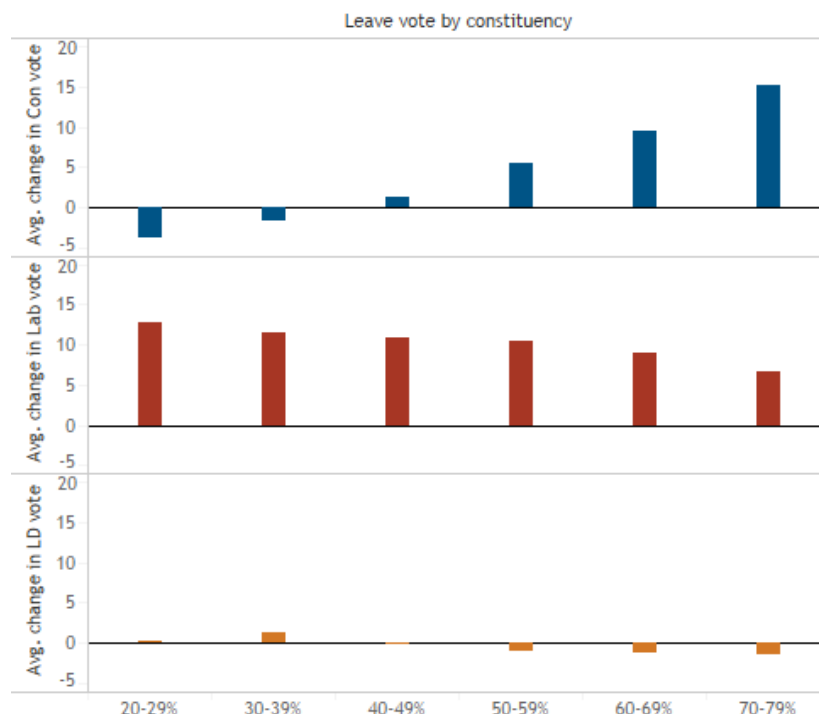# Was 2017 really a Brexit election?

Blog post by Senior Associate Roberto Robles, 13 June 2017

At the start of the election campaign, 2017 was meant to be the election that delivered Theresa May a strong mandate for Brexit as both Leave voters and pragmatic Remainers trusted her to get on with the job of implementing the referendum result. Meanwhile, Labour was supposed to be headed for a 1983-style defeat under the left-wing Jeremy Corbyn, losing Remain voters to the strongly pro-EU Liberal Democrats. The outcome of course was very different.

While the Conservative vote rose sharply in the strongest Leave areas, and fell in the most pro-Remain ones (notably in London, where the party had a terrible night), the story for Labour is much more mixed. While it had its strongest improvements in constituencies that voted Remain, the party's vote also rose significantly even in the most Leave areas, allowing the party to make gains in places like Battersea (69% Remain) as well as Peterborough (61% Leave). Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrats gained no anti-Brexit dividend and, despite modest seat gains, its support flatlined across both Remain and Leave areas.

How did Brexit impact the 2017 election result?

Leave vote by constituency

Source: British Election Study, Britain Elects (exc. Scotland)

Though the Labour and Conservatives positions on Brexit did not differ much in substance, they differed in their tone and approach. Leave voters were assuaged by the substance of Labour's message on immigration and ending free movement, while Remain voters saw the vote as an opportunity to reject the Conservatives' more nationalist and adversarial tone. According to post-

election polling by Lord Ashcroft, 33% of Labour voters were "enthusiastic about Brexit", 24% "accepting", and 43% "resistant" to it, demonstrating how the party's vote transcended the issue of Brexit. Labour's more nuanced position on Brexit allowed the party to appeal to a wider section of the electorate, while successfully shifting the conversation beyond Brexit to its core domestic issues. The same polling shows that while Brexit was the most important issue for 48% of Conservative voters, only 8% of Labour voters thought the same, focusing instead on issues like the NHS (33%) and spending cuts (11%), where the party had a clearer message. The Conservatives' pro-Brexit message allowed it to win over a majority of UKIP's former vote, but around a fifth switched directly to Labour, who also won over votes from the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and former non-voters.

2017 was a Brexit election, but largely for Conservative voters. For others, there were more factors at play, and the result shows the limits of an electoral strategy designed to appeal purely to Leave or Remain voters (particularly the latter). The referendum result has not fundamentally realigned British politics, and Labour has successfully straddled the Leave/Remain divide. The Conservative and Labour voter coalitions may still change as Britain leaves the European Union, but in 2017 most voters did not just have Brexit on their mind.