Brexit and the North: Not Our Problem

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1. Introduction

There has been a tendency in UK public discourse since the 2016 referendum on European Union (EU) membership to identify the residents of Northern England as the principal 'culprits' of the Brexit vote. Given that, in a direct, immediate sense, it appears that the North will be more negatively affected than most other parts of the UK (or certainly England) by departure from the EU's economic zone, this narrative has fed a sense that Northerners have acted both selfishly and foolishly. We have both dragged the UK out of the EU against the wishes of most of its constituent regions and nations, and, in doing so, acted in contradiction of our own economic interests.

This paper demonstrates that this depiction of the North's support for Brexit is far too simplistic. While there is evidence of strong support for leaving the EU – and indeed some support for leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement – Northern regions are far from the only, or even main, perpetrators of the Brexit vote. Yet it clearly suits certain popul*ist* (not necessarily to be confused with popul*ar*) political agendas to maintain the dominant fiction about the North, insofar as it enables politicians such as pro-Brexit campaigner Nigel Farage and Labour Party leader Jeremy Corbyn to claim the support of a previously disenfranchised body of 'left behind' voters for their positions on the EU withdrawal process.

The paper begins by briefly outlining the risks to the North of leaving the EU. It then examines the regional results of both the 2016 referendum and the 2019 European parliamentary elections to consider in greater depth Northern regions' contribution to support for leaving the EU, and leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement. By taking into account regional differences in population size and electoral turnout, it demonstrates unambiguously that electoral support for Brexit is concentrated in Southern England, rather than the North. The fourth section considers the political implications of this analysis for both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party, and the fifth section outlines a set of policy proposals which would allow the North's interests to be better deliberated and represented – rather than simply assumed – in both the Brexit process and post-Brexit governance.

2. Background: Brexit will harm the North (and everywhere else that voted to leave)

The North's developmental problems long precede the Brexit vote (see Berry and Giovannini, 2018). Northern regions have significantly lower levels of GDP per capita and productivity than Southern regions, reflected in lower levels of employment, earnings and life expectancy, and due in part to significant differences in public investment (Berry *et al.*, 2015). These inequalities have been reinforced by economic conditions since the financial crisis, despite an apparent elite commitment to 'rebalancing' the economy (Berry and Hay, 2016; Berry and White, 2014).

The weight of evidence suggests, however, that leaving the EU's economic zone will lead to further pain for the North. The model developed by Bart Los, Philip McCann, John Springford

and Mark Thissen (2017) – using the World Input-Output Database, the most detailed data currently available regarding the economic and trade structure of UK and EU regions – allows us to assess the overall economic impact of the UK's regional trade structures on the domestic economic performance. As Los *et al*. explain, the model enables them to

> calculate the share of local economic activity that is dependent on trade with the rest of the EU, including all those local supply chains comprising many firms which themselves do not actually export. The methodology incorporates all the evolving global value chains involving multiple cross-border movements of goods and services, and allows us to accommodate all value-adding configurations issues ranging from the so-called 'Rotterdam Effect' [the regional misallocation of export data resulting from transit via ports]… all the way to the complex multinational activities of global companies, including their interactions with small and medium-sized enterprises (2017: 788).

The results demonstrate that most NUTS-2 regions[1] in Northern England have an overall rate of dependence on EU consumption and investment demand higher than the UK's overall rate of 9.5 per cent. The main exceptions were the Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle city-regions, with (slightly) lower rates of dependence than the UK as a whole (and which of course generally voted to remain in 2016). Across the UK, the NUTS-2 regions most dependent on the EU are Cumbria and East Yorkshire. More generally, South coast regions, particularly in the South West, show the highest levels of dependence on the EU (and these areas of course generally voted to leave in 2016).

There are only three NUTS-2 regions where economic activity has an EU dependency rate below 8 per cent: Inner London, Outer London and North East Scotland (Scotland in general has relatively low levels of dependence on the EU economy). London and Scotland generally voted strongly in favour of remain in 2016. The East Midlands has a high EU dependency rate (and voted strongly to leave), while economic activity in the West Midlands and Wales is generally dependent on the EU in line with the UK overall (and these areas voted much more narrowly to leave).

In considering the regional impact of EU withdrawal, it is also worth noting the relative value of EU public investment across the UK. The chart below demonstrates the per capita value of the European Regional Development Fund (ERDF) and European Social Fund (ESF) across the UK's NUTS-1 regions[1] and nations, in the 2007-2013 and 2014-2020 funding periods. These funds are designed to support economic development in the EU's most disadvantaged regions.

Clearly, the main beneficiaries are Wales and Northern Ireland – closely followed by the North East. The North West and Yorkshire and Humberside are also among the regions that have received the highest levels of EU investment in recent years, although there has been a shift away from these regions towards the South West, and to a lesser extent the West Midlands and Scotland. London, the South East and the East of England receive relatively low levels of ERDF and ESF investments.

Crucially, ERDF and ESF spending is closely related to job and business creation (Berry *et al.*, 2016: 7). Furthermore, the EU investment approach requires that ERDF and ESF projects are

match-funded domestically, by central or local government, or the private or third sectors – especially significant given lower rates of public and private investment in the North. It is reasonable to assume that many funding partners may choose not to invest in development projects in future without the security of knowing that 50 per cent of the funding was being provided via EU funds.

Figure 1: Combined ERDF and ESF allocation per capita by UK region (€) *(Source: Berry et al., 2016)*
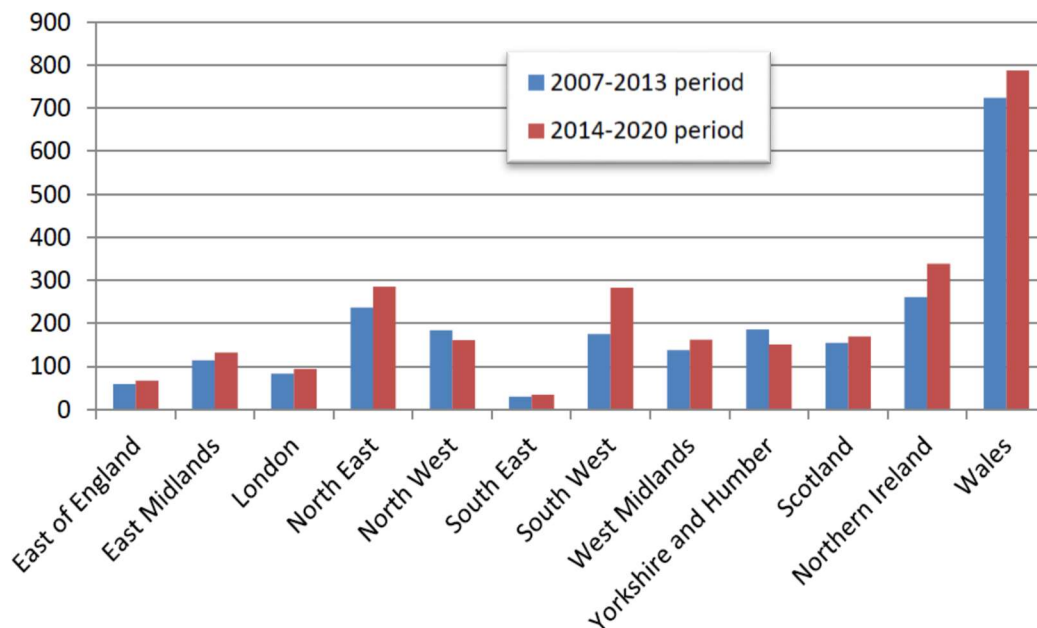
3. Evidence: the North voted for Brexit, but is not responsible for Brexit

