



The UK's Political Culture(s) in Transition: Imaginaries, Structures and Practices

Kirsten Forkert¹ · Marius Guderjan² · Zaki Nahaboo¹

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Abstract

Like other liberal democracies, the UK's political culture is undergoing profound transitions. As media, communication, consumption, popular culture and lifestyles have changed over time, political discourses and practices have become increasingly complex. Traditional alignments with the welfare state, social class, political parties and religion are eroding. The resulting feelings of instability and uncertainty are accompanied by a rising scepticism and declining trust towards established political elites and parties. This has been compounded by an ever-faster spinning, over-heated political climate resulting in irreconcilable divisions, intolerance, bullying, violence and even terror which cannot be explained socio-economic inequality alone. Brexit has been used to (re-)evoke, provoke and manipulate imaginaries of 'the people', national identity, and sovereignty. Right-wing populist movements and parties have advanced an illiberal political culture in which outsider groups, such as immigrants and the 'liberal establishment', are condemned as the enemy. At the same time, the party landscape has diversified to reflect different interests and priorities of different parts of society and the UK's four nations. By reflecting on the imaginaries, structures and practices of political culture as well as on shifts and conjunctures specific to the UK's recent political culture, the article establishes the conceptual and empirical context for this special issue. Drawing upon the interdisciplinary insights from Political and Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, the special issue explores facets of political identities, values and mobilisations beyond material realities, and it examines how these are shaped by generational, gendered, racialised and territorial differences and divisions.

Keywords Political culture · United Kingdom · Democracy · Populism · Brexit

✉ Marius Guderjan
Marius.guderjan@hu-berlin.de

¹ Birmingham City University, Birmingham, UK

² Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin, Berlin, Germany

Introduction

Liberal democracies across the world are facing a raft of challenges. While class alignments have eroded, people increasingly vote for political parties that meet their desire for identification and acknowledgement in a rapidly changing world. As living cost and economic inequality are steadily rising, erosion of political trust and disinformation campaigns have increasingly polarised politics and undermined democratic practices (Levitsky & Ziblatt, 2018; Runciman, 2018; Dasandi & Taylor, 2018; Sancino & Bloom, 2019; Lindstaedt, 2021; Norris & Inglehart, 2019; Zimdars, 2025; Ikenberry, 2020). Political culture in the UK is both formative of, and a reaction to, these developments – characterised by decades of declining trust in the traditionally mainstream parties and their politicians (Stoker, 2011; Leach, 2015; Jennings et al., 2017). In contrast to consensus-oriented democracies that share or disperse power, the UK's first-past-the-post system has always fostered a strong polarisation dominated by two major parties: Labour and Conservatives (Lijphart, 1999: 9). Rather than cooperating with other parties, the cultural tradition is for authority to be concentrated in single-party governments that dominate the legislature. This takes place against a backdrop where the government remains largely Westminster-centric and focused on Southern England – despite a significant devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland and to some extent to English local authorities.

Over the course of the last twenty years, the party landscape has diversified to reflect different interests and priorities of different parts of society and the UK's four nations. Parties targeting devolved parts of the UK (Scottish National Party, Plaid Cymru, Sinn Féin, Democratic Unionist Party) as well as Right-wing Eurosceptics (UKIP and Reform UK) became far more prominent contesting hitherto dominant parties. Although Labour won 63% of parliamentary seats in the 2024 General Election, the party only received 33.7% of the popular vote (a marginal increase from the previous election). Together smaller parties (Reform UK, the Greens, SNP, Liberal Democrats and independents) acquired 42% of the popular vote. These developments reflect the erosion of belief in the two-party system (Curtice et al., 2025) indicating a more volatile and pluralistic political climate. Challenging parties provide not only alternative policy solutions but also different ways of thinking and communicating politics (Bunting, 2025). Parties in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland have shifted people's attention from a Westminster-dominated perspective to pluralist political venues. In contrast to the civic nationalism emphasised by parties such as the SNP and Plaid Cymru, right-wing populist movements and parties enthusiastically advance an illiberal political culture. They have condemned outsider groups, such as immigrants and the 'liberal establishment', as the enemies of the people.

