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David Dimbleby

ROBERT FORD
TIM BALE

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PAULA SURRIDGE

The BRITISH GENERAL ELECTION of 2019

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Robert Ford · Tim Bale ·
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The British General Election of 2019

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Robert Ford
University of Manchester
Manchester, UK

Will Jennings
School of Economic, Social and
Political Science
University of Southampton
Southampton, Hampshire, UK

Tim Bale
School of Politics
and International Relations
Queen Mary University of London
London, UK

Paula Surridge
University of Bristol
Bristol, Avon, UK

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Foreword

Rob Ford and his team have produced the twenty-first volume in a series of British general election studies that started with the 1945 election. The series has continued without interruption and has no counterpart anywhere else. The 2019 election is remarkable for being the third general election in four years, a unique event in modern British politics.

R. S. McCallum, the originator of the series, envisaged his book on the 1945 general election as an exercise in contemporary history. In a delightful phrase, he said the election 'must be photographed in flight, studied and analysed' and should be of service to future historians. He also enlisted a young numerate undergraduate to provide 'some statistics for my book'. Nobody could anticipate that over 75 years later, the book would be the first in such a long-running series and that the undergraduate David Butler would become inseparable from it; the last one he co-authored was on the 2005 election.

There has been some debate about the predictability in the contents of the books, as befits a series. Michael Howard, then Conservative leader, commented that the 2005 book was 'formulaic'. It might be countered that the series provides the material to plot the changes and continuities in, for example, candidate backgrounds, opinion polling, media coverage, election strategies and so on. But the authors, themselves a changing cast, have had to take account of so many changes in context, notably the fragmentation of the party system, the blanket media coverage and the big shifts in the forces shaping voting behaviour. *The British General Election of 2019* balances these changes and

continuities admirably, making use of so many interviews with key decision makers in the parties and providing detailed and sophisticated analysis of the results. An understanding of contemporary British politics serious can start in no better place than the present Nuffield study.

The first general early election studies were sponsored by Nuffield College. David Butler was a Fellow of the College and his co-authors until 1970 were based at Oxford. Although still called Nuffield election studies, the authorial connection has been steadily extinguished since then. Ford is based at Manchester, Bale at Queen Mary College, Jennings at Southampton and Surridge at Bristol.

As the co-author with David of 12 of the election studies, I was always grateful for the professionalism and adaptability of our publisher Palgrave Macmillan. The books are feats of teamwork—this one perhaps more than any of the earlier ones—and the publishing team has been a crucial player.

Altrincham, UK Dennis Kavanagh

The original version of the book was revised: Post-publication corrections have been incorporated. The corrections to the book are available at https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74254-6_16

Preface

This volume is the twenty-first in a series which originated in 1945 in Nuffield College, Oxford. The author of that first volume, Ronald McCallum, was irritated by constant misinterpretations of the 1918 election and hoped his book would provide an objective record of events to combat such myths. This is the first volume since 1951 not to feature at least one of David Butler, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley on the authors list. While the team is new, the aim of this latest entry in the world's longest-running series of elections studies remains the same: to provide an accurate and, as far as possible, impartial account and explanation of the general election.

This book, like its predecessors, would not be possible without the generous support and cooperation of many others. Those who worked on the election for the various different parties were immensely generous with their time and thoughts, usually via Zoom video call as the restrictions of the global COVID-19 pandemic rendered face-to-face interviews impossible. They are not named or listed here as many spoke on condition of strict confidentiality, but we hope that the story we tell is one they recognise, even if they do not agree with all the conclusions we draw. Unsourced quotes used in the book are taken from these interviews, unless otherwise indicated. Many of our sources also reviewed draft chapters, suggesting improvements and challenging us to improve our thinking, for which we are again grateful. All remaining errors belong to the authors alone.

The argument over Brexit dominated this Parliament from start to finish, as Theresa May sought to work to the two-year deadline she herself had triggered by invoking Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty in March 2017. Unpicking over 40 years of political and economic integration in such a timeframe would be an impossible task for any Prime Minister, and was made more challenging still by May's failure to secure a parliamentary majority at the 2017 election. Both parties, and Parliament itself, began to buckle under the pressures of contradictory demands and impossible deadlines. Every vote became a knife-edge drama, briefly turning Commons debates into an unlikely spectator sport—one of the authors even noticed that his local pub began switching its TVs from Sky Sports to the Parliament Channel so that punters could cheer on their preferred outcome during crunch votes. The pressures proved too much for May, a leader distrusted from the outset by her party's Brexiteer wing, and who lacked the flexibility or powers of persuasion necessary to overcome this distrust or build bridges with opposition MPs. Brexit defined her and defeated her.

