Grimsby — a once-thriving fishing port on England’s Eastern coast — is the kind of working-class town that Americans might recognize. For decades, it voted for the country’s left-leaning party: In every election since 1945, Grimsby has sent a member of the Labour Party to Parliament.

Three weeks from now, that streak may end.

Many Grimsby residents, frustrated with their town’s decline, have decided that the Labour Party is no longer on their side, as The Economist explains. The forcing mechanism seems to have been Brexit. More than 70 percent of Grimsby voters supported leaving the European Union in the 2016 referendum, and they appear to like the full-throated pro-Brexit stance of Boris Johnson, the Conservative prime minister.

Conservatives have already won control of the local government in Grimsby, and a new poll shows the Conservative candidate for Parliament ahead by 13 percentage points. The election will be held Dec. 12.

“A realignment in British politics may be in the making,” The Economist explains. A good chunk of the electorate in working-class towns like
Grimsby have come to see the Labour Party as big-city elitists, rather than blue-collar allies.

The Economist piece caught my eye partly because I’m reading a 2017 book called “Democracy for Realists: Why Elections Do Not Produce Responsive Government,” by two political scientists, Christopher Achen and Larry Bartels. They argue (as Vox’s Sean Illing has summarized) that all politics is identity politics.

Voters don’t tend to make decisions based on which party offers policies favorable to them but instead on which party is in tune with a big part of their social identities. And social identity can be related to class, race, religion and age, among other things. The key, for a political party, is persuading voters that we’re on your side.

Left-leaning parties, like Labour in Britain and the Democrats in the United States, used to win elections in large part through class identity. They now struggle to do so, for a complicated mix of reasons — including both the parties’ own mistakes and a pattern of race-baiting by conservative parties.

How can the left win again in places like Grimsby or, say, Ohio? It doesn’t yet have an answer. Full-throated leftism doesn’t seem to work, based on the Labour party’s current standing in the polls and on recent American political history. Nor does it work to call your opponents racist. And while it may help to offer a lot of worker-friendly policies, it’s not enough, as Achen and Bartels argue.

Throughout much of the world, the left is still searching for an effective way to convey to the voters who often decide elections: We’re on your side. It’s a hard problem to solve, I recognize. But the payoff for doing so would be very large.

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