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The 2024 General Election and the Rise of Reform UK

OLIVER HEATH, CHRISTOPHER PROSSER, HUMPHREY SOUTHALL AND PAULA AUCOTT

Abstract

This article examines the social base of support for Reform UK. Did Nigel Farage's new party depend on the same types of 'left behind' voters who had previously backed UKIP? Do the results of the 2024 election suggest a hardening of the social divides that underpinned the rise of UKIP? Or has Britain's Eurosceptic and anti-immigration movement broadened its social appeal, making these lines of conflict between different social groups less distinctive? Using a newly created dataset mapping election results from 1997–2019 onto the constituency boundaries which came into force for the 2024 election, and individual level data from the British Election Study Internet Panel, the findings presented here reveal remarkable continuity between the places that previously backed UKIP and those which now back Reform. Even though the salience of Brexit as an electoral issue has faded, there is little to indicate that the divides that underpinned support for leaving the EU have dissipated.

Keywords: Reform UK, Brexit, general election, challenger parties, demographics

THE 2024 UK ELECTION delivered the largest swing against a sitting government ever recorded, seeing the Conservative vote share plummet by twenty percentage points as they were swept out of office, crashing to just 121 seats. However, even more unusually, the main beneficiary of the government's collapse in popularity was not the principal party of opposition—Labour, whose vote share increased by just two percentage points—but a challenger party. Under the banner of Reform UK, Nigel Farage's rebranded outfit secured more than 4 million votes—14.3 per cent of the total votes cast—winning five seats in the process.

In 2024, Reform performed better than any challenger party has ever performed. In 2019, the Brexit Party gained just 2 per cent of the vote. Meanwhile, the best general election performance for the UK Independence Party (UKIP) came in 2015 when the party finished in third place with 3.8 million votes and 12.6 per cent of votes cast, winning just one seat. Now, nearly ten years later and following the tumultuous impact of the Brexit referendum on the UK party system, there are once again around 4 million voters backing Farage. Many of these people are not the same, but to what extent do these two parties draw their support from the same types of people and places?

In this article, the social base of support for Reform is examined. Early work on the rise of UKIP emphasised the sort of 'left behind' places where support was greatest: smaller towns and rural areas with older, largely white working class populations with fewer educational qualifications.[1] In the 2016 EU referendum, many voters in these kinds of places turned out in large numbers to support leaving the EU.[2] Did Nigel Farage's new party depend on the same types of left behind voters who had previously backed UKIP? Do the results of the 2024 election suggest a hardening of the social divides that underpinned the rise of UKIP? Or has Britain's Eurosceptic and anti-immigration movement broadened its social

[1]R. Ford and M. Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right: Explaining Support for the Radical Right in Britain*, London, Routledge, 2014.

[2]M. Goodwin and O. Heath, 'The 2016 referendum, Brexit and the left behind: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 87, no. 3, 2016, pp. 323–332.

appeal, making these lines of conflict between different social groups less distinctive?

In the aftermath of Brexit, the Conservatives targeted former UKIP voters, first under Theresa May and then under Boris Johnson.[3] This strategy worked by cannibalising UKIP support, but came at a cost of more liberal, pro-European Conservative supporters moving away from the party. Fast forward to 2024: with the collapse of the Conservatives, to what extent have these former UKIP voters returned to Farage and backed Reform; what impact did this have on the election outcome and how many seats did Reform cost the Tories?

To answer these questions, this article draws on a newly created dataset which maps election results from 1997–2019 onto the constituency boundaries which came into force for the 2024 election, supplemented with individual level data from the British Election Study Internet Panel.[4] Most constituencies—585 out of 650—had their boundaries redrawn: some became larger, others smaller and some split into many parts with no obvious ancestor. To remedy this, past election results since 1997 have been redistricted into the new constituency boundaries, using voting age population counts for 189,000 census output areas. This unique data provides an insight into how residents in the current constituencies have voted over time. Combining this data with information from the 2021 census allows for an examination of how the social makeup of different places relates to changing levels of support for Eurosceptic parties.

The rise of Reform

Reform UK was founded (as the Brexit Party) in early 2019, following intra-party disputes over the future direction of UKIP that saw the majority of UKIP's EU MPs leave the party. Nigel Farage became leader of the new party a few weeks after its founding. At a time when deadlock over the UK's exit from the EU was the principal issue of British politics, support for the Brexit Party quickly surged, reaching a peak around the 2019 European parliamentary elections (see Figure 1) when the Brexit Party finished first, pushing the Conservatives into fifth place.

When Theresa May was replaced by Boris Johnson as Conservative leader and prime minister, support for the Brexit Party collapsed as quickly as it had risen. At the 2019 general election, having stood aside in many constituencies to avoid splitting the pro-Brexit vote, the Brexit Party fielded just 277 candidates and won only 2 per cent of the vote.

