**Brexit: The Democratic Expression of the Class Struggle**

Geoffrey Evans

Nuffield College, Oxford

The EU Referendum has transformed the landscape of Britain’s relations with the European Union and the world beyond. It also provides a fortuitously timely event through which the implications of the suppression of political choice and its impact on class politics in general and working class political expression in particular are illustrated. Though there has been post-Referendum discussion of Brexit and its creation of a divided society, this is misplaced. Britain is not now more divided than hitherto, these divisions have been in place for a long time. The key difference is that they have now been given the chance to be expressed through the presentation to the electorate of a clear choice between two competing alternatives. Most importantly, for the first time since the political transformation of the Labour Party from representing the interests of the working class to a centrist party of the new middle class, this choice has allowed the voice of the working class to be expressed effectively through the act of voting.

How has this happened? The key architect of Brexit is arguably the same individual who played such a pivotal role in marginalising the working class by moving Labour politics onto a common ground with parties of the liberal, centre-right: Tony Blair. From the mid-1990s onwards ‘New Labour’ engineered the political marginalization of the working class, as well as the demise of class voting as usually conceived, by rebranding Labour as a centrist party and in consequence restricting the electoral choices available to voters. As a result, class divisions in mainstream party voting declined and working class non-voting increased (Evans and Tilley 2012, 2016). Restricting the representation of the working class in electoral politics did not change working class preferences, it merely left them without a viable electoral outlet. Blair’s consequent decision to enable immediate immigration to Britain from the new accession countries of Eastern Europe in 2004 provided the conditions under which some of those preferences became salient. No other major ‘destination country’ in the EU allowed this option. They maintained the decision to have a five-year period of exclusion prior to accepting immigrants from accession countries. As a result, Britain received a historically unique inflow of migrants from the EU accession countries. This in turn led to a tightening link between concern about immigration and negative attitudes towards the EU.[[1]](#footnote-1)

The significance of this tightening bond becomes even more apparent when one considers that the only fact that could not be disputed in the fractious campaign leading to the EU Referendum vote was the EU’s commitment to freedom of movement. Staying in the EU would mean that Britain could not exclude EU citizens from migrating to Britain - however many, on whatever grounds, regardless of any level of language or other skills. This was reinforced by the EU itself when David Cameron attempted to arrange a change of policy on aspects of free movement that might well have facilitated victory in the referendum. All other issues were disputed, contentious, at times over-played, but not this basic fact about immigration. Unsurprisingly, therefore, immigration was a key factor for Leave voters.[[2]](#footnote-2) As Evans and Tilley (2016) show, opposition to immigration divides working class and less highly educated citizens from others in our society to greater degree even than the old core, class issues of economic redistribution (and has done for some time - Evans 2000). It should not surprise us therefore to find pronounced class and educational divisions in EU Referendum voting.

The clear message to be taken from the EU Referendum is that when people in different class and educational groups are given choices, they express their different preferences by choosing different outcomes. Removing the top down suppression of social divisions in preferences by ideologically convergent parties allows those class divisions to be expressed and to shape political outcomes in the most fundamental way.

But even when the demographic divisions in vote choice were so clear why did the result not go in favour of Remain? After all, one of the factors underlying the move to the centre by Labour in recent decades is the idea that the increasingly highly educated and new middle class composition of the electorate renders working class politics electorally non-viable. To understand the referendum outcome, however, we need to consider the extent to which changes in educational qualifications have actually altered the electoral landscape, as well as the impact of offering a preference-consistent choice on the political participation of alienated working class and less highly educated voters.

*Education, education, and education?*

Education is more strongly associated with support for Remain than any other social characteristic. The expansion of higher education has been the touchstone for the up-skilling of modern Britain before and since Blair’s famous three-part sound-bite in 1997. Yet Labour and many others have probably failed to appreciate its still limited reach in terms of the demographic composition of the population. Most people do not have degrees – even amongst the young, and far less so among the old: the increasing likelihood of voting for Leave among older cohorts is in part a reflection of their differing educational composition. Given that the composition of the electorate is increasingly weighted to older age cohorts – through longer life expectancy and the tendency to have fewer children in recent decades – the demographic impact of the relatively recent upsurge in participation in higher education will take many years to reach a tipping point.

But it is not only the demographic penetration of educational qualifications that weakens its impact on the distribution of attitudes on issues such as immigration and the EU. The impact of educational qualifications on having a sense of being middle class has been weakening as participation in higher education has been expanding. More people are receiving higher education, but this is not associated with having a middle class identity to the same extent as it once was. There are far more people who perceive themselves to be working class (around 60% of the electorate - Evans and Mellon 2016) than are typically allocated to such a position on the basis of their occasional class). Middle class people who see themselves as working class are far more like the working class in their attitudes to immigration and social issues than are those who perceive themselves to be middle class. This might reflect the diminishing social distinctiveness of having a degree. Also, however, it might reflect the diversifying nature of the composition and experience of higher education – analyses of recent British Election Study panel surveys indicate that people who have attended newer universities associated with the expansion of higher education are more likely to be pro-Leave than those who have attended long-established institutions. In short, it seems more than likely that New Labour and the Conservatives have over-estimated how well-established the liberal consensus on social issues – immigration in particular – has become. There is still a long way to go before the educational composition of the electorate is at a level that mirrors the values expressed by the main political parties. Moreover, expanding higher education may well dilute its consequences for these liberal values; a liberal consensus might never be attained.

