Beyond Remain vs. Leave: understanding changing voter perceptions and attitudes towards Populism – evidence from Scotland and the West Midlands

Alex de Ruyter[*a], David Hearne[b], Syed Mansoob Murshed[c], Geoff Whittam[d] and Dennis Aguma[e].

Abstract

This article explores the link between populism and governance arrangements. Adopting a comparative approach between the West Midlands and Scotland, it utilises novel primary qualitative data alongside official results and demographic statistics. Paying particular attention to the perspectives of Remain voters in "left behind" areas and how they perceive their Leave-voting counterparts, the article finds that despite divergent voting patterns both groups perceived a problematic lack of (regional) political agency. Economic disparities and subnational governance arrangements appear important in explaining discontent in those parts of the UK that have been "left behind" by globalisation. Meaningful devolution will be key in addressing these grievances.

a. Alex.DeRuyter@bcu.ac.uk. University House, Bartholomew Row, Birmingham. B5 5JU.
b. David.hearne@bcu.ac.uk University House, Bartholomew Row, Birmingham. B5 5JU.
c. Murshed@iss.nl International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), Erasmus University of Rotterdam (EUR), Kortenaerkade 12, 2518 AX, The Hague, The Netherlands.
   &
   Centre for Financial and Corporate Integrity (CFCI), Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry CV1 5FB, UK.
d. Geoffrey.Whittam@gcu.ac.uk Glasgow School for Business and Society, Glasgow Caledonian University. Glasgow. G4 0BA.

Introduction

In 2016 the UK voted to leave the EU, marking a new watershed in the rise of global populist sentiments following earlier electoral victories in Hungary, Poland and elsewhere. The result sent shockwaves through the political establishment and came as a surprise to most voters (Ashcroft, 2016). In light of the subsequent "electoral earthquakes" however, it is rather less shocking and takes on a new salience when considered alongside other "populist" electoral movements (Essletzbichler et al., 2018). As such, the vote share of populist parties since 2000 in Europe and Latin America has exceeded 10% and this longer-term growth in populism coincides with "hyper-globalization" (Rodrik, 2018).

Definitions of populism and populist political surges are notoriously difficult, but for the purposes of this paper, we adopt the conception discussed in Guriev and Papaioannou (2020) whereby it can be described as a "thin centred ideology" which sharply views society as split between two antagonistic groups. Thin centred because of ideological ambiguity, and the divide between 'us' and 'them' suggests that populism rises when society becomes more polarized. Bordering, both in terms of physical space and in terms of the 'in' and 'out' groups within it are intrinsic to populism (Casaglia et al., 2020). Brexit is a particular manifestation of this whereby both the physical border between the UK and rest of the EU is hardened but also allegorically via symbolic changes in relations and in terms of eroding freedom of movement (of both Britons and other Europeans).

However, these votes are typically spatially concentrated (Dijkstra et al., 2019; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018), suggesting a fundamental role for economic and political institutions and in particular, governance arrangements as addressing perceptions of feeling "left behind" by metropolitan areas and ignored by governing institutions. Nevertheless, whilst spatially concentrated, these votes were far from universal: in districts which voted particularly strongly for Brexit, a substantial minority of votes were in favour of the status quo. In fact,

even the most pro-Brexit district in the country still saw ¼ of all votes in favour of remaining in the EU and in an overwhelming majority of (often extremely deprived) Brexit-voting areas, at least one-third of all votes were in favour of remaining in the EU. A striking, but often overlooked fact is that *most remain votes were in leave-voting districts[i]*. The views of this group of voters has hitherto been rather understudied in the literature, yet their perceptions are likely to be as key as those of leave-voters in understanding the reasons that lie behind the spatial distribution of votes.

In the case of the UK, a second significant finding is that deprived communities in Scotland voted very differently to similar communities in the Midlands & North of England. Scotland has a devolved administration in the form of the Scottish Government, which has a clearly defined role and is widely considered to be democratically accountable to the public, evidenced by steadily increasing voter turnout at Scottish elections since 2003 (Aiton et al., 2016). In contrast, sub-national governance arrangements in England (with London an interesting exception to this rule) have been fragmented and prone to the vagaries of policy changes over the past ten years (Bentley et al., 2010; Bachtler, 2017)[ii]. These opaque (and often temporary) entities have struggled to secure legitimacy in the eyes of a sceptical public struggling to understand their functions and perceiving them largely as unaccountable (Murphie, 2016). This raises questions around whether voter perceptions of "being left behind" (particularly in the peri-urban fringes of the Midlands and North of England) are in part driven by a sense of being *politically* as well as *economically* left behind. Specifically, the lack of devolved governance arrangements within England.

This article considers evidence on the spatial nature of the Brexit vote and the potential impact of governance arrangements thereon, from primary data collected by the authors, alongside census data and official results. Specifically, interviews and focus groups were held in selected locales in the West Midlands and Scotland, which were the NUTS1[iii]

regions with the highest and lowest votes for Brexit. The findings from this analysis provides critical insight into why individuals in certain localities (after controlling for demographic differences) voted in such dramatically different ways. Areas were selected because, at an aggregate level, they have very similar socio-economic indicators (income, educational attainment, ethnicity etc.), yet displayed highly divergent voting outcomes in the 2016 referendum. With a view to furthering the discussion around the "places that don't matter" (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) this article seeks to answer the following research questions:

- Why did those who voted remain, which we would argue is *against* populist policies in deprived areas, vote differently to a majority of their neighbours?

- What factors drive perceptions of being "left behind"?

- What policy ramifications arise from this with relation to subnational governance and how should the findings inform future research?

The research findings tentatively suggest that voter perceptions of "being left behind" in the peri-urban fringes of the West Midlands relate to both a keen sense of spatial inequality *and* to a lack of suitable devolved governance arrangements within the UK. These perceptions (of spatial inequality in both economic and political terms) are shared by Remainers and Leavers alike (Duffy et al., 2021a). The article concludes by offering a research agenda moving forward and a warning for policymakers: true "levelling-up" needs to address regional governance in addition to spatial economic inequalities.