Endemic regional inequalities contributed to the Brexit vote, insofar as the vote to leave constituted a 'protest vote' against the UK's political and economic elites (and particularly the pursuit of austerity in the post-crisis period), but also reflected growing concerns around immigration (meaning 'free movement' from the EU had become increasingly politicised) (Berry, 2016a; 2018). As suggested above, Los *et al*.'s secondary thesis is that areas most dependent on the EU economy were paradoxically more likely to vote to leave the EU in 2016.

The evidence is fairly clear: the areas where economic activity is most dependent on EU consumption and investment demand were more likely to have voted to leave the EU, and indeed the areas most dependent tended to support Brexit more strongly (Los *et al.*, 2017: 788-789). However, there are several, vital caveats missing from this account. Firstly, we should not over-state regional differences in the 2016 results: with the exception of Scotland, no UK region or nation voted by more than 60 per cent for either leave or remain in the referendum on EU membership. Secondly, as Los *et al.*'s analysis makes clear, the relationship between EU dependence and support for Brexit is not evident only in Northern England, and is indeed

stronger in many other regions – yet it is Northern England which tends to illustrate the 'left behind' narrative most often in public discourse.

Thirdly, and most importantly, the notion that support for Brexit is concentrated in the North too often fails to take into account variable population sizes and electoral turnout rates across UK regions and nations. As demonstrated below, Northern regions might have been more likely to support leave in 2016, but leave-supporting Northerners were still outnumbered by those in the more populous Southern regions, where residents are more likely to vote.

3.1 The 2016 referendum

Taking population size and electoral turnout into account enables us to challenge the simplistic notion that the North was chiefly responsible for the Brexit vote in 2016. Including non-voters, support for leaving the EU was only 40 and 41 per cent in the North East and Yorkshire and Humberside, respectively (support for remain was 29 and 30 per cent, respectively). In the North West, only 38 per cent of the electorate voted to leave (and 32 per cent voted to remain). Support for Brexit was higher in both the South East and the East of England; 40 and 43 per cent, respectively (with 37 and 33 per cent support for remain, respectively).

London obviously voted heavily for remain, but taking turnout into account means only 42 per cent of the London electorate voted to remain in 2016 (with 28 per cent voting to leave). The proportion was identical in Scotland (with 26 per cent voting to leave). The Midlands regions both recorded higher proportions of the electorate voting for leave than in each Northern region (43 per cent in the West Midlands and 44 per cent in the East Midlands). There were also lower votes for remain in both regions than in the North West, with remain votes broadly equivalent to Yorkshire and Humberside's. Results in Wales, which ostensibly voted to leave, were similar to the North West: only 38 per cent of the Welsh electorate voted to leave in 2016 (34 per cent voted to remain).

Differential population sizes across the UK regions and nations challenge our view of the 2016 result quite dramatically. In a national referendum, regional variation is irrelevant to the result: the option which receives the largest number of votes wins. With the Northern regions generally less populous than other regions – particularly London and the wider South East region – the number of votes for each option in Northern regions should not be seen as decisive for the overall result.

The charts below illustrate the regional sources of votes for leave and remain, respectively. Interestingly, leave voters in both London and Yorkshire and Humberside represented 9 per cent of the national leave vote. The North West's leave voters represented a higher proportion (11 per cent), but broadly similar to the East of England, the South West and the West Midlands. The North East delivered only 4 per cent of the national leave vote, or one in 25 of all UK leave voters – significantly fewer than all Southern regions, both Midlands regions and even remain-supporting Scotland. The most significant regional result, by far, is the South East, where leave voters represented nearly one in seven of all UK leave voters. Interestingly, the North West delivered far more remain voters than all other areas, outside London and the South East (around one in nine of all UK remain voters).

Figure 2: Regional composition of national leave vote, 2016 referendum *(Source: see annex)*
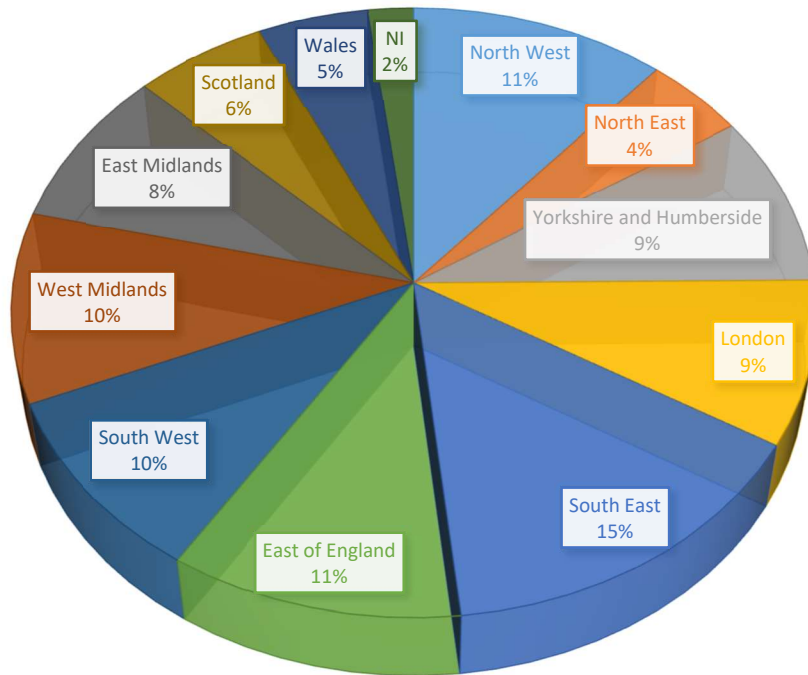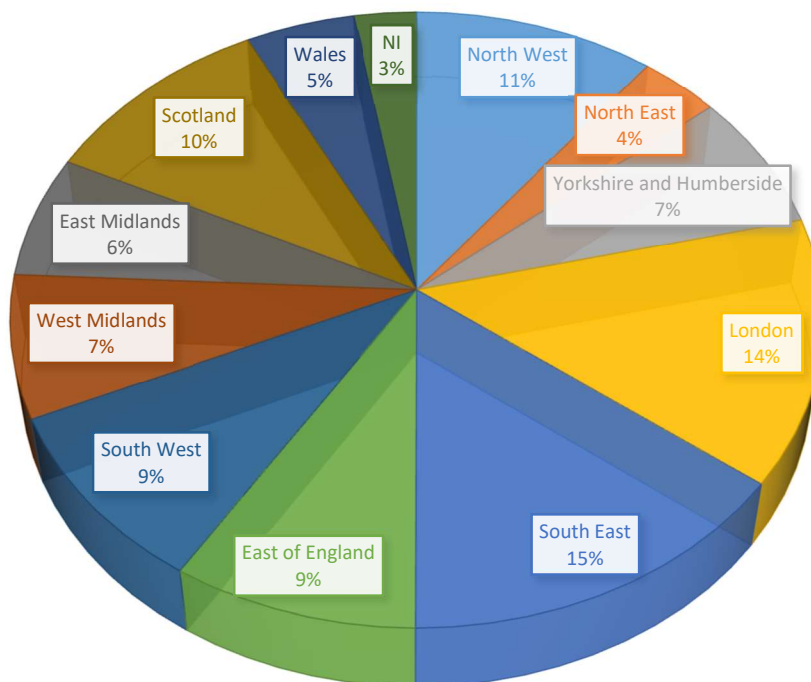