Just before the 2019 general election, Nigel Farage announced that, if Brexit were achieved, the party would change its name and focus on wider issues. Thus, the party officially became 'Reform UK' in early 2021. During Boris Johnson's tenure as prime minister, Reform languished in the polls, drifting from a nadir of less than 1 per cent at the start of 2020 to 3 per cent when Liz Truss became prime minister in September 2022. Nigel Farage stood down as leader in March 2021 and was replaced by the relatively unknown Richard Tice. The disastrous Truss mini-budget of September 2022 saw a slight recovery in Reform's fortunes, with support in polls doubling to around 6 per cent by the beginning of 2023, where it remained during the first half of Rishi Sunak's tenure as prime minister. Towards the end of the year, however, amid the renewed salience of immigration, Reform's support began to increase again, reaching 13 per cent by the time of the surprise announcement that there would be an election in July 2024. Reform's electoral fortunes were further buoyed by the return of Nigel Farage who—having initially said he was going to sit the election out—returned as party leader on 3 June.

On election day, Reform finished third in terms of vote share with 14.3 per cent, but sixth in terms of seats, winning only five. However, the impact of the Reform vote on the makeup of the House of Commons was considerably greater than their number of MPs might initially suggest. According to the British Election Study Internet Panel, nearly 80 per cent of people who voted for Reform in 2024 had voted for the Conservatives in 2019. Put another way, over a quarter of the people who voted

[3]O. Heath and M. Goodwin, 'The 2017 general election, Brexit and the return to two-party politics: an aggregate-level analysis of the result', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 88, no. 3, 2017, pp. 345–358; D. Cutts, et al., 'Brexit, the 2019 general election and the realignment of British politics', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 91, no. 1, 2020, pp. 7–23.

[4]E. Fieldhouse, et al., *British Election Study Internet Panel Waves 1–29*, British Election Study, 2024.

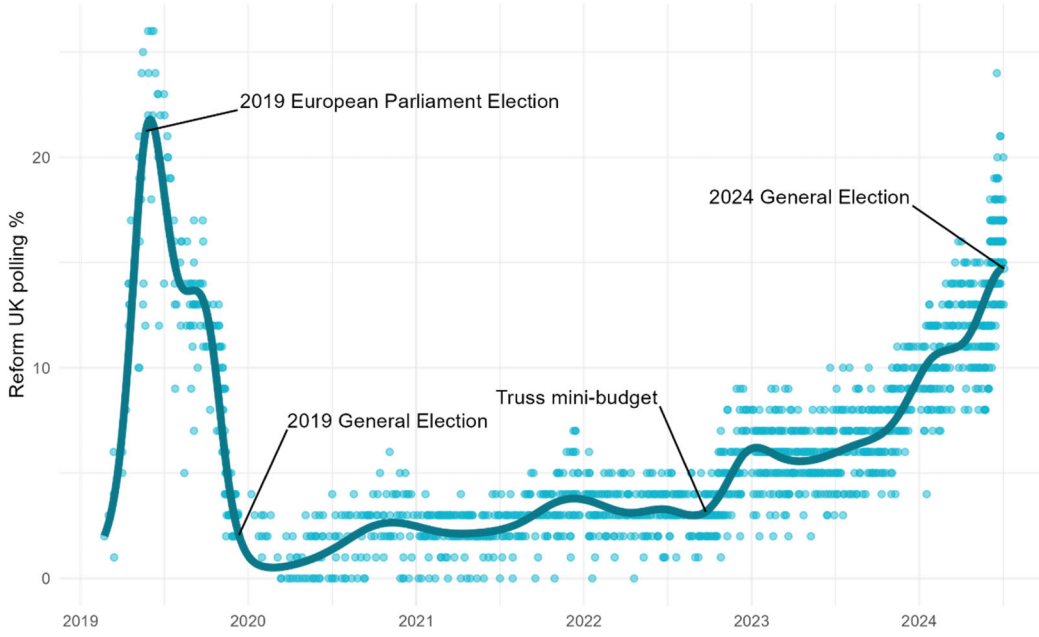

Figure 1: Opinion polling and public support for Reform, 2019–2024. Source: Mark Pack.[5] The solid line shows the estimated smoothed mean, with the 2019 and 2024 general elections weighted to ensure the polling estimates pass through the known results.

for the Conservatives in 2019 switched their vote to Reform in 2024 (compared to just 10 per cent who switched to Labour). Losing so many votes to Reform was catastrophic for the Conservatives, whose vote share declined most strongly in places where Reform performed best (r = -0.71), as illustrated in Figure 2.

Losing so many votes to Reform also hurt the Conservatives' vote overall, meaning that Labour could win many constituencies with a relatively modest increase in their vote share. In places where Reform polled more than 20 per cent of the vote, Labour gained fifty-nine seats from the Conservatives and the Conservatives held on to just thirty-three. Even more damagingly, of the 244 seats the Conservatives lost in 2024, the Reform vote was larger than the gap between the Conservatives and the winning party in 171 cases.

Who votes for Reform?

Given the impact of Reform on the election outcome, it is important to understand who Reform voters were and from where they came. Owing to the overlap in personnel and political platform between Reform UK and UKIP, this question is approached by examining how support for Reform compares to support for UKIP in 2015 and in what type of places it has grown the most.

