Abstract The chapter focuses on structural constraints and political obstacles that Labour faced under Corbyn. In the first section, various factors that contributed to Corbyn’s victory in the 2015 Labour leadership election are explored. The second section then discusses conservative constraints that limited Labour’s electoral chances, as well as conflicts within the party. The third and fourth sections discuss Labour’s 2017 and 2019 General Election campaigns and results, including how Brexit complicated the situation in 2019. The fifth and final section further analyses Labour’s political challenges. Its analysis draws on Hay’s (1999) conceptualisation of crisis narratives and structural contradictions, as well as Erik Olin Wright’s (2019) work on democratic socialist transformation.

Keywords Labour 2015 leadership election · Jeremy Corbyn · 2017 and 2019 General Election · Labour and Brexit · Crisis narratives · Democratic socialism

Introduction

The previous chapter discussed an old debate in the Labour Party regarding the balance between winning elections and ideological commitments to parliamentary socialism, which became relevant again following Jeremy Corbyn’s rise to leader of the party in 2015. On the one hand,
Corbyn attracted many new supporters to the party and popularised left-leaning ideas and policy proposals that challenged the political economic status quo. On the other hand, many Labour Members of Parliament (MPs) and mainstream media criticised Corbyn for his unelectability and vigorously opposed him throughout his leadership. Whilst the results of the 2017 General Election reinforced Corbyn’s position and suggested that Labour could perform well electorally based on a left-wing manifesto, the results of the 2019 General Election threaten to unravel Corbyn’s legacy.

Chapters 3 and 4 explore how Labour under Corbyn attempted to promote radical reform of the British political economy in ways that fundamentally challenge the status quo. Specifically, this chapter focuses on the political obstacles faced by the Labour Party under Corbyn between 2015 and 2020. Chapter 4 then analyses Labour’s policies during that period. It is argued in this chapter that Labour under Corbyn defied conventional expectations and challenged political norms, as well as shifted contemporary debates on economic policies away from austerity. However, the party suffered from many internal problems and, as the results of the 2017 and 2019 General Elections suggest, the dominant historical structures characterised by conservatism and neoliberalism severely constrained Labour’s political prospects. This chapter also discusses how the Conservative Party under Boris Johnson utilised Brexit narratives to win the 2019 election, and suggests that in addition to appealing to people’s economic interests, Labour might need to pay more attention to people’s identities and values.

The first section explores how the dominant ideological, institutional and material structures of the British political economy created seeds of dissent that partly grew into grassroots support for Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. The second section offers an account of the conservative ideological and institutional constraints on the Labour Party under Corbyn, including mainstream media representations of Corbyn. It also covers conflicts between Corbyn and the Parliamentary Labour Party (PLP), including his re-election as leader following a leadership challenge in 2016. The third section discusses Labour’s 2017 General Election campaign and its unexpectedly good electoral performance amidst conservative structural hindrance. The fourth section reflects on Labour’s electoral defeat in the 2019 General Election and argues that its prospects under Corbyn were significantly complicated by the realities of Brexit. Finally, before concluding with a summary of the main points, the fifth
section further analyses the 2019 election defeat and Labour’s political challenges.

THE 2015 LABOUR PARTY LEADERSHIP ELECTION

Political centrism and neoliberalism in the UK have faced consistent challenges in recent years. Since 2010 there have been many events that can be interpreted as public expressions of dissent, such as the student tuition fee protests and the UK Uncut protests against cuts to public services and tax avoidance (Bailey 2018, 11–12; Nunns 2018, 135), the Occupy movement, public sector strikes and riots in the UK in 2011, and the anti-austerity protests in June 2015 (Seymour 2016, 19). It has been suggested that the 2015 General Election was also affected by ‘anti-establishment’ sentiments, popularised by left-leaning social critics such as Owen Jones and Russell Brand. Although they appealed to different audiences, they helped to politicise some ‘disaffected democrats’ sections of the electorate, such as the young, ethnic minorities and those from poorer backgrounds (Flinders 2015, 242–243).

Jeremy Corbyn’s 2015 leadership campaign also benefited from democratic disaffections and anti-establishment sentiments. As Nunns (2018) argued, anti-austerity movement protests occurred intermittently between 2011 and 2014, but the anti-austerity movement finally found a home in the Labour Party under Corbyn, which allowed it to utilise Labour’s long-established connections to trade unions and voter bases (Nunns 2018, 136–138). As discussed in Chapter 2, Ed Miliband tried to promote economic reforms before he resigned as leader of the Labour party. However, it has been argued that Miliband lacked ‘intellectual infrastructure’ support and that he was also held back by centrist Labour MPs (Guinan and O’Neill 2018). Corbyn, on the other hand, was able to draw from alternative policies promoted by institutions such as the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR). Nevertheless, during his time as leader, Miliband paved the way for change in the leadership election rules to allow registered supporters and members of affiliated trade unions to vote in a ‘one member-one vote’ (OMOV) system (Garland 2016, 24). This rule change empowered Labour grassroots and activists, and enabled Corbyn’s election as leader of the party in 2015.

At the outset, no candidates in the 2015 Labour leadership election represented the Left of the party, and arguably the push to have a left-wing candidate came from the lower levels of the party structure. In May
2015, 10 young Labour MPs, including Rebecca Long-Baily, Richard Burgon and Clive Lewis, published a letter in The Guardian calling for a new leader who would strongly challenge austerity in the UK. Labour activists then organised an online petition, which eventually received over 5,000 signatures, that called for an anti-austerity candidate to stand in the election (Nunns 2018, 62–63). Jeremy Corbyn was not the most obvious choice. He volunteered to be the Left’s candidate mainly to broaden the debate and he only gained the necessary 35 nominations from the PLP to stand in the election at the last minute (Nunns 2018, 71–78, 91, 102).

Personally and as a politician, Corbyn provided a clear contrast to centrist and centre-right Labour MPs that had dominated the party before 2015, mainly due to his lifelong commitment to left-wing socialist causes, and also due to his mild manner. Corbyn was once a Voluntary Service Overseas worker in Jamaica, a trade union organiser, and a member of the Socialist Campaign Group in the party (Seymour 2016, 4–6). Influenced by left-wing ideas in the 1970s and 1980s, Corbyn maintained his beliefs and clearly expressed them during the Labour leadership campaign, including in his opposition to austerity and the Trident nuclear submarine programme. He also advocated left-leaning policies such as renationalisation of the railways, a People’s Quantitative Easing programme for job creation and infrastructural investment, policies to tackle tax loopholes, and policies to support high-tech industries (Richards 2016, 15; Seymour 2016, 8–9). In contrast, other candidates did not significantly distinguish themselves from Labour’s recent past; Liz Kendall was seen as the Blairite candidate, Yvette Cooper was seen as the Brownite candidate, and Andy Burnham, who was supposed to be the ‘soft-left’ option, re-positioned himself more to the right (Nunns 2018, 65–68).

