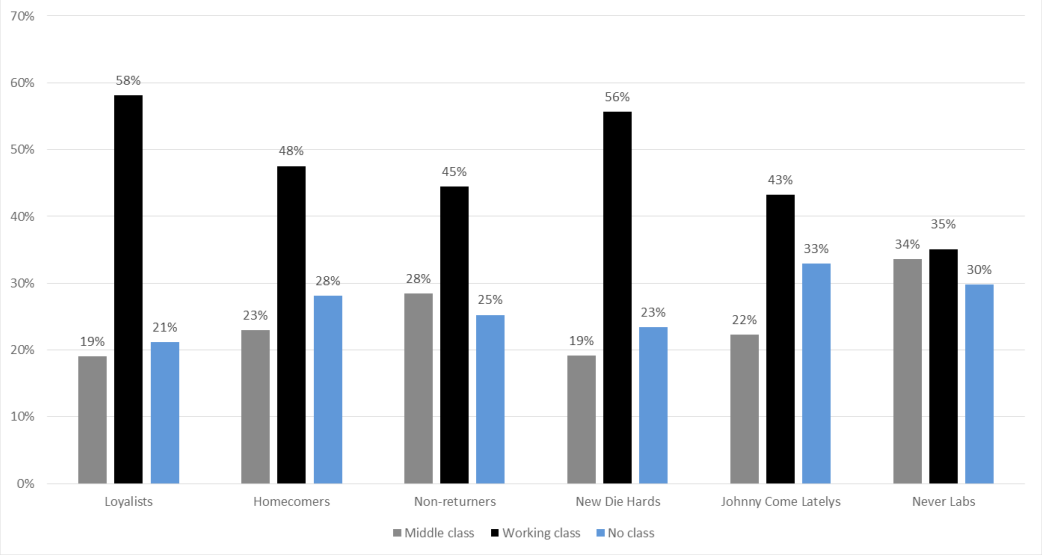
NS-SEC occupations taken from earlier BES waves (n=13,470)

Figure 13: Make-up of groups by gross household income



Post-election wave (n=14,877)

Figure 14: Make-up of groups by class identification



Mid-campaign wave (n=18,943)

Perhaps the most striking finding from this breakdown is simply the lack of any clear differences between Labour voters and the rest on the traditional (and available) objective measures of class, namely occupation type and income. Routine and semi-routine occupations, which we would tend to think of as working-class jobs (e.g. construction workers, bus and taxi drivers, restaurant staff and refuse collectors) make up between 15 and 20 per cent of all groups. This suggests that, as Stoker and Jennings have argued, the realignment of British politics away from traditional class-based divisions has happened over a much longer period than just since 2015.[8] Those who switched late to the party were slightly less likely to identify as working class (45 per cent) than its existing base (57 per cent), but still slightly more so than population as a whole (43 per cent) on that front. There is therefore no clear evidence that a 'middle class revolt' was behind Labour's campaign comeback.

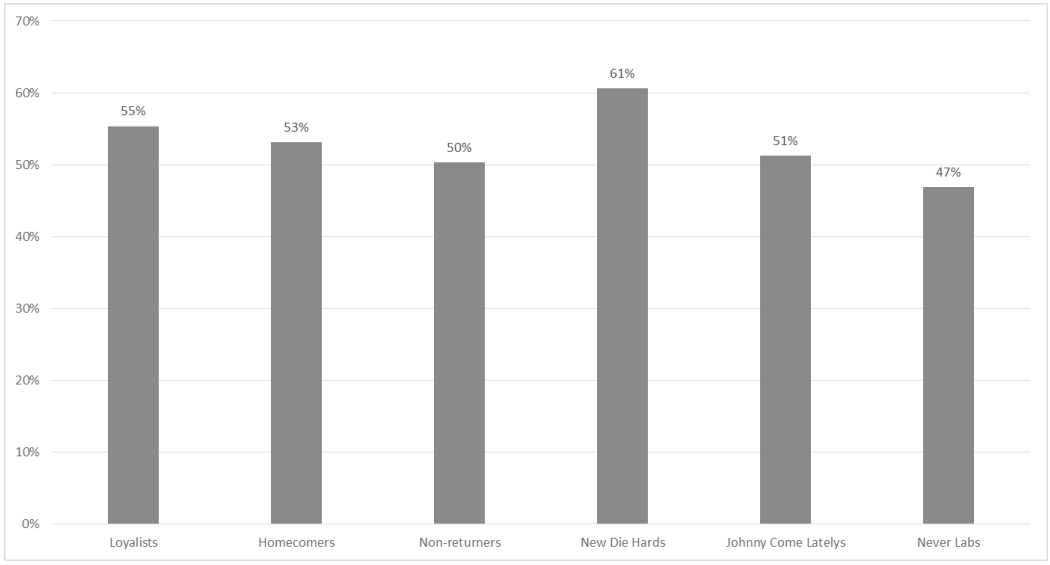
March of the grads?

As other studies have shown, Labour voters were disproportionately likely to have attended university.[9] While it is important to note that the British Election Study sample is skewed towards graduates overall, we can see from figure 15 that university attendance – which includes current students – is highest among Labour's new core, while it was lower among those who switched to the party during the campaign.

8. Stoker, G. and Jennings, W. (2017). 'Tilting Towards the Cosmopolitan Axis? Political Change in England and the 2017 General Election', Political Quarterly, vol 88(3), pp.359-369

9. Curtis, C. (2017). 'How Britain voted at the 2017 general election', YouGov. https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/06/13/how-britain-voted-2017-general-election/

Figure 15: University attendance, by group

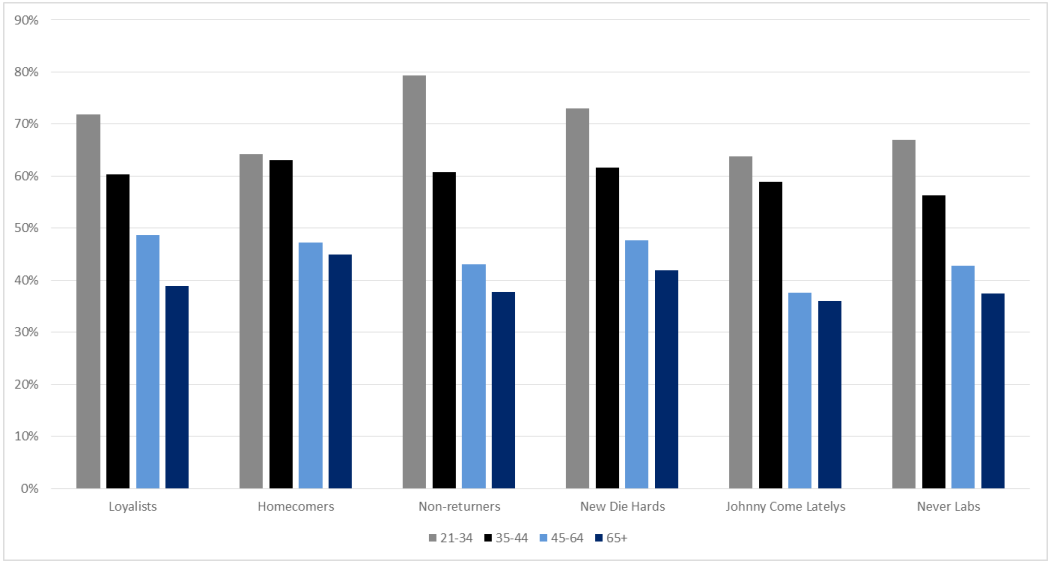


Percentages Include currently enrolled students but excludes dropouts, post-election wave (n=19,326)

However, in social research university attendance and age often act as proxies for one another due to the expansion of higher education in recent decades – that is to say, that students and graduates are more likely to be young and young people are more likely to attend university. To isolate trends related to university attendance, in figure 16 attendance rates in each group are divided up by age group. 18-20 year olds are removed as many would have not started university yet, rather than taking an alternative education or career path.

Among 21-34 year old voters, university attendance was highest among the non-returners, and lowest among the Johnny Come Latelys. It seems that the high proportion of students and graduates among the New Die Hards overall is largely thanks to that group being younger.

Figure 16: University attendance by age and group



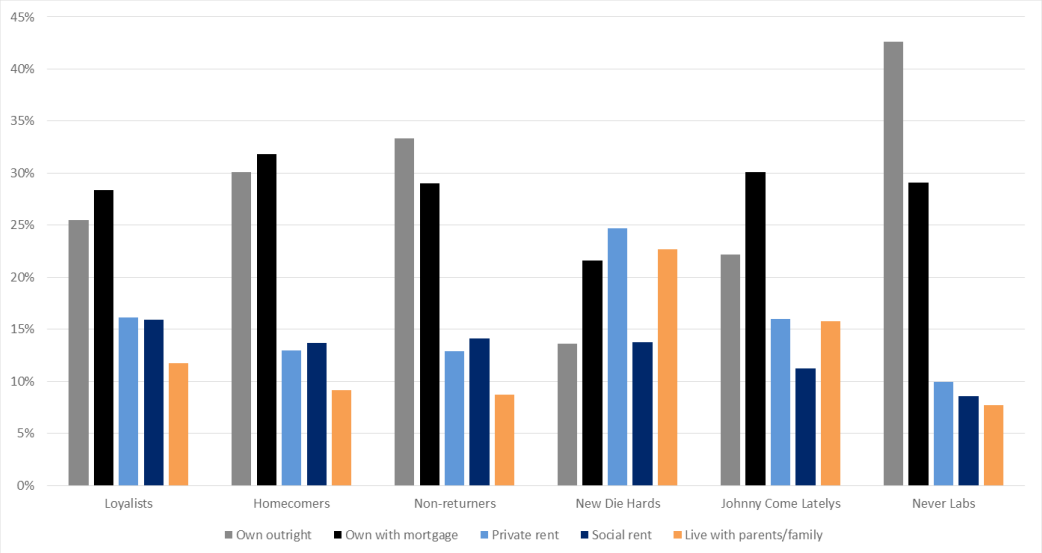
Percentages Include currently enrolled students but exclude dropouts (n=19,031)

Thus it is clear that, whatever happened in the general election, Labour's surprise comeback was not caused by a 'march of the grads'. Certainly, its 2017 vote was more 'graduate-heavy' than its support in 2015, but much of this graduate boost came from those who had already switched to the party by the start of the campaign.

Politics of place?

To what extent did people's immediate surroundings and the broader environments in which they live affect campaign swings? The analysis of the BES reveals important group differences over housing tenure. As seen in figure 17, those who switched to Labour before the campaign, the New Die Hards, are disproportionately likely to be in the private rented sector or still living with their parents or family. The Homecomers and Johnny Come Latelys who drove Labour's comeback were more likely to have a mortgage than to own outright or to rent, while previous Labour voters who wobbled and stayed away were most likely to own their homes outright.

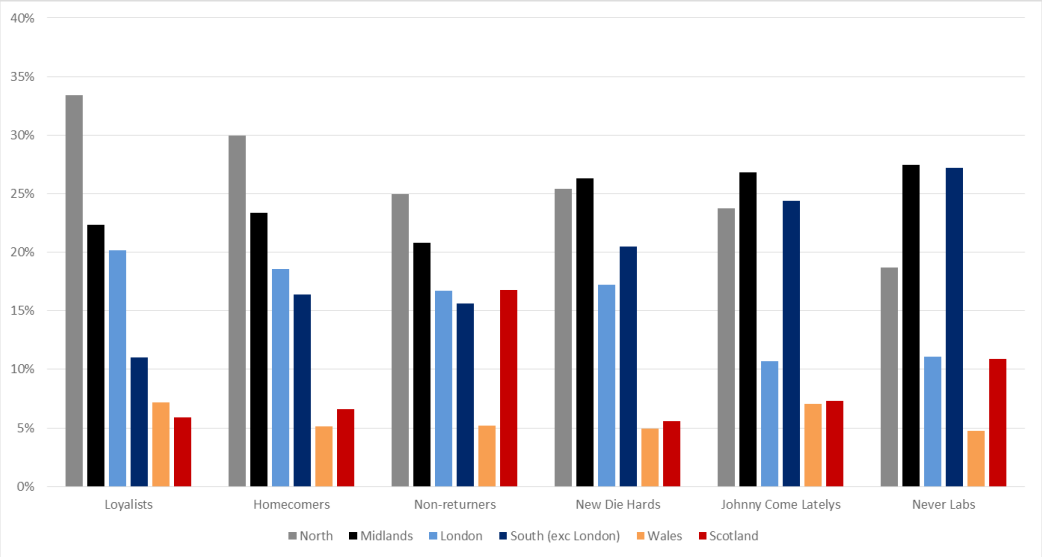
Figure 17: Housing status by group



Post-election wave (n=19,452)

Finally, when we look at regional distribution (figure 18), we can see a North-South divide among Labour's new core. The Loyalists are concentrated in the North, while the New Die Hards are twice as likely as Loyalists to live in the South of England (excluding London). Those that switched to Labour late on having not voted for the party in 2015 (the Johnny Come Latelys) were disproportionately from the South and Midlands, but less from London, while the Homecomers – like the Loyalists – were disproportionately from London and the North.