Literature Review

There is now a burgeoning literature investigating discontent and populist voting patterns around the globe – a phenomenon that has the potential to challenge tenets of "liberal" democracy, including respect for minority rights, and constraints on majoritarian power – of

which Brexit was one example. Yet many of the driving forces behind the Brexit result were visible both across the EU (Dijkstra et al., 2019) and elsewhere in the world (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018) and this should be of considerable interest to academics and practitioners alike. Notwithstanding the heterogeneous forces driving towards Brexit as a conjuncture (Clarke and Newman, 2017), three inter-connected and inseparable processes drive these changes: changes in voter perceptions and behaviour, the economic structural factors underlying these behavioural changes and changes in political institutions.

Much of the initial literature on Brexit – primarily from the political science discipline – focussed on the so-called "left behind" (Goodwin and Heath, 2016), although this interpretation has been challenged elsewhere (Antonucci et al., 2017). The referendum result was seen as a reaction against globalisation and so-called "metropolitan elites", although the decision is also widely seen to have been, in part, driven by xenophobia and fears related to immigration (Golec de Zavala et al., 2017; Gough, 2017). Indeed, the salience of immigration as a driving factor has been a recurrent theme in the literature. In common with other populist movements, Brexit appears characterised by nationalism with migrants as an 'out' group – see Gomez Arana et al. (2019), authoritarianism (witness support for perceived political "strength" and derision towards institutions and individuals dedicated to upholding democratic pluralism) as well as "anti-elite" sentiment (Mudde and Rovira Kaltwasser, 2018).

A second strand of the literature investigates the predictive power of certain socio-demographic characteristics in explaining the vote. Becker et al. (2017) offer a rather comprehensive overview of a large number of socio-demographic factors, using the demographic characteristics of each local authority to estimate the vote-leave share in that area. EU spending appears to have had a limited impact on how areas voted (Huggins, 2018), although there is some nuance that depends heavily on how such funds affect local

opportunities (Crescenzi et al., 2020). In general, the literature making use of aggregate data at the local authority level typically finds that demographic factors are much stronger predictors than economic variables (Matti and Zhou, 2017), although this is not the case for findings making use of individual-level survey data (Liberini et al., 2017).

These processes share a strong spatial element, although much voter polarisation was as evident intra-regionally as between regions (MacLeod and Jones, 2018). Voters across regions exhibit significant differences in certain key psychological traits driving voter behaviour (Garretsen et al., 2018), with research suggesting that social identity, group polarisation and an external 'locus of control' might be key potential socio-psychological causal factors underlying the results from predictive modelling (Hearne et al., 2019). Abreu and Öner (2019) note the potential challenges associated with inference from aggregate data in the referendum and, perhaps as a result, more recent research has focussed on using national survey data, which only latterly became available. Fetzer (2019) finds evidence that 'austerity' was a substantial contributory factor to the vote, whilst research using longitudinal survey data suggests that mobility was a key determinant of voter choices (Lee et al., 2018).

Regions and local areas that voted heavily for Brexit both contain a much higher proportion of less cosmopolitan, more conservative voters (Eichengreen, 2018) and have also been hit hard by recent economic trends, culminating in economic inequality and insecurity for median and below median households (Colantone and Stanig, 2018; Autor, 2014). The national income share of the middle class (defined as having an income in the range of 25% above and 25% below median national income) declined over this time period in nearly all Western democracies, with the UK exhibiting the fourth lowest share (Milanovic, 2016). More recent work has shed work on the extent to which these deep social cleavages in opinion span multiple "fault lines" and divergent views are held by groups that display a significant degree of mistrust and even hostility to one another (Duffy et al., 2021b).

If the rise of populist politics has a demand side, it also has a supply side (Guriev and Papaioannou, 2020) based on political entrepreneurship of new entrants who fill a political gap, and who are able to effectively reach out to the disaffected via simple but strong messages, which may include more than a modicum of falsehood. The growth of populism results in a realignment of politics away from the traditional left-right divide to an elite versus non-elite struggle that creates vacuums that populists can fill (Gennaioli and Tabellini, 2019). A sanguinary blow directed at established elites by supporting populists at the risk of further impoverishment is considered more important than centre-left redistributive promises by many alienated, conservative and insecure voters. In this vein, traditional voting patterns based on markers of "class" have rapidly broken down (Norris and Inglehart, 2019).

However, the economic structural factors underlying this differ dramatically across the UK, which is one of the most spatially unequal countries in the OECD (McCann, 2016). In retrospect, many of the cleavages that Brexit so brutally exposed were hiding in plain sight. Regional disparities have markedly worsened since the late 1970s (Gardiner et al., 2013). In this vein, it isn't surprising that the West Midlands voted more strongly for Brexit than any other UK region (Electoral Commission, 2016), given its poor long-run growth performance (Office for National Statistics, 2016). It is no accident that the demographics of these areas match rather closely to those most likely to vote for Brexit as identified above: demographic and class differences are always mediated through place (Gordon, 2018). Yet despite this plethora of research, Lizotte's (2019) plea for greater consideration of populism by political geographers has been only partially answered. This article builds on the literature by supplementing the insights gleaned from quantitative sources with interview data, in which fundamental issues of governance (as posed in the research questions earlier) are explored.

Many of these areas are associated with places that have "lost out" from globalisation,

a process typified by the plant closures that have reduced manufacturing employment in peri-urban areas (Armstrong et al., 2008; Bailey and de Ruyter, 2015). More recently, the burden of government fiscal retrenchment fell disproportionately on poorer areas (Gray and Barford, 2018). Indeed, there is evidence that one's propensity to vote for Brexit is related to the area in which one resides and not merely one's own income (Fielding, 2018; Abreu and Öner, 2020). This fits with the hypothesis that it is precisely the fact that certain regions "don't matter" to elite decision-makers, that has fuelled recent 'populist' voting patterns (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). There is substantial evidence of spatial clustering in the referendum results even after controlling for an area's socio-demographic characteristics (Beecham et al., 2018; Hearne, 2020), further supporting the notion that it is those living in left-behind *areas* who had the highest propensity to vote for Brexit.