Figure 3: Regional composition of national remain vote, 2016 referendum *(Source: see annex)*

If we treat the three Northern NUTS-1 regions, and London and the South East, as two mega-regions, it is clear that a narrative contrasting the 'left behind' North with the metropolitan areas of the UK's economic core is a significant misrepresentation of the actual results. While there were many more remain voters in London and the South East in 2016 (around 4.7 million, or 28.9 per cent of the national remain vote, versus 3.4 million in the North, representing 21.1 per cent of the national remain vote), the differences in terms of the leave vote are far less significant. There were 4.3 million leave voters in the North, versus 4.1 million in London and the South East – this represents 24.9 and 23.4 per cent of the national leave vote, respectively.

3.2 The 2019 European election

Given the circumstances of the election (the ongoing turmoil around the withdrawal process, and the likelihood that the MEPs elected would serve for only a very short period) and the low salience of most EU policy issues in UK domestic politics, the European parliamentary election held in the UK in May 2019 has understandably been seen as a 'proxy' second referendum on Brexit. More importantly, given that local and general elections obviously have implications for domestic governance ahead of issues around EU membership, the 2019 European elections were the first, major opportunity for voters to offer a verdict on whether they would be prepared to leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement and transitional period, or instead revoke the declaration of Article 50 (generally via a second referendum).

As such, it would be useful for the present purposes to consider the extent of support for both a 'no deal' Brexit, and revocation and/or a second referendum, across UK regions and nations. Nigel Farage's Brexit Party – which argued that the UK should leave the EU in autumn 2019 irrespective of a withdrawal deal being agreed – 'won' the election in the sense that it received most votes (and seats), but there was a discernible rise in support for parties unambiguously promising to revoke Article 50, or at least to delay withdrawal in order to hold a 'people's vote'. Layered on top of the dominant interpretation of the 2016 referendum, the implication is that leave support among 'left behind' voters – especially in the North – had hardened into 'no deal' support, while metropolitan voters abandoned the main parties in order to register their support for remaining in the EU.

The reality, again, is more complicated. The most obvious caveat is that turnout in the 2019 European parliamentary elections was significantly lower than in the 2016 referendum (36.9 and 72.2 per cent, respectively). This alone invalidates any account which claims that the election demonstrates widespread support for 'no deal'. The election was an opportunity to express support for this outcome – and generally speaking, voters in the North (and elsewhere) rejected the opportunity. At the same time, the opportunity to express support unambiguously for remaining in the EU was also rejected.

The analysis here considers support across the UK's regions and nations for parties and candidates which explicitly offered either a 'no deal' or revocation/second referendum platform (there is more detail on methodology in the annex). This means votes for both the Conservative Party and the Labour Party are excluded, since the leadership of both parties, at the time of the

elections, advocated leaving the EU via a withdrawal agreement and lengthy transitional period, and indeed a close, ongoing economic relationship with the continuing EU. The Yorkshire Party has been excluded on the basis that it has no specific position on Brexit, and very minor parties recording few votes have been excluded on the basis that they generally campaigned on issues other than Brexit. Parties standing in Northern Ireland have also been excluded; while they offer different positions on EU withdrawal, there was no meaningful 'no deal' option in Northern Ireland.

Support in the Northern regions for parties offering a 'no deal' approach was noticeably higher than for those offering revocation and/or a second referendum. In the North West, 12 per cent of voters supported 'no deal', alongside 14 per cent in Yorkshire and Humberside, and 15 per cent in the North East (with 11, 10 and 9 per cent, respectively, supporting revocation and/or a second referendum). However, these voters make up a relatively low proportion of the national vote in support of 'no deal'. 'No deal' voters in the North West represent 11 per cent of the national 'no deal' vote, alongside 9 per cent in Yorkshire and Humberside and 5 per cent in the North East (only slightly more than Scotland).

'No deal' voters in the South East represent, by far, the largest proportion of the national 'no deal' vote (17 per cent). The proportions for the South West, East of England and West Midlands are around the same as for the North West, and higher than for Yorkshire and Humberside. There are almost as many London-based 'no deal' voters as there are in Yorkshire and Humberside. Of course, higher population sizes means the support base for parties offering revocation and/or a second referendum is also concentrated in London and the South East (and Scotland). But there are more revocation/second referendum supporters in the North West than in either of the Midlands regions, and roughly the same number in Yorkshire and Humberside.

Comparing again the Northern and London/South East mega-regions helps to further illustrate these findings. While there were many more revocation/second referendum voters in London and the South East in 2019 (around 2.1 million, or 17.7 per cent of the national revocation/second referendum vote, versus 1.1 million in the North, representing 10.3 per cent of the national vote), the differences in terms of the 'no deal' vote are far less significant. There were just under 1.5 million 'no deal' voters in the North, versus just over 1.4 million in London and the South East – this represents 25.2 and 24.3 per cent of the national 'no deal' vote, respectively. Arguably, the 'no deal' vote in 2019 was slightly more weighted towards the North than the leave vote in 2016. Yet this is based in the overwhelming majority in the North (as elsewhere) choosing not to vote for parties offering either 'no deal' or revocation/second referendum – or indeed to vote at all.

Although acknowledging the limitations of the methodology, our verdict must be clear. By itself, the 2019 European elections demonstrates little appetite in the North for remaining in the EU or holding a second referendum on EU membership. Yet nor is there significant support evident for a 'no deal' Brexit. Indeed, there are significantly more people in the South prepared to support 'no deal', including almost a million people in the South East alone, despite a regional turnout under 40 per cent.