Party-political developments are only one example of the transformations of political attitudes, behaviour and formal politics in the UK (e.g., Goodwin & Heath, 2016: 325; Clarke & Newman, 2017; Jennings et al., 2017; Guderjan & Wilding, 2020). Political culture exists within and beyond formal politics and defines the boundaries of what is visible, what is sayable and who is represented or taken as representative. The rise of social media has reshaped the political culture of how people communicate, consume and mobilise. Political messaging has taken worrying manipulative turns by spreading 'fake news' and manufacturing threats on social media platforms,

such as TikTok, X and Facebook, Podcasts and so-called political influencers. Within this 'post-truth' political climate, the efficacy of democratic institutions, the judiciary, experts and journalists have dramatically declined. Feelings of uncertainty have been exploited by politicians who offer simple solutions to the complexities of a globalised world. The emotionalisation and radicalisation of political attitudes and behaviour has undermined informed debates and arguments and brought xenophobic and nationalist sentiments to the fore (Guderjan & Fischer, 2019:25). This has been compounded by an ever-faster spinning, over-heated political climate resulting in irreconcilable divisions, intolerance, bullying, violence and even terror which cannot be explained socio-economic inequality alone.

By exploring facets of political identities, values and mobilisations beyond material realities, this special issue enhances our understanding of political culture in the UK. Contributions examine how political preference and action are shaped by generational, gendered, racialised and territorial differences and divisions. Before we provide an overview of the subsequent articles featured in this special issue, our introduction sets the conceptual and empirical scene. Drawing upon the interdisciplinary registers of Political and Social Sciences and Cultural Studies, it refines understandings of political culture and focuses on imaginaries, structures, practices as three overlapping dimensions of political culture. We then consider what produces a transition within the UK's political culture.

The Imaginaries, Structures and Practices of Political Culture

Culture and politics do not exist independently from each other (Lietzmann, 2019: 17–22). On the contrary, beliefs, attitudes and values, including ethnicity and religion, shape the environment in which politics happens. With this in mind, "[p]olitical culture as an all-embracing specific country-holistic concept remains an elusive and vague notion that is difficult to pin down empirically." (Lane & Wagschal, 2012: 3). Or how Max Kaase (1983: 144) famously put it, political culture would be like trying to nail pudding to the wall (*Versuch einen Pudding an die Wand zu nageln*). To give us a better idea of the matter we are dealing with, Gabriel Almond (1956: 396) wrote: "Every political system is embedded in a particular pattern of orientations to political action. I have found it useful to refer to this as the political culture." And more specifically Sidney Verba (1965: 513) suggested: "The political culture of a society consists of the system of empirical beliefs, expressive symbols, and values which defines the situation in which political action takes place." Meaning-making and interpretations of actors and citizens, which attempt to make sense of political processes and events, can support, challenge and generate cultural dynamics (Rohe, 1990: 333 et seq.; Rudolf, 2018: 103). One dominant element in the study of political culture therefore aims to understand the stability and transformations of political life (Pateman, 1971: 291; Rudolf, 2018: 104). Knowing about the political culture within a given nation-state enables us to comprehend how political life is shaped by expectations of and attitudes towards its rules, institutions and performance (Lane & Wagschal, 2012: 3; Fuchs, 2009: 163; Kleer, 2023: 50). For instance, positive views

of the performance of democratic institutions can stabilise regime continuity and trust, while alienation can lead to rejection (Almond & Verba, 1963: 15 et seq.).

Political culture is sometimes understood as a macro-phenomenon, typically studied on the basis of aggregated survey data of citizens' micro-level attitudes and behaviour (Fuchs, 2009: 173–174). Related empirical research focuses on the norms, values and practices of voters, governments, parliamentarians, parties, judiciary, civil service, civil society organisations and social movements. However, political culture is also manifested in and informed by wider practices, discourses and symbols through which politics is perceived and performed (Diehl, 2019, p. 45). Under the umbrella of a political culture, cognitive (knowledge evaluations of a political system) and affective (conscious and unconscious feelings and emotions towards a political system) orientations of citizens interact with history, socialisation and everyday experiences. Political culture thus embodies the interplay between both internal and subjective as well as external and objective factors (Rohe, 1990: 333 et seq.; Rudolf, 2018: 87 et seq.). By looking at material conditions (such as socio-economic well-being, entitlements to civic rights, how laws or policies are enacted) along with subjective interpretations (narratives and feelings) we come to comprehend the imaginaries, structures and practices of political culture.