Figure 18: Broad region of residence, by group



n=15,983

Overall, this demographic analysis of the groups indicates that many of the common narratives or assumptions about the Labour comeback are not backed up by the evidence. In many ways, the New Die Hards – those that didn't vote Labour in 2015, but who had already decided to vote for the party by the start of the 2017 campaign, are the most distinctive group, and fit most neatly with the narratives about Labour's new voters, being overwhelmingly young, university graduates struggling to get on the housing ladder.

Those who switched to Labour during the campaign, shifting the party from a catastrophic 25 per cent to a respectable 40 per cent share of the vote, tended to be somewhere in between, being younger and better educated than non-Labour voters, but less so than the party's core voters.

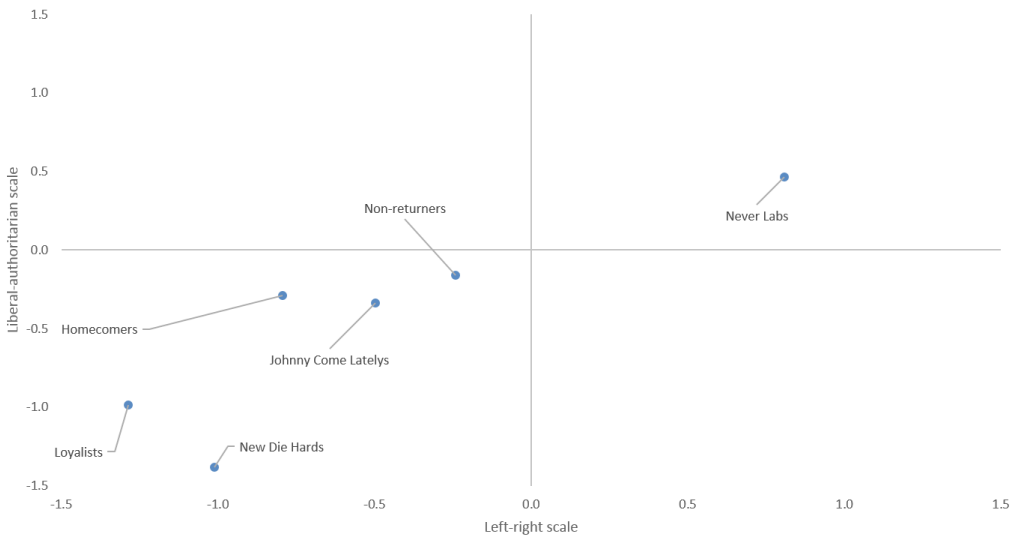
3. What did the switchers believe in?

Were those who switched to Labour during the campaign driven by traditional leftwing economic concerns, or were immigration and social issues more important?

The political spectrum

The BES asks survey respondents ten questions[10] that are then used to place them on a left-right scale and a liberal-authoritarian scale (shown in figure 19). Among Labour's new core, we can see that those that have joined since 2015 (the New Die Hards) are less leftwing but more socially liberal than the Labour Loyalists who voted for the party in 2015. Former Labour voters who wobbled were generally more authoritarian than those who stuck with the party throughout, but those who were drawn back to the party late on tended to be more leftwing than the Non-returners who didn't. Among those who switched to Labour having not voted for the party in 2015, those who had switched before the campaign started were much more leftwing and much more socially liberal than those who switched during the campaign.

Figure 19: Average position on left-right and liberal-authoritarian scales (positive score = more rightwing/authoritarian), by group



Scales based on post-election responses, relative to overall mean (n=17,967 and 17,384)

Regarding the more 'cultural' elements of liberalism, we find similar patterns of attitudes. When asked whether they felt attempts in Britain to give equal opportunities to ethnic minorities (figure 20), women (figure 21) and gay and lesbian people (figure 22) had gone too far or not far enough, the New Die Hards were the most liberal-minded group (believing these efforts have not gone far enough), closely followed by the Labour Loyalists. The Johnny Come Latelys and Homecomers were next, followed by the Non-returners and finally the Never Labs. The main exception to this is the Johnny Come Latelys' attitudes to equality for women: they were substantially less likely to feel that attempts to provide equal opportunities for women had not gone far enough than either the Homecomers or the Non-returners.

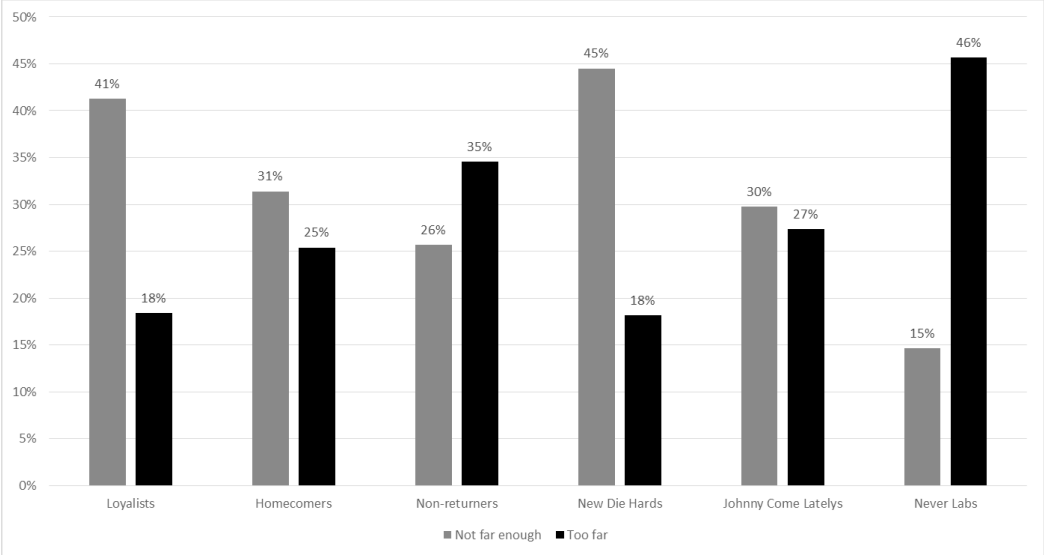
10. For the left-right scale, BES asks respondents how much they agreed/disagreed with the following:

- Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off
- Big business takes advantage of ordinary people
- Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth
- There is one law for the rich and one for the poor
- Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance

For the liberal-authoritarian scale, BES asks respondents how much they agree/disagree with the following:

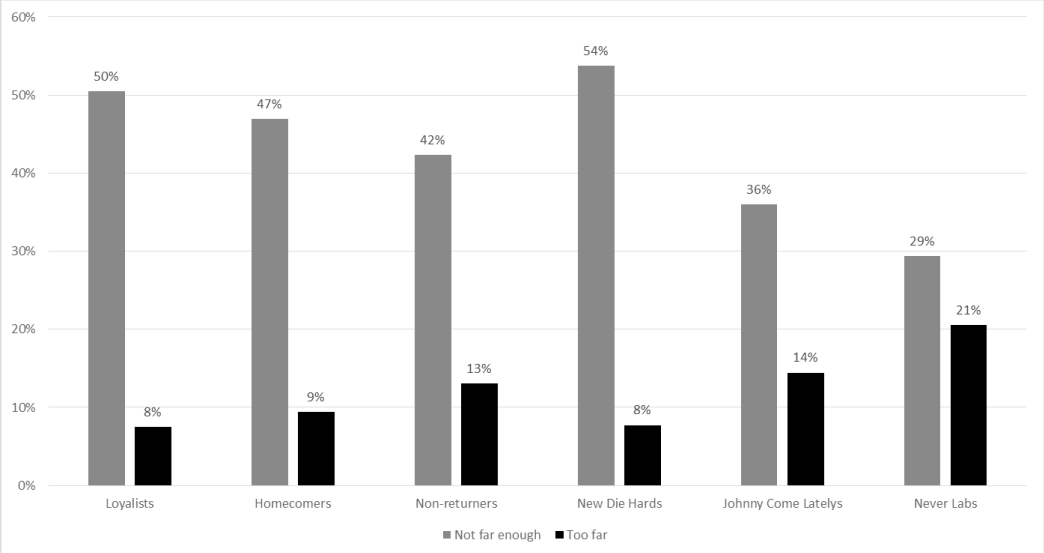
- Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values
- For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence
- Schools should teach children to obey authority
- Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards
- People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences

Figure 20: Per cent believing attempts to give equal opportunities to ethnic minorities have gone too far/not far enough, by group



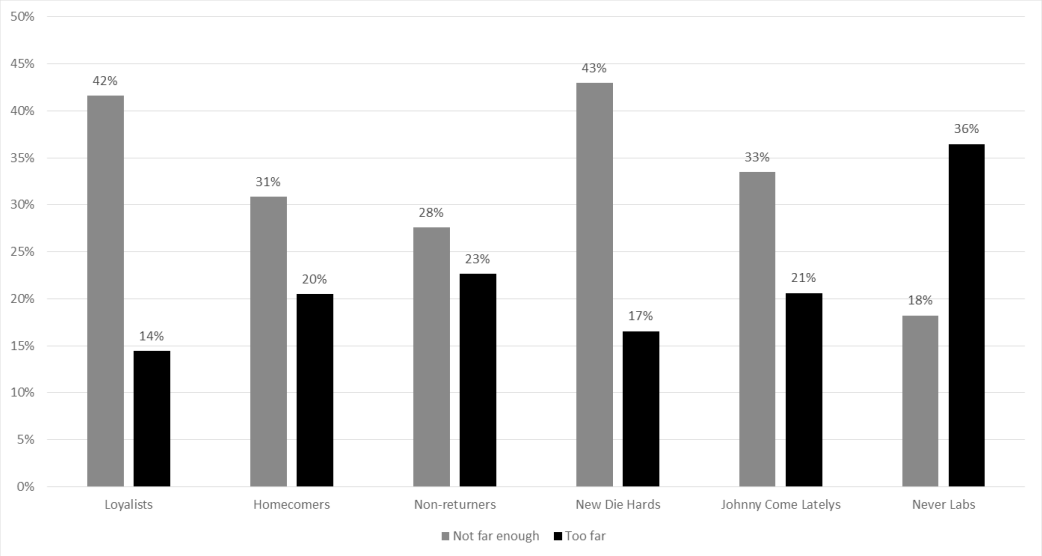
Wave 10 (24 Nov-12 Dec 2016) responses (n=13,815)

Figure 21: Per cent believing attempts to give equal opportunities to women have gone too far/not far enough, by group



Wave 10 (24 Nov-12 Dec 2016) responses (n=14,141)

Figure 22: Per cent believing attempts to give equal opportunities to gay and lesbian people have gone too far/not far enough, by group

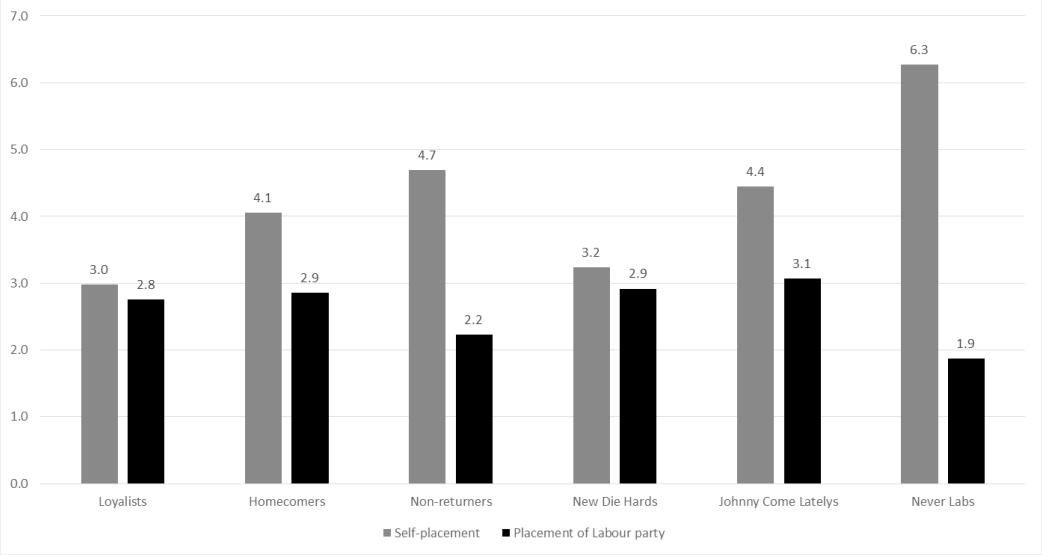


Wave 10 (24 Nov-12 Dec 2016) responses (n=13,809)

The BES survey also asks respondents to place themselves on a left-right scale, and to position the parties on the same scale. However, these questions were only asked at the start of the campaign and mid-campaign (wave 12 conducted between 5th May and 7th June), but not in the post-election BES wave.