Figure 4: Regional composition of national 'no deal' vote, 2019 EU election *(Source: see annex)*
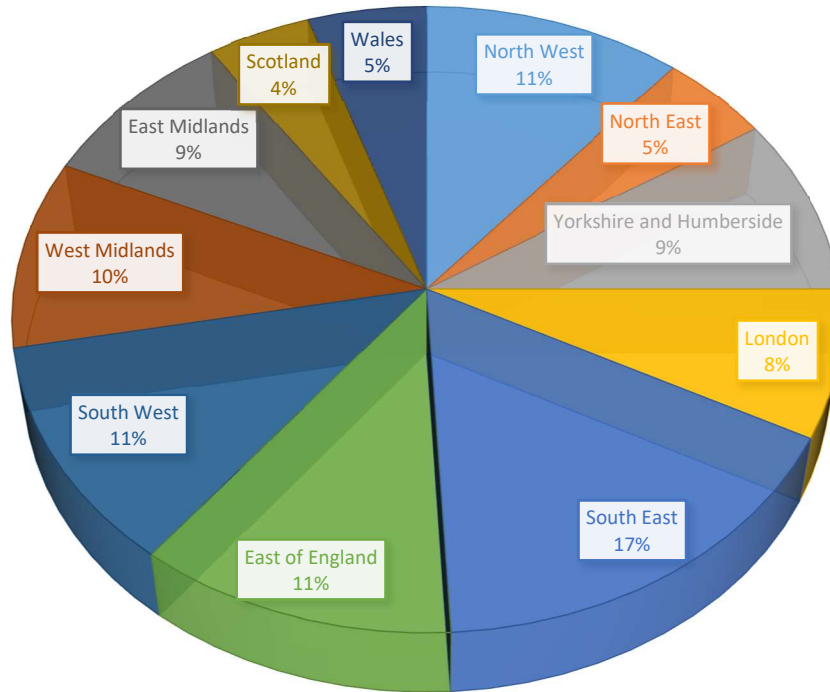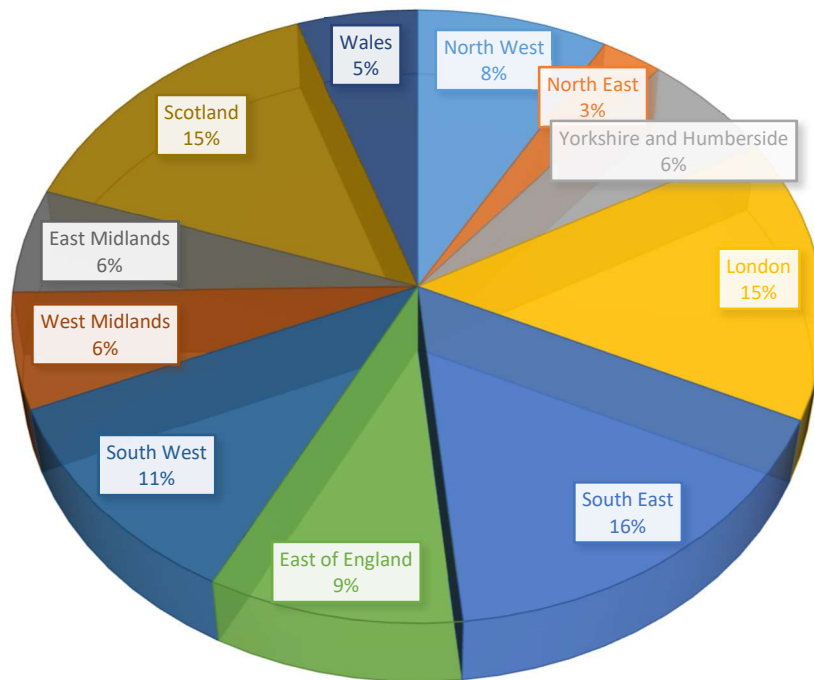

Figure 5: Regional composition of national revocation/second referendum vote, 2019 EU election
(Source: see annex)

4. Political implications: Brexit has produced disarray among the main political parties

In contrast to the prevailing narrative on the Brexit vote, support for leaving the EU (especially without a withdrawal deal) is lower in the North, and higher in the South, than generally assumed. Given that support for the UK's main political parties tends to be geographically concentrated, these results generally accord with what we know about the Brexit preferences of Conservative and Labour supporters.

People who voted for the Conservative Party in 2017, concentrated in Southern and Eastern regions of England, tend to support leave. In contrast, people who voted for the Labour Party in 2017, concentrated in the Northern and West Midlands regions, tend to support remain. While there were many parliamentary seats held in the North by Labour in which a majority of all voters supported leave in 2016, analysis by YouGov suggest in almost every (or perhaps every) seat now held by Labour, more Labours voters supported remain than leave in 2016 (Kellner, 2019a).

In short, Brexit is largely a centre-right agenda, driven by the type of voters who traditionally tend to vote for the Conservative Party (although they may have switched support to UKIP or the Brexit Party in recent elections). Brexit appears to be a conflation of two, contradictory impulses on the centre-right of UK politics. Firstly, an ultra-neoliberal and globalist or Atlanticist perspective which sees the regulatory function of EU institutions as a barrier to *future* prosperity, even if a very significant proportion of *current* economic activity in the UK is dependent on the EU economy.

Secondly, a socially illiberal perspective which sees the entrenchment of human rights in European law, and high levels of immigration, as a threat to social order and traditional conservative values. This perspective tends to be aligned with a more nationalist or protectionist economic policy, but essentially sees the economy as only a secondary issue in relation to EU membership.

The challenge facing the Conservative Party is to deliver a form of Brexit which satisfies both camps. The party's last two leaders failed in this regard (notwithstanding the fact that both campaigned for remain in 2016). David Cameron had most in common with the first perspective, but refused to tolerate the short-term consequences of leaving the EU (and his status as a 'moderniser' meant he lacked credibility as a social conservative). Despite once imploring the Conservatives to stop being 'the nasty party', Theresa May became a key voice for a more illiberal form of conservatism, but ultimately failed to sustain the support of the ultra-neoliberal Brexiters, due to her unwillingness to sanction 'no deal' (again, despite previously arguing that 'no deal' was a meaningful withdrawal option).

Nigel Farage (now as leader of the Brexit Party) is able to traverse these contradictions, for two main reasons. Firstly, his strident opposition to immigration (and/or demonization of immigrants). This agenda afford him credibility as socially illiberal, while at the same time supporting the ultra-neoliberal perspective in terms of trade liberalisation (beyond the EU) and domestic deregulation. Secondly, the fact he has never attained formal power, and seemingly

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does not seek formal power. This means he is untainted by the Conservative Party's austerity agenda and poor record on the economy – despite generally supporting the same policy approaches – and is in fact able to portray his ideological allies in the Conservative Party as members of the same establishment as EU policy-makers. His distance from power means he has also avoided scrutiny for recent claims about the benefits of (and mandate for) a 'no deal' Brexit.