Methodology

In order to address the research questions, the research adopted a comparative approach, paying careful attention to the multi-scalar element of the problem. The authors contend that, as in the case of economic geography (Martin, 2021), there are considerable benefits to methodological pluralism warranting such an approach. Aggregate data at several scales is used to assess the socio-demographic profile of local areas within the West Midlands and Scotland before conducting a series of focus groups in specific locations within them. The West Midlands and Scotland were chosen because of their divergent vote patterns in the 2016 referendum, being respectively the strongest 'Leave' & 'Remain' voting areas (and also containing different governance structures). The aggregate data analysis therefore frames the detailed qualitative data analysis that follows. Areas with equivalent socio-demographic characteristics were selected in both the West Midlands and West of Scotland. Specifically, Dudley and Glasgow (South West and East)[iv] were paired as areas with below-average

incomes, levels of education, age profiles and ethnic mixes. Similarly, Lichfield and East Dunbartonshire were chosen as more salubrious (although not necessarily wealthy) areas with higher average levels of education.

Focus groups were then conducted in each, to understand some of the drivers of their divergent voting patterns. Eight focus groups (3 in Dudley, 2 in Lichfield, 2 in Glasgow and 1 in East Dunbartonshire) were conducted between August and October 2020. Appendix 1 provides details of the focus group schedule and anonymised participant demographic traits. Participants were sourced via social media platforms, newsletters and word-of-mouth. Whilst a good spread of participants was obtained by age and education levels (key factors with the Brexit vote), the majority of participants voted Remain – our pilot work in this regard revealed a high degree of suspicion amongst Leavers of the motives of academics[v].

Pursuant of the research questions, the discussion with participants explored their perceptions on the nature of democratic institutions, local perceptions viz. "left behind" or "representative" of the UK as a whole and the impact of Brexit. Appendix 2 details the questions asked of each focus group – the questions were delivered in a semi-structured interview format to enable follow-up on responses of particular interest. The focus groups were conducted in accordance with the ethical tenets of fully-informed consent, voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. All name and subject-identifier data was destroyed upon the conclusion of the fieldwork. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed and the data was coded to enable the identification of clear themes. In the material that follows, the findings from the aggregate data analysis are considered before turning to the qualitative data.

Findings

Summary demographic statistics are provided for the four areas in the table below.

[Table 1 goes here]

Aggregate data

There are some data on the spatial distribution of the vote within both Dudley and Glasgow, but none below the local authority level in Lichfield and East Dunbartonshire. In Dudley this is available at the ward level (spatial units of around 10,000 persons). In Glasgow these are by parliamentary constituency (spatial units of between 60,000 and 80,000 individuals). No area in Dudley voted to remain in the EU and none in Glasgow voted to leave but we nevertheless see very significant intra-regional variation in both locales. Thus, the leave vote in Dudley ranged from 55.9% in parts of Stourbridge to 77.4% in Brockmoor and Pensnett. Similarly, the proportion of leave voters in Glasgow ranged from a mere 21.6% in Glasgow North to 43.8% in Glasgow East. An interesting point to note is the extremely low turnout in areas of Glasgow that voted more strongly in favour of leaving. This stands in marked contrast to similar areas in the West Midlands.

[Figure 1 goes here]

The most recent demographic data consistently available at these levels derives from the 2011 census, raising questions over how contemporary some of these are. Although there is some change over time in the demographic composition of areas, the *relative* differences between areas tends to be more stable (albeit not completely so). Mindful of issues with timeliness and the inherent challenges of ecological regression, it is instructive to consider those variables that are the most significant predictors of an area's vote amongst the many census variables considered in previous work. Specifically, the proportion of degree-holders is highly significant and this finding is robust to empirical approach (Becker et al., 2017; Hearne, 2020; Beecham et al., 2018; Abreu and Öner, 2020). Indeed, informally comparing

these maps to the Brexit vote is instructive: the two match closely. However, there are clear local factors at play and a high number of correlates, pointing to the need for local context.

As an example of this, Glasgow North has a high proportion of degree holders but is locally associated with young professionals. Alongside Glasgow Central, it also has a high proportion of students (over 22% of the population in both cases) which gives further indication of the nature of the area. We know from previous research (Hearne, 2020) that the proportion of students in an area is an important predictor of the vote (perhaps because students tend to vote similarly to those who have completed education to that level). There are few students in any part of Dudley, although the southern reaches with greater numbers of degree holders are typically more affluent.

[Figure 2 goes here]

Nevertheless, as can be seen below, there are clear differences between the two areas. Although education has a powerful (and similar) predictive impact for both, their intercepts are quite different. Previous research indicates that this is a "Scottish effect" rather than a "Glasgow" or "Dudley" effect (Beecham et al., 2018). Scots of all education levels appear less likely to vote to leave the EU than their English counterparts.

[Figure 3 goes here]

The other key variable, which might be less immediately obvious, is the proportion of the population employed in the manufacturing industry. This has a powerful predictive impact in both areas. One interpretation of this is in line with the hypothesis of Rodríguez-Pose (2018) and others. Specifically, manufacturing employment in the UK has declined precipitously over the past half century and areas with a greater proportion of the population engaged in

manufacturing could have been more severely affected over time.

[Figure 4 goes here]

Also notable is the fact that many variables are highly collinear. For each of the 4 local authorities, the correlation between the percentage of the population with a degree and the percentage in the top occupational codes is never less than 0.94, for example. Similarly, Dudley is clearly comparable to South West Glasgow and the east of the city. Thanks to the constituency data, we know how these areas voted. Although in excess of 40% of South West Glasgow's voters voted to leave the EU, this is around 20 percentage points lower than Dudley. Also notable are differences in turnout (54.9% in Glasgow South West versus 71.7% in Dudley). These 'non-voters' are likely to prove a fascinating group for further research.

[Figure 5 goes here]

These areas are socio-demographically similar, yet voted very differently and there is strikingly little evidence as to *why* this should be the case. Ultimately, only detailed qualitative data are able to ascertain the reasons behind these interesting effects. Accordingly, the next section reports on focus group (FG) findings conducted in the aforementioned municipalities.

Focus group findings

With these issues in mind, the qualitative findings detailed in this section were piloted through an exploratory study between December 2017 and March 2018 consisting of a series of focus groups and "town hall" events in the top ten estimated Leave voting constituencies (Hanretty, 2016). These explored with members of the public, amongst other things: how they voted in 2016; why they voted the way they did; what the key underlying issues were; whether they felt "left behind" or disenfranchised, and; what they felt their identity was. The

findings from these events revealed that the "lived experience" appeared to be significant in how people and communities formed their views around Brexit. For example, conversations with respondents in Walsall North revealed how headline concerns around migration were actually rooted in deeper concerns around school provision:

> "My mum is French, don't get me wrong - I like Europe, but we've had pressure on schools here and we can't put both our children in the same school because of pressure on places" (Respondent, Walsall North).

