How the Electoral Map of England and Wales has been Redrawn

Jamie Furlong and **Will Jennings** plot the shifting electoral geography of England and Wales ahead of the General Election.

What is it about places that leads them to vote in particular ways? And why do certain places diverge from what might be expected based on the demographic characteristics of the voters who live there? There has been a resurgence of interest in electoral geography in recent years, as events such as the referendum on UK membership of the EU and election of Donald Trump as US President in 2016 have highlighted stark divides in political values and behaviour between places. While those divides often reflect social and economic differences between places, and the appeals of parties

and candidates to their populations, some areas defy prediction.

Our forthcoming book with Oxford University Press explores both how the places that vote for the Conservative and Labour parties have changed over the 40 years, from the start of Margaret Thatcher's premiership in 1979 to Boris Johnson's decisive victory in 2019, and why Labour or the Conservatives 'over-achieve' in some places compared with expectations based on demographics alone. Through extensive analysis of constituency-level results for every election during this period, we show how changes in the socioeconomic and demographic structure of society have impacted upon the

spatial distribution of voters. Combined with changing party support amongst different groups of voters, this has resulted in a long-term but recently accelerating realignment of the geographical basis of electoral competition in England and Wales. Through qualitative research in Merseyside and Lincolnshire, we also present new evidence for the contextual factors that have led to distinct electoral trajectories in these areas.

Three types of 'left behindedness'

There has been much recent discussion of so-called 'left behind' places in England and Wales (Ford and Goodwin, 2014). Often these areas are assumed to be largely homogenous. However, electoral trends differ significantly between three types of left behind area. The first type – demographically left behind constituencies

– are characterised by older, whiter, more working-class populations with lower levels of educational attainment. It is these areas and their populations that have recently been the focus of so much political attention, first due to the rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP), second because of the vote to leave the European Union, and third as a result of the collapse of support for Labour in many parts of the North and Midlands of England at the hands of Boris Johnson's Conservatives at the 2019 General Election.

Our analysis reveals that while the trend has sharpened recently, there has been a significant long-term shift in demographically left behind areas away from Labour to the Conservatives. Seats such as Bolsover, Stoke-on-Trent North and Rother Valley may have been won by the Conservatives for the first time in 2019, but these results came about because of a long process of Labour Party decline in its former heartlands in post-industrial towns across Northern England and the Midlands. This is illustrated by Figure 1, which shows the gradual weakening of the positive association between the proportion of manufacturing employment in constituencies and Labour vote shares. The reverse trend is observed for the Conservatives, such that by 2017 any negative correlation had been eliminated altogether. Constituencies such as Amber Valley, Scunthorpe and Telford are archetypal – places with significant manufacturing industries (also characterised by ageing populations and low levels of educational qualifications) where by 2019 the Conservatives had built substantial majorities.

A similar trend is evident for the proportion of people employed in routine and semi-routine occupations, becoming markedly less negatively associated with Conservative support between 1997 and 2017. For Labour, there has been a slow, long-term weakening in the once strong positive link between routine and semi-routine employment and its vote, with the most noticeable decline occurring in 1997 – a result of the broadening of electoral support in more typically middle-class areas in Tony Blair's landslide victory.

Yet if we extend the definition of left behind areas beyond sociodemographic characteristics, by recognising that areas with the most pronounced economic deprivation