May was succeeded by Boris Johnson, once the most prominent Conservative in the 2016 Leave campaign, who had resigned from May's Cabinet in the summer of 2018 in protest against compromises with the EU he claimed were unacceptable, and then, a year later, successfully bid for the top job by promising a more hard-line approach on Brexit. Johnson delivered on his promise from the outset, with several dramatic and deeply controversial gestures designed to underscore his determination to resolve Brexit without delay. He also confounded critics by securing alterations to May's Brexit deal which proved sufficient to win over both his party's Eurosceptics and pro-Brexit Labour MPs. However, unable to force it through Parliament by his self-imposed deadline, he then took the matter to the electorate, urging voters to give him the majority needed to implement his supposedly 'oven-ready' Brexit deal and finally 'get Brexit done'.

British voters were thus, for the second time, invited to the polls early by a Conservative Prime Minister seeking a Brexit mandate. This time, however, the Labour opposition proved unable to shift the focus of the campaign away from Brexit, where their own position was an unappealing compromise, and towards domestic policy. There was no repeat of the 2017 campaign drama. This was a more conventional British election, where the party that started with a poll lead, a better-regarded

leader and a more popular policy on the most important issue of the day retained all three from start to finish, then won by a margin largely predictable from the final polling. Several recent elections have been marked by high levels of campaign volatility. This was not one of them. The result, though, was historic—a first large Conservative majority for more than 30 years, capping over two decades of recovery for the party since its collapse in 1997. While authors of this series have long been justly sceptical about naming elections, this was in many key ways the 'Brexit election'. It was called over Brexit by a party which campaigned relentlessly on the issue, voters' Brexit preferences were critical in determining the result, and the conclusion of Britain's fraught exit process from the EU was the most significant immediate consequence of the result. The choice voters made in 2019 will resonate for a long time.

We are grateful to all of our contributors, whose names are listed in the table of contents, and all of whom met tough deadlines in demanding conditions and dealt with our many editorial requests with graceful dispatch. We are also grateful to the authors of the preceding three volumes, Dennis Kavanagh and Philip Cowley, who have provided generous support to the new team, including the contribution of a foreword (Kavanagh) and a chapter (Cowley) to this latest volume. In addition to contributing a chapter and the analysis in Appendix 1, John Curtice, Stephen Fisher and Patrick English also supplied the data from which Appendix 2 has been compiled.

The structure of this book once again follows the broad template of previous volumes in the series, with some variations to accommodate the context of this election. A separate chapter on Brexit is once again necessary, given the issue's dominance of the campaign and the preceding Parliament. We once again open with a chapter on the decision to call an early election. Recent volumes have acknowledged the diverging political context of Scotland with a separate chapter; we expand this into a chapter covering politics in all three of the devolved nations. We have also expanded the remit of the broadcasting chapter to reflect the growing blurring together of broadcast and online campaign coverage. This volume also introduces a chapter analysing the election result at the individual level and promotes the traditional appendix analysis of geographical voting patterns into the main text. Our story ends, like most of its predecessors, with the announcement of the election result, with only brief attention to its aftermath.

None of the authors could possibly have completed this book in the middle of a global pandemic without the amazing forbearance and support of their respective families and especially their respective partners/spouses. Rob would like to thank Maria, Zofia and Adam for putting up with far too many conversations about the BBC—Brexit, Boris and Corbyn. Tim would like to thank Jackie. Paula would like to thank Neil, Thomas and Daniel who have had to forgo far too many family game afternoons. Will would like to thank Natalie and Arthur for their support and patience.

We are also grateful to colleagues who have supported this project in various ways. We owe a special debt of gratitude once again to Wes Ball, who provided invaluable background research and support for Chapters 4, 6 and 7; to Chris Butler for his vital research and support for Chapter 5; and to Ruth Puddefoot for her research contributing to Chapter 9. Thanks also to Siddharth Singh Ahlawat, Nick Allen, Jack Bailey, Matthew Bailey, Martha Bearne, Daniel Braby, Hannah Bunting, David Cowling, Daniel Devine, Alhussein Elrayah, Ed Fieldhouse, Louisa Gabriel, Jennifer Gaskell, Isla Glaister, Matthew Goodwin, Jane Green, Robert Hutton, Laurence Janta-Lipinski, Ian Jones, John Kenny, Beth Mann, Siobhan McAndrew, Lawrence McKay, Jon Mellon, Neil Moss, Tim Oliver, Nick Or, Chris Prosser, Colin Rallings, Andra Roescu, Georgia Shepherd, Maria Sobolewska, Gerry Stoker, Patrick Sturgis, Michael Thrasher, Joe Twyman, Viktor Orri Valgarðsson, Julia Walker, Ian Warren, Paul Webb, Stuart Wilks-Heeg, Christopher Wlezien and Negus Woldegiorgis.