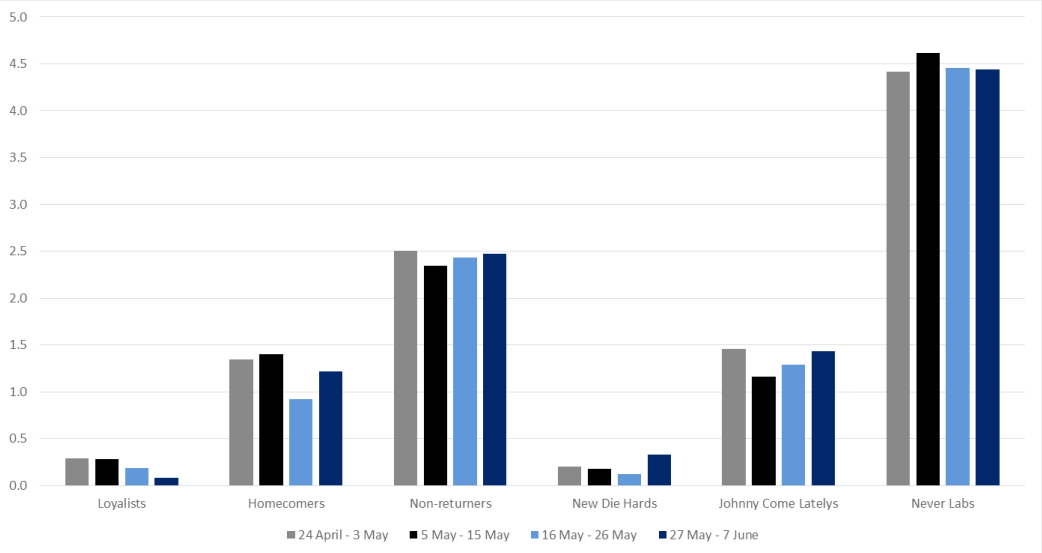
On average, all groups – even the Labour Loyalists and the New Die Hards – placed themselves to the right of where they felt the Labour party was by the middle of the campaign (see figure 23). Unsurprisingly, the gap is smaller among those who initially didn't plan to vote Labour but then switched during the campaign, than among those who didn't make the switch. There is also not much evidence of a change in that gap. When we compare the pre-campaign wave with mid-campaign responses broken down by the dates that the survey was answered, we might expect to see those who ultimately shifted their vote to Labour change their perceptions to match Labour's position more closely – but figure 24 shows no evidence of such a shift, nor of a widening gap with perceptions of the Conservatives (figure 25). The Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys' perception of Labour and the Conservatives' position compared to their own barely changed between the period before the local elections, and those interviewed in the last ten days of the campaign.

Figure 23: Respondent's placement of self and Labour party on left-right scale (0=left, 10=right), mean score by groups



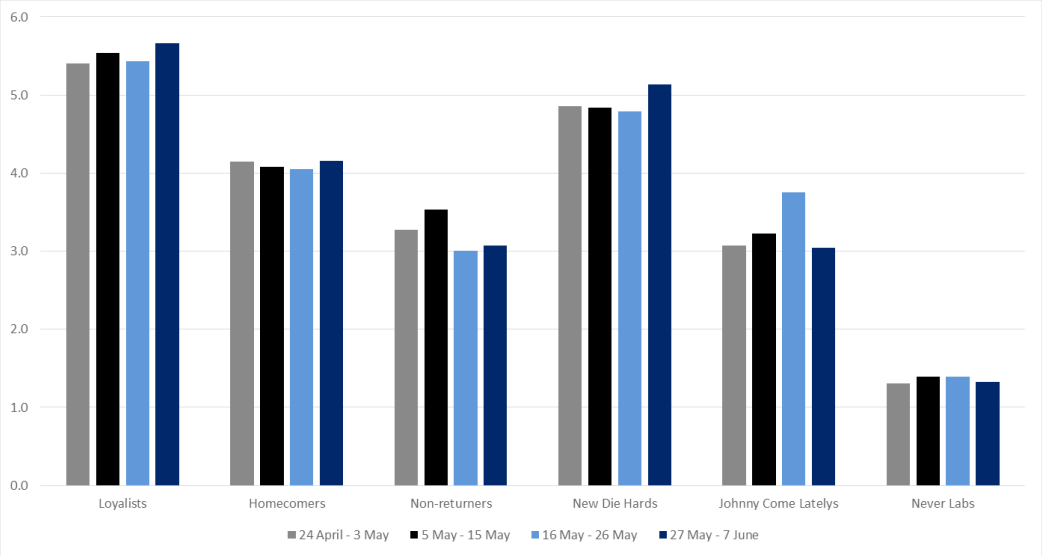
Mid-campaign wave (n=16,492 and 16,145)

Figure 24: Extent to which Labour perceived as more leftwing than respondent (10 = much more leftwing), by groups and dates of survey response.



n=15,311, 5,056, 4,916 and 5,564

Figure 25: Extent to which Conservatives perceived as more rightwing than respondent (10 = much more rightwing), by groups and dates of survey response



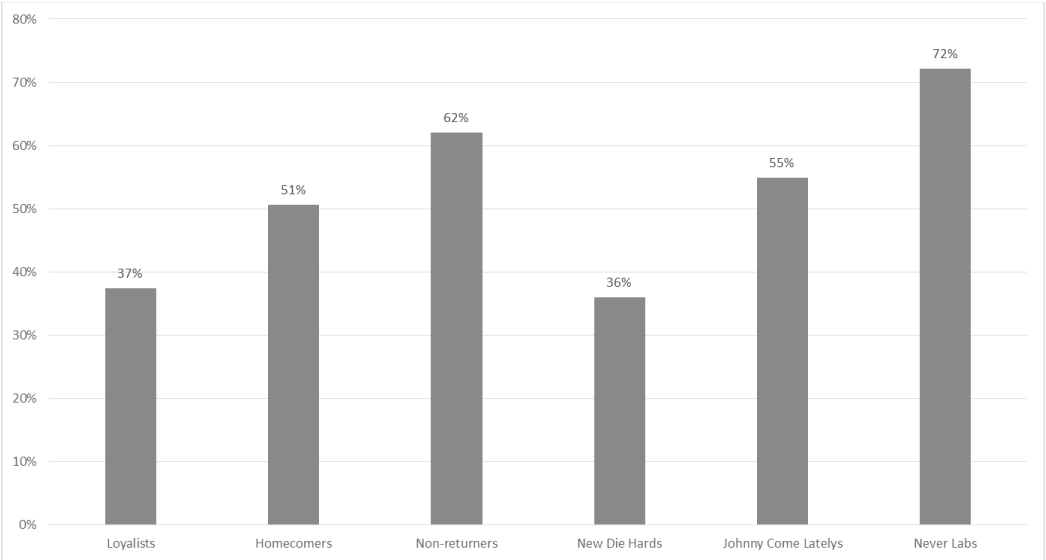
n=15,372, 5,077, 4,923 and 5,571

The evidence from these political spectrums suggests that Labour's campaign comeback was not down to a convergence of opinion, either with voters becoming more leftwing to match Labour, or perceiving Labour to have been moderating itself. On the other hand, we can also say that attempts from the Conservative campaign and parts of the right-leaning media to portray Corbyn's Labour as a party of dangerous, far-left extremists do not appear to have had a strong effect on voters' perceptions of the party.

Immigration

On the issue of immigration, there is a clear gap between wavering 2015 Labour voters who did return (51 per cent supporting less immigration) and didn't return to the party (62 per cent), although in both cases a majority was in favour of reducing immigration. Labour's new core – the Loyalists and the New Die Hards were the most pro-immigration. The other group of Labour switchers – the Johnny Come Latelys – also for the most part supported a reduction in immigration (see figure 26).

Figure 26: Per cent in favour of less immigration to the UK, by group



Pre-campaign wave, per cent giving responses of 0-4 on a scale of 0 (much less immigration) to 10 (much more) (n=18,143)

As with the left-right scale, we can map attitudes to immigration onto respondents' perceptions of the Labour party's position (although note that this data is taken from the pre-campaign wave). This is notable not only because immigration has been such an important electoral issue, but also because, since the referendum, Labour's position on the subject has lacked clarity. When a candidate or party is popular, we might expect a degree of vagueness to be helpful as voters will tend to project their own views onto those they like and identify with. When a candidate or party is disliked or not trusted, the reverse can be the case.

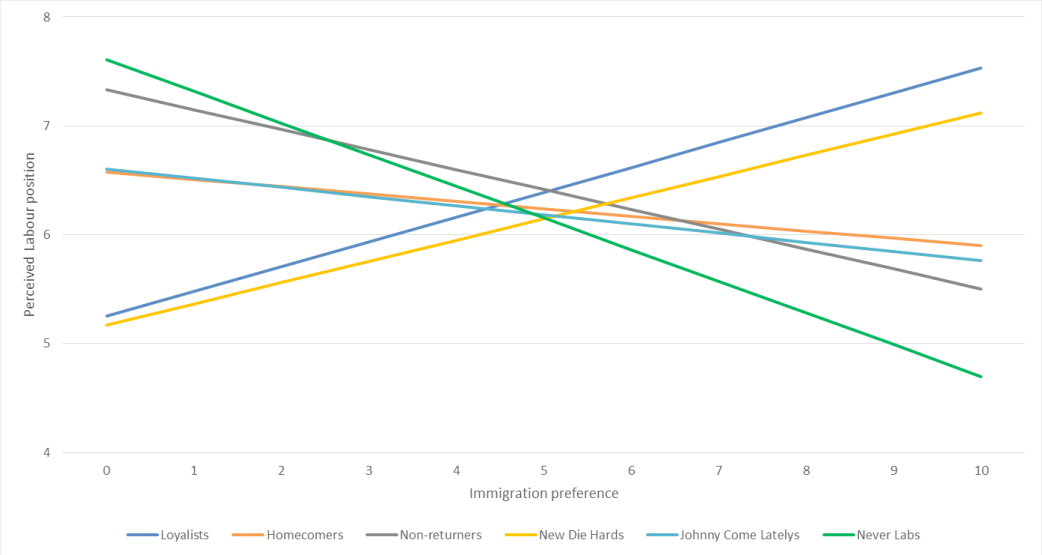
Research conducted by YouGov in January 2016 suggested that anti-immigration respondents tended to think Labour wanted more immigration, while those in favour of immigration tended to think Labour wanted to keep it the same or to reduce it.[11]

When we split up survey respondents into our groups again and look at immigration policy preferences compared to perceptions of the Labour position, we can see that there is a positive association among Labour's new core – the Loyalists and New Die Hards. In other words with these groups, the more pro-immigration an individual was, the more pro-immigration they thought Labour's position was, and vice versa.

Among all the other groups, the reverse is true: anti-immigration respondents tended to think Labour was pro-immigration, and pro-immigration respondents tended to think Labour was anti-immigration. We can see from figure 27 that there is a particularly strong negative association between the non-returners and the Never Labs, but less so among those who ultimately switched to Labour.

11. Curtis, C (2017). Voters don't know where Labour stands on immigration. https://yougov.co.uk/news/2017/01/16/labours-immigration-compromise-risks-alienating-vo

Figure 27: Predicted perception of Labour's immigration policy, by own preference (0=a lot less immigration, 10=a lot more)



Multivariate OLS regression, controlling for left-right and authoritarian-liberal scales, age, education and how much respondent likes the Labour party. Pre-campaign wave (n=10,003)

These findings reinforce the idea that immigration was not a key issue at the 2017 election: it does not appear to have been a driver of changes in voting behaviour that resulted in Labour's campaign comeback. As other opinion polls have suggested, concern about immigration has fallen steadily since the 2016 referendum[12], and it is speculated that this is because many believe that Brexit has 'settled' the issue.[13]

On the other hand, while Labour's vagueness on immigration might have helped it to keep parts of its existing coalition together, it may have contributed to the alienation of the non-returners, who felt at odds with the party on the issue.