Corbyn’s leadership campaign was aided by volunteers and the widespread use of social media. The campaign also involved more than a hundred old-style local political rallies that were often highly attended (Nunns 2018, 113–114, 209–215; Seymour 2016, 7). Corbyn received a great deal of support from trade unionists and new members, notably young people (Seymour 2016, 61), as well as support from the anti-austerity movement (e.g. People’s Assembly demonstration, 20 June 2015) (Nunns 2018, 123–125). By the time of the registration deadline for new members to be eligible to vote, Labour had gained 105,973 new members since the 2015 General Election defeat, which increased its total membership to 553,954 (Garland 2016, 23). Despite Tony Blair warning that Labour should not shift too far leftwards and that members
who wanted to follow their hearts and vote for Corbyn should ‘get a transplant’ (BBC 2015a), on 12 September 2015, Corbyn won a landslide victory (59.5% vote share), based on support from both full members and registered supporters (Nunns 2018, 253–255). The registered supporter scheme allowed non-members to easily vote in the leadership election by paying merely 3 GBP (Nunns 2018, 126–129). Out of the registered supporters’ 105,598 votes (25% of total votes), 83.8% were for Corbyn (Nunns 2018, 255). Whereas those who supported other candidates cited conventional rationales such as electability and acceptability within the party, those who supported Corbyn tended to disregard these criteria and instead cited his policies, as well as how he represented a break with New Labour, as their reasons for voting for him (Quinn 2016, 766, 773).

The grassroots support that enabled Corbyn to become leader of the Labour Party has been used as an example to suggest that the old ‘law of curvilinear disparity’, which suggests that party activists tend to be more radical than MPs, might become relevant again in British politics (Quinn 2016, 760). It is often argued, however, that achieving popularity amongst a pool of left-leaning Labour supporters is one thing, but that achieving sufficient popularity with voters to win a general election is an entirely different matter. Chapter 2 discussed the writings of socialist scholars on the need to prepare voters for a socialist government, since a political party of socialist orientation is likely to face great political obstacles. Corbyn and his allies, however, barely had time to prepare to lead the Labour Party. Corbyn was pushed forward as a leadership candidate by the Left of the party—a faction that had never controlled the party. Campaigning for Corbyn to be leader was a significant risk for the Left. Even the left-wing political commentator, Owen Jones, initially thought it was a bad idea because the Left was not ready, and that the defeat of a left-wing candidate might severely set back the Left in Britain (Nunns 2018, 70).

The next section offers an account of how numerous Labour MPs attempted to undermine and end the Corbyn project, as well as how conservative ideological and institutional constraints harmed Labour’s electoral prospects under Corbyn. Aspects of Corbyn’s past and his unconventional views on security and foreign policy also made him an easy target.
Mainstream Media and Conflicts Within the Labour Party

Since the first week of his leadership, Corbyn became a target for mainstream right-wing media. MPs who believe in republicanism tend not to express those beliefs as it might invite negative reactions from voters (Norbauer and Studlar 2011, 235–237). Corbyn, however, was open about his republicanism. Shortly after becoming Labour leader, he faced a media onslaught and was labelled ‘unpatriotic’ by the Conservative Party and monarchists for not singing the national anthem, ‘God Save the Queen’, during the Battle of Britain service at St Paul’s Cathedral (Bloom 2015). Moreover, due to his anti-war and anti-nuclear weapons positions, Corbyn was portrayed by the media and his opponents as a pacifist who was a threat to national security (Seymour 2016, 206). For example, Prime Minister David Cameron set the tone by tweeting that Labour was now a ‘threat to our national security, our economic security and your family’s security’ (cited in Gunter 2015). The Conservative Party also smeared Corbyn in an online video that portrayed him as a terrorist sympathiser (Jones 2015). The ability to paint Corbyn in this light was made possible by his willingness to engage with protest and rebel groups in the past. For example, he invited Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams to parliament in 1984 as the violence in Northern Ireland was raging—an act that was widely criticised at the time. After he became leader, however, Corbyn tried not to publicly stray from the party line on security issues, such as its support for the Trident nuclear submarine programme (Piper 2019).

A study by the Media Reform Coalition (2016) suggested that in Corbyn’s first week as Leader of the Opposition the press ‘systematically’ undermined him through overwhelmingly negative coverage; based on an analysis of 8 national daily newspapers, 60% of news, comments and editorial pieces were negative, 27% were neutral, and only 13% were positive (Media Reform Coalition 2016, 2). News stories and editorial coverage from right-wing newspapers such as The Sun and the Daily Mail, the two largest national papers, were mostly negative, whereas The Guardian and the Daily Mirror were more balanced (Media Reform Coalition 2016, 4). Similarly, an academic study within the London School of Economics’ Media and Communications Department in 2016, which analysed media representation of Corbyn in 8 British newspapers from 1 September to 1 November 2015, identified a process of ‘delegitimisation’ that involved
not representing his views directly (‘lack of or distortion of voice’), use of ridicule, scorn and personal attacks, and association of him with terrorism. The study also raised concerns about how media bias of this sort might subvert the functioning of British democracy (Bart Cammaerts et al. 2016).

Media hostility and exaggerated criticisms of Corbyn persisted until the 2019 General Election and beyond. What Corbyn experienced was similar to previous attempts to ridicule and smear past leaders of the Labour Party, as discussed in Chapter 2, but in his case it was especially severe. Some of the more recent unfounded stories include, for instance, The Sun’s allegation that Corbyn was a spy for Czechoslovakia during the Cold War (see Tait et al. 2018). Perhaps more damagingly, news reporting of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party sometimes insinuated it could be traced directly to Corbyn, which seems dubious given that he has consistently championed racial equality and promoted a multifaith and multicultural society (for example, see Datoo 2015; Edwards 2017; Nunns 2018, 107). A 2018 study on media coverage of anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, conducted by the Media Reform Coalition and Birkbeck, University of London, pointed out that there was significant news coverage (95 clear examples out of around 250 examples), both on television and in online news, that involved either distorted facts, misquotations, failures to provide essential context, and/or false suggestions by journalists or their sources, which could be interpreted as ‘systematic reporting failures’ (Schlosberg and Laker 2018, 3 and executive summary). Following this report, 27 academics and activists, including Noam Chomsky, signed an open letter in The Guardian that expressed concerns about inaccurate and distorted reporting on anti-Semitism in the Labour Party, which contributed to ‘an underserved witch-hunt’ against Corbyn, whilst prevalent anti-Semitism amongst far right groups across Europe went underreported (The Guardian 2018).