In the context of political culture, *imaginaries* refer to the ideas that underpin reflections upon, rationalisations of, or challenges to existing lines of identity and belonging as well as of power relations within society. Importantly, what counts as socially and democratically just depends on what is cast as inside and outside to its discursive formation. As Wendy Brown (2010: 45–46) notes, the very notion of democracy as 'rule by the people' says nothing about '*what* powers must be shared among us for the people's rule to be practiced, *how* this rule is to be organized, nor by *which* institutions or supplementary conditions it is enabled or secured'. Michael Freeden (2008: 213) and Stuart Hall (1979: 17) suggest that imaginaries are entwined with agenda setting and decision-making. For instance, dominant gender and ethnic identifications are baked into liberal democracies' seemingly impartial state laws and citizenship practices – resulting in outliers being precluded from political participation and agenda setting (Young, 1989). Identity entrepreneurs create imaginaries of a (national) political community based upon ethnic and civic criteria, while mobilising this imaginary within rule-making institutions to differentiate between citizens and non-citizens (Wimmer, 2013). As imaginaries are embedded in the everyday lived realities, "common" knowledge, affect and aspirations (Taylor, 2004: 23–30), they are not prior to political structures and practice. They enmesh within each other.

The notion of *structures* helps us conceptualise social and political intentions, strategies, actions and events in relation to their context. Structures have constraining as well as enabling effects depending on the objectives and positioning of the acting subject. While they provide resources and opportunities for 'the powerful', they limit the practices of the subordinate or 'powerless' (Hay, 1995: 205–206; Archer, 2003: 5). Structures are not static (Suddaby et al., 2014) but emerge through human interactions (Archer, 1995, p. 196) based upon, as well as enshrining, cultural norms. Structural properties organise social practices over time and space (Giddens, 1984: 17). Raymond Williams' (1961) 'structures of feeling' point to an understanding of structure as a direction, not an achieved or easily nameable object. For example, an

emergent political system is not simply a set of institutions but a general sense of what shapes policy, party behaviour, class relations and so on. Nevertheless, institutionalised contexts guide the expectations and norms behind practices.

Practices refer to a wider range of dynamics that testify to the differentiated sites and expressions of political culture, including formal politics (parties, elections, parliamentary business, government procedures), informal engagement (protesting, boycotting, volunteering, boycotting), the mobilisation of symbols (flags, placards, gestures) as well as everyday behaviour (speaking, writing, reading, learning). Political practices entail representative claims, whereby speech and action conjure a public and re-presents their interests (Saward, 2000). Representative claims may align with, or fail to reiterate, dominant expectations of who is authorised by the state to engage in political action and what counts as permissible action (e.g., a legal right to protest) (Zvi, 2012). Yet, it is the practices of protest, lobbying, voting and other political practices that mark a continual attempt to transform what counts as the appropriate form and collective subject of political engagement (Clarke et al., 2014). Western democracies have faced an increasing 'public disengagement, manifested in declining public participation in elections and parties, as well as acquiescence to dominant paradigms of public policy' (Fawcett et al., 2017: 6). Consequently, practices have emerged that depart from formal politics – a phenomena often referred to 'anti-politics'. Matthew Flinders uses the term 'doing politics differently' to signify movements that elide or denounce the state as a target of politics and instead attempt to forge relatively autonomous political collectives online or in localised sites (Fawcett et al., 2017: 6).