Beginning with a comparison of the constituency level performance of Reform in 2024 to that of UKIP in 2015 using the redistricted data, one of the striking features of the Reform vote in 2024 is its similarity to UKIP's vote at the 2015 election. As Figure 3 shows, there is a strong correlation (r = 0.86) between the places where UKIP performed most strongly in 2015 and the places where Reform performed strongly in 2024. Given that so many of the Tory gains in 2017 and 2019 had come from targeting former UKIP voters, the Conservatives were particularly vulnerable in those places where UKIP had previously been strong—and where a rebooted Reform could

[5]M. Pack, 'Pollbase: opinion polls database from 1943 today', *Pollbase*, 2024; https://www.markpack.org.uk/opinion-polls/

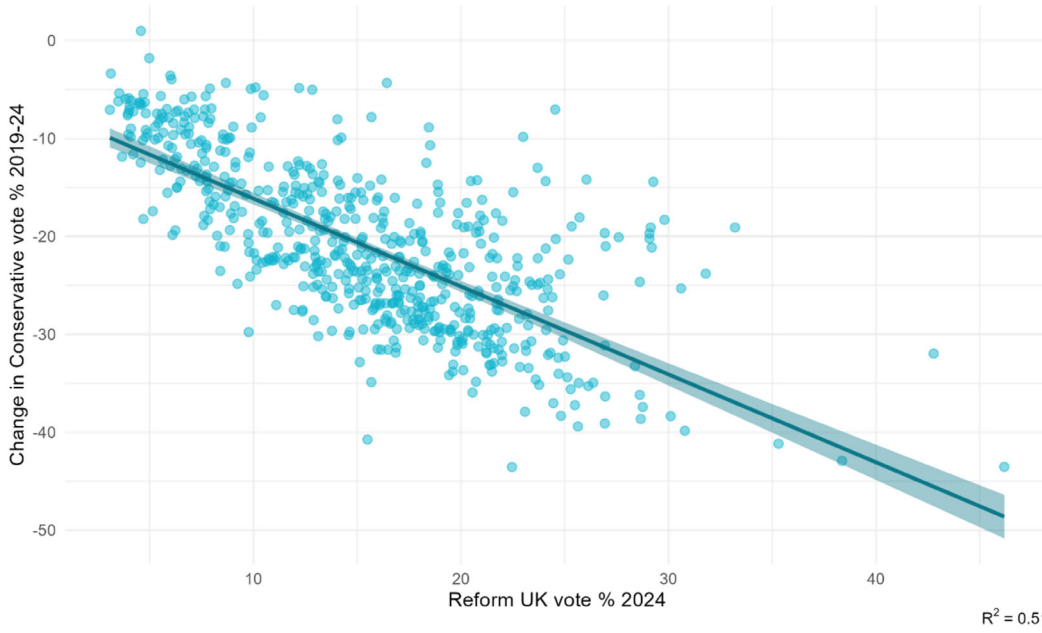

Figure 2: Swing against the Conservatives and Reform vote, 2024

therefore act as a spoiler.[6] Indeed, UKIP's share of the vote in 2015 exceeded the winning margin from 2019 in seventy-five Conservative seats. In the event, Reform exceeded UKIP's 2015 vote in nearly all of them and the Conservatives held on to just five of these seats in 2024.

Supporters of UKIP in 2015 and supporters of Reform in 2024 were also very similar at the individual level, as shown in Table 1 below. UKIP and Reform supporters were very similar in terms of age, gender and class. There are, however, some important demographic differences. Reform voters were slightly less white than UKIP voters (though they are still overwhelmingly white). Reform voters were also more educated, slightly more likely to own their own home and had slightly higher incomes. The most important differences between UKIP and Reform voters—and something that explains the very different impacts they had on the overall election results—is their political history. Although both parties drew the plurality of their supporters from previous Conservative voters, the rate at which they did so is very different. In 2015, of those that had voted in 2010, 41 per cent of UKIP voters had previously voted Conservative (three times as many as had voted Labour); in 2024, of those that had voted in 2019, 77.7 per cent of Reform voters previously voted Conservative—nearly twelve times as many as had voted Labour, partly reflecting the inroads which the Tories had made among such voters in 2017 and 2019.

Although there are obvious similarities between UKIP and Reform voters, it is important to emphasise that they are not simply the same people, though there are of course many who voted for both parties. According to the BES, of those that voted in both 2015 and 2024, just over half (53 per cent) of UKIP voters voted for Reform, while the majority of Reform voters did not vote for UKIP in 2015—37 per cent had done so, but slightly more (41.5 per cent) had voted Conservative.

An expanding base: where has Reform gained votes?

To a certain extent, the factors that helped to explain rise of Nigel Farage and UKIP also

[6]E. Fieldhouse, et al., *Electoral Shocks: The Volatile Voter in a Turbulent World*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2020; G. Evans, et al., 'Volatility, realignment, and electoral shocks: Brexit and the UK general election of 2019', *Political Science & Politics*, vol. 56, no. 4, 2023, pp. 537–545.