Figure 1: Correlation of Industrial Employment and Occupations with Conservative and Labour Vote
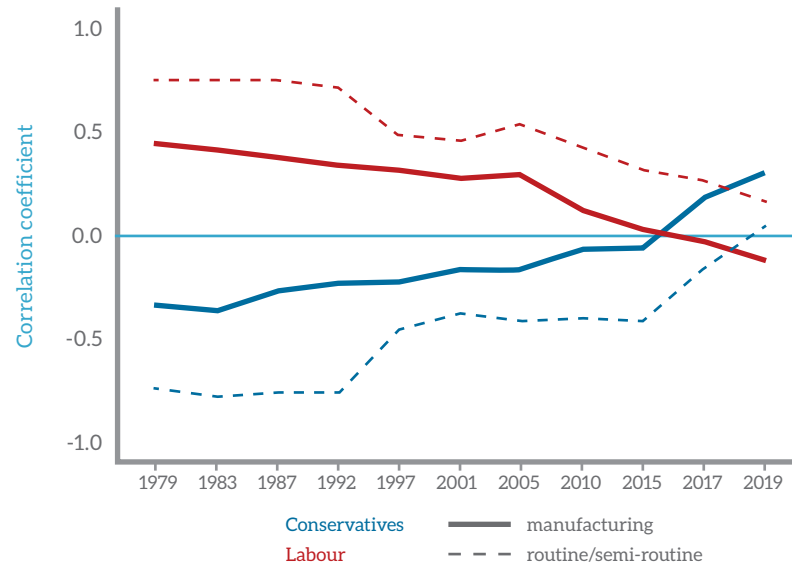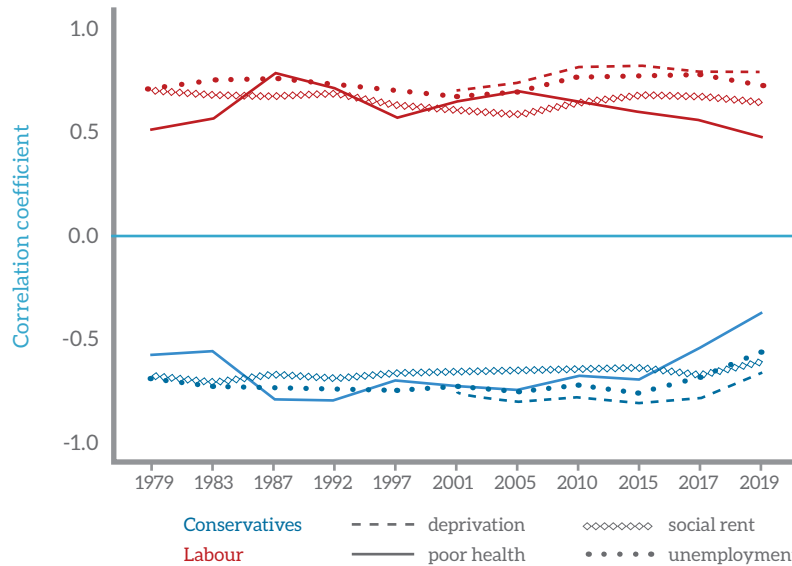

Figure 2: Correlation of Deprivation, Poor Health, Unemployment, and Social Renting with Conservative and Labour Vote


– often found in ethnically diverse cities – can be left behind rather than have populations cast as 'cosmopolitans' or 'anywheres' (Goodhart, 2017), a very different pattern emerges. Labour's electoral dominance over the Conservatives was, for the most part, as strong in economically left behind (in other words, the most deprived) areas of England and Wales in 2019 as it was when Margaret

Thatcher came to power. In fact, our statistical models show that poverty itself was a stronger predictor of returning a Labour MP in 2019 than it was back in 1979.

Figure 2 presents the correlations over time between several markers of economic left behindedness and Labour and Conservative support. It points to a clear and defined cleavage: areas with high

Figure 3: Correlation of Precarious Occupations and Secure Employment with Conservative and Labour Vote

Conservatives — precariat occupations

Labour - - - - secure employment
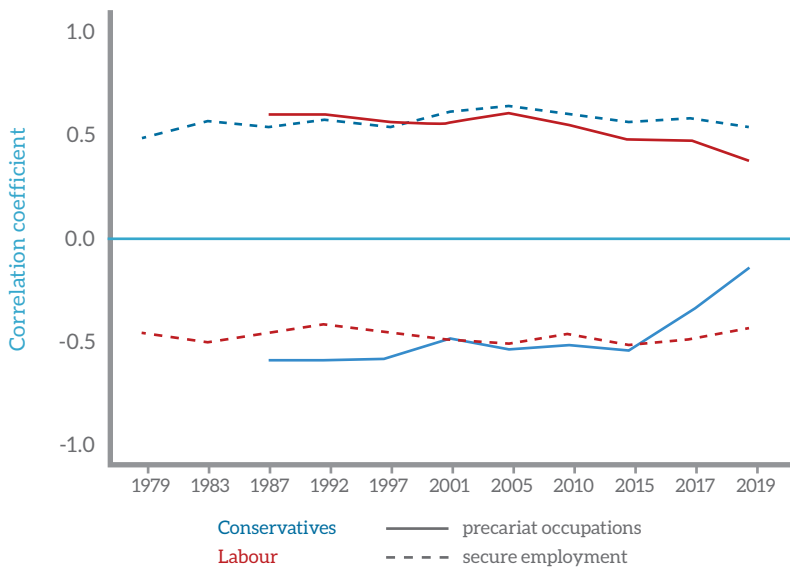
levels of deprivation, unemployment, poor health and social housing, have consistently elected Labour MPs across this period and see particularly low vote shares for the Conservative Party. Labour's electoral support in the most disadvantaged areas – from Liverpool, Walton to Birmingham, Hodge Hill – has been high for some time, despite weakening slightly at the 2017 and 2019 General Elections.