However, a subsequent engagement event in Greenock in the West of Scotland on May 4th 2018 revealed different issues. As regards to engagement with the democratic process, there was a view of greater trust in the Scottish parliament over Westminster. This raised questions as to the ways in which differences in governance and the lived experience thereof impacted perceptions in areas that might be categorised as "left behind". As such, the fieldwork reported on here sought to further explore these issues in the West Midlands and Scotland, with the key themes explored in our FG work being that of "understanding" the Brexit vote as a manifestation of discontent. One hitherto understudied area of considerable interest relates to the perceptions of remain voters. How did remain-voting respondents perceive their leave-voting counterparts and what are their perceptions about living in "left-behind" areas? This work therefore explored perceptions of participants' localities and whether they felt "left behind" as well as the extent to which further devolution (principally in the English context) would alleviate such perceptions.

Understanding the Brexit vote: assessing 'Remainer' perceptions of 'Leavers'

That those who had higher formal educational qualifications tended to vote Remain is evident from the aggregate data presented above. Interestingly, there was some evidence that remain-voting respondents strongly perceived their leave-voting counterparts as "less educated" and

unaware of the salient facts:

> "I have to say that from my experience…talking to people and from hearing…what people were saying… there seemed to be a kind of belief if we left the European Union we would shut the door and stop the [immigrants]" (Participant 1, FG2, Dudley).

> "…the Government has misled people … in their ideas around what BREXIT is about and I think people got excited on the issue that really shouldn't have been part of it" (Participant 4, FG1, Dudley).

This fits closely with the evidence found from larger scale surveys, (Duffy et al., 2021b), in which remain voters tended to perceive their leave-voting counterparts as 'intelligent' to a much lesser degree than the converse. Remainer perceptions of Leavers were corroborated here to the extent that there was some evidence of erroneous beliefs amongst leave-voting participants; for example, one participant in Lichfield who appeared to wrongly believe that membership of the EU had prevented the UK from trading with the rest of the world:

> "[we have] a reasonably sized manufacturing sector that I think is going to do particularly well… certainly feel that for local industries there is going to be a benefit there as we will be able to trade with the entire world as opposed to just a protectionist trade block, being stuck in the EU" (Participant 2, FG5, Lichfield)

Although some acknowledgment of the economic upheaval of Brexit was recognised by Leave participants, it was perceived to be modest, as mentioned by two older participants in Dudley (FG3) who explicitly stated that whilst they expected disruption, it would only be in "the short term" and that eventually "we will get through it". Remainers strongly perceived Leave voters as being more intolerant and xenophobic, which again matches survey evidence (Duffy et al., 2021b), with one respondent stating:

"The racism, the lack of tolerance, the lack of empathy, the lack of concerns for people who are in difficult life circumstances, so I see a huge mountain here ….it really doesn't strike a code with me" (Participant 7, FG4, Lichfield).

"I have actually had people actually tell me that I should leave the area and I think for me, as somebody who grew up here, this is my home….. to me the worst aspect of BREXIT is the hostility I felt towards me myself and also more generally towards the EU and towards foreigners and that made me feel very disconnected from our local community" (Participant 4, FG4, Lichfield).

There was also some traction to this argument, with statements from two leave-voting participants in Dudley bearing testimony to the notion that migration from the EU was to blame, and had exacerbated the relative deprivation of the area:

"Well it was always a nice place to go until a few years ago you know but now the whole street is just Romanians hanging out on the road like it's not safe to even drive down it at night now so I try and stay away from there.." (Participant 1, FG3, Dudley).

Not that all Leave voters were motivated by issues of migration. Some felt that the EU only represented the interests of business, as one respondent in Scotland extolled:

"[i]t's certainly true that a lot of people who voted for Brexit are racist and little Englanders. But I think a hell of a lot of people were like me who see it as a boss's club and it still is. Look at the way they treat refugees and the way the EU treated the Greek economy… it's Fortress Europe - they've built a wall… It's alright if you're rich, it's alright if you're white or rich, but if you're looking for refuge from the wars

that the Western world has inflicted on the Middle East then it's f@ck you"
(Participant 5, FG7, Glasgow).

Such nuances in opinion are inherently difficult to capture in a quantitative survey-based context where, of necessity, questions are typically shorter and more targeted. In considering the Scottish context, views on Brexit were intimately linked to questions of identity and Scotland's relationship with Europe, in that the EU was often seen as a bulwark against an overweening England. For those Scottish participants that voted Remain, antipathy towards a "succession" of Tory Governments in Westminster[vi] contrasted with a more proximate Holyrood administration that was seen as being more aware and responsive towards the people of Scotland. In contrast, for one participant who voted Leave:

"they [the Scottish National Party] have an agenda that they are [not] diverting from no matter what and that seems to be their sole focus, its independence at all costs and whatever else is going on is just pushed to the side…" (Participant 5, FG6, East Dunbartonshire)

In contrast, examining the West Midlands, evident was that our Remainer participants generally viewed Leavers as right-wing, and as such, pro-Conservative or pro Boris Johnson:

"I had conversations with my neighbours which I actually find quite unpleasant ranging from Black Lives Matter to BREXIT…. So, and the countering right wing views that I am really uncomfortable with, I don't feel connected to this community anymore" (Participant 6, FG4, Lichfield).

However, this was not necessarily well-founded and those in left-behind communities were not necessarily politically as far from their remain-counterparts as the latter believe, if the evidence of one Leave-voting participant was anything to go by, who expressed that:

> "if anything I think what Boris and his Eton mates do will over the next few years will have a much worse impact than Brexit" (Participant 4, FG2, Dudley).

It is difficult to contextualise this statement, but the same participant did express remorse in voting Conservative in 2019, because of their perceived poor response to the pandemic at the time. Interestingly, some remain voters saw the informal and familial networks of their leave-voting counterparts as barriers to greater communication and understanding. In Dudley, for example, according to one respondent (who voted Remain and was a teacher by training), ingrained family beliefs could obstruct the influence of formal education in seeking to provide a "factual" analysis of the likely impact of Brexit:

> "their parents believe and their kids believe and it doesn't matter what evidence you throw at them … you couldn't show them otherwise because it's so ingrained from…the families and [they] will believe what their families believed" (Participant 4, FG2, Dudley).