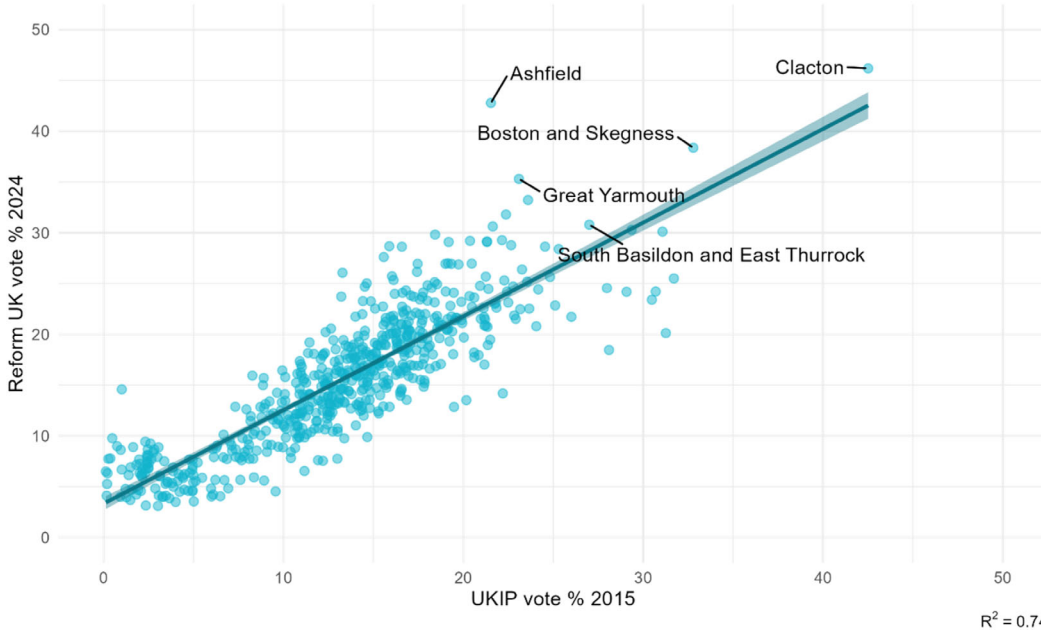

Figure 3: UKIP vote share 2015 vs Reform vote share 2024

Table 1: Social profile of UKIP 2015 and Reform 2024 voters

	UKIP 2015	Reform 2024
Mean age (SD)	54.2 (14.8)	54 (16.1)
% Male	57	57.7
% White British	95.7	91.9
% Degree	24.4	32.8
% Routine + Semi-routine	23.5	22.1
% Retired	48	30.4
% Homeowner	64.7	68.3
Median annual household income	£20,000 to £24,999	£30,000 to £34,999
% Previous Conservative	41	77.7
% Previous Labour	13.5	6.5

helped to explain support for Reform in 2024. However, this clearly is not the whole story. In a number of places, Reform's vote exceeded that of UKIP by a large margin. The biggest change was in Ashfield, where former Conservative MP Lee Anderson gained 42.8 percent of the vote, up from the 21.4 percent that Simon Ashcroft won for UKIP in 2015 and up on the 39.3 percent of the vote that Lee Anderson won in 2019 as the Conservative candidate. There were also large increases in seats such as Amber Valley, Rhondda and Ogmore, Great Yarmouth (won by Reform's Rupert Lowe), Blackpool South and Llanelli. In Scotland, although Reform's vote lagged well behind its performance in England and Wales—with a mean of 7 per cent, compared to 16.2 for England and 17.5 for Wales—this was a considerable rise from UKIP's performance in 2015, when they had achieved a mean of only 1.9 per cent, compared to 14.2 in England and 13.7 in Wales.

But, in other places, Reform's vote was substantially down on what UKIP received in 2015. East Thanet—largely made up of the former constituency of South Thanet, where Nigel Farage had stood in 2015—saw the largest decrease, with the Reform vote dropping to 20.1 per cent compared to UKIP's 31.3 per cent in 2015. Reform also fared worse in places such as Rother Valley, Barking, Rochester and Strood—where Mark Reckless won a by-election for UKIP in 2014—and Aylesbury.

Given the Eurosceptic origins of UKIP and the role that immigration played in the Brexit referendum, it is perhaps not surprising that

there is also a strong relationship between the places that backed Leave in 2016 and the places that supported Reform in 2024, as shown in Figure 4 below.[7] The five seats that Reform won were amongst the most pro-Leave constituencies in the 2016 referendum. However, rather than a simple linear relationship, the association is curvilinear, indicating that Reform did disproportionately well in the most Leave areas.