Labour implemented measures to address anti-Semitism in the party. It set up an inquiry to investigate the issue in 2016 (Wainwright 2018, 40) and it adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance’s definition of anti-Semitism, which, the party stated, does not prohibit free speech on Israel (BBC 2018). Citing anti-Semitism within the party and the leadership’s reluctance to advocate a second Brexit referendum, several Labour MPs splintered from the party to form ‘The Independent Group’ (TIG) in early 2019. After being joined by a few defections
from the Conservative Party, TIG later became the now defunct political party, ‘Change UK’ (Elgot 2019). The Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) launched a formal investigation into anti-Semitism in the Labour Party in May 2019 (Buchan 2019), whilst in July of the same year, 64 Labour peers (a third of Labour members in the House of Lords) took out an advertisement in *The Guardian* that criticised Corbyn for failing to tackle anti-Semitism and argued that he had ‘failed the test of leadership’ (Mason et al. 2019). Labour responded by committing to full cooperation with the EHRC. It also argued that the party’s disciplinary procedures had been improved, and that since September 2015 the number of anti-Semitism cases that had undergone disciplinary procedures related to around 0.06% of its members (Buchan 2019; Mason et al. 2019). Nevertheless, criticism of the leadership’s handling of anti-Semitism continued to plague the party up until its election defeat in 2019.

Centrist and right-leaning Labour MPs made numerous attempts to undermine Corbyn’s leadership, which likely harmed the party’s image even further in the eyes of the voters. For the sake of party unity, Corbyn’s first shadow cabinet consisted of MPs from different ideological positions in the party (Nunns 2018, 258–262). However, this attempt to build unity was unsuccessful. One of the first signs of conflict between Corbyn’s leadership and the PLP concerned a parliamentary vote on airstrikes against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria. Although Corbyn wanted the party to vote against the strikes, he was pressured by his shadow cabinet to give MPs a free vote (BBC 2015b). The infighting erupted in June 2016 following the UK’s European Union (EU) membership referendum, as some Labour MPs blamed the result (51.9% voted leave) on Corbyn’s lack of enthusiasm to campaign for Remain. Mass shadow cabinet resignations and a leadership challenge followed (Nunns 2018, 269–270). Labour MP Angela Smith, for example, argued that Corbyn should take responsibility for the referendum result and insisted that he had shown ‘insufficient leadership’ (*The Economist* 2016). The conflict within the party was also fought at the level of its bureaucracy. According to Nunns (2018, 272–274), pre-Corbyn party bureaucrats intentionally tried to damage his leadership, such as by delaying press releases and leaking information to the press. Similarly, a leaked internal report in April 2020 alleged that many right-leaning officials rooted for Labour to perform badly in the 2017 General Election, attempted to channel funds
to anti-Corbyn candidates in that election, and failed to act resolutely on anti-Semitism complaints (Stone 2020).

Despite hostilities from the right of the party and the mainstream media, Corbyn remained popular with Labour members and trade unions in 2016. On 24 September 2016, he easily fought off the leadership challenge by winning the resulting leadership election with an increased mandate of 62% of total votes (Nunns 2018, 276 and 284). By 2018, Corbyn’s allies had taken control of Labour’s National Executive Committee and a major Corbyn supporter, Jennifer Formby, had become Labour’s General Secretary (Stewart 2018). Richard Leonard, who became the Leader of the Scottish Labour Party in 2017, is also from the left of the party; he has supported radical redistributive taxation, the return of Scotland’s railways to public ownership, and claimed that Scottish Labour aims to ‘fundamentally change the existing economic system’ (Brooks and Carrell 2018).

Corbyn’s leadership gained greater acceptance amongst the PLP after the better-than-expected general election result in 2017, which is discussed in the following section. However, internal conflicts persisted throughout Corbyn’s leadership. The main sources of infighting were the leadership’s handling of anti-Semitism in the party and the party’s position on Brexit. Criticisms were often directed at Corbyn’s closest advisors, particularly Karie Murphy, Seumas Milne, Andrew Murray and Len McCluskey (sometimes referred to as ‘The Four Ms’), who were often portrayed as hard-left Euro-sceptics (Pickard 2019a). They were heavily criticised by some Labour MPs for ineffective handling of anti-Semitism allegations, for blocking adoption of a clear second referendum and ‘remain’ position on Brexit, and also blamed for Labour’s disappointing European Parliament election results in May 2019 (Blunkett 2019; P. Mason 2019; Stewart 2019a).

Internal conflicts also stemmed from the rise of Momentum—an organisation formed from Corbyn’s grassroots supporters. Momentum helped canvass grassroots support for the Corbyn project, attracted new members to the Labour Party, and its activists were instrumental to the party’s election campaigns in 2017 and 2019. As discussed in Chapter 2, socialist scholars have argued in favour of connecting extra-parliamentary forces with political parties to advance parliamentary socialism (Panitch and Leys 2001, 268). Nevertheless, despite its positive contribution, Momentum’s influence also increased tensions within the party. Its call for mandatory reselection of Labour MPs to ensure they were supported
by local party members and affiliated organisations (Sabbagh et al. 2018) placed significant pressure on centrist and right-leaning MPs in the party. In return, anti-Corbyn Labour MPs were often hostile towards Momentum activists, even referring to them as ‘dogs’ (Nunns 2018, 266, 275–276, 281). Momentum’s prominence in the party during Corbyn’s leadership also caused some tension with trade unions, which is the more traditional support base of the party’s left wing (for example, see Kettle 2018; Stewart 2018).

The following sections discuss Labour’s performance in the General Elections of 2017 and 2019. The increase in Labour’s share of the vote in 2017 suggested that many of its left-leaning policies were popular and that perhaps the Overton window had shifted leftwards. However, Labour’s catastrophic defeat in 2019 suggests that Labour under Corbyn failed to unite fragmented groups of votes to form a successful counter-hegemonic bloc.