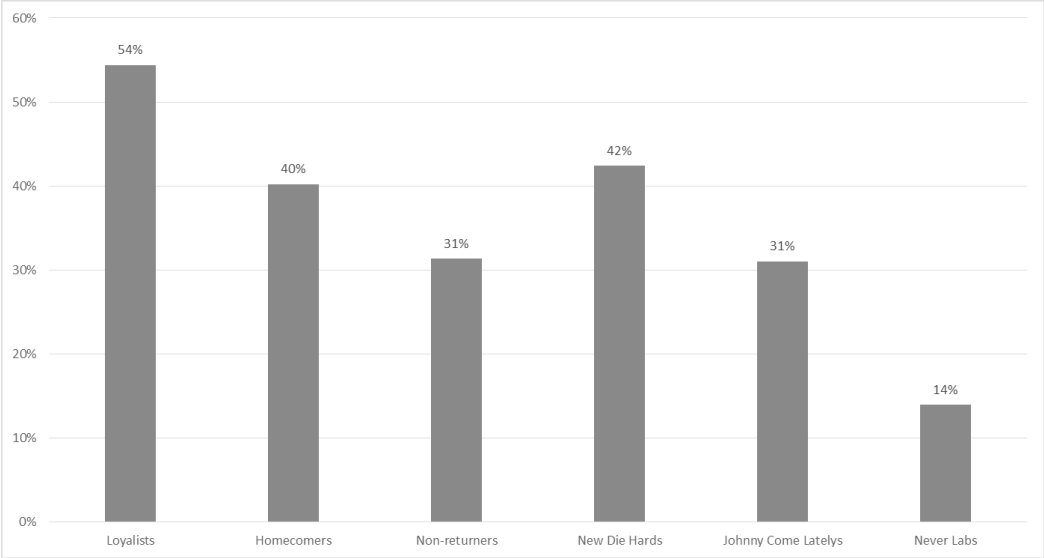
Austerity and the deficit

There are also big differences between the groups on attitudes towards austerity. Perhaps somewhat surprisingly – though it fits in with the fact that they were also less conventionally leftwing – the New Die Hards are less vehemently anti-austerity than the Labour Loyalists, though very few respondents in any of the groups were actually in favour of more cuts. Among those that switched to Labour, the Homecomers are more anti-austerity than the Johnny Come Latelys, who are no more leftwing on this issue than 2015 Labour voters who stayed away from the party this time around (see figure 28).

12. Ipsos MORI (2017). Ipsos MORI Issues Index – June 2017. https://www.ipsos.com/sites/default/files/2017-06/issues-index-june-17-charts.pdf

13. Kirk, A. (2017). 'Britain doesn't care about the economy now – here's what worries us instead'. The Telegraph, 31 July 2017. http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/0/britain-doesnt-care-economy-now-worries-us-instead/

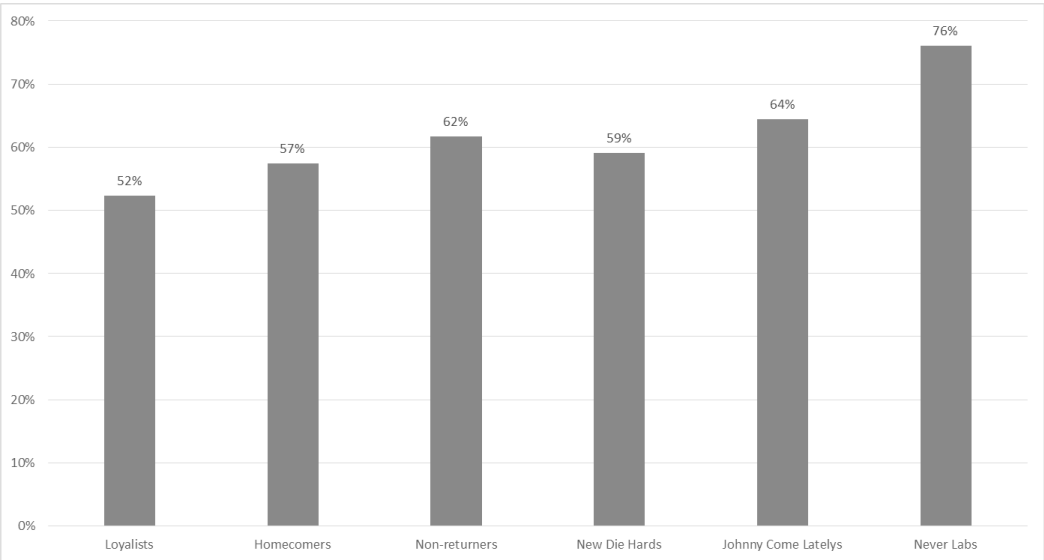
Figure 28: Per cent believing that cuts at a national level have gone much too far



Mid-campaign wave (n=18,233)

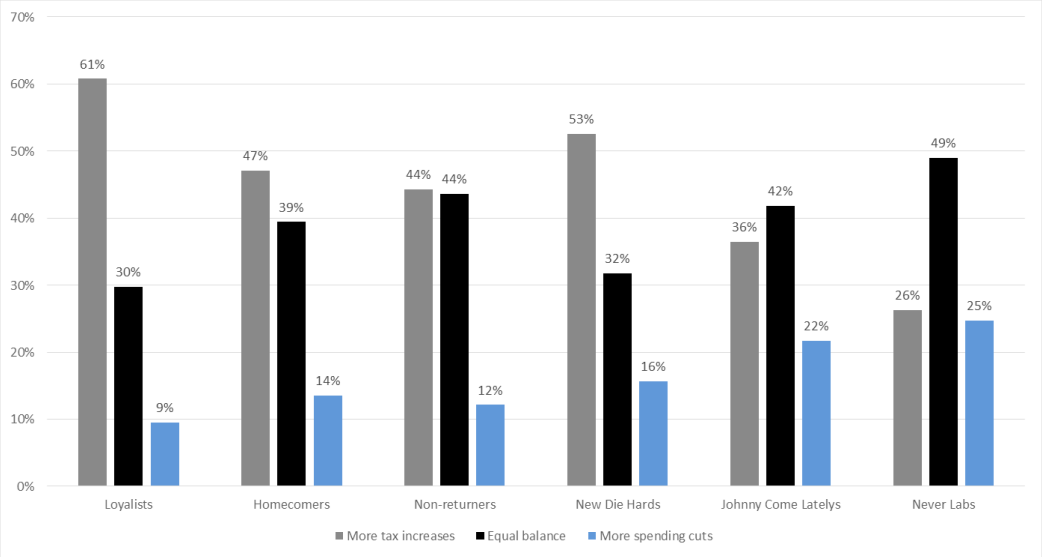
However, on the question of reducing the deficit, figure 29 shows broad agreement, with a majority of every group saying it is important or necessary to do so. The main source of disagreement – shown in figure 30 – is over whether this should be achieved primarily through tax increases or spending cuts. Among the 2017 Labour coalition, those who switched to the party late on (Johnny Come Latelys) were more than twice as likely as Labour Loyalists to favour spending cuts, and just over half as likely to favour tax increases. In fact, the Johnny Come Latelys were even more in favour of spending cuts and less in favour of tax increases than the Non-returners who voted Labour in 2015 but not 2017.

Figure 29: Per cent believing that reducing the deficit is necessary/important



Pre-campaign wave (n=17,706)

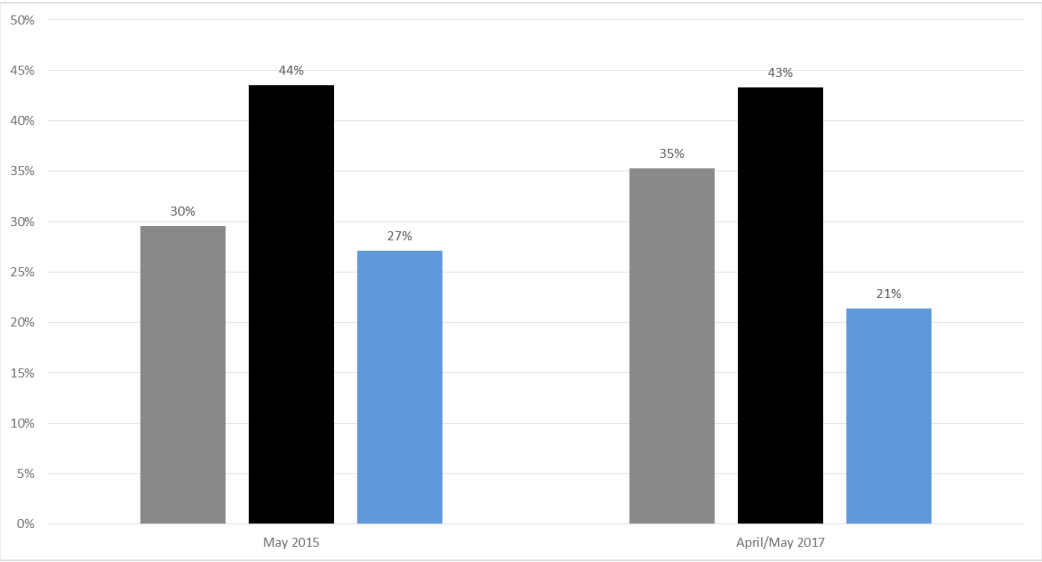
Figure 30: Preference over how to reduce the deficit, by groups



Pre-campaign wave (n=17,073)

It is, however, striking just how much more popular tax rises are compared to spending cuts across the board. This is a substantial shift from previous waves of the BES (see figure 31). In wave 6, conducted immediately after the 2015 election, tax rises were favoured over spending cuts by 30 per cent to 27 per cent. By the start of the 2017 election, tax rises were almost twice as popular as spending cuts.

Figure 31: Preferences over how to reduce the deficit, change over time



n=10,176 and 18,313

This analysis of the attitudes and policy preferences of different groups of voters paints a similar picture to the demographic analysis in chapter two, in the sense that the New Die Hards – rather than the groups that switched to Labour during the campaign – are the most distinctive group and fit best with the common narratives around Labour voters. Not only are they younger and

better educated, they are also the most socially liberal and pro-immigration, although they are not as economically leftwing as the Labour Loyalists. Those who switched during the campaign were much more typical of the population as a whole in terms of attitudes – more 'middle Britain' than the image sometimes portrayed of the latte-drinking 'elites' or Glastonbury-going 'idealists'.

The analysis also shows clear evidence of 'austerity fatigue', with very few people now in favour of further public spending cuts and an increasing proportion in favour of tax rises as a means of reducing the deficit. This suggests Labour was on fertile ground with its unequivocally 'anti-austerity' platform.

4. What did the switchers make of the Labour party?

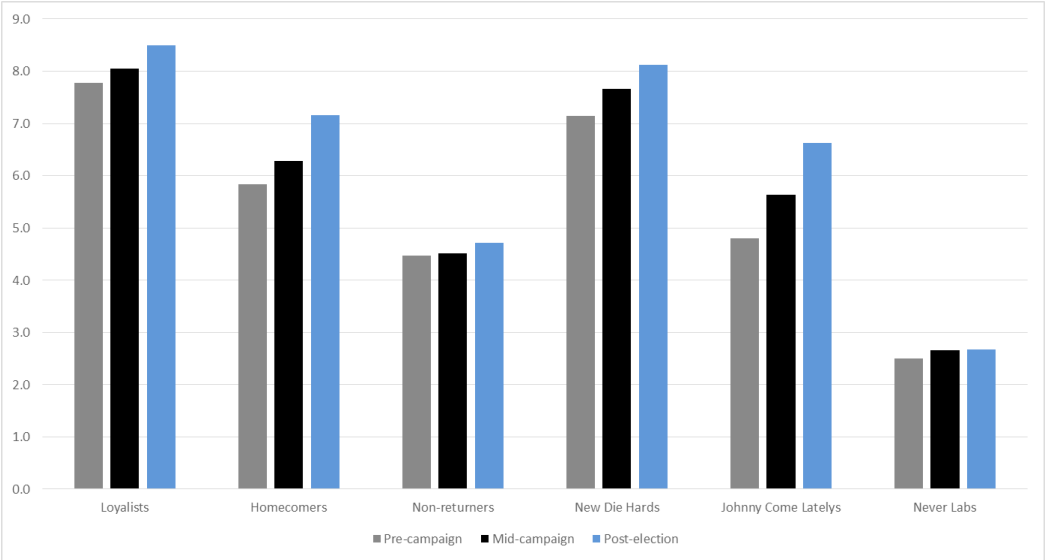
Did the late Labour switchers ultimately switch because they changed their mind about the Labour party, or its leader? Or did they retain their scepticism, backing the party safe in the knowledge that it wouldn't win?

Who liked Labour and its leader?

First, if we look at how attitudes towards the party and Corbyn changed between April and June 2017, we can see that there are significant improvements in their ratings, especially among those who switched late to Labour (figures 32 and 33). Figure 33 shows that the extent to which respondents liked Corbyn swung dramatically among the Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys, suggesting Corbyn's improving personal appeal (albeit from an extremely low base) did help to shift Labour's fortunes.