Where has Reform expanded its support compared to UKIP? As Brexit has faded as an electoral issue, has Nigel Farage's new party broadened its appeal beyond the Brexit heartlands that had previously flocked to UKIP? To examine these questions, a longitudinal analysis is used which shows how the vote shares of UKIP (1997–2017), the Brexit Party (2019) and Reform (2024) have changed over time in different types of constituencies. Figure 5 shows how support for Reform and its Eurosceptic predecessor parties have varied over time between those places which were most pro-Remain and those places which were most pro-Leave. Pro-Leave constituencies are defined as those places where residents expressed a high level of support for Brexit in 2016 (upper quartile) and pro-Remain constituencies as those with a low level of support for Brexit (lower quartile). Even when UKIP was just a fringe force in the early 2000s, it still tended to perform somewhat better in those places that would go on to support Brexit. However, in 2015—the election when David Cameron pledged an in-out referendum—UKIP's vote surged in those places which would go on to back Brexit strongly a year later, with their vote share increasing by over fifteen percentage points in pro-Leave constituencies compared to just three percentage points in pro-Remain constituencies. Nearly ten years later, Reform's vote share is once again strongest in those places which backed Brexit, overtaking even what UKIP managed previously. Thus, even if the salience of Brexit as an electoral issue has faded, there is little to indicate that the divides that underpinned support for leaving the EU have gone away and, if anything, are just as strong as they were before the referendum took place.

Early work on the rise of UKIP characterised support for the party as a 'working class phenomenon' which drew support from disaffected voters who had previously supported Labour.[8] As such, it would be logical to consider the relationship between class and support for Reform and its Eurosceptic predecessors. Once again, working class constituencies are defined as those which have a high percentage of residents (upper quartile) engaged in either semi-routine or routine occupations according to the 2021 (for England and Wales) and 2022 (for Scotland) censuses. Middle class constituencies are defined as those which have a low percentage of residents (lower quartile) engaged in those occupations.

Figure 6 shows that, in the early days of UKIP, there was not much of a class difference between the places where it drew support. However, the gains that UKIP made in 2015 were greater in working class areas than they were in middle class areas. Although, post-Brexit, UKIP in 2017 and the Brexit Party in 2019 received many fewer votes than previously, the class gap in support remained. In 2024, the class gap became even more pronounced. Whereas in middle class areas Reform's vote is now at the same level as it was for UKIP in 2015, in working class areas, Reform's vote now exceeds what UKIP ever obtained. Thus, there is some evidence that class divides have become stronger.

Another way in which support for UKIP was distinctive is the ethnic and age profile of its supporters and the places where it was most popular. UKIP appealed to older, white voters who had grown up during a time when the country was almost exclusively white and most people would have had limited contact with migrants or people from other countries.[9] Figure 7 shows that UKIP in 2015 tended to be more popular in places with predominantly

[7]C. Hanretty, 'Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership', *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties*, vol. 27, no. 4, 2017, pp. 466–483; C. Hanretty, '2016 Brexit referendum estimates on 2024 boundaries', 2023; https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1mtph-ml7CYVoeEUIc1g_IbOvbiZMa_ezRGQlHQoCpF4/

[8]Ford and Goodwin, *Revolt on the Right*; G. Evans and J. Mellon, 'Working class votes and Conservative losses: solving the UKIP puzzle', *Parliamentary Affairs*, vol. 69, no. 2, 2016, pp. 464–479.

[9]R. Ford and M. Goodwin, 'Understanding UKIP: identity, social change and the left behind', *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 85, no. 3, 2014, pp. 277–284.

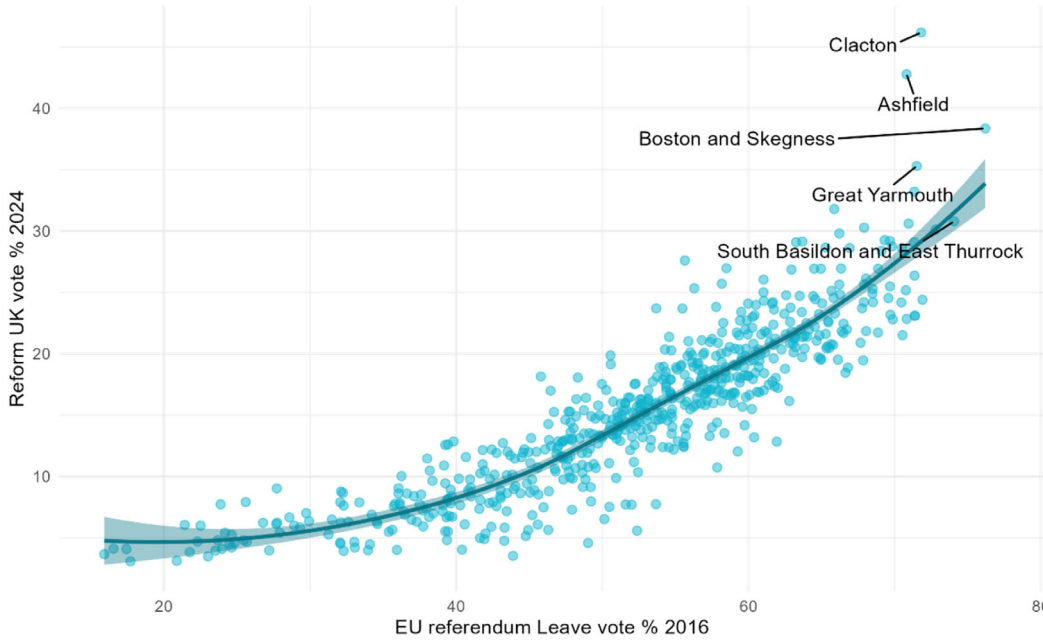

Figure 4: Leave vote in 2016 vs Reform 2024

white populations than it was in more ethnically diverse constituencies, though the differences were comparatively modest. However, in 2024, these differences were somewhat more pronounced. Whereas in ethnically diverse constituencies Reform's vote is now at the same level as it was for UKIP in 2015, in predominantly white areas, Reform's vote now exceeds what UKIP obtained.