The 2017 General Election

When Prime Minister Theresa May called a snap election in January 2017, she sought a strong mandate to negotiate a Brexit deal with the EU, which would include leaving the single market and the customs union, and ending the free movement of people (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 347). Labour, however, did unexpectedly well in the election. It increased its vote share by 9.5% compared to the previous election; the biggest increase in vote share for Labour since Clement Attlee won the 1945 General Election (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 346). Overall, Labour received 40% share of the vote, gained 30 seats and won 262 seats, whilst the Conservatives lost 13 seats and won 317 seats (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 345–346). The results defied conventional expectations and forced the Conservative Party to establish a ‘confidence and supply’ arrangement with the Democratic Unionist Party (DUP) to retain power as a minority government. Before the election, most polls (except one) indicated that the Conservatives would win a majority (an average prediction of roughly 70 seats) (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 345–346). The Conservatives initially had a lead of 19 points over Labour in April 2017 but its lead over Labour dropped to 9.5 points by late May and dropped even further to 6.6 points by June (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 348). An eventful campaign contributed to this unexpected result.
During the campaign, there was a stark contrast between, on the one hand, Theresa May’s approach to Brexit and her business-as-usual policies, and, on the other hand, Corbyn’s soft-Brexit approach and his anti-austerity policies (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 346). One study argued that party manifestoes in 2017 (including Conservative, Labour, SNP, Green, and Liberal Democrats) were more ‘left-wing’ (although only very slightly in the case of the Conservatives) than in 2015 (Allen and Bara 2019, 6–7). Although the Conservatives’ manifesto was perhaps more socially liberal, its economic policies had become even more neoliberal (Allen and Bara 2019, 8). Some policies were deeply unpopular, particularly what became known as the ‘dementia tax’, which would have involved reforming state-funded home care for the elderly, such that, excluding a protected 100,000 GBP of assets, people would have to pay for it after death through the value of their homes (Allen and Bara 2019, 3). The Conservatives were forced to ditch the ‘dementia tax’ mid-campaign in an embarrassing U-turn and their manifesto was also criticised for being un-costed; whereas the Labour manifesto was fully-costed (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 348). Furthermore, May proved to be a poor campaigner and was widely criticised for it (for example, see Ward and Wring 2018, 204–205).

Theresa May might have hoped to retain the support of middle-class and pro-remain voters whilst seeking to attract votes from working-class Brexit supporters in traditionally Labour held seats. However, this strategy did not pay off. Although the Conservatives gained votes in predominantly white and marginalised areas, they were less popular in areas with more high-skilled workers, and they suffered losses in traditionally Conservative held seats in the South where high numbers of graduates tended to oppose Brexit (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 345, 355, 356–357). In contrast, many polls suggest that Labour did particularly well at attracting younger voters (under 45) compared to 2015 (see the discussion in Travis 2018). Labour also achieved some ‘shock wins’ in places such as Kensington, which had been held by the Conservatives for the last 20 years (Chaffin 2017), and in Canterbury, which Labour won for the first time since the constituency was formed in 1918 (BBC 2017).

Labour ran a campaign that aimed to mobilise young, marginalised and politically apathetic voters (Nunns 2018, 288). The strategy resembled Corbyn’s 2015 Labour leadership campaign in which political speeches were organised in local areas around the country with the help of Momentum volunteers. Momentum assisted in coordination of campaign
activists and their online tool, ‘My Nearest Marginal’, helped Labour activists identify their nearest swing seats (Ward and Wring 2018, 215). Notably, Labour’s campaign was aided by the use of social media and left-leaning online news websites, such as The Canary and Paul Mason News, and by support from sports and television celebrities, as well as popular music artists such as the rapper Lowkey and grime artists (‘Grime4Corbyn’) including Stormzy (Nunns 2018, 322–335, 341–342; Ward and Wring 2018, 214–215). Compared to the Conservative Party, Labour’s political campaign dominated Twitter and Facebook and it was generally more successful in terms of stimulating bottom-up engagement (Ward and Wring 2018, 211, 214).

Arguably, the UK’s election broadcasting rules were another factor that allowed Labour to catch up in the polls. These rules came into effect after the dissolution of parliament on 3 May and they impose stricter constraints on news reporting. Corbyn’s supporters believe it helped voters hear Labour’s message more directly, as opposed to through hostile distortions, and led to more accurate reporting of Labour policies. Labour also tightly controlled the ‘message’ it wanted to communicate to the public during the election campaign (Nunns 2018, 351). Nevertheless, the majority of national newspapers did not support Labour and right-wing newspapers continued to portray Corbyn and his allies as extremists sympathetic to terrorism (Ward and Wring 2018, 206–207). Even The Guardian, a supposedly ‘left-leaning’ broadsheet, did not fully endorse Corbyn until early June 2017 (Nunns 2018, 353). As Chapter 2 discussed, mainstream media outlets have strong online presence (Fenton 2016, 83) and shape the topics that are discussed on radio and television (Fielding 2015, 63). Small online news websites received significantly fewer visits compared to large and more established news sites (Media Reform Coalition 2019, 12–13). It has been suggested that young adults might rely on social media for their news. However, BBC News remained the most important source of news for all age groups (Ward and Wring 2018, 216). These factors suggest that there are limits to using online media as a platform to counter mainstream narratives.

There is evidence to suggest that Labour’s 2017 manifesto was one of the main causes that contributed to Labour’s unexpected electoral performance in 2017. Research by YouGov in 2017, for example, found that 28% of surveyed Labour voters cited the party’s manifesto or policies as the main reason for voting Labour (15% cited anti-Conservative sentiment, 13% cited their support for Corbyn, and 12% cited how the party
provided hope/fairness for the many) (Smith 2017). Chapter 4 discusses the policy proposals in detail. In brief, the 2017 manifesto proposed extensive state intervention and radical restructuring of the economy, including nationalisation of utility companies, support for alternative models of ownership, and the establishment of a National Investment Bank and regional development banks (Wainwright 2018, 38). Although May attempted to frame the election as a ‘Brexit election’, Labour successfully brought attention to other issues, particularly the effects of austerity on welfare. Moreover, shortly before the election, after the Manchester terrorist attack in May, Corbyn made a speech that linked public sector cuts to a weakening of the police force (Heath and Goodwin 2017, 348). This was a bold attempt to reshape narratives on terrorism and security issues as being about past foreign policy failures and the effects of austerity (Nunns 2018, 348–349; see also Ward and Wring 2018, 207–208).

The unexpected popularity of Labour’s 2017 manifesto and its electoral gains perhaps contributed to a leftwards shift in the ‘Overton window’ of British politics. Prior to the election, the Conservative Party under May had already adopted some of Labour’s policies under Miliband, such as an energy price cap and publication of pay ratios within companies (D’Urso 2017; Dresner 2016). During the 2017 election campaign, May argued that there was no ‘magic money tree’ that could satisfy everyone, and that it was necessary to bring public spending under control after previous mismanagement by Labour governments (Dearden 2017). However, since the election, the Conservatives have slowly turned away from austerity. For example, in June 2018, the Conservative Party announced tax increases to fund a 20 billion GBP increase in the budget of the National Health Service (NHS) by 2023 (Triggle 2018). May’s successor as Prime Minister and Leader of the Conservative Party, Boris Johnson, when opting for a snap election to seek a parliamentary majority and resolve the Brexit impasse in late 2019, also pledged to increase public spending.