*Reversing the spiral of exclusion?*

Evans and Tilley’s (2015, 2017) argument about the political exclusion of the working class focuses on the decline in their representation by the main political parties and the consequent spiral of working class electoral exclusion as Britain becomes ever more like the USA, where the electoral participation of the poor and less highly educated has been markedly lower than that of others for decades (Leighly and Nagler 2014). But what happens when class-based preferences are represented on a level playing field – where choices are clear-cut and relevant to class differences in preferences? Examination of turnout from areas with differing levels of class and education indicates that the participation of the working class increased between 2015 and 2016. Moreover, it did so to a greater degree than the participation of the middle class. These changes in levels of turnout are not massive, but their direction is exceptional: low participation areas increase their turnout to a greater degree than high participation areas. Following the nadir of electoral participation in the 2001 General Election, increases in participation have been far more pronounced among the middle class and the educated than among the working class and less highly educated – hence the dramatically growing class cleavage in participation. The disproportionate increases in participation between 2015 and 2016 in the working class, poor, and less highly-educated areas of the country mark an exceptional reversal of this trend.

When people are given a choice, and a choice that is not strongly linked with allegiances to political parties they can re-engage. Brexit occurred because the adoption of direct democracy with a clear choice did not enable parties to restrict the supply of policy preferences favoured by the working class and those with lower levels of education. When the chance was presented these groups were able to ‘bite back’ and, for the first time for many years, shape an important political outcome.

Brexit clearly confounds sociological, bottom-up, accounts of political change that assume that the influence of social structural divisions on politics is in terminal decline. Whether the political class will allow the voters such expression in the foreseeable future remains to be seen. The significant divisions in preferences between the advantaged and disadvantaged in British society, combined with the sluggish demographics of higher educational expansion, and the widely held sense of being working class that persists in part because of the increasingly unequal nature of British society, suggest that this strategy will be used sparingly: it is simply too risky for the political elite to allow the voters to have a direct say. Thus despite the significant expression of working class voice embodied in the Brexit result, their spiral of exclusion from British electoral politics is likely to continue. For the time being however, Brexit stands as arguably a democratic success story: the victory of groups used to exclusion from the political mainstream could serve to counteract their increasingly weakened faith in that system. For the others, the middle class and educated liberals who mirror the values of the main political parties, it is a valuable lesson in the significance of ‘loser’s consent’ for the legitimacy of democratic politics.

**References**

## Evans G. 2000. ‘The Working Class and New Labour: A parting of the ways?’ *British Social Attitudes, the 17th Report: Focusing on Diversity*. London: Sage, 51-69.

## Evans G. 2016. ‘The People are Perceptive. Immigration and the EU’, in P. Cowley and R. Ford, eds. *More Sex, Lies, and the Ballot Box.* Biteback Publishing, London.

## Evans, G and Mellon, J. 2016. ‘Identity, Awareness and Political Attitudes: why are we still working class?’, *British Social Attitudes*, 33, 1-19.

## Evans, G. and Tilley, J. 2012. ‘The Depoliticization of Inequality and Redistribution: Explaining the Decline of Class Voting’, *The Journal of Politics*, 74: 963-976.

## Evans G and Tilley J. 2015. The New class war: excluding the working class in 21st century Britain, *Juncture*, 21(4): 265-71.

## Evans G. and Tilley J. 2016. *The New Class Politics in Britain: The Political exclusion of the Working Class*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

## Leighley, J.E. and Nagler, J. 2014. *Who Votes Now?: Demographics, Issues, Inequality, and Turnout in the United States*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

1. Analysis of the relationship between immigration rates from different origins, attitudes towards immigration and month-on-month changes in the strength of the relationship between concern about immigration and attitudes towards the EU shows how concern about immigration from the EU evolved to become a key influence on attitudes towards it. There was only a moderate relationship between the two in 2004 when EU immigration from accession states was minimal, but over time the correlation increased in line with the flow of EU immigrants, their growing presence, and their increasing relative prominence in the public’s mind as other forms of immigration declined following the Coalition government’s attempt to reduce net immigration to less than 100,000 per annum, primarily by targeting immigration from other areas of the world (Evans 2016). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. This was demonstrated on election night by Green and Prosser’s ‘word cloud’ analysis of EU Referendum panel data from the British Election Study, which found that immigration dominated Leave voters’ reported reasons for their decision. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)