Similarly, Figure 8 shows that Reform's vote has increased more in constituencies with older populations than it has in constituencies with younger populations. Taken together, these findings indicate that Reform is building support in areas of prior strength rather than broadening its base, suggesting that social divides may be hardening rather than softening.

To investigate these patterns more fully, a multivariate regression can be conducted to understand how Reform has expanded its base since 2015 by examining the impact of class, age and ethnicity as well as support for Brexit, while controlling for past support for UKIP in 2015. The results are presented in Table 2.

The first thing to notice is that the best predictor of Reform's performance in 2024 is UKIP's performance in 2015. This clearly illustrates how close the structure of support for Reform maps onto past support for UKIP. Once accounting for past support for UKIP, the effects of the other variables indicate the sort of places where Reform's vote has either increased or decreased relative to UKIP in 2015. It is important to be cautious in how these variables are interpreted as they now show us the partial effect on support for Reform, controlling for past support for UKIP. For example, it is known that places which supported UKIP in 2015 were more likely to support Brexit in 2016. However, when accounting for past support for UKIP, the effect of Brexit on support for Reform is still positive. This implies that support for Reform in 2024 is slightly more polarised along Brexit lines than support for UKIP was in 2015 in the run up to the referendum, indicating that Reform has increased its base in more pro-Leave areas. Thus, places where UKIP was strong and where people supported Brexit in heavy numbers tend to be more likely to vote for Reform than places where UKIP was equally strong, but support for Brexit was somewhat lower.

The association between class and support for Reform is positive, albeit somewhat weaker. This implies that support for Reform in 2024 is slightly higher in working class areas

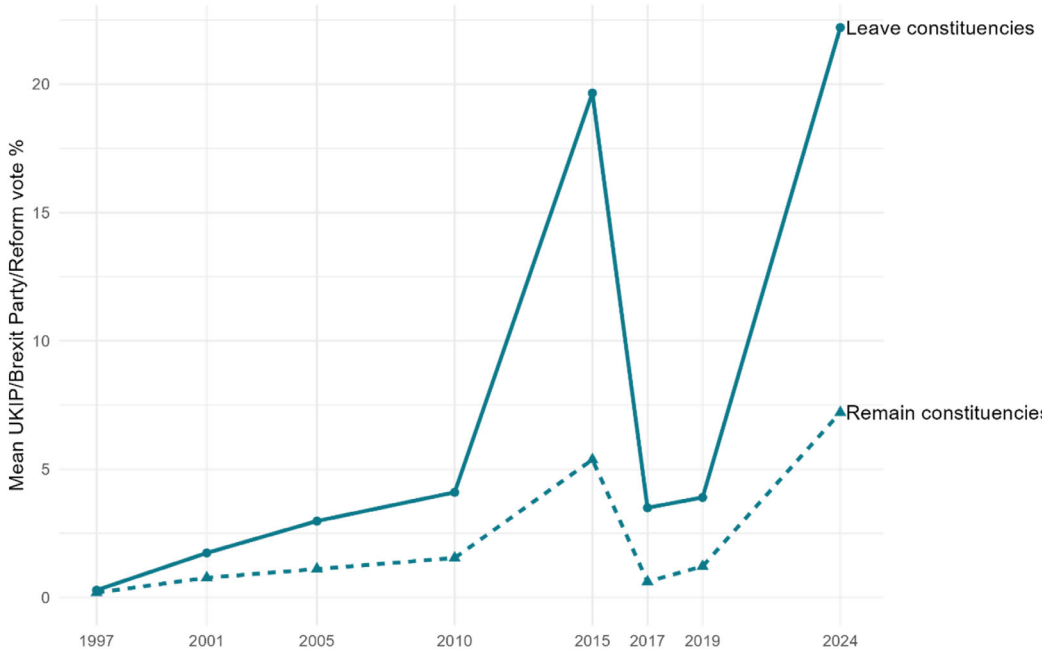

Figure 5: Support for Reform in pro-Brexit and pro-Leave constituencies, 1997–2024

