

# Brexit and the Left Behind

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There has been much made of the idea that the UK's vote to leave the EU was in part a backlash from voters who have been "left behind" by economic developments over the past 30 years<sup>[1]</sup>. Globalisation is often seen as a rather totemic posterchild in this regard, although debate remains over exactly what commentators mean by the term in practice. Nevertheless, it is clear that particular emphasis is placed on both the dramatic rise in international trade over the period and the increasing mobility of large tracts of the world's population.

Particular attention is paid in the academic literature to the spatial structure of the vote, with many noting a 'geography of discontent'<sup>[2]</sup>. Indeed, Professor Rodriguez-Pose at the LSE has gone so far as to argue that the vote represents "the revenge of the places that don't matter"<sup>[3]</sup>. This is not a UK-centric phenomenon: research has shown that similar regions in other parts of Europe and the USA also exhibited voting preferences for so-called 'populist' agendas<sup>[4]</sup>.

There is no doubt that this is an important research agenda. We have substantial evidence that people in socio-economic groups that are typically less well-off (often identified as an objective measure of being "working class" in the literature) were more likely to vote to leave the EU<sup>[5]</sup>. In addition, areas with a larger concentration of such individuals also tended to vote for Brexit (the ecological regression fallacy notwithstanding!)

What's interesting in this entire debate is the comparative absence of fieldwork examining the nexus between the rapid growth of relatively insecure forms of work and the propensity to vote for Brexit. The past decade has seen an explosion in the use of zero-hours contracts, in addition to a rapid rise in self-employment. Within the latter, there has been a particularly noticeable growth in the numbers of 'dependent contractors' (quite probably linked to the gig economy). As pointed out by Professor De Ruyter and Dr Brown of Birmingham City University, "the growth of the Gig Economy and its potential for eroding the employment terms and conditions of work in other sectors, then, poses a direct challenge to the agendas of international organisations such as the ILO, who seek to promote the growth of decent work."<sup>[6]</sup>

What do these individuals actually think and feel about such jobs and the impact on their lives? Whilst many holders of zero-hours contracts are young, there is a much broader spread of ages amongst dependent contractors. We know very little about the extent to which those who fall into such labour market categories in strongly Brexit-voting areas in fact perceive of themselves as being 'left-behind' by recent developments.

We lack an in-depth understanding of the true labour market trajectory of individuals in these categories of work, and how this might impact their voting preferences. Are precarious forms of work a stepping-stone to a more permanent job, or do individuals become 'trapped' in a cycle of precarious employment. Indeed, there is some evidence suggesting that amongst the least secure in the labour market, rapid cycles of short-term employment (whether in the traditional terms or more flexibly) and short spells of unemployment might be becoming more common.

How does this affect the everyday experience of individuals involved, and what is the link between so-called "left behind communities" and Brexit? If it were simply a question of poverty, there are fascinating questions to be answered about what is different between deprived communities in the West Midlands conurbation and ostensibly similar communities in and around Glasgow. Is it about a sense of erosion in relative standing and change? This could perhaps explain why salubrious areas like Lichfield voted for Brexit.

Perhaps the focus on this link is misplaced. Whilst the Brexit roadshow organised by the Centre for Brexit Studies gave some initial hints about the so-called 'lived experience' of communities (often quite materially deprived communities) that voted most strongly for Brexit, far more information is needed. Only detailed interviews can really uncover the links between the growth in precarious work, the impact of various facets of globalisation in facilitating and driving this, and voting to leave the EU. Given the international evidence, such work is surely of global importance. What we do know for certain is that, irrespective of whether one feels the EU to be a good or bad influence, a large number of voters feel deeply unhappy. People want change: the red button has been pressed.

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3. Rodríguez-Pose, A., *Commentary: The revenge of the places that don't matter (and what to do about it)*. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 2018: p. rsx024-rsx024.
4. Essletzbichler, J., F. Disslbacher, and M. Moser, *The victims of neoliberal globalisation and the rise of the populist vote: a comparative analysis of three recent electoral decisions*. Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society, 2018. **11**(1): p. 73-94.
5. Ashcroft, M. *How the United Kingdom voted on Thursday... and why*. 2016; Available from: <https://lordashcroftpolls.com/2016/06/how-the-united-kingdom-voted-and-why/>.
6. De Ruyter, A. and M. Brown, *The Gig Economy: Old Wine in a New Label?* 2019, Newcastle-Upon-Tyne: Agenda.