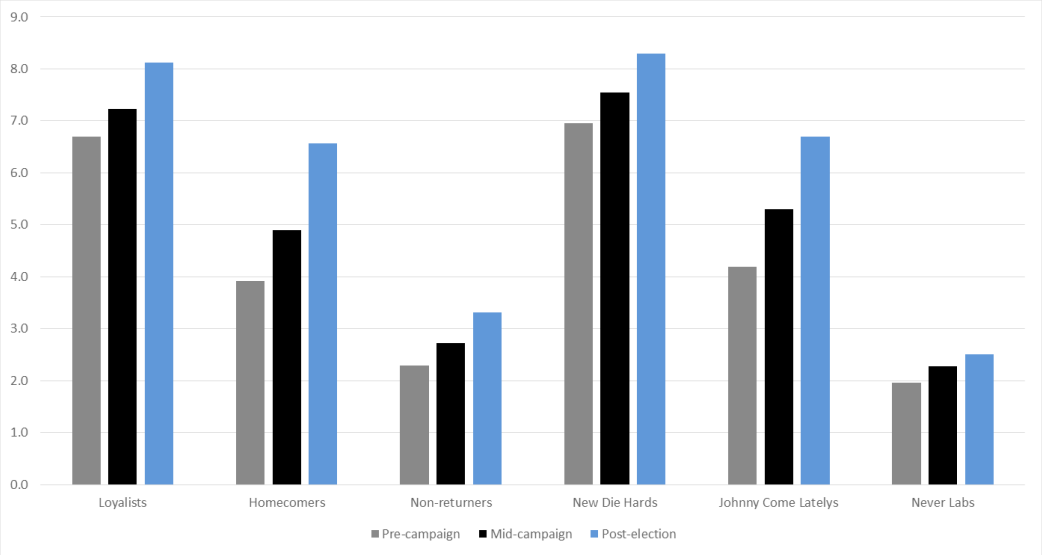
However, as figures 34 and 35 show, this corresponded with a fall in the Conservatives and Theresa May's appeal, and these falls were particularly strong among the same key groups. Theresa May started off more popular than her party among the voters that switched to Labour during the campaign, but ended up as a drag on the ticket. Certainly Corbyn had a good campaign, but May and her team had a particularly bad one. It's difficult to know for sure which of these ended up being more important when voters decided who to back on 8th June.

Figure 32: Average scores for how much respondents said they liked the Labour party (0-10 scale), by group and campaign wave



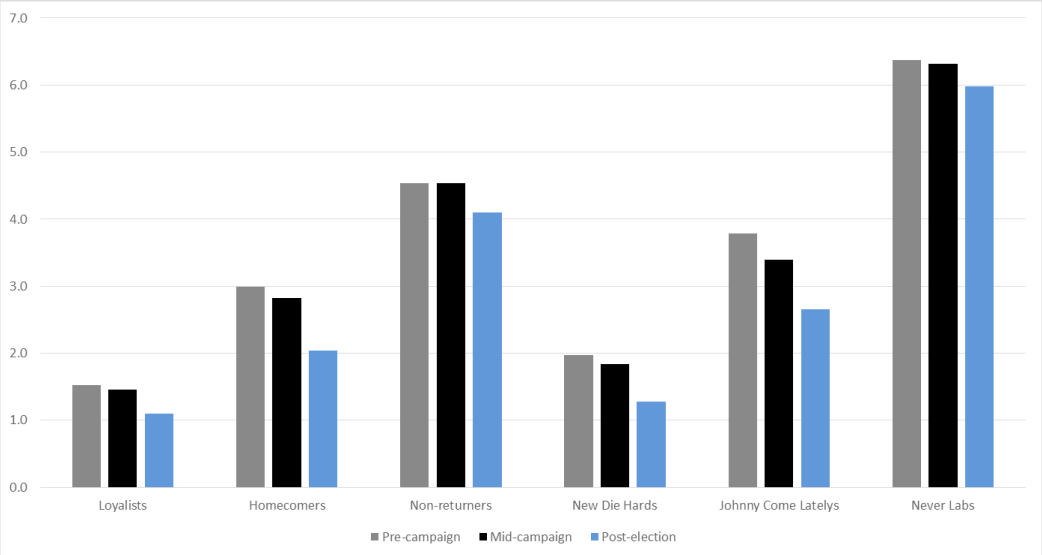
n=18,929, 19,043 and 19,203

Figure 33: Average scores for how much respondents said they liked Jeremy Corbyn (0-10 scale), by group and campaign wave



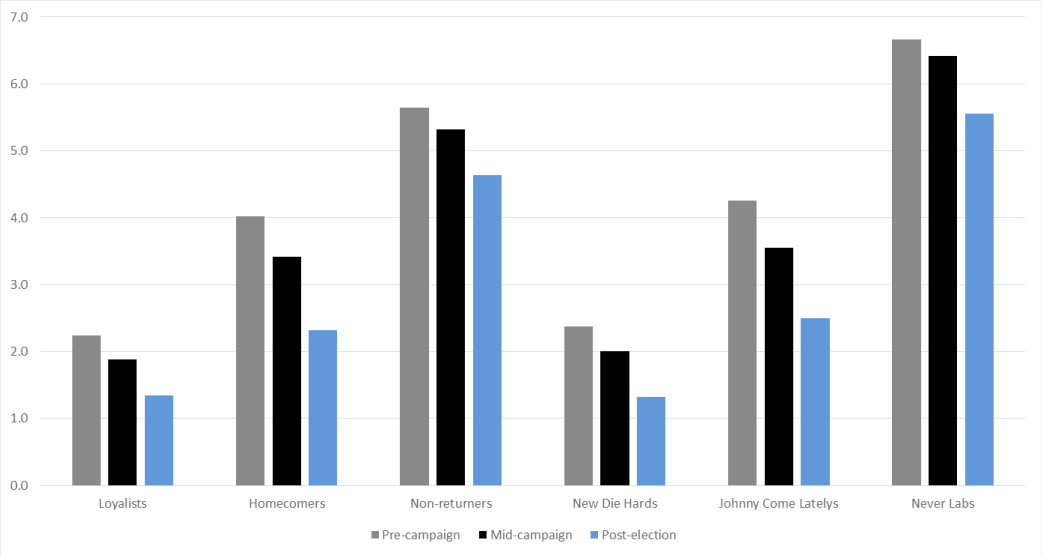
n=18,819, 18.932 and 19,148

Figure 34: Average scores for how much respondents said they liked the Conservative party (0-10 scale), by group and campaign wave



n=18,955, 19,065 and 19,197

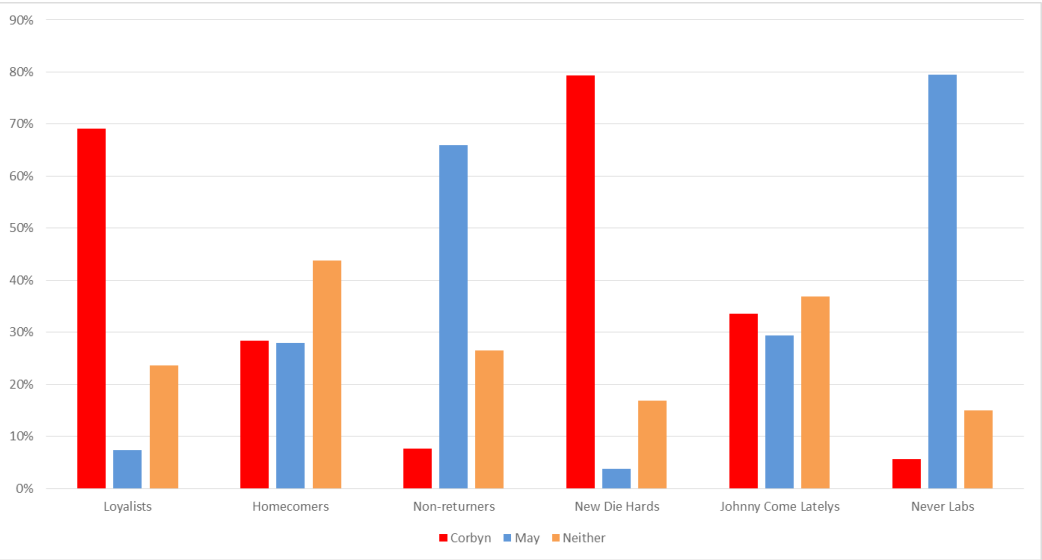
Figure 35: Average scores for how much respondents said they liked Theresa May (0-10 scale), by group and campaign wave



n=18,935, 19,038 and 19,180

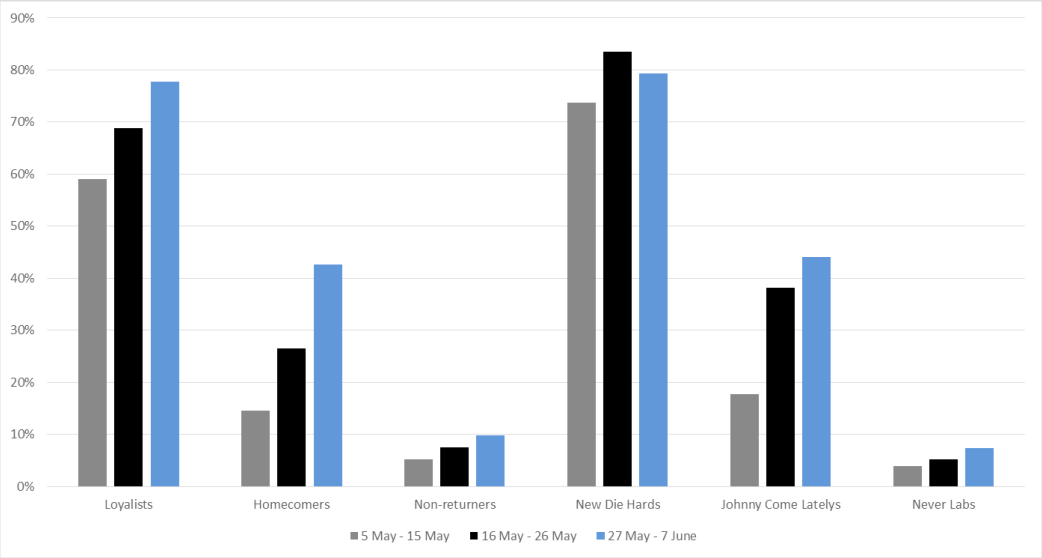
Those that switched to Labour during the campaign were not overwhelmingly in favour of a Corbyn premiership during the campaign (see figure 36). As with his likeability ratings, when we divide responses into campaign thirds, we can see a marked improvement for Corbyn and deterioration for May, particularly among the late-switching Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys that gave Labour such a surprisingly narrow defeat on June 8th (see figures 37 and 38). However, once again, the Labour leader's improvements are from an extremely low base: even by the last few days of the campaign, less than half wanted a Corbyn premiership.

Figure 36: Preferred prime minister, by group



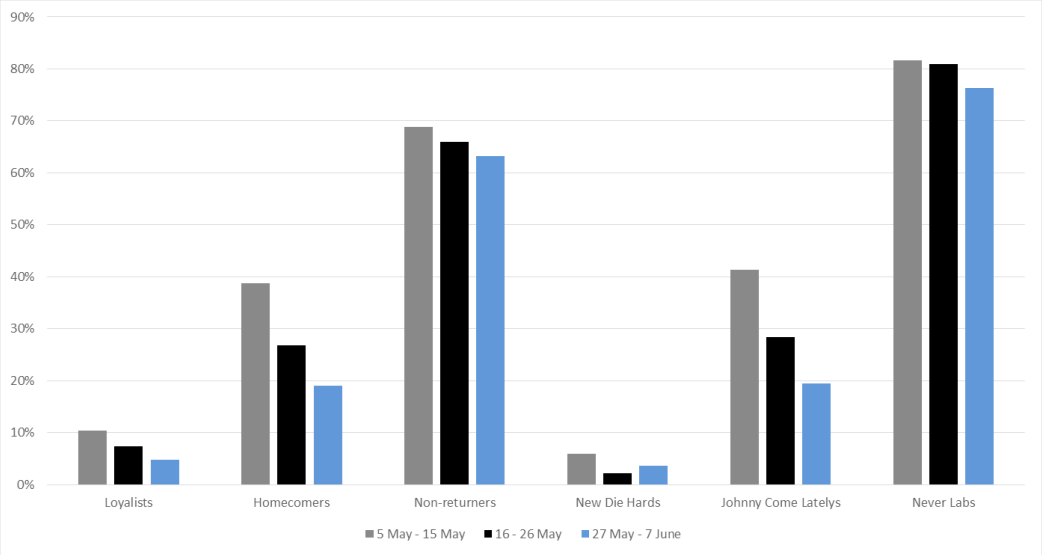
Mid-campaign wave (n=18,264)

Figure 37: Per cent preferring a Corbyn premiership, by group and date of fieldwork



Mid-campaign wave (n=5,926, 5,818 and 6,520)

Figure 38: Per cent preferring a May premiership, by group and date of fieldwork (mid-campaign wave)



Mid-campaign wave (n=5,926, 5,818 and 6,520)

This analysis demonstrates that the campaign had an important effect on voters' perceptions of the parties and their leaders, and that these effects were particularly strong among those who switched to Labour during the campaign. However, it would be a mistake to conclude that these voters switched due to a strong enthusiasm for Corbyn. Improvements in popularity were from a very low base, and only a minority of switchers preferred a Corbyn premiership. Reverse causation is also possible – some respondents may have reported more positive views of Corbyn and more negative perceptions of May because they had decided to vote for Labour.