Imaginaries, structures and practices can be contained within one another. Theories of discourse and performativity have long recognised that these facets of political culture do not exist in disjunctive relations. Foucault's (2001: 232) account of discourse contends that an 'imaginary' cannot be juxtaposed to a 'real' and an 'institution' is not a cause. They emerge as effects of 'practices' that elicit what can be made intelligible, governable, normalised or contestable (Selg & Ventsel, 2020). Identity discourses have become a recent practice contesting formal politics. An example hereof are far-right movements promoting counter-publics, antagonistic rhetoric and cultural differentiation on the ground of ethnicity (Korstenbroek, 2022).

As suggested thus far, contemporary political culture is comprised of imaginaries about what a political system is, or ought to be in relation to institutional, regulatory structures that have constraining as well enabling impacts on practices. In turn, practices manifest, (re-)produce and transform the imaginaries and structures of political culture.

Shifts and Conjunctures in the UK's Political Culture

In the seminal text *New Times*, Stuart Hall describes 'transition' as an over-determined space, whereby multiple elements converge to produce a distinctive situation (Hall, 1989: 126–127). Recent shifts and conjunctures of the UK's political culture are part of a wider transition that date back to the late 1970s. According to Hall, these changes were characterised by a nostalgic conservatism, the belief in free

markets, a mismatch between imperialist hubris and economic decline, the offshoring of capital and labour, rising unemployment, and inflation (Hall, 1989). Thatcherism aimed to dispense with social democratic ideals and Keynesianism as a means of securing economic prosperity and mitigating industrial disharmony. In doing so, it linked heterogeneous social grievances to an ideology of ‘law and order, the need for social discipline and authority in the face of a conspiracy by the enemies of the state’ (Hall, 1979: 16). The 1980s became marked by an amalgam of anti-corporatist policies and denationalised finance, underwritten by ideologies of individualist meritocratic striving and staunch nationalism (Leadbeater, 1988). These imaginaries and structural shifts were entwined with the remaking of the appropriate political subject. As Hall and Held (1989) noted, due to its successful individualisation and responsabilisation at the expense of political solidarity, the language of social citizenship and non-domination became transformed into matters of consumer choice, volunteerism, and national affect.

In the 1990s, New Labour integrated elements of multiculturalism, nationalism and the Third Way displacement of social democracy (Back et al., 2002). Although New Labour and the subsequent Coalition of Conservatives and Liberal Democrats were vastly different from Thatcher’s Britain, they continued to adopt policies and rhetoric that spoke to white English cultural identity while creating a stigmatising and hostile environment for those considered of “immigrant” heritage, the “undeserving poor” and people in need (Tyler, 2013; McKenzie, 2015; Forkert, 2017; Shilliam, 2018). The 2008 financial crisis was a decisive conjuncture for the UK’s political culture fostering the rise of populist movements culminating in the UK’s departure from the European Union. Under the austerity agenda access to public services, welfare, education, health care, justice, libraries, and culture was severely reduced. Wages in real terms have been ever since declining while poverty has grown. The people’s vote for Brexit has been interpreted by some as an expression of frustration with political elites and socio-economic inequality, which became channelled through anti-immigration discourses (Guderjan et al., 2020: 3–4; Forkert, 2020; Guderjan & Wilding, 2020). As evidenced by the 2016 EU Referendum and the 2019 UK General Election result, some of those who suffer most from increasing inequality and would benefit from social-democratic policies (Solivetti, 2022) turned to politicians who promise to “take back control” and restore a nostalgic past. Others have drawn attention to generational divides being more significant than economic divides (Dorling et al., 2016; Serra’s and Grasso’s contribution to this issue). The successful cultivation of a ‘sense of loss’ relates not merely to material well-being but to symbolic status and the ‘psychic privilege’ associated with white, patriarchal authority (Clarke & Newman, 2017: 109) and ‘postcolonial melancholia’ (Gilroy, 2004). For Norris and Inglehart, Brexit as crystallised an authoritarian backlash marked by a combination of ethnic and civic nationalist ideals, grassroots protest against minoritised groups as well as transformations of the state’s political and legal apparatus (Norris & Inglehart, 2019).