To maintain a viable electoral coalition, the next leader of the Conservative Party somehow has to marry both perspectives. There is no reason to assume this will be any more achievable for the next leader than it was for Theresa May, especially given that he or she will be confronted with an even more acute version of the dilemma faced by their predecessor. Avoiding a 'no deal' outcome will involve either accepting a permanent customs union, and possibly single market membership, in order to secure parliamentary support – effectively abandoning Brexit in both its ultra-neoliberal and socially illiberal guises – or pursuing a second referendum or general election – effectively abandoning Brexit altogether.

At the same time, pursuing 'no deal' as a genuine option is highly likely to bring about a second referendum or general election anyway – and there is no evidence that 'no deal' commands sufficient electoral support for the next Conservative leader to be remotely confident about either scenario. In this context, the Brexit Party is highly likely to continue to gain support among those traditional Conservative supporters, including in the North, who are prepared to leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement. This dynamic will severely wound the Conservatives – perhaps fatally – without the Brexit Party ever forming a viable governing prospect in its own right.

Among the current candidates for the Conservative Party leadership, Andrea Leadsom is probably the closest ideological approximation to Farage – yet her position *within* the governing party means it is almost impossible for Leadsom to recreate Farage's insurgent persona. Likely victor Boris Johnson's increasingly 'hard' stance on Brexit endears him to the ultra-neoliberal camp, and his history of racist and homophobic remarks clearly endears him to many within the socially illiberal camp among Conservative Party members. But it is not an act likely to prosper outside traditional Conservative Party territories, especially without Farage's endorsement. Farage's political career may yet not survive mounting allegations of wrongdoing in public office and criminality, yet even if he were to depart the scene, it would simply leave a Farage-shaped hole in the centre-right of UK politics which the Conservative Party cannot fill.

The disarray on the centre-right of UK politics adds to the frustration felt by many Labour supporters regarding their own party's positioning on Brexit. Even more so than on the right, the prevailing narrative of the North as strongly supportive of leave is playing an important role in debates within the Labour Party on how to respond to Brexit. Broadly speaking, there are four, alternative perspectives on Brexit within the Labour Party. Firstly, a centrist/neoliberal perspective which, unlike the ultra-neoliberal perspective on the right, sees EU membership as a key element of a liberal, market-based economy. Increasingly, this group has been deserting the Labour Party, choosing instead to support the Liberal Democrats or the new Change UK party. They have actually sought to challenge, to some extent, the notion that Labour's

supporters in the North are predominantly Brexiters, but at the same time seek to organise primarily in metropolitan areas, especially in the South.

Secondly, a 'Lexit' perspective, which is accepted substantively by Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn, and some of his most loyal supporters among parliamentarians, trade union leaders and the commentariat. There is no doubt that the notion that the North and the West Midlands – Labour's 'heartlands' – are perceived as strongly supportive of leave is convenient to this perspective, although its main advocates, like Corbyn, are products of London-centred political communities. The ascendancy of this perspective explains not only Labour's timidity in relation to supporting a second referendum, but also the prioritisation of customs union rather than single market membership in any 'soft Brexit' construction; Lexiters are content to impede trade with the EU, while at the same time preventing the UK from signing future free trade agreements with non-EU countries.

Thirdly, a broadly centre-left perspective which, although supportive of Corbyn's leadership, has come to recognise the dangers inherent in Brexit, in terms of both the challenge to liberal values and social protections which a centre-right Brexit agenda represents, and the likely economic consequences of a 'no deal' Brexit, especially for groups more likely to support Labour. Adherents of this perspective are beginning to criticise Corbyn's perspective with increasing frequency – including some of his key allies such as John McDonnell, Diane Abbott and Emily Thornberry. It is primarily Labour's pro-remain figures (alongside other centre-left parties) – whether supportive or critical of the Corbyn leadership – who have highlighted the dangers of a 'no deal' Brexit for Northern Ireland and the Good Friday Agreement.

Corbyn clearly believes that Labour's victory at the Peterborough by-election in June 2019 strengthens his position in this regard, despite the significant loss of support experienced by the party, seemingly to both the Brexit Party and the Liberal Democrats. Overall, the result suggests that supports that support for Labour is falling dramatically, but that paradoxically the party is benefiting from centre-right voters being divided between the Brexit Party and the Conservative Party (whose combined vote significantly outweighed Labour's in Peterborough).

Fourthly, a 'Blue Labour' perspective; although the MPs (predominantly representing Northern constituencies) associated with this perspective generally support remaining in the EU, they have been insistent that Labour cannot be seen to abandon its leave-voting supporters in Northern England. It is to this perspective which the present analysis probably represents the most significant rebuke. While it is undeniable that the majority of Labour-held constituencies in the North supported leave in 2016, levels of support for leave in the North have been significantly over-stated.

As noted above, the majority of Labour's 2017 voters in (virtually) all Labour constituencies support remaining in the EU; moreover, among working-class leave supporters, two-thirds voted for the Conservative Party rather than Labour in 2017 (Kellner, 2019b). However, leading Blue Labour advocate Lisa Nandy (2019) has rightly responded that the Labour Party should not be using its 2017 electoral base as a benchmark, since the 2017 result reflected the fact that working-class voters (most obviously, in the North) had been moving away from Labour for two decades (see also Berry, 2017). For Nandy, Labour should be trying to win back this support – and as such needs to be conscious that many working-class, non-Labour

voters in the North are more supportive of Brexit than those that have continued to support the party.

Nevertheless, the overriding priority for any political party is the pursuit of formal power, necessitating the construction of a governing project which can command a sufficient electoral coalition. If the prospect of a binary choice between 'no deal' and 'no Brexit' (and/or a second referendum) materialises after the Conservative Party leadership election, Labour may finally be forced to choose between increasing its appeal to leave-supporting voters prepared to accept a 'no deal' departure, and remain-supporting voters unwilling to countenance 'no deal' in any circumstances. This paper is obviously not able to adjudicate on the likelihood of success of the respective strategies. Yet choosing the former strategy on the basis that there is overwhelming supporting for leaving the EU in the North – let alone without a withdrawal agreement – would be inconsistent with the empirical evidence.

Similarly, this is not to suggest that Labour should embrace revocation or a second referendum on the basis that it is an obvious route to electoral success. It may be that Labour is unable to restore its credibility as a pro-remain party, given the extent of the leadership's intransigence on this issue since 2016. However, there is a possible solution which would mitigate the dangers inherent in either electoral strategy: the formation of a centre-left coalition (or 'progressive alliance') with parties such as the Green Party and the Liberal Democrats. (Interestingly, Nandy has in fact advocated such a coalition in the past (Nandy *et al*., 2016); Labour probably does need to win leave-voting Conservative marginal seats in order to win an election (Johnson, 2019), but it does not necessarily need to win support from Conservative voters in these areas.) This move would commit the Labour leadership to supporting a second referendum, increasing its appeal to remainers. But it would also allow the party to argue, with credibility, that it has been compelled to support a second referendum due to political circumstances (notwithstanding the necessity of avoiding the economic consequences of 'no deal') while maintaining its own, more nuanced position on reforming the EU.