However, what also became apparent in discussions with participants in the West Midlands was that notions of being "left behind" did have considerable traction. Reiterating findings of our preliminary work in other heavily-Leave voting parts of England, the sense of relative decline was keenly felt by leave and remain-voting respondents alike. Interestingly, this appears one of relatively few areas that unites those across both sides of the Leave-Remain divide, as well as other points of political division (Duffy et al., 2021a). In the case of Dudley, this was driven by the notion that the borough, as part of the "Black Country", was once an industrial powerhouse that provided secure jobs for locals. As the processes of structural change and globalisation have unfolded, the changing contours of capital-labour relations have starkly illustrated a geography of rising labour market precariousness (Strauss, 2018). This has been epitomised in terms of the erosion of secure (manufacturing) jobs and

the growth of low-grade service-sector jobs leaving a sense of resentment and anger:

> "it's also specially suffered from the decline of industry - manufacturing industry and it really has and it's in a way …… a lot of the landscape is in a waste has been a wasteland from the declined industry….. and a lot of the resentments and the anger that you have locally in Brexit has come from that" (Participant 5, FG1, Dudley)

It is to these issues that we now turn.

Feeling "left behind": moving beyond the Remain/Leave dichotomy

As such, our participants in the West Midlands generally concurred that they felt on the periphery, and as such to be in places that "did not matter" (Rodrigues Pose, 2018). Those in Lichfield consider themselves to be a commuter/satellite town of Birmingham, and in spite of being somewhat affluent still felt "left behind" politically (as exclusion from the WMCA would attest). Similarly, participants in Dudley were cognisant that Birmingham, as the regional economic centre, tended to attract higher levels of investment and as such, higher value-added industries. Noting our earlier finding of the impact of educational levels upon the Leave vote, it is notable that Dudley Metropolitan Borough does not have a university, and Dudley is also notable for being the only town centre in the West Midlands conurbation without a train station:

> "Um, well I'd say the main focus area that seems to be Birmingham, ah which you know all of Birmingham I think is a great investment but…. everybody in the borough [Dudley] is ignored in terms of housing, in terms of education and health" (Participant 2, FG1, Dudley).

The sense of feeling left behind also fed into wider concerns that the Midlands was somewhat overlooked in the national discourse, and that UK-wide discussions of interregional

inequality focussed on some extant 'North-South divide'[vii] with the attendant observation that "the North" was better at promoting itself as a region than the Midlands:

> "I did hope that when [West Midlands Metro Mayor] Andy Street got elected that might change but no …… that doesn't seem to be the case, you see more of that guy from Manchester on the television - very rarely anything to do with the Midlands …… for example Channel Four not coming to the West Midlands and then going to the North I think that we are massively underrepresented" (Participant 2, FG2, Dudley).

However, such sentiments do actually have a solid economic foundation in terms of the perceptions of feeling left-behind given the long-run growth performance of the region (Office for National Statistics, 2016). It is in this context then, of a "Missing Midlands", as per the previous comment of a Dudley FG participant alluded to in describing "waste lands" that the high Brexit vote in the East and West Midlands needs to be considered[viii].

In contrast, we did not find the same notion of being "left behind" in Scotland. Whilst Glasgow in particular contains areas with severe deprivation (even relative to other poor parts of the UK), this did not manifest itself in a majority Leave vote. Indeed, even in the context of deprivation some respondents had extremely strong views of Leavers, referring to "UKIP level crazy" (Participant 2, FG8, Glasgow). Ascertaining the exact reasons for Scotland's anti-populist sentiment is beyond the scope of this paper, but one respondent alluded to the notion of a stronger sense of solidarity and social justice in Scotland than England, matching Massey's (2008) conception of a progressive rather than 'defensive' sense of place:

> "my opinion is that the majority of people in Scotland are more motivated by social justice … I know that is a stupid generalisation, but it's just the general sense I have

> in Glasgow I mean more often than not people would pay a little bit more if people were going hungry…" (Participant 1, FG8, Glasgow).

Interestingly, given generally high levels of concern about inter-personal inequality (with 60% of the overall public concerned about the issue, including a slim majority of Conservative voters (Duffy et al., 2021a), this might underestimate the 'latent' concern with social justice in England. A majority of respondents felt that the Scottish Government was seen as responsive to their needs, and countered the sense of a distant Westminster that was largely irrelevant to peoples' daily lives.

> "[W]hen you compare how our system is in Scotland compared to Westminster, Scotland's approach is far more tailored to us they actually know what we are like as Glasgow regions" (Participant 2, FG8, Glasgow).

Hence, it is to issues of attitudes to devolution that we now turn.

More devolution please

As such, the limited powers of the Combined Authority to tackle these economic disparities were evident to our participants in the West Midlands, in contrast to the Scottish Government, which enjoys extensive powers to enact its own policies in devolved competencies such as health, education, public transport and the environment. The Scottish Government also has a modicum of revenue-raising powers, such as being able to vary income tax rates from UK levels, although these remain quite limited and have historically not been used a great deal. In contrast, the functional areas of Metro Mayoral Combined Authorities are limited in scope and their powers vary across England. Greater Manchester has a devolved responsibility for health, whilst the West Midlands does not, with the WMCA budget almost entirely being accounted for by transport. This was evident to our participants:

"I think that its good there is someone looking over that region, but I don't think the Metro mayor has enough powers as Manchester…they have got a lot more powers than us and I wasn't aware that the metro mayor can raise taxes" (Participant 5, FG5, Lichfield).

Such support for increasing the scope of the mayor's powers appears common across the West Midlands and in other mayoral regions (Centre for Cities, 2021). Nevertheless, it was apparent from the research in Dudley that some of the participants (three) were unaware that there even was a West Midlands mayor and a Combined Authority, which reiterates the notion that devolution in England in the form of fragmented and opaque entities have struggled to secure legitimacy with the wider public. This was revealed in the following dialogue:

P1: He's West Midlands mayor?

INTERVIEWER: Yeah…

P1: I thought he was just Birmingham, haha

INTERVIEWER: No he covers the Combined Authority, so it's a pretty big area actually

P1: Well I guess in that sense he doesn't represent me at all haha I didn't even realise he was our mayor

INTERVIEWER: Well he's different from say the Dudley mayor because he's mayor of a big area

P1: Well I couldn't even tell you what he looks like and it's not like I don't watch the news - I watch it three times a day.. I genuinely thought he was just Birmingham cause of like the trams in the centre of town now and that train thing..