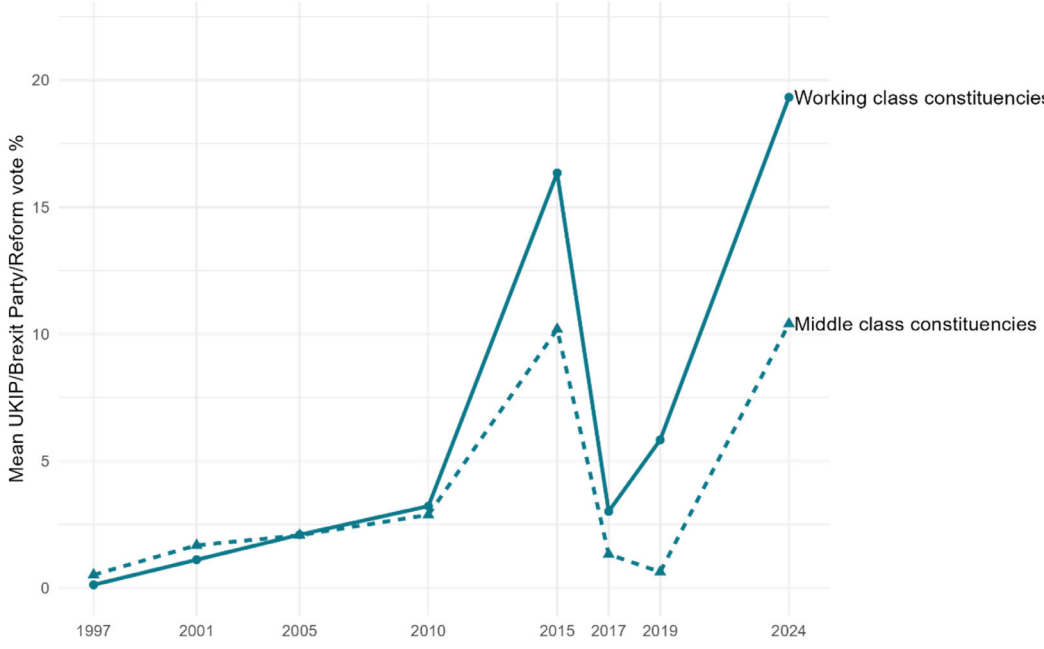

Figure 6: Support for Reform in working class and middle class constituencies, 1997–2024

than support for UKIP was in 2015, indicating that Reform has deepened its base more in areas of the country that are more working class than places that are more middle class. From the direction of the coefficients, it can be seen that Reform has deepened its support

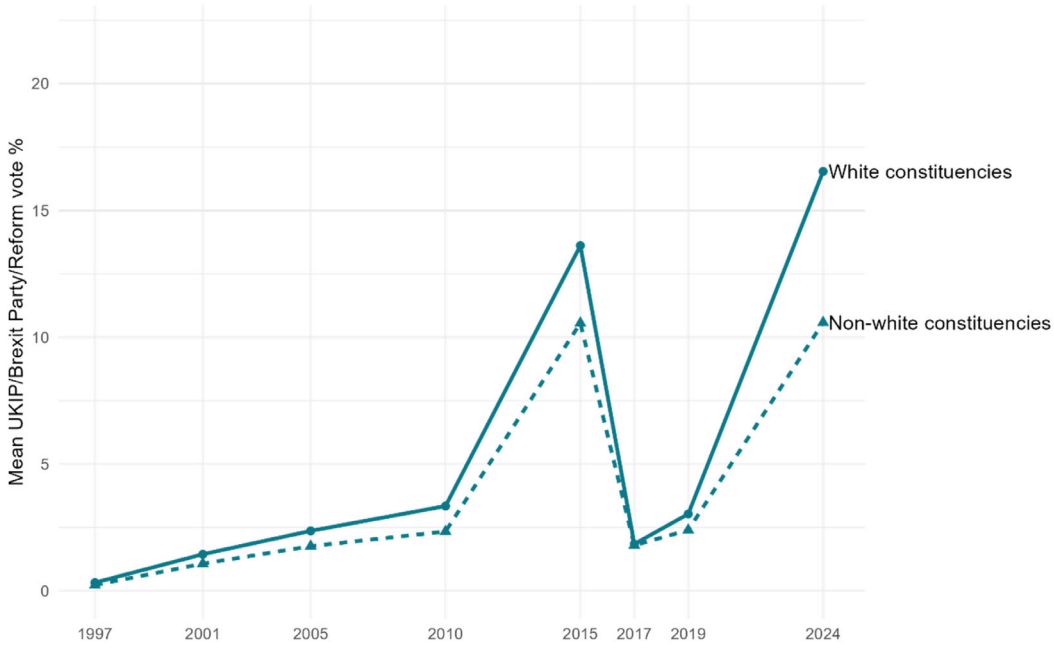

Figure 7: Support for Reform in white and ethnically diverse constituencies, 1997–2024