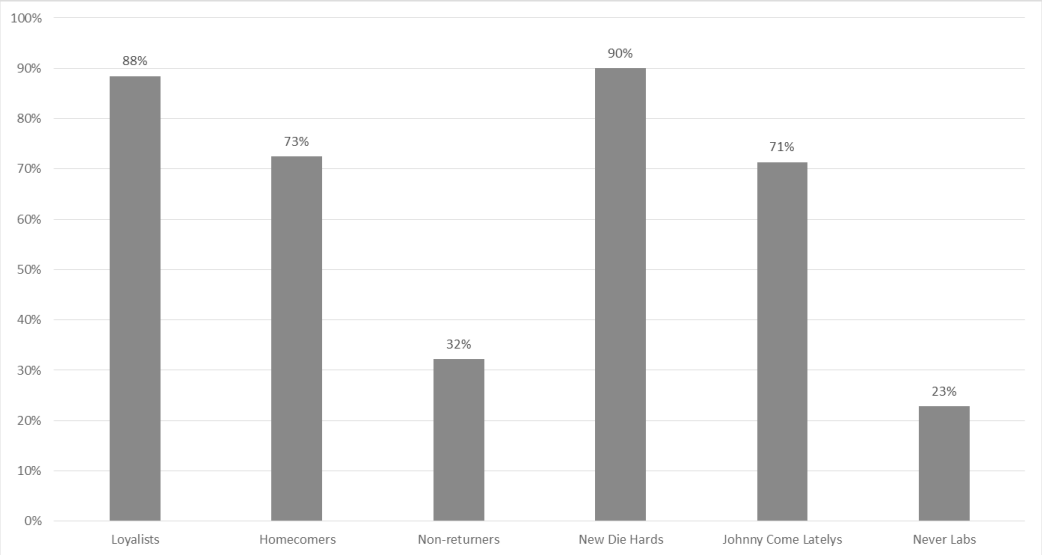
However, it seems likely that these improvements did help Labour's fortunes to some extent. Alongside their enthusiastic, 'die hard' supporters, Labour and Corbyn appear to have succeeded in becoming the 'lesser evil' to enough people to deny the Conservatives a majority, especially after the wheels began to come off the Conservative campaign following their disastrous manifesto launch, the 'dementia tax' controversy, and Theresa May's faltering media performances.

A competent Corbyn?

Elections are not just about likeability. In the past Labour has often been seen as the 'nicer', more caring of the two main parties, with the Conservatives often seeking to shake off their reputation as the 'nasty party'. However, Labour has often struggled to win elections because of concerns over its competence while the Tories are seen as the 'natural party of government'.

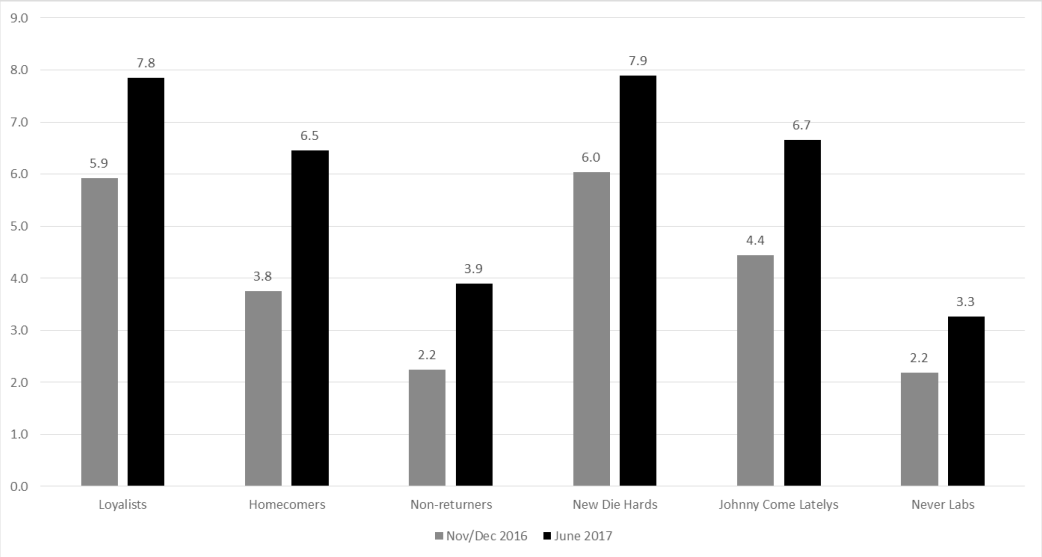
BES respondents were asked directly about their perception of Corbyn's competence, both in the survey wave conducted at the end of 2016, and after the election. In the latter (figure 39), there is a clear pattern of more Labour voters, and particularly more staunchly Labour voters, most likely to give Corbyn a positive competence rating. We can also see (figure 40) that the biggest changes in that time were among those who switched during the campaign: the Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys.

Figure 39: Per cent of respondents who gave Corbyn a positive (6-10) competence score, by group



Post-election wave (n=9,270)

Figure 40: Mean Corbyn competence score (0-10 scale), by group and survey wave



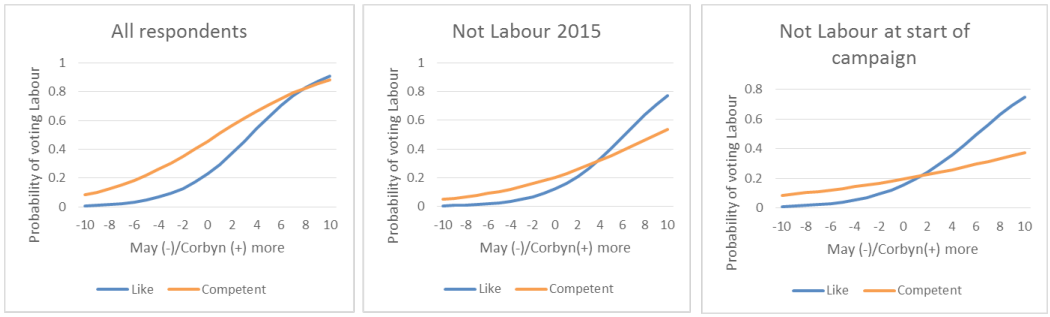
n=3,383 and 9,270

So how much did the leader's perceived competence matter relative to his likeability in driving votes to or from Labour? This is an important question for future political strategy. If likeability matters more, then there is potentially more scope to pursue a bold agenda full of popular policies even if it is difficult to show they are feasible, or that the sums add up. An attack on the Tories as the 'nasty party' that has the wrong priorities is likely to be more effective than one that shows them to be incompetent. If competence is more important, sticking to valence issues that the party and its leadership is perceived to be more competent on (e.g. NHS spending for Labour) may be particularly fruitful.

In figure 41, I compare two logistic regression models which predict the likelihood of a respondent voting Labour in 2017 based on how much they liked Corbyn relative to Theresa May, and how much more or less competent than May he was perceived to be, controlling for age, education, and the respondent's position on left-right and liberal-authoritarian scales of ideology. The three graphs presented are the results for the two models among: all respondents; just those who did not vote Labour in 2015; and just those who were not Labour at the start of the campaign.

In each case, the more liked and perceived to be competent Corbyn is compared to May, the more likely a respondent is to vote Labour. Among those who did not vote Labour in 2015 and those who were not planning to vote Labour at the start of the campaign, we can see that liking Corbyn more than May is a much stronger indicator of a switch to Labour than perceiving Corbyn to be more competent.

Figure 41: Predicted probability of voting Labour, by how much respondent likes Corbyn compared to May and relative perceptions of competence (-10 = May a lot more, +10 = Corbyn a lot more)



Multivariate logistic regression analysis, post-election wave. Controls for position on left-right and authoritarian-liberal scales, age and education. Sample sizes range from 2,042 to 18,182.

The fact that likeability mattered more than competence for Labour switchers suggests that Corbyn's approach – offering a radical set of policies (e.g. nationalisation, abolishing tuition fees, rent caps) that were individually popular – paid off in convincing some voters to switch to the party. A more cautious, Miliband-style strategy, such as focusing on the NHS but matching the Conservatives in other areas such as overall public spending may not have had the same electoral pay off in such a political environment.

The 'Joan Ryan' effect

During the campaign, the idea that people might vote Labour despite not wanting or expecting them to win gained traction. Many Labour activists hoped that – backed by the party's dire poll ratings in the early part of May – they could convince voters on the doorstep to vote Labour to secure a strong opposition, or to avoid handing Theresa May a strong mandate for a hard Brexit or for further austerity, rather than to achieve a Labour government.

For example, the Labour MP Joan Ryan, who had regained her Enfield North seat just two years earlier, circulated a letter to residents during the campaign arguing that because 'no one thinks Theresa May will not be Prime Minister', that whatever their 'misgivings about the Labour leadership', they should vote for her as their local MP and help avert the Tory landslide that might enable May to push through further austerity and privatisation.[14]

So, was there a widespread trend of people voting Labour because they expected them to lose?

Using logistic regression analysis of BES data, Jon Mellon and Chris Prosser have tried to answer this question.[15] They attempt to quantify the effect of an individual thinking Labour was likely to win a majority, and the effect of a change in expectations during the campaign, on the likelihood of voting Labour, controlling for social attitudes, perceptions of the Labour party, education and age. Overall they found that, controlling for those other factors, respondents were more likely to vote Labour the more likely they thought the party was to win. Additionally, those who initially didn't plan to vote Labour were more likely to switch to the party during the campaign if they thought Labour would win, and if their expectations of a Labour victory improved.

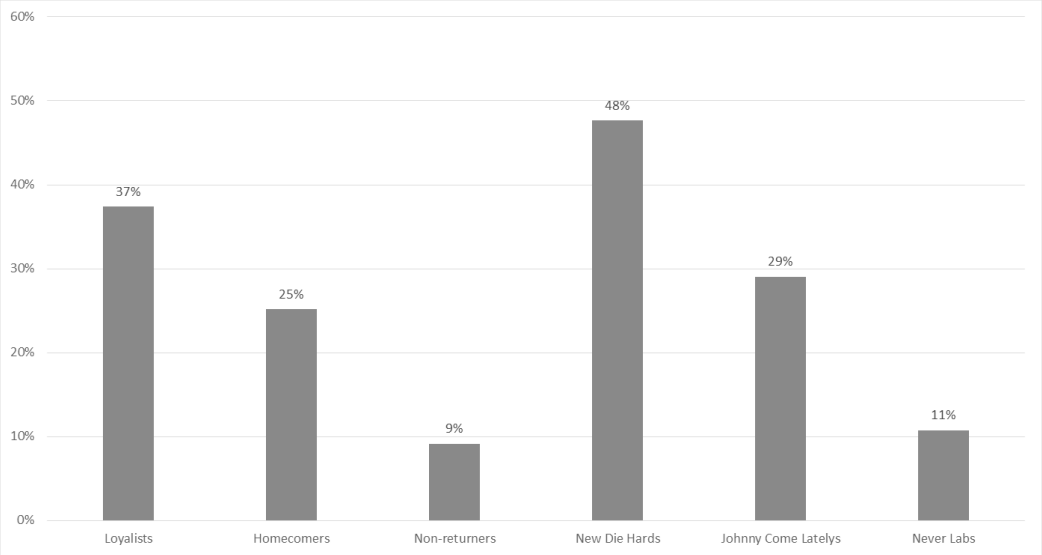
In line with Mellon and Prosser's findings, we can see from our groups in figure 42 that Labour-inclined voters were generally more likely to think Labour would win a majority. However, this is from a generally low base, and among none of the groups did a majority predict a Labour victory.

14. Elgot, J (2017). Back me despite Corbyn as May will win, Labour candidate urges voters. https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2017/jun/02/back-me-despite-corbyn-as-may-will-win-labour-mp-urges-voters

15. Mellon, J. & Prosser, P. (2017). Strategic support and electoral expectations: did voters choose Brexit and Corbyn because they expected them to lose? https://ssrn.com/abstract=3012739 or http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3012739

Among those that switched to Labour during the campaign, less than a third expected Labour to win a majority.