The writing of this book was aided by other excellent accounts of the election, the Parliament and the political parties which came out as it was being produced. These included Gabriel Pogrund and Patrick Maguire's Left Out, David Kogan's Protest and Power, Anthony Seldon and Raymond Newell's May at 10, and Jonathan Tonge, Stuart Wilks-Heeg and Louise Thompson's Britain Votes 2019. We also owe a great debt of gratitude to the UK in a Changing Europe initiative, whose 'Brexit Witness Archive' project was a treasure trove of insights, and will be a vital resource for future historians seeking to understand the domestic and international politics of the UK's departure from the EU. We are indebted to all of these sources and many others for helping to inform our analysis. We do not agree with these authors and sources on every point, but their insights have enriched our own work.

We are also indebted to all of those who have allowed us to reproduce material. This includes the political parties, who all generously allowed us to reproduce campaign materials. We are also once again grateful to Britain's extraordinary talented political cartoonists. Christian Adams, Dave Brown, Ben Jennings, Nicola Jennings, Graham Keyes, Morten Morland, Martin Rowson, Chris Riddell and Martyn Turner all granted us permission to use their outstanding images, and the book is all the better for it. We are also grateful to News UK for granting permissions to use Morten Morland's cartoons. The majority of photos in the plates section at the front, and in the main chapters, come courtesy of either Alamy or Getty. We are also grateful to the anonymous source who provided the cameraphone photo from inside Southside on election night (p. 261).

Rob Ford would like to acknowledge the funding provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the UK in a Changing Europe initiative Rapid Reaction Funding Scheme for funding research on the Labour Party and Brexit, which has contributed to this volume. Tim Bale would like to acknowledge the funding provided by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) for his research (conducted with Paul Webb and Monica Poletti) on party members (grant numbers ES/M007537/1 and ES/T015632/1). Will Jennings would like to acknowledge funding from the University of Southampton to support research interviews and the ESRC for his research on political trust and UK polling (ES/S009809/1 and ES/S000380/1). Paula Surridge would like to acknowledge a University Research Fellowship from the University of Bristol, which allowed her to have a period of study leave covering the period including the election and its aftermath.

Finally, the author team would like to thank our editors Ambra Finotello and Rebecca Roberts, copy-editor Jon Lloyd and the whole team at Palgrave Macmillan for helping us to tell the story of an extraordinary election.

Manchester, UK — Robert Ford
London, UK — Tim Bale
Southampton, UK — Will Jennings
Bristol, UK — Paula Surridge
May 2021

Praise for *The British General Election of 2019*

"If we journalists write the first draft of history, we rely on academia to produce the definitive version when it comes to General Elections. The authors of *The British General Election of 2019* are the experts we—and the nation—need to tell us what really happened and to explain why. Never has this been more important. This was a truly transformative election, as Boris Johnson assembled a new winning Conservative coalition of voters and a record number of inexperienced MPs ended up in Parliament. Painstakingly and perceptively, this essential book exposes the sources of what is going on in British politics today."

—Adam Boulton, Editor at Large, *Sky News*

"An exhaustive, well-researched, informative and highly readable account. A must for anyone who wants to understand British politics."

—Stephen Bush, Political Editor, *New Statesman*

"An invaluable account, superbly researched, of one of the most significant periods of modern British political history. Historians will look back one day in wonder that the UK of all places came to be so infected by the virus of populism that Boris Johnson became Prime Minister. This will be an important part of that story. A must-read for anyone wanting to understand how Brexit, a changed Labour Party and a changed Tory Party combined to give the Tories a majority they are now exploiting to the full, and Labour a disastrous defeat from which they are struggling to recover."

—Alastair Campbell, Editor at Large, *New European*

"A comprehensive romp through the dramatic run-up to the 2019 general election, the culmination of several electrifying years which transformed British politics. From Getting Brexit Done, through Jeremy Corbyn's leadership to the state of the Union, the authors tell the compelling story of an election that fundamentally redrew the political map. Packed with anecdotes, data and analysis, this is a must read for anybody who wants to understands what comes next."