The UK’s withdrawal from the EU shows that the separation of the material and post-material explanations ignores the intersectional dimension of political culture (Maiguascha, 2019: 775–776). From the Leave EU campaign of the mid-2010s onwards, dominant public discourses on class are becoming framed less in relation to reducing gaps between rich and poor, and increasingly within identitarian terms. After

the EU referendum, in 2016, then Prime Minister Theresa May labelled “cosmopolitans” who wanted to remain in the EU as “citizens of nowhere”. Although social class has lost its reliability as predictor of voting intention (Curtice et al., 2025), in the aftermath of the vote to leave the EU and the 2019 election, the construct of the “left behind” and the “red wall” became prominent. Such constructs rely on assumptions about the working class being primarily white, male and culturally conservative, and disinterested or even hostile towards debates and policies around gender, sexuality or racial justice which are framed as “identity politics”. As some people are urged to fear for the cohesion of their town communities along racialised lines, traditional party politics has declined in favour of group identity and a simplification of political discourse – fostering an ‘us-versus-them’ mentality (Moffit and Tormey, 2014: 391).

The manipulative and divisive imaginaries and practices on which ‘Brexit populism’ (Guderjan & Wilding, 2020) thrived have become even more severe during the COVID-19 pandemic. A rise of conspiracy theories further undermined trust in political institutions, the judiciary, experts and journalists. Under former Prime Minister Boris Johnson, the UK Government’s unclear messaging and breach of COVID restriction and lockdown policies further contributed to the public’s perception of an elite for which the rules do not apply (Forkert & Guderjan, 2023: 40–41). Subsequently, Russia’s 2022 invasion in Ukraine and more recently the US’s attack on Iran, contributed to rising inflation and costs of living. The state of permanent or poly-crisis distracted the focus from important policy issues and has challenged the democratic consensus. At the same time, party political commitments are not neatly divided along Left- and Right-wing lines anymore and the hegemony of the Conservative and Labour parties is under serious threat. The success of authoritarian populism has also spurred Left wing parties to develop a competing populism, which also seeks mass appeal across class lines. The Green Party is accruing increased support from an 18–24 age group (Curtice et al., 2025), and attempts to fill the social democratic void in ways that challenge the “anti-immigration” populism of Reform UK and the Conservatives, by shifting debates onto a common class struggle. This reframing of the Left is also pursued by sections of the SNP and Plaid Cymru, albeit with an emphasis on rooting out perceived detrimental English-centric policies. Their EU-centric nationalism, international outreach, migrant hospitality and social justice agendas are examples of imaginaries, structures and practices distinct from an English, Westminster-centric political culture.

For obvious reasons, neither our introduction nor the special issue can capture all aspects that are relevant to understand transitions of the UK’s political culture. In particular, the impact of algorithm-based political communication on platforms, such as Instagram, TikTok, X, Telegram, Youtube, Reddit etc., would deserve a closer examination, as they profoundly change people’s political outlook and behaviour as well as the means of political mobilisation (Sancino & Bloom, 2019). This has exacerbated some of the dynamics we discussed earlier, which is demonstrated by the emergence of far-Right riots across the UK (in place like Southport, Belfast, Manchester, Sunderland, Middlesbrough, Hull, Hartlepool and Aldershot). Nevertheless, in the following we present a range of works that focus on important facets of how political culture in the UK is in transition.

Contributions to the Special Issue

This special issue is based on a multidisciplinary perspective covering insights from Political and Social Sciences as well as from Cultural Studies. It combines different methodological approaches to analyse different aspects political culture, and contains quantitative research on citizens' aggregated macro-level orientations (Stark et al., 2025; Serra & Grasso, 2025) and qualitative studies of discourses and narratives (Jones & Kulz, 2025; Forkert, 2025; Guderjan, 2025).