Figure 42: Per cent expecting a Labour majority after the 2017 election



Mid-campaign wave (n=17,690)

The findings in this chapter suggest that improvements in Labour's and Corbyn's favourability relative to May and the Conservatives did play a role in driving Labour's comeback. Moreover, there is no evidence of large swathes of voters switching to Labour because they thought the party wouldn't win. On the other hand, those who did switch started off with negative perceptions of Labour and its leader, and the shift in attitudes that paved the way for the comeback was more from poor to mediocre, than towards great enthusiasm for a Labour government with Corbyn at the helm. The key question for Labour is whether its 2017 performance can be repeated or improved upon in a scenario where many more voters expect it to win.

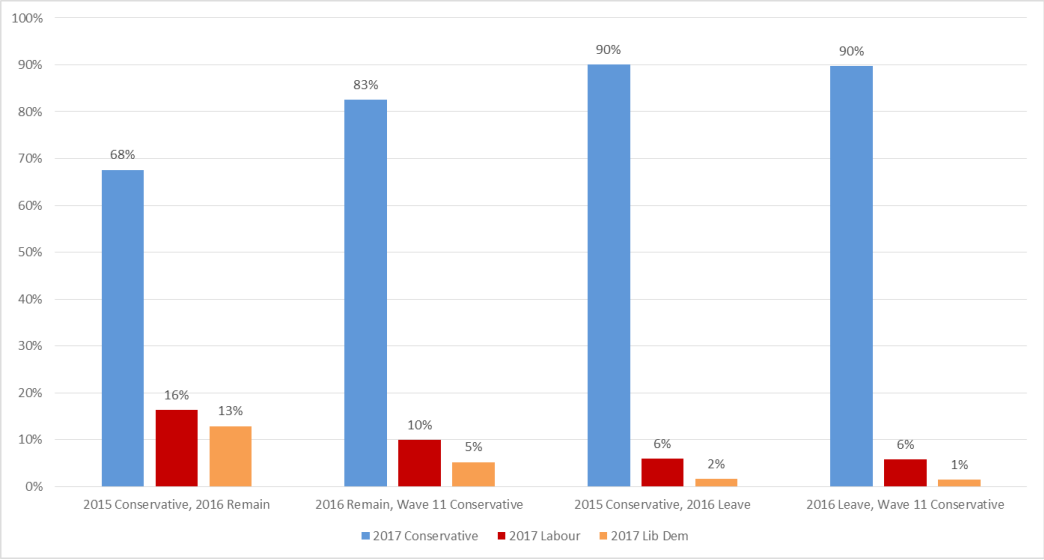
5. Was it the Remainers wot 'won it' for Labour?

Another, related, pervasive narrative that has been used to explain Labour's campaign comeback is that it was largely driven by concerns over Brexit, and that the party was saved by hordes of Remainers joining the Labour fold. Proponents believe that a significant chunk of Conservative Remainers switched to Labour, along with others who were uncomfortable with the idea of Corbyn as prime minister, but were determined to take a stand against Theresa May's hard Brexit vision. Typically socially liberal, these voters might initially have flirted with the idea of voting Liberal Democrat, but were put off, among other things, by Tim Farron's socially conservative personal beliefs. As the Lib Dem campaign failed to gain any traction, these voters ended up opting for Labour as the best way of stopping the Tories.

Remainer rage?

At first glance, this seems plausible. Figure 43 shows that of those who voted Conservative in 2015 and Remain in 2016, 16 per cent switched to Labour in 2017. Of Remainers who intended to vote Conservative at the start of the campaign (wave 11), 10 per cent had switched to Labour by polling day. However, figure 43 shows there was also a small movement among previously Conservative Leavers towards Labour too (6 per cent), which helped to counteract substantial movement to the Conservatives among 2015 Labour Leavers (figure 44).[16]

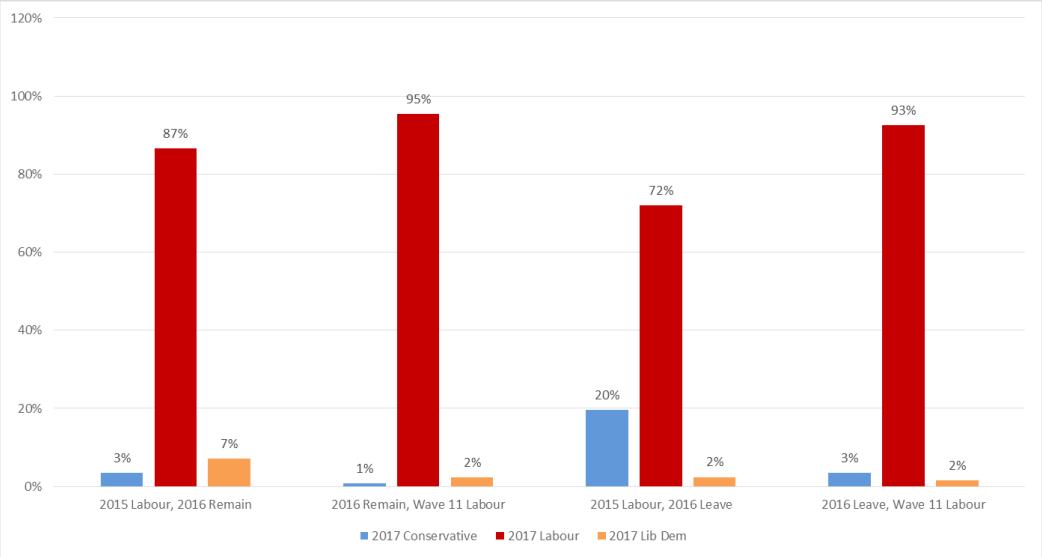
Figure 43: 2017 vote by past votes and pre-campaign (wave 11) voting intention



'Don't knows' included in percentages (n=11,711 and 12,459)

16. Note that in the BES dataset, after removing missing past voting data, the (wave 11-13) weighted sample gives the Conservatives a 4-point lead in the 2017 election, rather than the real 2-point lead.

Figure 44: 2017 vote by past votes and pre-campaign (wave 11) voting intention

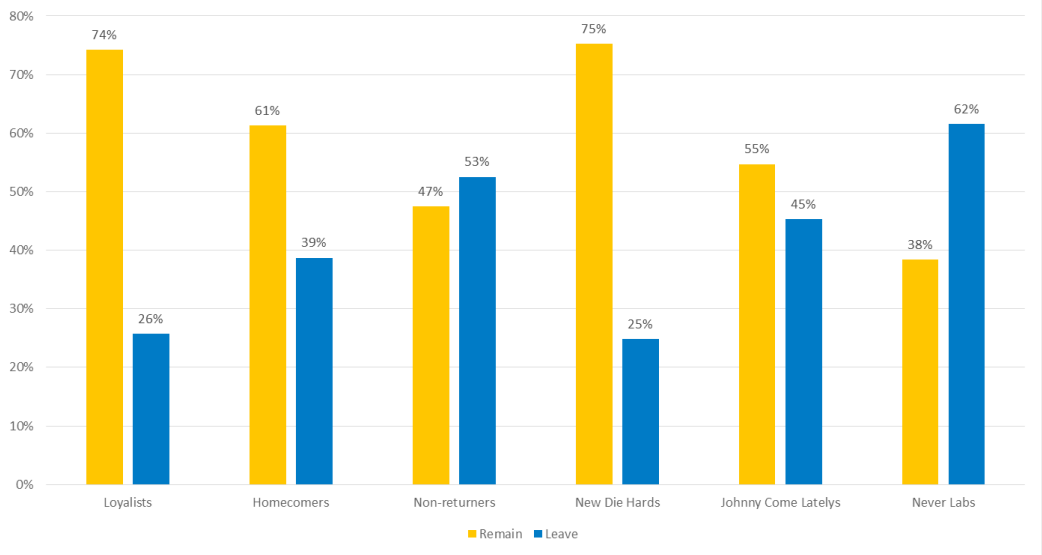


'Don't knows' included in percentages (n=11,711 and 12,459)

However, as we know, the 2017 election was not just about direct swings between Labour and the Conservatives. 1.5 million more voters turned out than in 2015, many for the first time, and there were important swings away from UKIP, the Greens and the SNP, and both from and to the Liberal Democrats.

If we return to our groups, we can see in figure 45 that, compared to Labour's new core (the Labour Loyalists and the New Die Hards), those who switched to Labour during the campaign (the Homecomers and the Johnny Come Latelys) were not overwhelmingly Remainers. In fact, among the Johnny Come Latelys – those who didn't vote Labour at the previous election but were attracted to the party during the 2017 campaign, 45 per cent voted to leave in 2016.

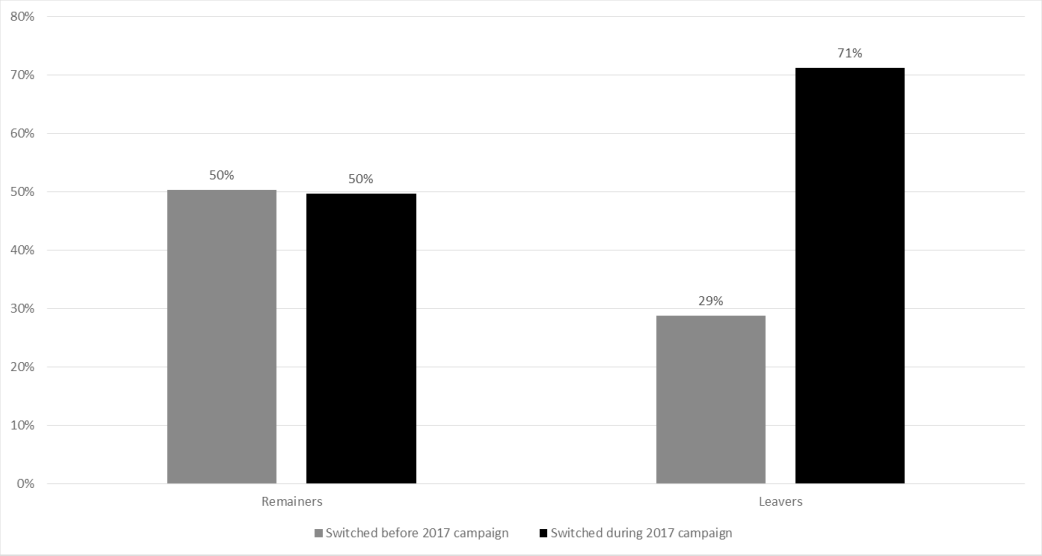
Figure 45: 2016 EU referendum vote, by groups



n=19,041

That the New Die Hards group is so pro-Remain shows that Labour did indeed win over a new group of pro-European voters at the 2017 election, compared to 2015. However, much of this shift occurred before the start of the campaign, and the late swing to Labour was not overwhelmingly pro-Remain. In fact, of all the Leavers that switched to Labour between 2015 and 2017, 71 per cent did so during the campaign, compared to 50 per cent of Remainers (figure 46).

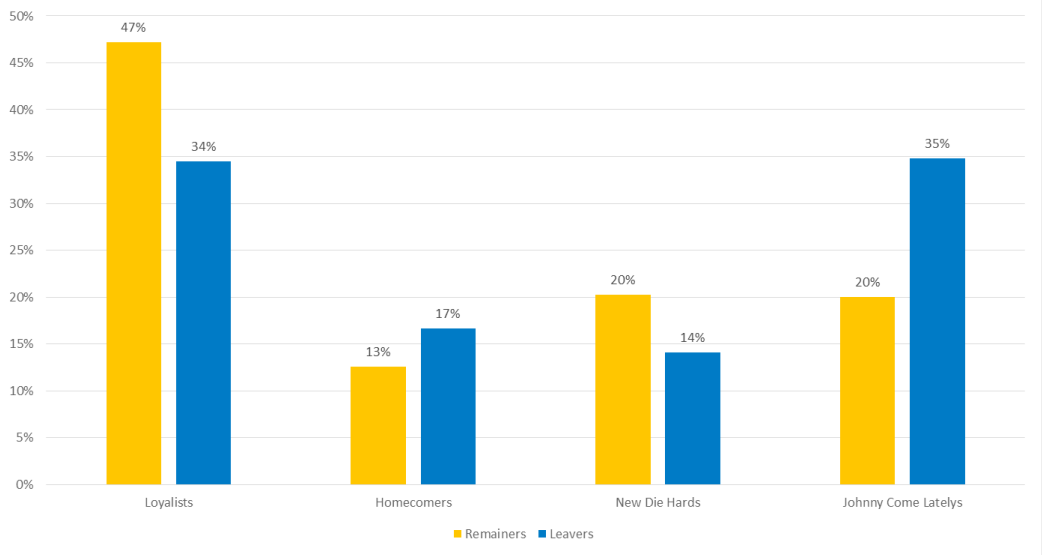
Figure 46: 2017 Labour voters who did not vote Labour in 2015, by timing of switch to Labour



n=2,620

Of all 2017 Labour-voting Remainers (including both those who did and did not vote Labour in 2015), 67 per cent were with the party at the start of the campaign (Loyalists and New Die hards), compared to just 48 per cent of Labour-voting Leavers (see figure 47).