INTERVIEWER: HS2?

P1: The London one?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, high speed rail

P1: Sorry chick I don't really know what to say for this one cause he clearly doesn't do a fat lot over in these ends does he?" (Participant 1, FG3, Dudley).

In contrast, in Scotland, there seemed to be more satisfaction with the nature of devolved government, with its greater powers over a wide range of core governmental functions. Interestingly, one participant had noted that the emergence of the Scottish government had also acted to reduce the prominence of local government (although they will still favourably disposed to the devolved government:

"I think Holyrood has supplemented the affinity people used to have with local councils and it was Glasgow council that was really important and the only representation was Westminster. With the Scottish parliament, councils have kind of sunk back because there is another level of political authority and the councils are more administrated, but I do think Holyrood is really important for representation for Scotland." (Participant 3, FG7, Glasgow)

Moreover, the nature of the voting system for the Scottish parliament was also picked up on, with one participant suggesting that the 'regional list' system, in effect a system of proportional representation, allowed for a greater representativeness of different political views, in contrast to Westminster:

"I would say the Scottish parliament is quite small and it's quite representative across the regional representation. What's the term… a list system, yes. So yeah, I would say

we are better represented in the Scottish parliament than we would be in the UK parliament in the first post system" (Participant 1, FG7, Glasgow).

Turning back to the West Midlands then, evidence from our FG sessions tentatively suggested that there was an appetite by participants in the West Midlands for further powers to be devolved to a regional level, and that the current mayoral model was insufficient in terms of its abilities or accountability to the public:

"I am not sure what actual impact the metro mayor has had in four years. Can anyone tell me a significant thing that he has achieved? I don't think it should be a political post to be honest; it should be independent and have greater autonomy/accountability" (Participant 1, FG1, Dudley).

"Ah if you have a Mayor you know, like you had in London, a mayor should have an assembly, like you have a London assembly. We haven't got an assembly with representatives of Dudley and the other boroughs being able to speak out" (Participant 5, FG1, Dudley)

As such, our findings suggest that communities are "left behind" not merely economically and culturally, but also in terms of their perceptions of their own political agency. Crucially, in the case of the West Midlands (in contrast to Scotland), it appears that the absence of local, responsive political decision-making is critical to this.

Discussion

The findings of our research suggest then that the simple dichotomy between Remain and Leave voters conceals a more complex picture in terms of demography, attitudes towards Brexit, perceptions of being "left behind" and political agency. Whilst having a low educational attainment is a significant predictor of voting Leave in the aggregate, our focus

groups highlight that this hides a rich tapestry of individual voters: three out of our seven Leave voters had attained post-secondary qualifications. In a similar fashion, whilst age is a strong predictor of a Leave vote, three out of these seven were under 65 (23, 41 and 51 years' old respectively). Our findings therefore caution against reductivism and suggest that we need to go beyond aggregate indicators to understand how people form their perceptions.

In this regard, our work alludes to two aspects; first, the importance of 'neighbourhood effects' (Abreu and Öner, 2020; Hearne, 2020) and the nature of one's social and cultural capital in determining support for populist ideas (and consequent voting-patterns) during the referendum. Community and familial networks will exert a significant influence on individual views, which could explain why highly-educated voters in majority Leave areas were more likely to vote Leave than those in Remain areas as can be seen in Appendix 3. This used a simple logistic regression – in which the dependent variable represented whether one voted for Brexit – against a number of available covariates from the British Election Study dataset (Fieldhouse et al., 2017), as a basic "sense check" against a dataset with external validity. The second aspect of our findings relates to the socio-geographic networks of participants. Bringing the apparatus of social geography (Del Casino Jr, 2016) to bear on this problem may prove a fruitful avenue for future research. Remain voters in Leave-voting areas tended to be more educated and were more likely to work and commute to jobs in city or town centres (which had a higher Remain vote). In this context, they had a greater sense of connection with the spatial concentration of knowledge and power (Gregory et al., 2015). Their wider socio-geographic horizons meant they were more likely to be exposed to a broader (pro-EU) range of views.

However, in considering the nature of political agency in terms of feeling "left behind" and whether further devolution would address this, what was interesting was that both Leave and Remain voters had shared perceptions around levels of deprivation in their

localities. Perhaps this should not be surprising, as both share the same amenities and have to rely on the same public services and infrastructure. But where they differed was in terms of grasping the nature of current devolved governance and its perceived inadequacies. Our Remain voters were more likely to have a better understanding of the limitations of current devolution and therefore to suggest alternatives, such as an elected assembly in the West Midlands. Leave voters were less cognisant of current arrangements (notably the territorial geography of these devolved entities) and therefore less likely to proffer support for alternatives, even though they were clearly dissatisfied with the status quo.

Hence, in considering further devolution in England, our findings tentatively suggest that there is some desire to embrace further devolution in the West Midlands, so as to provide a greater modicum of decision-making and accountability. To the extent that existing regional governance structures in the West Midlands were viewed with some degree of scepticism by participants, there does appear to be some support for a more substantial transfer of power and resources to the regional level, irrespective of whether one voted Remain or Leave. In this sense, then, there is a need to go beyond "the city" in reframing spatial justice (Barnett, 2018). In contrast, the Scottish experience suggested that the Holyrood parliament was generally (though not exclusively so) viewed favourably by participants, and more approachable and accountable than a "distant" Westminster.

This is not to suggest that the Holyrood model could (or should) simply be transplanted to English regions. Rather, it is to recognise that the appeal of regionally devolved government also lies in having sufficient public support and this in turn is partially linked to questions of identity[ix]. Scotland has an obvious cultural and national identity, which appears to have strengthened in recent years. In contrast, the West Midlands lacks any real semblance of a regional identity and moves to brand a regional body around some incipient 'Greater Birmingham' have been frustrated by the deeply-ingrained jealousy and suspicion of

the smaller municipalities that surround Birmingham City Council, in stark contrast to Greater Manchester[x]. Our participants very much saw themselves in terms of local identities (with those in Dudley strongly identifying with being in the "Black Country"), and being 'English'. Perhaps this should not be surprising – the English "regions" (with the probable exception of Yorkshire[xi]) are geographical artifices bearing sterile names such as 'North-East' and 'South-West', which were relatively recently created by Central Government[xii].