This strategy is obviously not risk-free for Labour. Yet given the fissures within the UK's traditional political tribes exposed and created by Brexit, there may be no good options left for either main party.

5. Policy implications: to break the Brexit impasse, the North needs voice and power

Since the 2016 referendum, Northern England has been talked about, but not listened to – as demonstrated by the crude, exaggerated depiction of leave support in the North which prevails in UK public discourse. Alas, the UK's next Prime Minister is likely to be a factional politician: drawn from a particular side in the Conservative Party's Brexit debate, without a mandate to represent all perspectives within the party, let alone the country more generally. For now, we can expect political elites to continue to invoke the North in support of a political project born, raised and maintained in the Conservative Party heartlands of Southern and Eastern England.

Yet the voting patterns explored in this paper should provide grounds for a fresh approach. Given the states preferences of the candidates most likely to succeed in the Conservative Party leadership contest, it seems likely that the new Prime Minister will seek approval to leave the EU in October 2019 without a withdrawal agreement, if necessary. If parliament were to refuse this request, as also seems likely, it would create an intractable problem for the Prime Minister: prevented by the current parliament from pursuing their main policy objective, but unable to call a general election without risking a major defeat. In this moment, a wholesale commitment to a cross-party and cross-regional approach to EU withdrawal process would become essential.

The referendum was a blunt instrument for measuring voters' preferences on EU membership, and the UK's electoral system (the single-member, first-past-the-post constituency system) can lead to unrepresentative outcomes. Brexit is too big for the Westminster model of government. The new Prime Minister should establish a new mechanism within the Whitehall machinery for devising an approach to EU withdrawal, within which all major parties are represented (in proportion to their support), and all regions and nations are represented (in proportion to their size). The most obvious form would be a cross-party and cross-regional committee, with executive power to oversee both negotiations with the EU and Brexit-related legislation, operating at arms-length from 10 Downing Street.

Clearly, Northern regions must be suitably represented within such bodies. There is a strong case for the North's existing political leaders – alongside other national and regional leaders – to take on executive roles within the reconfigured Brexit process. However, given that leaving the EU (and especially leaving without a withdrawal agreement) is not supported by a majority of voters in any Northern region, there is a case also for new, locally-organised democratic processes to elect representatives for the specific task of managing Brexit at the national level. Citizens' assemblies could also be formed in Northern regions to guide the work of those representing the North in the Brexit process; indeed, such assemblies could also be established to guide the work of the national committee.

It should of course be made clear that a second referendum on EU membership would almost certainly be a pre-requisite of the new process advocated here, for two main reasons. Firstly, parties such as the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party (and, conceivably, the Labour Party) may insist on a second referendum being held as a pre-requisite of their participation in efforts to forge a new withdrawal agreement with the EU. Secondly, and more importantly, the process envisaged here would require more time than the government currently has available – if the EU were to agree to a further extension of the Article 50 deadline, they may insist on a second referendum in return.

In these circumstances, there would be a strong case for repeating the first referendum, to ascertain in the most straightforward way whether the electorate has 'changed its mind'. Yet there is also a strong case for a referendum process designed to ensure substantial, majority support for whichever option is chosen, and which protects relations between the UK's regions and nations rather than exacerbating existing divisions. As such, firstly, it may be necessary to insist that the referendum achieves a very high turnout to be considered legitimate (or, given the danger of incentivising non-voting, precisely to ensure the legitimacy threshold is not reached, it may be necessary for voters' to be compelled to participate through mandatory voting). Secondly, the referendum process could include provision by which majorities in a

certain proportion of the UK's regions and nations (or perhaps all regions and nations) must have voted in line with the national result in order for it to be considered a legitimate outcome.

Both of these approaches would ensure that Northern voters are better represented in a second referendum, albeit in different ways. Of course, a second referendum may now be justifiable for its own sake, if it proves to be the only mechanism available for avoiding a 'no deal' Brexit, an outcome which currently has questionable democratic credentials.

Yet this raises the prospect that the 'no deal' option should in fact be included on the ballot paper, second time around (effectively offering its advocates the opportunity to gain democratic approval). However, it would surely be irresponsible for 'no deal' to be included in a second referendum, if the 'no deal' in question related to leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement in October. (The evidence here demonstrates, above all, that Northern voters cannot reasonably be invoked to justify this approach.) It would also be impossible to stage a referendum before October, given that the process for selecting of a new leader by the Conservative Party is expected to last until mid/late summer 2019.

There is, on the other hand, a case for including a different 'no deal' on the ballot paper. On the basis that the UK government agrees a further Article 50 extension, it could be that voters are asked to provide a mandate for leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement, if necessary, at the end of this extension, if this longer period allows adequate time for greater preparedness. Crucially, voters would not be asked to deliver 'no deal', but rather simply to allow the government to pursue this option if the extended Article 50 period again fails to produce a withdrawal agreement which can secure parliamentary support. Moreover, if a new government fails to gain parliamentary approval for a new withdrawal agreement, they would be expected to call a general election rather than automatically allow the UK to leave the EU without a withdrawal agreement and transitional period. Admittedly, it may be difficult to describe this more nuanced 'no deal' option in a succinct manner in order to offer a straightforward choice to voters – which may provoke challenges to the referendum's legitimacy – so this option would have to be carefully considered by parliament and clearly communicated to voters.

While there are few reasons to believe that leaving the EU (especially without a withdrawal agreement) will benefit Northern England, remaining in the EU – that is, the status quo – is hardly a panacea. While Northern regions are not chiefly responsible for the Brexit, and there is no evidence that a majority of Northerners support leave, we should nevertheless take seriously the fact that a large number of Northerners have expressed a preference to leave, and indeed that some seem prepared to countenance a 'no deal' Brexit. Whether Brexit is the correct solution to the North's problems, or otherwise, it is clear that the status quo is not.

There is a strong case for treating the pro-leave 'take back control' mantra as applicable not simply to our borders, but to our economy – specifically local economies, governed via local institutions through which citizens can exercise meaningful influence over their everyday economic lives (McInroy *et al.*, 2016). The ultra-neoliberal agenda for post-Brexit domestic economic governance generally offers 'more of the same', and is unlikely to address the chronic economic problems of the UK's disadvantaged regions. What does taking back control of our economy look like? In short, industrial policy (Berry and Jones, 2017). Theresa May's instinct in linking the Brexit vote to the need for an industrial strategy, to create a more

sustainable and inclusive economic model, was the correct one. But delivery has been inadequate, in part because of a lack of ambition in challenging previous practice, and in part because of May's failure to challenge entrenched interests among the UK's political elite favouring a light-touch (and highly centralised) approach to intervening in the economy (Berry, 2016b; 2019).