The next section discusses the Conservative Party under Johnson and argues that it was more successful than Labour in uniting cross-class interests through effective electoral strategies and Brexit narratives, which enabled its election victory in 2019. The section also explores how Labour continued to suffer from internal conflicts during the 2019 election campaign, and how its 2019 manifesto, unlike its 2017 manifesto, was
criticised for being excessive and lacking focus in a Brexit dominated election. Together with other strategic errors, these factors help to explain why Labour suffered a massive defeat in 2019.

**Brexit and the 2019 General Election**

Labour’s unexpectedly positive performance at the 2017 General Election gave the Corbyn project more credibility. However, its electoral prospects under Corbyn in 2019 were very much complicated by the unresolved issue of Brexit. On the one hand, Corbyn is known to be a Eurosceptic and a large portion of Labour voters voted to leave the EU. There are arguments against the EU from the Left (for example, see Lapavitsas 2018, 2019). The EU’s state aid rules, for example, are seen as obstacles that prevent national governments from setting industrial development directions (Lapavitsas 2018). The EU is also seen as a fundamentally undemocratic institution that structurally embodies neoliberalism, with member countries that have highly unequal power (Lapavitsas 2019, 8–11, 70–71, 113, 121–122). On the other hand, 85% of Labour members supported a second Brexit referendum and 90% voted to remain in the EU (Gamble 2019, 6). Additionally, many figures in the shadow cabinet such as Emily Thornberry and Keir Starmer openly supported the ‘remain’ camp. As the following paragraphs discuss, Labour’s middle-ground position on Brexit was widely perceived as a major factor that contributed to their heavy defeat at the 2019 election. Other factors include Labour’s perceived inability to effectively tackle anti-Semitism in the Party, Corbyn’s decline in popularity, a strategically inefficient campaign, and a bloated manifesto that was less well-received than the 2017 manifesto.

Many studies suggest those who support Brexit tend to have low education and income, harbour political disaffection and anti-migrant sentiments, and live in areas characterised by high levels of unemployment and recent increases in immigration. This led many scholars to interpret Brexit as a reaction against globalisation by those people it had left marginalised (for example, see Hay 2019, 9; Rosamond 2019, 413). Individuals’ motivations to vote for Brexit, however, were driven by more than just economic interests. Some scholars have argued that people’s decisions to vote leave were based not only on risk assessments and cost–benefit calculations centred around economic and immigration issues, but also on emotional reactions to images of EU leaders, as well as leading
figures in the remain and leave camps (Clarke et al. 2017, 460–461). Both
economic and cultural insecurities factored into people’s voting behaviour
(Jennings and Stoker 2019, 159). Support for Brexit became tied up
with ‘the emotional politics of identity and subjectivity’ (Browning 2019,
222), as Leave campaigners appealed to people’s existing anxieties and
ontological insecurity to build nostalgic populist fantasy narratives about
Brexit - that it would bring freedom, sovereignty, control and agency, and
hence a sense of fulfilment (Browning 2019, 229–235).

Brexit dominated parliamentary politics throughout 2019 and there
were also many popular mobilisations on the issue, whether from
Remainers (e.g., the People’s Vote campaign) or Leavers (e.g., the Leave
Means Leave campaign). The newly established Brexit Party, led and
founded by the former leader of the UK Independence Party (UKIP)
and Member of the European Parliament (MEP), Nigel Farage, also
received growing support, particularly from former UKIP voters (Cutts
et al. 2019, 18). Notably, Farage was widely criticised for inciting racial
hatred through his anti-immigration ‘breaking-point’ poster during the
2016 referendum campaign. This prompted Boris Johnson to distance the
official Vote Leave campaign from Farage (Stewart and Mason 2016).

At the European Parliament election in May 2019, the Brexit Party
won the most UK seats (29 seats based on 32% of the popular vote) and
the pro-remain Liberal Democrats came second (16 seats based on 20% of
the vote) (Uberoi et al. 2019). In contrast, the Conservatives and Labour
won very few seats (4 and 10 seats respectively) (Uberoi et al. 2019).
In this polarised Brexit-dominated election, many of Labour’s traditional
white working class voters instead supported the Brexit party, whilst many
younger voters in cosmopolitan areas turned to the Liberal Democrats
(Cutts et al. 2019, 18). Even though voter turnout was only 37% (Uberoi
et al. 2019), the election result drove many in the Conservative and
Labour parties to rethink their positions on Brexit. Some suggested the
Conservative Party ought to win back Brexit Party supporters (which was
polling 12–16% support by September 2019) (Sabbagh 2019), whilst
some senior Labour figures, such as Shadow Foreign Secretary Emily
Thornberry, argued that Labour required a clearer position on Brexit and
that it ought to support a second referendum (Elgot and Mason 2019).
In early 2019, Labour’s position was to support a ‘soft Brexit’ that would
involve and a permanent customs union with the EU, as well as regula-
tory alignment on rights and protections (Finn 2019, 29). Nearer to the
December General Election, Labour promised that, within 6 months of
being in government, it would renegotiate a Brexit deal that would be more closely aligned with the EU’s rules on trade, the environment and workers’ rights, and that it would then allow the people to decide whether to accept the deal or ‘remain’ in another referendum (Parker and Blitz 2019). Corbyn maintained that Labour’s stance aimed to ‘bring people together’ and ‘give the people the final say’, and that he would adopt a neutral position during the referendum (Corbyn 2019). As discussed below, this position is widely perceived as costing Labour many of its ‘heartland’ seats in the North at the 2019 General Election.

Similar to Labour, the Conservative Party sought to maintain their traditional supporters that included both leave and remain voters (Cutts et al. 2019, 18). Nevertheless, after Boris Johnson became leader, the party’s commitment to Brexit was strengthen to the extent that it would accept a no-deal Brexit if necessary. Both Johnson and Dominic Cummings, who became Johnson’s chief advisor in 2019, were leading figures in the 2016 Vote Leave campaign. Further boosting his pro-Brexit image, Johnson challenged the parliamentary model of democracy in the UK by proroguing parliament for 5 weeks - an act widely criticised as an attempt to avoid scrutiny by parliament, which was taking measures to rule out a no-deal Brexit (for example, see Proctor 2019). The prorogation was later ruled unconstitutional by the Supreme Court. Nevertheless, it allowed Johnson to pursue what some commentators called a ‘people versus parliament’ narrative and unite Leavers behind him (for example, see Kibasi 2019). Johnson’s promise to ‘get Brexit done’ can be viewed as an attempt to recapture votes from the Brexit Party and attract votes from Leave supporters who traditionally vote Labour. By early September, polling averages suggested the Conservatives had managed to regain a significant proportion of support that had been lost to the Brexit Party (Sabbagh 2019). The Conservatives also tried to neutralise Labour’s popular anti-austerity position by promising more spending in politically sensitive areas, such as the NHS; Johnson pledged 1 billion GBP for immediate spending on equipments and upgrades for hospitals, and another 850 million GBP for 20 hospitals in the next 5 years (BBC 2019a). He also promised to hire an extra 20,000 new police officers by 2022 and increase funding for schools (BBC 2019a).