—Pippa Crerar, Political Editor of the *Daily Mirror*

"To be able to identify every tree but never lose sight of the wood is a very difficult skill, but one these authors possess. The result is an adornment to the important series to which this book belongs. A consequential account of a consequential election."

—Daniel Finkelstein, *Times* Columnist, Conservative Member of the House of Lords and Chair of Onward think tank

"This is such a fascinating, detailed and well-sourced account that anyone wanting to go near another election should not only read it but keep it as a talisman against making the same mistakes again. It's a rare mix of authoritative and funny."

—Isabel Hardman, Assistant Editor, *The Spectator* and Author of *Why We Get The Wrong Politicians*

"A riveting read, explaining the deep currents running through the 2019 "Brexit election" and the way the country's political map was changed beyond recognition. Fresh insights from the people in the room bring this remarkable story to life."

—George Parker, Political Editor of the *Financial Times*

"This is more than the definitive study of the last general election: it is a map and compass for anyone trying to navigate the politics that that event has bequeathed us, including the remaking of the Conservative coalition and Labour's steady decline. Existing evidence, new interviews and analysis are bound together tightly but with flair and verve. The book, justly, will serve as a resource for any student of politics for years to come."

—Gabriel Pogrund, Whitehall Correspondent, *The Sunday Times* and Author of *Left Out*

"The *British General Election* series has charted the ebbs and flows of electoral politics for three-quarters of a century. The new team maintain the standard of their predecessors with a mix of shrewd judgement, pertinent comment, and robust statistical analysis."

—Colin Rallings, Emeritus Professor of Politics, University of Plymouth

"The authoritative account by an alpha team of political scientists. Lucid explanation of complex events and forces is combined with penetrating analysis of the causes and effects of a highly consequential election."

—Andrew Rawnsley, Chief Political Commentator of *The Observer* and Author of *The End of the Party*

"This is the definitive guide to one of the most important elections in British history. It is full of the best insights, inside accounts of the thinking of the different parties, and what is now established as the best statistical analysis led by Professor Sir John Curtice. The new authors have managed to maintain and even enhance the authority of the long-running series, which is now as essential a part of the British election tradition as the motorcade to Buckingham Palace for the winner to be invited to form a government."

—John Rentoul, Chief Political Commentator, *The Independent*

"This book provides the definitive study of the 2019 UK General Election. It is brilliantly written in easy accessible language, and yet it simultaneously offers a sophisticated statistical analysis of the increasingly fractured and complex landscape of British electoral politics. It should be compulsory reading for anyone who wishes to understand both the electoral result in 2019 and the likely prospects of the major parties in the future."

—David Sanders FBA, Professor of Government, University of Essex

"From the role of Brexit, to perceptions of the party leaders, to the election's consequences: this is the authoritative account of the 2019 general election campaign and is required reading for anyone with an interest in contemporary British politics."

—Sonia Sodha, Columnist and Leader Writer, *The Observer*

"The essential guide to the Get Brexit Done campaign of 2019, from the UK's foremost elections experts. How Boris Johnson was able to bulldoze his way to a majority; what went wrong for Jeremy Corbyn, and much else besides. A must-read."

—Heather Stewart, Political Editor, *The Guardian*

"This book is essential reading for anyone wanting to get under the skin of the most consequential election for decades. The authors marshal a wide range of essential sources with political nous to provide key insights into the Brexit maelstrom out of which the election sprang, and the dramatic realignment which voters then delivered. This is a foundational text for understanding a political revolution which will continue to play out for years to come."

—Mark Wallace, CEO, *ConservativeHome*

"The decade just passed had no fewer than four extraordinary elections. For those who want to understand what each of them meant, the Palgrave Macmillan guides are nothing of seminal- allowing us to understand what really mattered, what really happened amid the ever amplifying noise. The 2019 edition is no exception and given it coüvers perhaps the most significant election of the four, it's the most important. Perhaps the most frequent question I'm asked by exasperated viewers and readers is 'what the hell has happened in politics?'- from now on I'll simply refer them to this book."

—Lewis Goodall, *BBC's Newsnight* and Author of *Left for Dead? The Strange Death and Rebirth of the Labour Party*

"An unmissable retelling of one of the most complex and politically brutal periods we may ever know, and how it shaped the political landscape we have today."

—Kate McCann, Political Correspondent at *Sky*

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