Figure 47: Per cent of (2017) Labour Remainers and Labour Leavers in each group



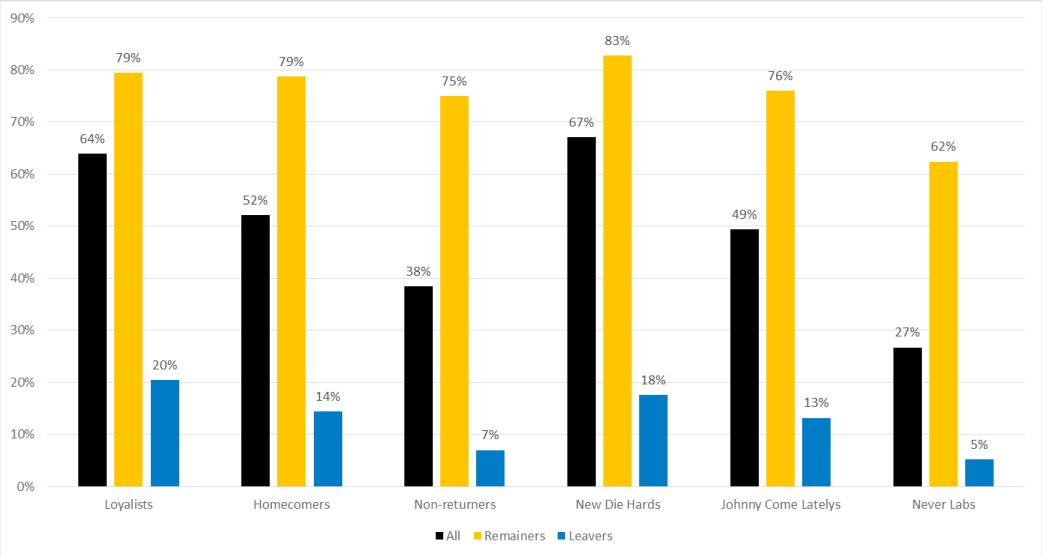
n=19,041

Labour's stronger performance compared to 2015 was driven to some extent by Remainers switching to the party. However, it does not appear to account for the campaign comeback specifically.

Stop Brexit?

Similarly, there is no evidence of a particular desire to reverse Brexit through a second referendum, or to ensure a 'softer' version of it among the late Labour switchers. Figure 48 confirms that Remainers in all the groups are overwhelmingly in favour of a second referendum, while very few leavers are. The differences in overall support for a second referendum between the five groups that were with Labour at some point largely just reflect the differences in the leave-remain cleavage. Less than half of the Johnny Come Latelys want a second referendum, compared to two thirds of Loyalists and New Die Hards.

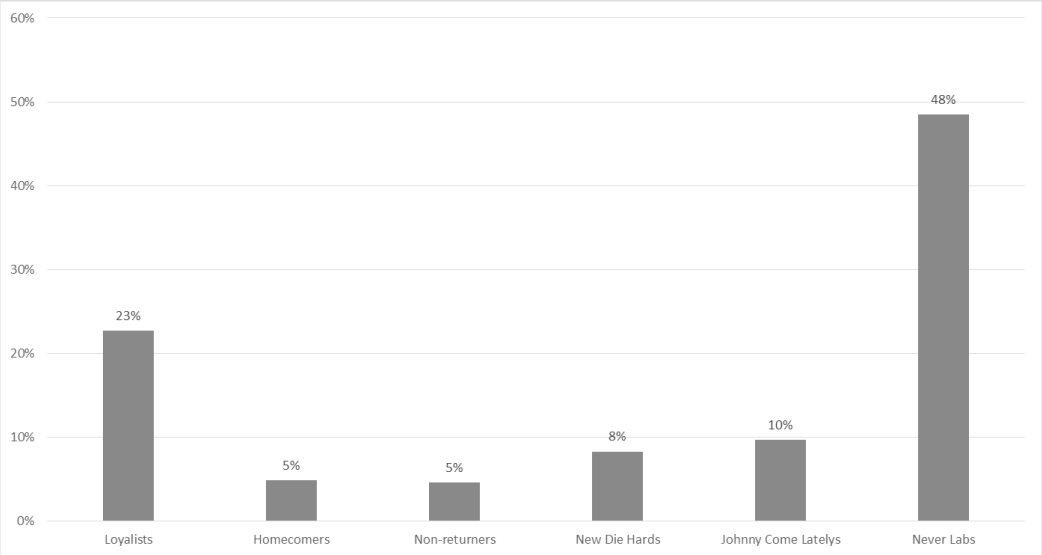
Figure 48: support for a second referendum on EU membership



Post-election wave (n=18,264)

Of those who changed their mind during the campaign in favour of a second referendum having previously been opposed, less than half voted Labour, and most of those that did were already planning to do so at the start of the campaign (see figure 49). Just 5 per cent of those who changed their minds on a second referendum were in the Homecomer camp and 10 per cent in the Johnny Come Lately camp – roughly the same as in the survey sample as a whole.

Figure 49: Percentage of those who switched to favouring a second referendum during the election campaign falling into each group

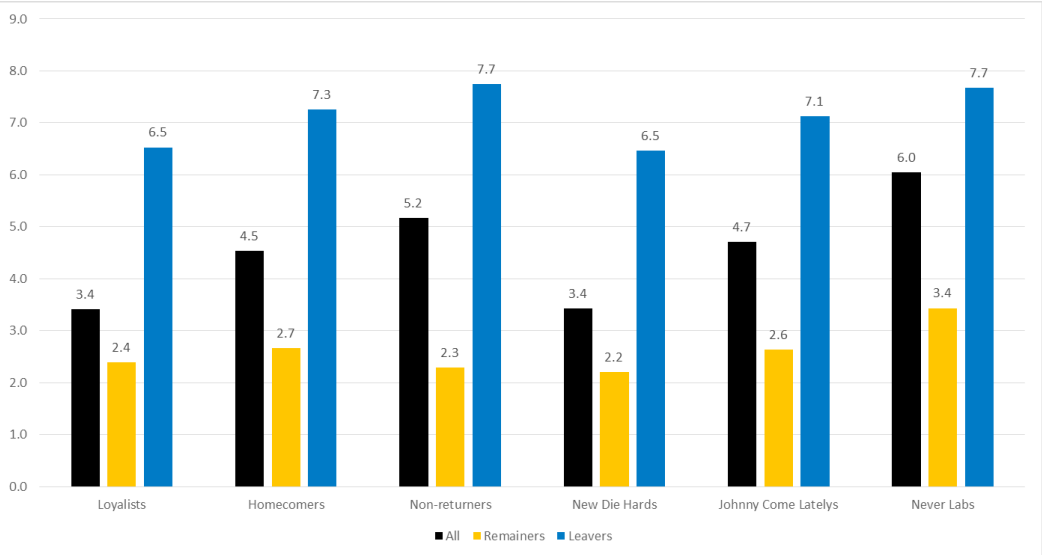


Pre- and post-election waves (n=18,057)

Soft Brexit?

When asked to place on a scale how much they would like to prioritise access to the single market versus control over immigration, the Johnny Come Latelys put themselves roughly in the middle, and more in favour of a hard Brexit than other Labour-voting groups. Similarly, among the Homecomers – who broke 61-39 for Remain at the referendum – there was no particularly strong desire for a second referendum or a soft Brexit (see figure 50).

Figure 50: Brexit priority on a 0-10 scale (0 = access to single market, 10 = control immigration)



Post-election wave (n=17,888)

Counter to the dominant narrative that Labour was saved from disaster by hard Remainers, these findings suggest that the late swing to Labour was not driven particularly by a desire for a soft Brexit, by Remainers, nor were the Remainers that switched to them particularly in favour of reversing Brexit.

While much has been made of the 'post-Brexit divide' in British politics, in some ways it is surprising how little party support has coalesced along these lines. 68 per cent of Remainers who had voted Conservative in 2015 did so again in 2017, and likewise 72 per cent of leavers that had voted Labour in 2015 stuck to their guns. In part, this was because with both main parties apparently backing Brexit, the issue appeared to many voters to be settled. It was an odd truce in the 'culture war' that could well ramp back up as the full consequences of Brexit are realised over the course of this parliament. With so many ardent leavers still in the Labour column and so many remainers still among the Non-returners and the Never Labs, depending on the date and circumstances of the next ballot, we could still get the 'Brexit election' Theresa May had been hoping for back in April 2017.

6. Conclusion

Labour's shock campaign comeback cannot be put down to any single factor. It was not all about stopping Brexit or ensuring a soft Brexit. It was not all about enthusiasm for Corbyn, nor were most Labour supporters voting for the party in spite of him, safe in the knowledge that he wouldn't win. New young voters made up an important part of the overall Labour vote, but the late swing was not particularly youth-heavy.

In very simple terms, if we imagine Labour's support as, crudely, being split across two camps – one older, less left-wing, less socially liberal and more pro-Brexit, and the other younger, more left-wing, socially liberal, and pro-European – the former appears to have been more swayed during the campaign, while the latter tended to already be in the Labour camp.

The larger group of in-campaign switchers, the Johnny Come Latelys, were the least leftwing, least vehemently anti-austerity and most anti-immigration and pro-Brexit of all the Labour-voting groups. While of course no individual parliamentary seat is as homogenous as they are often characterised to be, we can conclude from this that the late swing to Labour probably did more to save seats like Ashfield, Bishop Auckland and Dudley North that almost fell to the Conservatives than it did to gain the likes of Battersea and Brighton Kemptown.

In conducting this analysis, I hope to have set a framework for future discussions over how Labour can go about building further support to secure a majority.

First, will those who drove Labour's campaign comeback stick around for the long term? The Homecomers and Johnny Come Latelys remained less leftwing than Labour throughout the campaign, and remain sceptical of a Corbyn premiership, despite substantial improvements. The vast majority voted Labour with the expectation that it wouldn't win (though there is no evidence of causation), and this is unlikely to be the case at the next election.

A fifth of these late Labour switchers were intending to vote for the Liberal Democrats at the start of the campaign. It is possible many of these voters were put off by the Lib Dems' own lacklustre campaign, or the controversy over Tim Farron's personal views on same sex relationships (the Johnny Come Latelys were more liberal than average on equality for gay and lesbian people). Could they be persuaded to return to the Lib Dem fold if that party can become relevant again, if the idea of a Corbyn premiership remains as unpalatable to these voters? Moreover, 88 per cent of those who switched from the Lib Dems to Labour during the campaign voted remain, and 82 per cent are in favour of a second referendum. The Johnny Come Latelys as a whole were not overwhelmingly pro-European, but some of the Lib Dem-inclined cohort of Johnny Come Latelys and Homecomers (which makes up 8 per cent of the total Labour vote) may be at risk, particularly if Labour ends up failing to oppose the final Brexit deal when it is presented to parliament.

Second, can Labour retain the support of the Loyalists and, in particular, the New Die Hards? Given that they backed the party even at its lowest ebb at the start of the campaign we might think this is a given, but they should not be taken for granted. Overwhelmingly pro-European and supportive of Corbyn, it is unclear which of these two factors would prevail if Corbyn fails to move the party towards a more clearly soft Brexit position or to commit to a second referendum on the terms of the future relationship with the EU. Does the fact that the New Die Hards have been grabbed in their youth mean that they have formed an early habit of voting Labour that could last a lifetime, or is politics simply becoming more volatile? That they are the most socially liberal group means that many may be persuaded to stay should the Conservatives continue the 'culture war' they have

embarked on (e.g. raising the 'free speech on campus' issue, attacking the 'ban on straight white men' at Labour's recent equalities conference).

Finally, and perhaps this is the biggest challenge, can Labour win over the Non-returners and enough of the Never Labs to form a majority government? They are generally right of centre, and continued to perceive themselves well to the right of where they saw Labour, even by the end of the campaign. They are more convinced of the need to reduce the deficit than most, but the overwhelming majority are in favour of some tax rises to do so. A majority voted to leave the EU, and are less inclined towards a 'soft Brexit' than the other groups, which could make Labour's already delicate balancing act on Brexit even more tricky as time goes on.

These groups remained extremely sceptical of Corbyn and Labour throughout the campaign, with only the slightest improvements recorded. However, the improvements in perceptions of Corbyn among those who ultimately switched to Labour were from a very low base – from terrible to mediocre rather than anything particularly positive. This means that if the Tory government continues to lose popularity, a similar shift among the Never Labs and Non-returners might be enough to sway some of these voters.

Ultimately, Labour's comeback shows that campaigns matter, and even the most expert political minds can get their predictions badly wrong. Whatever happens to either party's fortunes over the next four years could be wiped out in a matter of days. A botched manifesto launch, a high-profile gaffe or an unforeseen event could make all the difference. It should warn all party leaders, including Corbyn, who could well go into the next campaign as the clear favourite, of the danger of hubris.