Shortly after parliament rejected his swift timetable for passing the Withdrawal Agreement Bill in October, Johnson won parliamentary support for a snap general election in December 2019. Labour under
Corbyn would therefore again challenge the Conservatives with a left-wing agenda that sought to capture people’s desires for change and popular participation in politics. However, by this point, the party was in disarray. Labour continued to face anti-Semitism accusations and the Chief Rabbi Ephraim Mirvis suggested that anti-Semitism in the party came from the very top (BBC 2019c). Corbyn polled badly throughout 2019; perhaps unsurprising given the amount of toxic news coverage he had received in the mainstream media since 2015. A YouGov poll in July suggested that many people thought Labour should change its leader (the top 3 most popular alternatives were future leader Sir Keir Starmer, John McDonnell and Emily Thornberry) (Wearmouth 2019). In September, the percentage of people who thought Johnson would make the best Prime Minister was double that of Corbyn (Pickard 2019b). Many Corbyn allies, such as Shadow Transport Secretary Andy McDonald, attributed some of the blame for Corbyn’s unpopularity to mainstream media, including the BBC, for allowing him to be unfairly ‘demonised and vilified’ and portrayed as an anti-Semite (Walker 2019).

There is also evidence to suggest that Labour ran an inefficient and ineffective campaign. Seat targeting reportedly suffered from a lack of planning (Stewart 2019b), and an internal party report pointed out that whilst door-to-door campaigning helped to increase turnout for Labour, it was badly organised. There was often a lack of campaign materials and it was unclear which key policies were to be promoted, especially since numerous different policies were released throughout the campaign (Proctor 2020). In addition, there were many accounts of internal infighting between senior figures in the leadership, as well as confusion about who was in charge of the campaign (for example, see the discussion in Stewart 2019b). Compared to the 2017 manifesto, the 2019 manifesto was significantly heavier on policy. Despite containing many interesting and progressive proposals (discussed in Chapter 4), the manifesto was criticised for being incoherent and unfocused. It was therefore difficult to communicate key policy ideas to voters and it contrasted sharply with the simple and focused Conservative slogan of ‘get Brexit done’ (Stewart 2019b; Syal et al. 2019). In addition, Labour’s policy of free high-speed broadband was perceived negatively by some voters as a ‘gimmick’ (Proctor and Murray 2020). Labour councillors have also argued that the leadership did not listen to their concerns, which helps to explain why the party failed to connect with voters (Butler 2020).
Labour activists put a great deal of work into online media during the campaign. Through its digital tool, ‘mycampaignmap.com’, Momentum mobilised its network of volunteers to canvass for Labour, and it also formed a team to create video campaign materials for social media (Rodgers 2019). However, the growing use of online media for political campaigning may not necessarily benefit the Left. As previously discussed, mainstream news organisations still dominate online news. Moreover, political advertising on social media can be used to target specific constituencies, yet, because expenditures are not counted as part of local constituency spending, this can undermine a level playing field at the local level (Moore 2019, 99). It also allows candidates with greater financial resources an extra advantage. Large personal data-gathering through social media additionally creates a situation where political campaigners are in a privileged position as they can use the data to predict people’s political views (Moore 2019, 95). This compromises the secrecy of people’s voting choices and leads to the possibility of targeted advertisements being used to discourage people from voting (Moore 2019, 95–97). Right-leaning groups in the UK, such as the Vote Leave campaign, have used large online data-gathering and analysis, but lack of regulation has meant insufficient scrutiny of how the data was used (Moore 2019, 101).

The Conservative Party effectively utilised digital advertising on platforms such as YouTube and Facebook during the campaign, both to widely disseminate a simple message on Brexit and to micro-target audiences based on their constituencies (The Economist 2020). According to the ‘We Are Social’ consultancy, although the Conservatives spent less than Labour and the Liberal Democrats on online advertising (Kelly and Blood 2019), it nevertheless succeeded in gaining 10% more engagement with its advertisements compared to Labour (The Economist 2020). Interestingly, there were also ‘shadow campaigns’ with unclear connections to political parties that spent half a million GBP on political advertising, including on Facebook and other channels, to promote issues relating to Brexit and tactical voting, and to campaign against Labour’s policies (Kelly et al. 2019). ‘First Draft’, a non-profit which monitors misinformation and disinformation online, claimed that 88% of the Conservatives’ Facebook ads in the first 4 days of December contained misleading information (Kelly and Blood 2019). The Conservatives also exploited Labour’s promise to renegotiate Brexit and have another referendum by using Facebook advertisements to target Leave voters in key Northern
and Midlands seats (O. Wright and Knowles 2019). To compensate for potential losses of votes from Conservative Remainers, ‘Onward’, a right-wing think tank, identified ‘Workington Man’ (older, white, non-graduate, northern, traditional Labour supporter who voted to leave the EU) as the type of voter the Conservatives needed to attract to win the election (ITV 2019; Martin 2019).

As the 2019 election result suggests, the Conservatives’ strategy seemed to pay off. The party gained 48 seats and won 365 seats in total (43.6% of total votes compared to 42.3% in 2017), which allowed it to form a government with a sizable majority of 80 and push through Brexit (Baker et al. 2020). In contrast, Labour lost 60 seats and only won 202 seats in total (32.1% of total votes compared to 40% in 2017) (Baker et al. 2020). A YouGov study of almost 500 voters who voted Labour in 2017 but not in 2019 suggests the reasons for this were: Corbyn’s leadership (35%), Labour’s Brexit position (19%), Labour’s perceived ability to implement their economic policies (16%), tactical voting (10% generally, 15% amongstRemainers), and other unspecified reasons (Curtis 2019).

It has been argued that the main reason the Conservative Party won the election was because it managed to consolidate votes from almost 75% of Leavers, whereas Labour received slightly less than 50% of votes from Remainers (approximately 20% voted for the Conservatives and roughly 20% voted for the Liberal Democrats) (Curtice 2020). Many Leavers and Remainers who voted Labour in 2017 instead voted for the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats in 2019 (Curtice 2020). Labour lost many of its traditional seats to the Conservatives in the so-called ‘red wall’ across the North and Midlands, such as Blyth Valley (Labour since 1950), Sedgefield (Tony Blair’s former constituency) and Bolsover (Dennis Skinner’s seat since 1970) (D. Wainwright 2019). Many Labour MPs and former MPs in Leave areas strongly criticised Corbyn’s leadership and his Brexit strategy after the election. Caroline Flint, for example, insisted that ‘Labour has ignored working-class voters who chose leave’ (Flint 2019).