The May government's agenda around 'local industrial strategy' (LIS) has been the most significant disappointment (Berry, 2019; Tomaney and Pike, 2018; Sensier and Devine, 2018; Spence, 2018). Two Northern localities, Greater Manchester and Tees Valley, were selected as pilot areas for LISs, alongside the West Midlands and, incongruously, given the extent of public investment already directed to the region, the Oxford-Cambridge-Milton Keynes 'corridor'. The effort to support local economic development since the 2008 financial crisis has been impeded by two, main constraints. Firstly, its coincidence with severe cuts in local government expenditure, imposed by central government (which have, within England, disproportionately affected the North). Secondly, the abolition of Regional Development Agencies (RDAs) in 2010, and the reabsorption of their (limited) powers and resources by central government. Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs), which loosely replaced the RDAs, lack specific policy powers, adequate resources and, in many cases, political legitimacy.

The LIS initiative follows an array of 'deals' signed between the Treasury and combined authorities, the new metro-mayors elected in some city-regions, and LEPs. These deals have replaced some of the resources lost to austerity, but only partially, and have actually been used by central government to create new mechanisms of disciplining local authorities (by, for instance, dictating how budgets could be allocated). Local authorities are now expected to agree a LIS with central government to demonstrate the former's contribution to the national industrial strategy – albeit with no expectation of enhanced powers or increased resources. Instead, through an LIS, local authorities are simply asked to explain how they will use existing resources in a more strategic manner.

We need urgently to move away from this rather juvenile approach to local economic development. Above all, we need a new vision for local government – both restoring its ability to deliver local services at an adequate standard, and creating opportunities for citizens to engage democratically with the organisation of the local economy through meaningful devolution. (The 'foundation economy' perspective developed by Julie Froud and colleagues informs us that supporting local public services and the local economy are inherently linked (Froud *et al.*, 2018)). We also need a new vision, relatedly, for centre-local relations in the UK, with genuine representation for the North and other UK regions and nations within Westminster and Whitehall. A reconfigured policy process for EU withdrawal, outlined above, could be a blueprint for a new constitutional settlement in the UK.

As noted in the first section, by leaving the EU, UK regions and nations will lose access to European funds designed to support local economic development in disadvantaged areas. Funds allocated to the UK for 2014-2020 amount to €17.2 billion, or €26.8 billion including domestic co-financing. The Conservative Party committed in its 2017 manifesto to replace these funds with a Shared Prosperity Fund (SPF), although has repeatedly delayed plans to consult on the form the fund will take. It remains uncertain whether the SPF would be funded at the same level as the EU funds (although the May government insisted that all funding

promised by the EU would be honoured by the UK government, in the event of the UK leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement) (Brien, 2019).

Clearly, the government needs to commit to ensuring, as a minimum, that all UK regions and nations will benefit from the SPF to the same extent as they benefited from EU funds. Given that the UK is a net contributor to the EU budget, it is logical to expect that the SPF can be funded by the ending of contributions to the EU budget. However, the issue is slightly more complicated in practice, given that (a) the UK can probably expect to make continuing contributions to the EU budget, if it were to seek preferential single market access, and (b) the economic disruption of Brexit will have negative consequences for the public finances, at least in the short term.

Nevertheless, it is essential that UK regions and nations do not receive even lower levels of public investment in economic development, as a direct result of Brexit. In fact, the government should take the opportunity to increase public investment in disadvantaged areas. Furthermore, it should commit to fully devolving the management of this investment – abandoning the centralised SPF model in favour of greater freedom for local authorities to determine priorities for investment in the local economy.

6. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper has demonstrated that, in contrast to the prevailing narrative on Brexit preferences, support for leaving the EU (especially without a withdrawal deal) is lower in the North, and higher in the South, than generally assumed. The North certainly favoured leaving over remaining in 2016 – and the 2019 European election offered evidence that more Northern voters support a 'no deal' Brexit than the revocation of Article 50 and/or a second referendum. Yet there are simply not enough Northerners – compounded by the fact that we do not turn out to vote in sufficient numbers – to have a decisive effect on levels of support nationally for leaving or remaining in the EU, or leaving with or without a withdrawal deal. The North is not responsible for Brexit, and will not be responsible if the UK leaves the EU without a deal in the autumn.

Obviously, such results must be treated with a degree of caution, especially regarding the support for 'no deal' and revocation/second referendum expressed in the 2019 general election. Votes for the two main parties were excluded from analysis, precisely because of their ambiguous positions on EU withdrawal, which make it impossible to discern the Brexit preferences of Conservative and Labour voters in Northern regions in 2019. There is no suggestion here that we should not recognise that more people support leave over remain, and indeed 'no deal' than revocation/second referendum, in many areas, including the North. Yet there is sufficient evidence to refute strongly the notion that Northern voters are driving Brexit against the wishes of voters in Southern, metropolitan areas. We should of course take very seriously the desire to leave the EU evident among many Northerners, while at the same time challenging the exploitation of the image of 'left behind' leave voters in the North to justify an elite-led Brexit agenda, and indeed, more recently, a 'no deal' Brexit.

We can speculate, given stereotypical depictions of Northerners in public discourse (Russell, 2004), that blaming Northerners for Brexit is often espoused as a proxy for blaming working-class voters. Yet there were many more middle-class leave voters than working-class leave voters in 2016 (Dorling, 2016). It would be incorrect to deny that leaving the EU enjoyed support across the income distribution – but middle-class voters are often overlooked in accounts of the Brexit vote. It is also worth noting, furthermore, that, among working-class voters in 2016, twice as many supported the Conservative Party in 2017 than supported the Labour Party (Kellner, 2019b).

Wherever one stands on leaving the EU, it is vital we recognise that EU membership is far from the North's most significant socio-economic problem. Support for Brexit has to be seen, to some extent, as a product of UK governments' – not EU institutions' – failure to address the North's endemic problems. The same dynamic also partially explains support for Brexit elsewhere, including larger and more populous regions, where more people voted for Brexit than in the North, even if there were also sizeable remain votes in these regions. Leaving the EU will in all likelihood compound the North's developmental difficulties, given the dependence of local economies in the North on the EU economy. In general, the UK's poorer regions are more dependent on EU trading relations, as part of Europe-wide production processes, whereas more prosperous areas – above all London, and parts of the wider South East and Scotland – benefit from both *global* industries such as finance, and other high-value industries fuelled by *domestic* household and business consumption, as well as significant public support for high-value manufacturing industries such as pharmaceuticals (McCann, 2016).

With a new Prime Minister soon to take office, both main political parties in disarray, and the next Article 50 deadline only a few months away, it is imperative that a cross-party and cross-regional approach to EU withdrawal is adopted. The fifth section of this paper suggested:

- The establishment of a new, executive mechanism within the Whitehall machinery for devising an approach to EU withdrawal, within which all regions and nations, and all major parties, are represented.