The Conservatives have also failed to make significant inroads into Labour support in constituencies with high levels of insecure labour – those areas we refer to as 'precariously left behind'. Figure 3 highlights that Labour's vote has retained its link with places typically home to Ainsley's (2018) 'new working class' – lower and middle-income workers in the service and hospitality industries. There should be some caution, however, in assuming that growth of the 'precariat' class described by Standing (2011) will necessarily lead to a significant shift in electoral gravity. While these places may be firmly on Labour's side, they tended to have falling levels of turnout between 1979 and 2015.

The new heartlands
What does this all mean for the geography of Labour and Conservative support? In

many ways, there has been remarkable consistency across nearly half a century: in rural and small-town Southern England, especially south of the 'M4 corridor', the Conservatives have remained fairly dominant. In contrast, Labour consistently secures higher vote shares in urban parts of Northern England, South Wales, the far North East, Birmingham, and London. Yet this consistency can lead one to overlook key changes. For instance, within the so-called 'Red Wall', rather than a collapse in Labour's support, there has been a recentring of the party's core vote, from smaller coal-mining towns and villages (typically areas becoming demographically more left behind) to the larger 'regenerating' cities of Leeds, Sheffield, Manchester, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and Liverpool, that are characterised by increasing numbers of graduates and ethnic minorities but also deep-seated poverty.

Using spatial analytical techniques, we extend the idea of a 'heartland' to include not just areas of consistent electoral dominance but also areas of electoral 'over-performance', by identifying clusters of constituencies where compositional models under-predict support. This is based on the premise that, while the sociodemographic characteristics

of constituencies can accurately predict vote shares across England and Wales generally, there remains a spatial structure to the data in which specific regions under- or out- perform model predictions, confirming Tobler's (1970) first law of geography that places that are near each other are more similar than places that are far away.

Labour's over-performance has shifted from coal-mining towns of the North East, Yorkshire, the Midlands and South Wales in 1979 to the North West of England, and more specifically, Merseyside in 2019. The over-performance in Merseyside is evident in the local cluster map shown in Figure 4, where the red ('High-High') areas are statistically significant clusters of positive residuals (i.e. model under-prediction of Labour support) from a compositional model predicting Labour vote shares in 2019. Equivalent analysis for the Conservatives reveals a clustering of over-performance in Lincolnshire and parts of the West Midlands outside of Birmingham, with this tendency becoming stronger over time. In the book, we explore the local, regional, cultural, and contextual factors that account for these divergent voting patterns.

What does this mean for the future?
Through extensive analysis of patterns of voting at general elections from 1979 to 2019, we can draw a long historical arc from the forging of Britain's electoral geography in the era of the industrial revolution and formation of a party system dominated by the Conservative and Labour parties. The post-industrial period has seen a redrawing of that electoral map. The contemporary economic model – and its shaping of social and economic change – has produced, and continues to produce, a gradual realignment of the geographical basis of electoral competition in England and Wales. As such, the result of the 2019 General Election – and the Conservative gains in long-held Labour seats – represent one distinct moment in an ongoing structural shift in the electoral politics of England and Wales.

Over time, the ebb and flow of the electoral tide has exposed more or less of the

changes occurring underneath the surface – with Labour's 1997 landslide disguising some of the underlying changes in the geography of its vote, whereas its heavy defeat in 2019 exposed how weak its support had become in demographically left behind places. A dramatic recovery of support from a volatile electorate at the next election may once again conceal the ongoing transformation of how the party's vote is spatially distributed.

Holding a large lead in the polls, it is conceivable that in the forthcoming general election, Labour might win back large swathes of the demographically left behind seats it lost to the Conservatives in 2019. This possibility was highlighted in May's local elections where Labour made substantial gains in Leave-voting areas in the North of England. Such a scenario would likely provoke much commentary about the party having rebuilt parts of the so-called 'Red Wall' – with the regaining of seats in places like Bishop Auckland, Stoke-on-Trent, Grimsby, Bolsover, and the Rother Valley taken as the death knell of this geographical shift. Yet the repaired 'Red Wall' would have a very different profile to that held by the party in 1997. Back then some of Labour's biggest majorities were found in demographically left behind former coal-mining and industrial towns; this time these are likely to be narrower gains with more substantial majorities in the bigger cities of the North. At the same time, the party's support will likely be consolidated in areas with high numbers of younger graduates and professionals – the sorts of demographic that used to vote Conservative. Victories in places like Rushmoor and Worthing show the potential for Labour to make inroads into traditionally Conservative parts of Southern England. The redrawing of the electoral map of England and Wales is not yet finished.