Arguably, the ties between working class voters in the ‘red wall’ and the party began to weaken in the New Labour era, with many working class voters previously switching their support to other parties such as UKIP. Nevertheless, since the majority of the working class voted to leave the EU, the Conservative Party’s support for Brexit made it an increasingly appealing electoral choice between 2015 and 2019 (Evans and Mellon 2020).
It is worth noting that the Conservative Party won a significant parliamentary majority despite increasing its vote share by only 1.4% compared to 2017 (Norris 2019). In addition to the first-past-the-post electoral system and the disunity of Remainers, Norris (2019) argued that the Brexit Party, in deciding not to run candidates in Conservative-held seats, significantly benefited the Conservatives. Compared to other parties, Labour appears to have been more negatively affected by the Brexit Party. In constituencies where Brexit Party candidates ran, Labour’s vote share fell by 8.6% on average compared to 7.3% in other constituencies (Norris 2019). Norris (2019) also estimated that votes lost to the Brexit Party enabled the Conservatives to gain 20 former Labour seats, which doubled Johnson’s parliamentary majority.

The next section continues to analyse Labour’s 2019 electoral defeat, drawing from Hay’s (1999) conceptualisation of crisis narratives and structural contradictions, and Wright’s (2019) work on collective political actors. It also discusses future political challenges for the Labour Party.

**Political Narratives, Structural Contradictions and Fragmented Voters**

In light of the 2019 General Election, this section argues that the Left should consider more seriously the construction of crisis narratives, and also people’s cultural identities, in its attempt to create broad-based support for its political project. As the previous section discussed, Brexit and the narratives surrounding it played an important role in determining the outcome of the 2019 election. The following paragraphs discuss Hay’s (1999) conceptualisation of crisis narratives to help analyse the importance of Brexit in the election, as well as Labour’s political challenges and Wright’s (2019) ideas about creating collective political actors to support social transformation.

Hay (1999) suggested that Gramsci’s ‘war of position’ could be reinterpreted as ‘a war of competing narratives, competing constructions of crisis, increasingly fought out in the media between conflicting political elites …’ (Hay 1999, 336). The discursive construction of crisis narratives arises when fundamental contradictions within the current state regime threatens social stability and can no longer be solved through ‘minor tinkering’ within the current system (Hay 1999, 329–330). ‘Crisis’ is conceptualised as a moment where political actors widely perceive that ‘decisive intervention’ can and must be made (Hay 1999, 323). There
are likely to be competing political narratives of structural crisis that resonate with (but also simplify) the material conditions experienced by citizens. Distinct and separate events are also interpreted to support these narratives. Eventually a ‘dominant crisis narrative’ that emerges will form the basis of a new state project and new political economic consensus, even though it might not fully address the complex underlying causes of structural contradictions (Hay 1999, 331–335).

It can be argued that Johnson’s 2019 General Election victory was based on the Conservative Party’s successful attempt to capitalise on the dominant crisis narrative that blends political discontent with Brexit promises. As discussed in the previous section, the support for Brexit was driven by economic and cultural insecurities (Jennings and Stoker 2019, 159), and was also tied up with ‘the emotional politics of identity and subjectivity’ (Browning 2019, 222). Pro-Brexit campaigners had promoted nostalgic populist fantasy narratives about Brexit and anxieties tended to arise when the ‘fantasmatic’ narratives were threatened, as can be seen from how some Leavers blamed Remainers, civil servants and judges for what they saw as unreasonable attempts to obstruct Brexit (Browning 2019, 238–239). This played into Johnson’s ‘people versus parliament’ narrative, which suggested a singular drastic solution to break the political deadlock and ‘get Brexit done’.

The political alliance of those in the leave camp, however, is likely to unravel after the Withdrawal Agreement passed through parliament in January 2020. Many promises made by the Vote Leave campaign in 2016 have already been widely challenged. For example, Johnson and Vote Leave claimed that leaving the EU would allow the UK to spend 350 million GBP extra per week on the NHS, instead of as payment to the EU, but Sir David Norgrove, Chair of the UK Statistics Authority, argued that this figure did not take into account payments from the EU to the UK (see the discussion in Lee 2020). As discussions proceed on the UK’s future relationship with the EU, it might become increasingly clear that Brexit cannot satisfy all Leavers’ wishes. Although the ‘hyperglobalist neoliberals’ and ‘nativist economic nationalists’ allied during the EU referendum, they have fundamentally different visions for the future direction of the UK economy; the former wants to commit the UK more fully to the market economy, whereas the latter prefers to pursue state-directed industrial strategies (Rosamond 2019, 414–415).

The differences between the ‘discursive construction of crisis narratives’ and actual ‘structural contradictions’ (Hay 1999, 323) are also
likely to become more pronounced in the post-Brexit era. As Hay (1999) argued, the new state project founded on the dominant crisis narrative might selectively address some contradictions or symbolically respond to the ‘crisis’ as constructed in the narrative, or both (Hay 1999, 337). The pursuit of neoliberal policies during the Thatcher era, for example, corresponded with the dominant narration of crisis in the 1970s, which portrayed the interventionist state as the culprit. Even though Thatcherism did not resolve structural contradictions, it was arguably a successful state project that reduced people’s expectations of the state, with occasional suppressions of dissent (Hay 1999, 325, 337–338). An interventionist and developmental state project, on the other hand, might arguably have been more successful in solving fundamental contradictions in the British political economy (Hay 1999, 338).

It has been suggested that there are ‘multiple imagined Brexits’ (Hay 2019, 15). Nevertheless, given competitive global economic pressures, the post-Brexit UK economy is likely to be characterised by more intense forms of austerity and the neoliberal growth model, which contradict the economic interests of those Leavers who were ‘left behind’ by neoliberal globalisation (Hay 2019, 15–17). Moreover, Brexit is likely to harm Leave areas in the North more than Southern areas and exacerbate uneven development due to the uneven effects of trade disruptions, losses of EU structural funds and regional support, lower government funding, and rising living costs outside of London (Jessop 2018, 1741–1742). Brexit might also complicate the UK’s political union, since only 2 out of 4 constituent nations (England and Wales) voted to leave (Hay 2019, 9, 16). Together with the economic effects of the coronavirus outbreak in 2020, which is briefly discussed in Chapter 4, structural problems in the British political economy, such as high levels of inequality, are likely to become more prominent in the post-Brexit era.