- Locally-organised democratic processes to determine regions' representatives, and their mandates, within a newly configured Brexit process at the national level. This might include citizens' assemblies and/or elections to specific roles.

- A second referendum on EU membership may be required to facilitate the time and political support for this new executive mechanism to function (irrespective of the case for a second referendum in its own right).

- A very high turnout would be required to ensure a second referendum is legitimate (perhaps achieved through a compulsory vote). Ideally, the result would also require the support of majorities in most or all of the UK's regions and nations.

- While it would be irresponsible and/or impossible to include leaving the EU without a withdrawal agreement in October 2019 in a second referendum, it may be necessary to offer voters the option of authorising a 'no deal' Brexit after a lengthy Article 50

extension, if a new government cannot secure parliamentary support for a withdrawal agreement.

The fifth section also proposed a series of radical, domestic reforms, not least to address the discontent expressed in the Brexit vote. This agenda would transform political and economic governance in the North – but not only the North. And these reforms would become ever more essential if the UK were to leave the EU, which in all likelihood would exacerbate the UK's geographical inequalities:

- A substantive, place-based industrial strategy is required to ensure public policy powers and resources are utilised in a strategic manner to support sustainable economic development in all parts of the UK.

- In place of the flawed local industrial strategy initiative, local areas should be granted substantial new, devolved powers and resources to allow for meaningful control over local economies.

- The UK also needs a new settlement for centre-local relations, with genuine representation for the North and other UK regions and nations within Westminster and Whitehall.

- As a minimum, cuts to local authority expenditure should be reversed, and any EU regional investment forgone (if the UK leaves the EU) replaced in full by national government. Ideally, the management of this investment would be devolved in full to local and regional authorities.

The status quo is not an option. Radical reform may, or may not, include leaving the EU. However, it certainly cannot end there. And a first step towards constructing a political settlement and economic model which better represents and supports the North – and other disadvantaged parts of the UK – is challenging the crude depiction, and exploitation, of Northern voters in prevailing narratives around the 2016 Brexit vote (and 2019 European election).

Acknowledgements

Notes

1. 'NUTS' refers to 'Nomenclature of Territorial Units for Statistics'. The UK has 12 large 'first-level' or NUTS-1 regions (eg. the North West), further divided into 40 smaller regions (eg. Greater Manchester is one of five NUTS-2 regions within the North West).

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ANNEX: VOTING DATA

Table A1. Support for leaving or remaining in EU across UK regions, 2016 referendum

		NW	NE	YH	Lon	SE	East	SW	WM	EM	Scot	Wal	NI
Leave	Number of votes	1,966,925	778,103	1,580,937	1,513,232	2,567,965	1,880,367	1,669,711	1,755,687	1,475,479	1,018,322	854,572	349,442
	% regional electorate	37.53	40.23	40.77	27.89	39.72	42.75	40.35	42.65	43.60	25.54	37.64	27.71
	% UK electorate	4.23	1.67	3.40	3.25	5.52	4.04	3.59	3.78	3.17	2.19	1.84	0.75
	% UK leave vote	11.30	4.47	9.08	8.69	14.75	10.80	9.59	10.08	8.47	5.85	4.91	2.01
Remain	Number of votes	1,699,020	562,595	1,158,298	2,263,519	2,391,718	1,448,616	1,503,019	1,207,175	1,033,036	1,661,191	772,347	440,707
	% regional electorate	32.41	29.08	29.87	41.73	36.99	32.93	36.32	29.32	30.52	41.66	34.02	34.95
	% UK electorate	3.65	1.21	2.49	4.87	5.14	3.12	3.23	2.60	2.22	3.57	1.66	0.95
	% UK remain vote	10.53	3.49	7.18	14.02	14.82	8.97	9.31	7.48	6.40	10.29	4.78	2.73

Table A2. Support for leaving or remaining in EU across Northern and London/South East mega-regions, 2016 referendum

		North	London & SE
Leave	Number of votes	4,325,965	4,081,197
	% regional electorate	39.14	34.32
	% UK electorate	9.30	8.78
	% UK leave vote	24.85	23.44
Remain	Number of votes	3,419,913	4,655,237
	% regional electorate	30.94	39.15
	% UK electorate	7.35	10.01
	% UK remain vote	21.19	28.84

Source (Tables A1 and A2): Author calculations based on voting and turnout data available from the Electoral Commission website

Table A3. Support for parties offering 'no deal' or revoke/second referendum across UK regions, 2019 EU election

		NW	NE	YH	Lon	SE	East	SW	WM	EM	Scot	Wal
No deal	Number of votes	653,260	278,325	537,734	446,754	972,173	669,608	673,874	574,086	510,519	261,424	298,970
	% regional electorate	12.46	14.68	13.97	8.23	14.99	15.29	16.26	14.02	15.06	6.63	13.26
	% UK electorate	1.40	0.60	1.15	0.96	2.09	1.44	1.45	1.23	1.10	0.56	0.64
	% UK no deal vote	11.18	4.76	9.20	7.65	16.64	11.46	11.53	9.83	8.74	4.47	5.12
Revoke/ 2nd ref	Number of votes	561,325	179,203	397,322	1,005,317	1,102,824	622,297	734,071	409,175	369,736	972,445	354,805
	% regional electorate	10.71	9.45	10.32	18.52	17.01	14.21	17.71	9.99	10.91	24.67	15.74
	% UK electorate	1.20	0.38	0.85	2.16	2.37	1.34	1.57	0.88	0.79	2.09	0.76
	% UK revoke/2nd ref vote	8.35	2.67	5.91	14.96	16.41	9.26	10.92	6.09	5.50	14.47	5.28

Table A4. Support for parties offering 'no deal' or revoke/second referendum across Northern and London/South East mega-regions, 2019 EU election

		North	London & SE
No deal	Number of votes	1,469,319	1,418,927
	% regional electorate	13.37	11.91
	% UK electorate	3.15	3.04
	% UK leave vote	25.15	24.28
Revoke/ 2nd ref	Number of votes	1,137,850	2,108,141
	% regional electorate	10.36	17.70
	% UK electorate	2.44	4.52
	% UK remain vote	16.93	31.37

Source (Tables A3 and A4): Author calculations based on voting and turnout data available from BBC News, local media and local government websites

Methodological note (Tables A3 and A4): 'No deal' parties = Brexit Party, UK Independence Party, English Democrats and Tommy Robinson (an independent candidate in North West). Revoke/second referendum parties = Liberal Democrats, Green Party, Change UK, Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru. Conservative Party, Labour Party and Yorkshire Party excluded due to ambiguous position on 'no deal' and/or revocation/second referendum. Parties/candidates with fewer than 35,000 votes nationally excluded due to negligible impact and the majority campaigning on issues other than Brexit. All parties/candidates in Northern Ireland excluded due to absence of a major 'no deal' party in Northern Ireland, thereby inhibiting meaningful comparison.