attention). Taken as a whole, however, *Dickens and Democracy* contributes greatly to understandings of Dickens, the politics of the Victorian novel, and the role of print culture in modern democracy. "[R]epresenting the People," Berman observes, "remains a vital and pressing challenge" (327).

Paul Whiteley, Harold D. Clarke, Matthew Goodwin and Marianne C. Stewart. Brexit Britain: The Consequences of the Vote to Leave the European Union

Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023. Pp. 280. $60.00 (cloth).

Andrew Gamble

University of Sheffield
Email: a.m.gamble@sheffield.ac.uk

Eight years have passed since the Brexit referendum in 2016. Will it be seen by future historians as a watershed in Britain's political and economic development or only as an interlude in the long history of British decline? This book provides useful analysis and data which may help them decide. It is the follow-up volume to the authors' earlier study of why Britain voted to leave the EU. The current volume traces the consequences of that vote, focusing on the two general elections of 2017 and 2019 and the European Parliament election in 2019. The authors provide a narrative of what they call the serious and protracted political and constitutional crisis into which the Brexit referendum plunged the UK polity. Britain experienced a deep political polarization and the future not just of the party system but of the United Kingdom itself came into question.

The main reason for the turmoil after 2016 was the gulf which opened between plebiscitary democracy and representative democracy. There were sound reasons why the British had tended to shun referendums, regarding them in Attlee's words as the tools of dictators and demagogues. No one had given serious thought to what would happen if the government held a referendum and then lost it. As the authors note, many of the problems of Brexit stemmed from this fact. Fifty two percent of voters supported Leave in the referendum, but only 25 percent of MPs. There was majority support for Remain among Conservative MPs and also in Cameron's cabinet (twenty-four out of thirty). In these circumstances it is hardly surprising that the referendum result brought a clash between two principles of democratic legitimacy. Theresa May was determined that Brexit should mean Brexit but she also thought that because the referendum vote had been so close and because two of the four UK nations had voted Remain, the government needed to find a compromise that respected the vote to Leave but also kept the UK in a close relationship with the European Union. Boris Johnson and Brexit purists aided by the Tory newspapers disagreed and demanded a hard Brexit, but until the 2019 election they did not have the votes in Parliament to deliver it.

Brexit was also unusual because it was a position issue that divided and polarized opinion. The authors argue, in line with their earlier work, that valence issues such as the economy, health, education, and crime are much more important in shaping electoral outcomes than position issues. Using advanced statistical techniques they show that the 2017 and even the

2019 elections are best understood in valence terms. It was the relative standing of the parties on the economy and the popularity of their leaders that shaped the outcome of those elections rather than Brexit itself. With Brexit fading in importance as a political issue after 2020, the authors conclude that many of the narratives which saw Brexit driving a permanent realignment of British politics are false. The strong recovery of the Labour party in 2023 bears this out. The authors suggest that few of the Red Wall seats captured in 2017 and 2019 will remain Conservative after the next election. The debacle of the Truss premiership ranks with Black Wednesday in 1992 and the financial crash in 2008 as a seismic political event that destroys the reputation of the incumbent party for economic competence.

If this analysis is correct, it raises a number of questions. First, why has an anti-immigrant and populist nationalist movement not become embedded in Britain, in sharp contrast to so many other western democracies? UKIP and later the Brexit party were very important catalysts in winning the Referendum and then ensuring a hard Brexit was delivered. But they have failed to break the British party system. The dominance of the Conservatives and Labour, despite everything, remains. Second, will Brexit have any significant long-term consequences, either for the party system, for the Union, or for British policy? A large majority of voters now think Brexit was a mistake and has been negative rather than positive. The Sunak government accordingly has been making pragmatic adjustments to ensure a much closer relationship with the European Union. This trend is likely to become even stronger if Labour wins the next general election. The book strikes different notes on this, presumably reflecting the different perspectives of the authors. At one point (18) the claim is made that Brexit exposed the fact that millions of people felt left behind not just by the elite consensus on EU membership but by the arrival and acceleration of globalization, immigration, and social liberalism. But the evidence presented in the book seems to discount this. Whatever Brexit governments have done since 2016, they have promoted globalization not reversed it, they have boosted immigration not restricted it, and they have been ineffective in resisting social liberalism. In Brexit Britain the electoral beneficiary so far of this backsliding has not been populist nationalists but Labour, using classic valence issues to put itself in a strong position to win the next election. The last paragraph of the book appears to contradict the analysis of the previous three hundred pages, claiming that "Britain's future lies in the hands of its own people and in 2016 these people spoke. They sought to reverse the growing internationalism, cosmopolitanism and globalisation advocated by elites in Britain and across the Western world" (316). That may be a good summary of what some Brexiters and one of the authors believe. But it is not what this book shows. Its great merit is that it sets out to puncture the myths of Brexiters and Remainers alike, deconstructing their grand narratives by focusing on the prosaic realities of electoral politics.