Labour under Corbyn arguably tried to put forward a form of crisis narrative based on its analysis of the British political economy’s structural problems (discussed in Chapter 4). During the 2019 election campaign, Corbyn also tried, unsuccessfully, to reframe the Brexit discussion by maintaining that the government was putting the NHS at risk by including it in ongoing post-Brexit UK–US trade agreement negotiations (BBC 2019b). As previously discussed, Labour suffered from various problems during the campaign and adopted a middle-ground position on Brexit that alienated voters, which caused it to lose the election along with many traditional Labour seats in the North and the Midlands.
In addition to convincing voters that its economic policies are credible, winning over fragmented groups of voters remains one of Labour’s most important political challenges. Chapter 2 discussed how increased polarisation in the voting behaviour of people located in ‘cities’ and ‘towns’ makes it difficult for national parties to build a broad-based political alliance. Younger, socially liberal, more educated and ethnically diverse city dwellers increasingly vote Labour, whilst town dwellers who tend to be older, more socially conservative and less ethnically diverse increasingly vote Conservative (Jennings and Stoker 2019, 155–156, 161). Brexit further polarised voters at the 2019 election, which made it difficult for political parties to target ‘the median voter’ in both Remain and Leave camps (The Economist 2019). After the 2019 election, there was much discussion about how to win back the Labour heartlands (for example, see Nandy 2019). However, this should not be done at the cost of alienating Labour’s other bases of support that were inspired by Corbyn, such as the young and ethnic minorities in urban areas. As Sarkar (2019) argued, Northerners in traditional Labour seats are not representative of the entire working class, which Labour is supposed to represent. Arguably, the definition of ‘working class’ in contemporary Britain should be broadened to take into account generational wealth gaps and situations facing white collar workers in precarious jobs, amongst other factors (Sarkar 2019). Moreover, strategies to win back voters in Scotland ought to be developed if Labour hopes to form government. Whereas the ‘cities and towns divide’ characterises voting behaviour in England and Wales, Scotland’s voting behaviour in the past decade indicates rising nationalism (Jennings and Stoker 2019, 156, 162). Labour has lost dominance of the Scottish Parliament to the Scottish National Party (SNP) since 2007, and in the 2015 UK General Election it managed to retain only one Scottish seat. Corbyn inherited this problem but was unable to reverse Labour’s decline in popularity in Scotland (Finn 2019, 23–24).

To establish broad-based alliances of fragmented voters to win the next election, Labour and the Left might benefit from reflecting on Wright’s (2019) proposal about the formation of collective actors to drive social transformation. To mobilise individuals for a sustained political project, it is insufficient to take into account people’s economic interests; people’s (often competing) identities and values must also be considered. Wright (2019) noted that class identities are important but that they might be insufficient as a basis to foster solidarity. Other forms of non-class identities, such as race and gender, might on appearance have identity-interests
that contradict class interests, but, if values align across identities (e.g. shared egalitarian beliefs), these non-class identities may still be used to aid the Left’s political project (Wright 2019, 133–138). In other words, values ‘constitute a potential basis for constructing political unity across these diverse identities’ (Wright 2019, 138). The Left might still be able to attract working class people who are sympathetic to right-wing populism, but this depends on political contexts, particularly political cultures, rules and institutions (Wright 2019, 139–141). It is also important to link political parties with left-leaning grassroots groups, which can together push to reform the ‘political rules of the game’ in their favour (Wright 2019, 141).

As previously discussed, Labour’s 2019 election campaign focused on the importance of structural economic reforms and appealed to people’s material interests, but in an overwhelmingly disjointed manner. Labour was unable to construct a simplified and compelling narrative relative to that of the Conservatives, who successfully capitalised on Brexit narratives linked with cultural identity and used strategic political targeting to secure the support of Northern voters. Many left-leaning scholars have noted the importance of changing the political narrative, and suggested that the Left could learn from the popularisation of Thatcherism that took place years before Thatcher’s electoral victory (Berry 2019; Coates 2017, 90). As Coates (2017) argued, ‘[p]olitical power is ultimately about establishing the hegemony of ideas in the minds of voters, and the Right has been extremely effective at hegemonic politics of late. It is time, therefore, for the centre-left to imitate and outmatch them’ (Coates 2017, 90). This does not mean that persistent ideological challenges to the status quo need to be prioritised over winning elections. The choices before the Labour Party should not be framed as a binary choice between either ‘winning elections’ or ‘commitment to the socialist cause’, since in the long run they are both important and complementary. As discussed in Chapter 4, Labour’s 2019 manifesto contained important policy ideas that could radically transform the British political economy. However, the Conservative government under Johnson might introduce measures that deepen structural inequality and imbalances in the British political economy in ways that are difficult to reverse. Chapter 4 also returns to Wright’s (2019) ideas to reflect on the future of the Labour Party after Corbyn.
Conclusion

This chapter has argued that the dominant material, institutional and ideological structures of the British political economy created seeds of dissent that partly grew into grassroots support for Jeremy Corbyn in 2015. Nevertheless, the dominant historical structures, characterised by economic neoliberalism, conservative ideas and political institutions, continued to provide a ‘frame of action’ that severely limited the possibility of a radical left-wing Labour Party winning power. In addition to Labour’s strategic errors during the 2019 election campaign, the UK’s preoccupation with Brexit stole the limelight away from the party’s radical reform agenda. Ultimately, Johnson’s Conservative Party was more successful at creating a new right-of-centre ‘hegemonic bloc’ based on the propagation of populist Brexit narratives. Nevertheless, Labour under Corbyn was able to propagate alternative economic ideas and policies to a certain extent. It also challenged political norms through the promotion of extra-parliamentary forces and grassroots political mobilisation. To achieve broad-based political support, it is suggested in this chapter that Labour might need to pay more attention to people’s identities and values in addition to their economic interests.

This chapter has also pointed to the importance of political narratives and the interconnections between ideas and material realities, which relates to one of the main arguments of this book - the Labour Party necessarily needs to engage in consistent ideological challenges to the status quo if it wants to drive progressive socialist changes in society. Nevertheless, it is important to make a clear distinction between structural contradictions and dominant crisis narratives. As Chapter 4 discusses further, structural problems in the British political economy are unlikely to wither away after Brexit. The post-Brexit and post-coronavirus economy might also create a climate where Labour’s alternatives to neoliberal economics could be more relevant than ever.

The next chapter discusses in detail Labour’s attempts under Corbyn to challenge the neoliberal economic status quo and push for a new economics that works for the majority, with goals such as job creation, social care and environmental sustainability. It also discusses the future for Labour and for the Left in light of the 2019 General Election defeat.
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