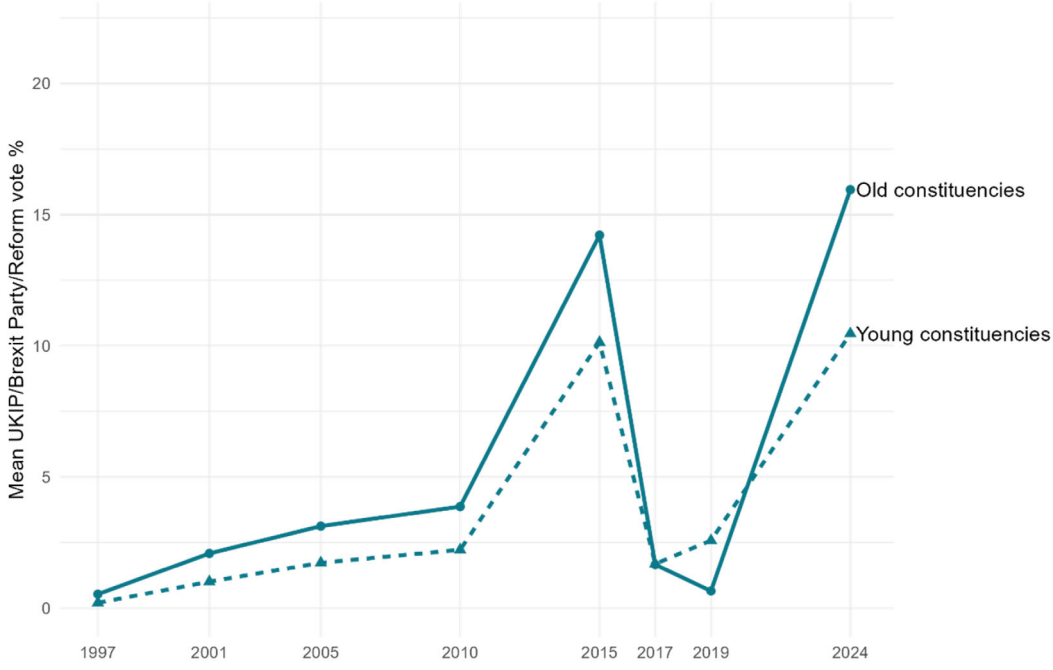

Figure 8: Support for Reform in older and younger constituencies, 1997–2024

somewhat in areas of the country which are predominantly white British compared to UKIP, and broadened its support in younger areas (all else being equal). Overall—with the partial exception of age—there is evidence that Reform's support is more socially polarised

Table 2: The social correlates of support for Reform, constituency analysis

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)
% UKIP 2015	1.002***	0.520***	0.875***	0.876***	0.953***	0.463***
	(0.026)	(0.038)	(0.027)	(0.028)	(0.028)	(0.035)
% Leave 2016		0.288***				0.224***
		(0.019)				(0.023)
% White British			0.067***			0.101***
			(0.007)			(0.009)
% Working class				0.188***		0.084***
				(0.020)		(0.022)
% Old					0.105***	-0.177***
					(0.023)	(0.031)
Scotland	3.495***	1.780***	1.053+	1.638**	2.743***	-1.051*
	(0.559)	(0.487)	(0.579)	(0.559)	(0.575)	(0.524)
Wales	1.979**	2.004***	0.851	1.328*	1.625**	0.618
	(0.602)	(0.511)	(0.573)	(0.567)	(0.598)	(0.484)
Intercept	1.880***	-6.617***	-1.377**	-1.555**	0.150	-8.226***
	(0.394)	(0.647)	(0.499)	(0.519)	(0.545)	(0.629)
Num.Obs.	609	609	609	609	609	609
R2	0.763	0.829	0.794	0.793	0.770	0.862
R2 Adj.	0.761	0.828	0.793	0.791	0.769	0.861

+ p < 0.1
*p < 0.05
**p < 0.01
***p < 0.001

than UKIP's support was, indicating that the divides that underpinned support for UKIP—also evident in the vote for Brexit—are becoming sharper rather than softer. However, these differences should not over-emphasised. The main story is one of continuity rather than change and the similarities between the places that supported UKIP in 2015 and Reform in 2024 are much greater than the differences.

Conclusion

In 2013, David Cameron promised an in-out referendum on EU membership to 'put the issue to bed' and unite the Conservative Party. If David Cameron's decision to hold the EU referendum in 2016 had been designed to appease Eurosceptic Conservatives who were defecting to UKIP, then the long-term impact of the strategy has failed spectacularly. The rise of Reform UK in 2024 resulted in substantial losses for the Conservatives, handing many seats to Labour in the process.

The social base of support for Reform—both at the individual level and constituency level—bears striking similarities to that of UKIP nearly ten years earlier. There is also remarkable continuity between the places that previously backed UKIP and those which now back Reform. Even though the salience of Brexit as an electoral issue has faded, there is little to indicate that the divides that underpinned support for leaving the EU have dissipated, with immigration once again high on the political agenda.

Despite the high levels of volatility that recent elections have demonstrated, this stability in the sources of support between UKIP and Reform is even more noteworthy and implies that there is a strong—and relatively stable—base underpinning the party's electoral fortunes. There is little evidence that Reform has expanded beyond the UKIP base over the last decade. Rather, at least in geographical terms, it has perhaps deepened its base in those areas where UKIP was most popular, making the party a more credible and competitive electoral force in the process. This suggests that the Tories may not find it as easy to win back these votes as they hope.

Oliver Heath is Professor of Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. *Christopher*

Prosser is Senior Lecturer in Politics at Royal Holloway, University of London. *Humphrey Southall* is Professor of Historical Geography at the University of Portsmouth. *Paula Aucott* is Senior Research Associate at the University of Portsmouth.