To the extent that further devolution is touted in England, this will be to augment the status of Mayoral/Combined Authorities in the cities, and a related mooted abolition of district authorities and their replacement with unitary authorities in the Shires (Hill, 2020). We would argue that these measures are insufficient and that meaningful devolution in England should consist of regions that have sufficient democratic accountability and as such an attendant transfer of power and resources. Given questions of scale, it would appear likely the regions that have been ensconced in policy now for some 25 years suggests would form the basis for any genuine English regional governments, although there is no reason to remain wedded to these in practice.

However, there would need to be a clear willingness from Central Government to facilitate this shift, which at present appears sorely lacking. The controversy around the UK Government's recent *Internal Market* bill suggests that their stated intent for further devolution or decentralisation is not genuine (Herald Scotland Online, 2020). However, regional stakeholders themselves can do more to make the case for a devolution of power and resources, as the Core Cities group's agenda attests (Core Cities UK, 2020). In this sense, then, scholarly work must contest the spatial socio-political hegemony (Blomley, 2006) represented by the current Westminster-centric regime.

Conclusions

This article has explored the issues surrounding populism, governance arrangements and the perceptions of Leavers and Remainers - particularly the extent to which Leavers conformed to the stereotype bestowed on them by Remainers - on the 2016 Brexit vote in the UK, drawing on focus group data from the West Midlands and Scotland. The findings of this article reiterate the view that support for populism, as depicted by the Brexit vote in the UK, depends on the geographical distribution of a polarised society, of which the shifting geography of labour (Herod, 1997) is perhaps one part. However, the findings of the article also suggest that the lack of regional governance arrangements in England may also be a factor, as evidenced by the divergent Brexit vote between areas with similar demographic characteristics (Lichfield c.f. East Dunbartonshire; Dudley c.f. East/South west Glasgow). Our findings suggest that support for further devolution could enable greater accountability and transfer of power and resources to areas that feel they are left-behind. Whether this would be enough to mitigate the discontent in these areas, we have argued, depends on the nature of devolution and consequent community empowerment. We are also cognisant that the limited number of focus groups would also preclude widespread generalisations of our findings.

In this context, further work should explore other regions of England. There is, moreover, an active research agenda that considers the perspectives of non-voters by region, particularly given the notably large differences in turnout in different areas. Turnout in pro-remain Glasgow was much lower than in "pro-leave" Dudley or Lichfield during the referendum and this is a group whose views are very much worth exploring. However, given that we are of the view that further devolution would only be beneficial to the economic and social wellbeing of the UK, there is a case to be made for a more pro-active "action research" agenda. Such critical geographical scholarship (Blomley, 2006) might take the form of public

engagement via focus groups and "town hall" meetings, so as to further explore devolution, if the uneven economic geographies that fuel populist discontent are to be adequately tackled.

Acknowledgments

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Table 1: Summary demographic indicators

	NVQ4+	Mean age	Median full-time income (residents)	No formal qualifications	% white British	% vote leave
East Dunbartonshire	34.8%	42.2	£32,750	19.9%	93.4%	28.6%
Glasgow South-West	16.2%	38.6	£23,816	37.6%	86.6%	40.9%
Glasgow East	12.7%	39.4	£25,496	42.2%	92.5%	43.8%
Dudley	19.2%	40.5	£26,406	30.0%	88.5%	67.6%
Lichfield	28.4%	42.2	£34,346	22.4%	94.6%	58.8%

(Office for National Statistics, 2019; Office for National Statistics and National Records of Scotland, 2016; Electoral Commission, 2016)
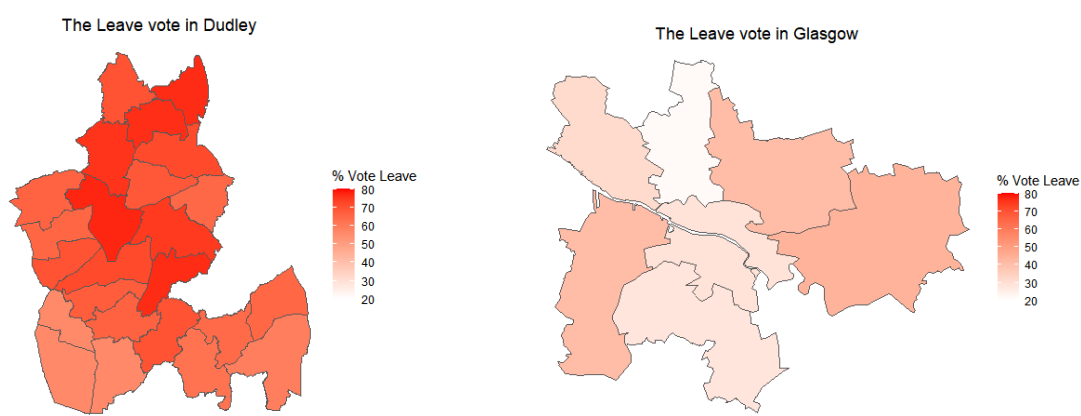
Figure 1: The Leave vote in Dudley and Glasgow

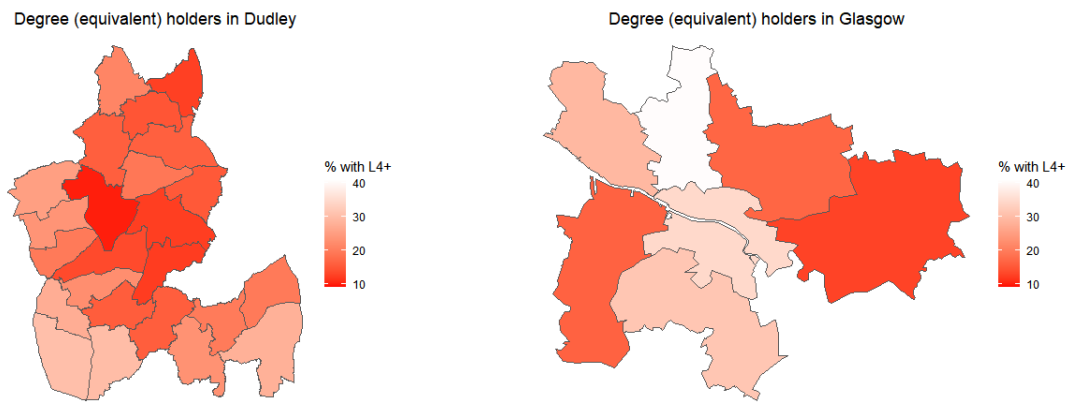Figure 2: Education levels in Dudley and Glasgow