As each generation develops its own value set, which corresponds with the circumstances and structures at the time and continues to guide its political imaginaries and practices, political cultures change over time. Based on survey data about value cleavages on the basis of age, social class and gender, Serra and Grasso's article *Political Socialisation in the UK: Describing Generational Changes of Values* focuses on how socialisation and generational effects inform political attitudes and behaviour. The article explores changes to social attitudes during the administrations of Margaret Thatcher, Tony Blair, and the Conservative/Liberal Democrat coalition. While the younger citizens are more closely aligned with Left-leaning parties and progressive policies as well as with unconventional forms of political action, the older cohorts tend to have more nationalistic and socially conservative views. These divisions became plainly obvious during the Brexit referendum, as younger people often felt that older voters threatened their future by taking them out of the EU. Nevertheless, the relation between age and ideology is not straightforward, and certain young people have started to adopt more Right-wing views, while certain older cohorts advocate for more Left-wing positions. Yet, Serra and Grasso found a general shift towards liberal sociocultural values regardless of age. At the same time, large parts of working class voters defected from Labour to parties that promote anti-immigration policies. Furthermore, there seems to be a clear pattern associating higher levels of education with liberal views and lower levels of education with more authoritarian attitudes. Gender has emerged as another important driver of opinion-formation among younger cohorts in the UK and elsewhere, with younger women tending to vote for Labour or smaller Left-leaning parties, and younger men being twice as likely to vote for Reform UK. This may be attributed to divisive gender-focused narratives on social media platforms, such as TikTok or X. These platforms, amongst others, have been utilised effectively by misogynistic influencers to promote discourses that are hostile towards women.

Since the EU referendum, the role and politics of emotions have gained more attention among scholars. Yet it remains underexplored how they shape imaginaries and practices and are thus an expression of political culture. *Anxiety, Insecurity, and Redistribution in the UK 'Red Wall': Have Policy Preferences Changed Since the COVID-19 Pandemic?* by Graham Stark et al. explores the politics of emotions, particularly fear and anxiety. The article is based on surveys that asked participants about their views on financial circumstances, their view on the state of democracy and their support for redistributive policies such as Universal Basic Income and the Green New Deal. Importantly, the surveys coincided with both the end of the Covid-19 pandemic and the start of the Ukraine War. The authors contend that fear and anxiety are an understandable response to real material circumstances. They note

that these emotional states can be linked to support for progressive and redistributive policies. Furthermore, participants' support for these policies outlasted their feelings of anxiety. Therefore, the authors' findings challenge some of the assumptions underpinning the conventional ways that such emotions are discussed in relation to politics. They question why critical perspectives often assume that fearful and anxious people are being manipulated, and challenge the view that responses to these emotions are necessarily connected to conservative and authoritarian preference formation.

Political identities have always been formative aspects of political culture. In the past, however, social class, religion, ethnicity and other factors have been reasons why they seemed to more fixed and only slowly changing. In *Fixed Identities, Zero-Sum Games and Oppression Hierarchies: The Impasses of Current Debates About Race and Their Consequences for Contemporary Politics*, Forkert considers persistent tendencies to see identity – and in particular racial identity – as fixed and static despite their fluidity and contingency. Using a conjunctural analysis, her article examines how such conceptions of ethnic identity intersect with two other imaginaries and practices of the current conjuncture: neoliberal individualism and culture war politics. Within the divisive politics of culture wars, competition and fixed identities harden into a zero-sum game: greater recognition and rights for one group becomes, by definition, a loss of rights and recognition for another. Solidarity and collectivity become inconceivable, and international politics – particularly international solidarity – becomes unrecognisable within this framework. The article focuses on recent controversy surrounding Diane Abbott MP and her claims that racism experienced by those racialised as Black is different from those who can pass for white. It also explores reactions to independent candidates in the 2024 election who called for a ceasefire in Gaza. These reactions framed the situation as sectarian politics relating to the 'Muslim vote'. In both examples, fixed identities, competitive individualism and zero-sum games are mobilised to narrow the scope of debate, misrepresent people and situations and exclude important political questions from discussion, especially international politics. This reflects longstanding political practices for compartmentalising issues of racism. Forkert calls for a reconsideration of anti-racism so that it might better serve the interests of solidarity, and for a revisiting of challenges to fixed imaginaries of identity.

Polarising imaginaries, such the proclaimed "culture war", have undermined liberal democratic structures and fostered oppressing practices that affect not only adults but also children. Jones' and Kulz's contribution *Culture Wars as a War on the Young: Understanding the UK Culture Wars Through the Lens of Young People's Political and Civic Resistance* explores the targeting of children by the former Conservative government. The article focuses on the cases of flag-burning protests at the London school Pimlico Academy, controversies about gender-neutral toilets, and the case of Child Q (a young Black girl who was wrongfully suspected of possessing drugs and was strip-searched). It explores why children and young people become objects of inflammatory rhetoric and punitive policies of right-wing conservative political imaginaries, and how they have become symbols of unwelcome social change, but also a potential future progressive politics (exemplified in this case by more fluid conceptions of gender and more critical perspectives on British identity). For the Conservative Party, these cases reveal contradictory views on childhood. In the case

of the toilet controversy, school pupils are positioned innocent and in need of protection from non-binary conceptions of gender (repeating older homophobic tropes which equate childhood innocence with heteronormativity). However, in the case of Child Q, the girl in question was positioned as an adult and a potential criminal (repeating older tropes around the ‘adultification’ of Black children). The article highlights how the governmental rhetoric and policies lead to an identity politics that has material and structural consequences, which go beyond political imaginaries.

Lastly, the UK’s political culture is manifested in and formed by its territorial structures, imaginaries and practices, which are characterised by diverging ambitions to either centralise or decentralise power and authority. Guderjan’s article *Narratives of Devolution and Intergovernmental Relations in the UK: Policy Paradigm, Institutional Setting and Cultural Norms* turns to formal politics. It emphasises how the increasing devolution of political, legislative and fiscal powers has challenged and transformed the centre-oriented, top-down thinking and practice that was for centuries dominated by Westminster and Whitehall. Looking at policy paradigms, institutional settings and cultural norms, the article analyses the macro-level policy narratives that shape how the different governments operate and interact with each other. While the relations between government depend on good will and good faith, after the first decade of devolution policy narratives have become increasingly competitive and tense. As Westminster’s majoritarian sovereignty reflexes have struggled to come to terms with the policy interdependence between the different jurisdictions, the devolved governments have felt as *victims* to English politics. Scottish independence ambitions and Brexit eroded reciprocal trust and the willingness to cooperate. Consequently, negative narratives have challenged the established narratives about policy paradigm, institutional setting, and political culture, while calls for the transformations and reform of territorial politics have become stronger.

Conclusion

The imaginaries, structures and practices that contribute to the UK’s political culture seem inexhaustible and in constant flux. The articles of this special issue were already published in 2025, and meanwhile things have moved on. As this introduction is about to be finalised, in his first speech as Prime Minister in July 2026, Andy Burnham acknowledged that people “are fed up with politics. I hear you. And I want to be honest with you. We have not been good enough, and we need to be better. We will be.” While this points into a new direction of political communication, he further promised “the biggest changes in the last forty years”, decentralisation of political power to local authorities and devolved governments, as well as the nationalisation of public services. To what extent one person can trigger reforms and ways of political thinking so far-reaching that they transform the UK’s political culture remains to be seen. Political cultures do change but not overnight. Imaginaries, structures and practices are long-lasting and powerful. People have the agency to ‘act differently’ and to ‘intervene in the world’ (Giddens, 1984: 14). Their autonomy is, however, relative and relational to “the settings in which they find themselves” (Hay, 1995, p. 189). Politicians, policy-makers and citizens invent and reinvent ideas, behaviours

and the environment in which they think and act; yet, they are not free of them. Material conditions, power relations, institutions, rules, rights and entitlements as well discourses, all of which are both determinants and outcomes of political cultures, influence strategic choices and actions.

We conclude by emphasising the importance of an interdisciplinary and approach, which has been particularly fruitful for this this special issues. Combining concepts and methods of social and political science and Culture Studies has added the discursive reflections to capture some of the complexity of the topic. Of course, this special issues only focuses on one country and a handful of case studies. We therefore hope the insights and perspective we offer here inspire future interdisciplinary research on other country as well on the UK.

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