Degree (equivalent) holders in Dudley

Degree (equivalent) holders in Glasgow

% with L4+

Figure 3: Educational attainment and voting patterns by local area within Dudley and Glasgow

University Equivalent Education and the Leave Vote in Glasgow and Dudley

% Voted Leave

% of Population with NVQ4+ Equivalent Qualifications

Location
— Dudley
— Glasgow
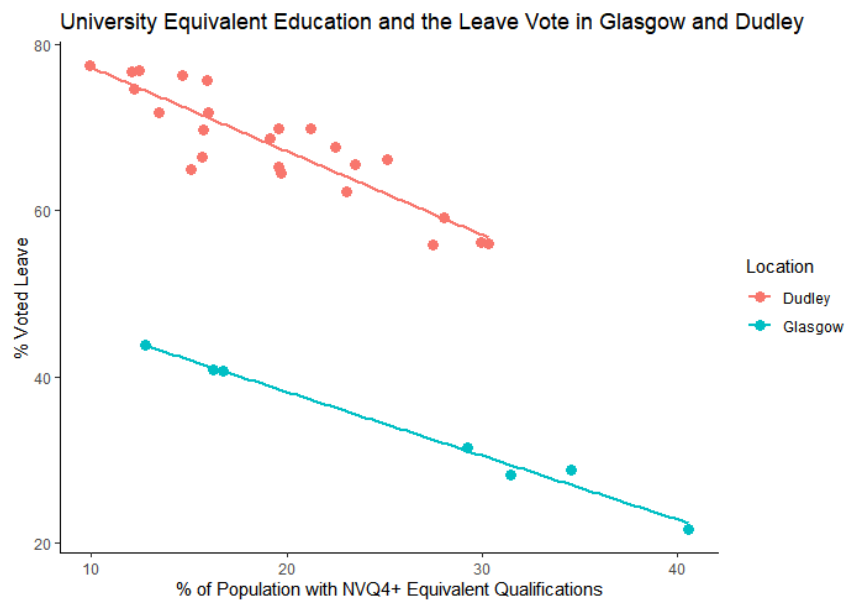
Figure 4: Manufacturing in Dudley and Glasgow

Manufacturing in Dudley

Manufacturing in Glasgow

% employed in manufacturing
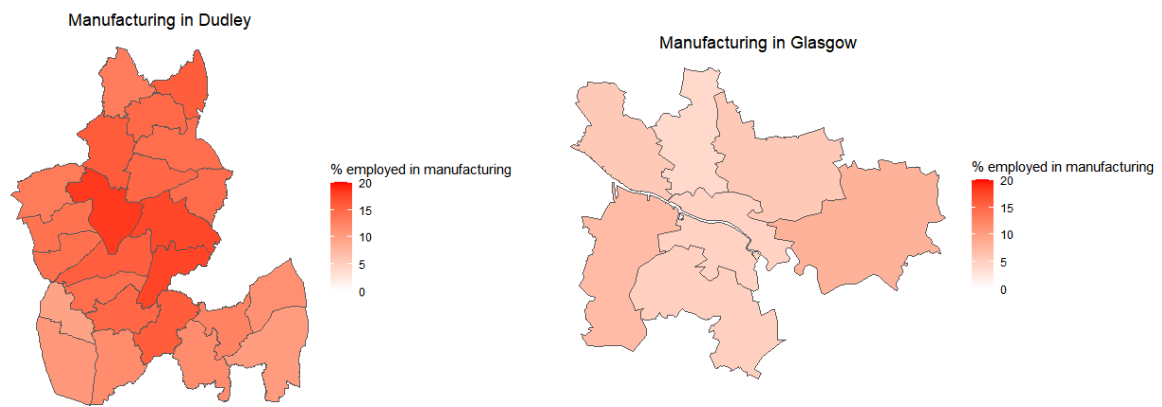
Figure 5: Education level in East Dunbartonshire and Lichfield by small area

Degree (equivalent) holders in East Dunbartonshire

Degree (equivalent) holders in Lichfield

% with L4+

large spatial scale and extreme heterogeneity. Birmingham is unsuitable due to the fact that it has a radically different ethnic mix to Glasgow.

[v] This is an interesting finding in its own right, although perhaps not a surprising one given discourse during (and subsequent to) the referendum. It is nevertheless deserving of further study, particularly given that unlike in the US, voting patterns do not appear to correlate closely to other markers of behaviour as to how people cognitively assess an issue and then filter what they regard as "valid" information (e.g. vaccine scepticism, denial of scientific hypotheses with overwhelming evidence in their favour such as evolution, man-made climate change etc.)

[vi] Such antipathy towards Conservatives is a marked feature of supporters of 'other parties' in general (Duffy et al., 2021) and does not appear unique to Scotland. The survey data suggests that many struggle to separate their views of the party and its leaders from those who vote for it, although it is an open question as to whether this is actually born out in their lived experience.

[vii] As Hearne (2019) notes, the Midlands have always "sat awkwardly" in conversations over a North-South divide, with the West Midlands reclassified as part of 'the North' in the 1980s (Martin, 1988).

[viii] Indeed, the contraction of disposable income per capita in the West Midlands over a short period of time is striking; going from less than 2.3% below that of the South East according to this metric and greater than any other region except London in 1975 to being the poorest region in England by 1981 (Office for National Statistics, 2016).

[ix] The one attempt to do this in England by the then Labour Government was in the North-East, where a referendum in 2004 to establish a regional assembly faced a significant defeat (not helped at the time by the Iraq war).

[x] QED the *West Midlands* Combined Authority (WMCA) as opposed to *Greater Manchester*. To sow further confusion, the WMCA is not even coterminous with the West Midlands NUTS1 region (being a subset).

[xi] Whilst a number of historical counties – Cornwall and Lancashire, for example – have strong local identities, these are of much smaller spatial scale than NUTS1 regions.

xii As such, they have little resemblance to the historical 'Heptarchy' of the great earldoms (Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Kent, Sussex and Wessex) that preceded the Norman Conquest.