Figure 4: Clustering of Over- and Under-Performance for the Labour Vote in 2019

Cluster | Not significant | High-High | Low-Low | Low-High | High-Low
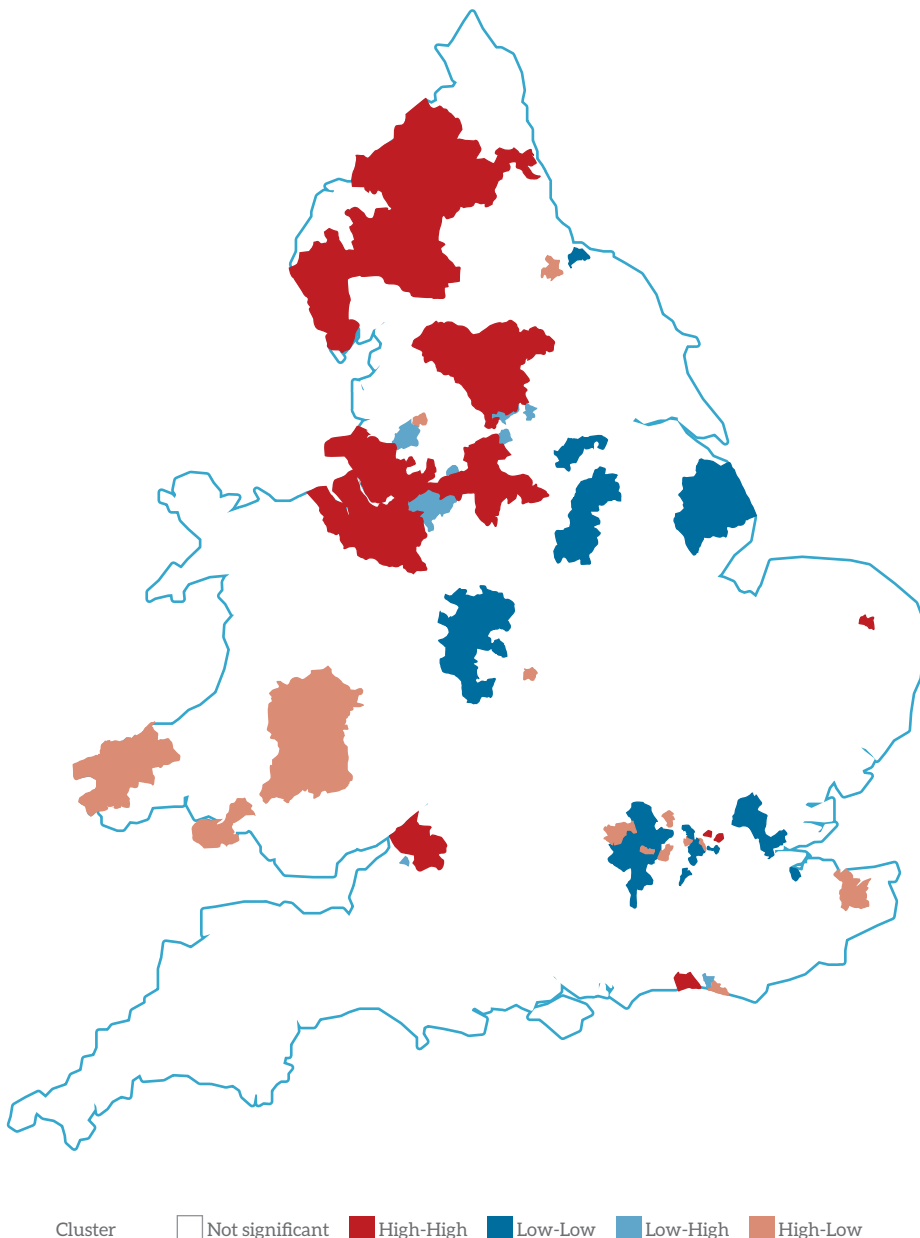
References

Ainsley, C. (2018). *The New Working Class: How to Win Hearts, Minds and Votes.* Bristol: Policy Press.
Ford, R. & Goodwin, M. (2014). *Revolt on the Right.* London: Routledge.
Goodhart, D. (2017). *The Road to Somewhere: The Populist Revolt and the Future of Politics.* London: Hurst & Company.
Standing, G. (2011). *The precariat: The New Dangerous Class.* London: Bloomsbury Academic.
Tobler, W. (1970). *A Computer Movie Simulating Urban Growth in the Detroit Region. Economic Geography, 46*(suppl_1), 234–240. doi: 10.2307/143141

Jamie Furlong is a Research Fellow at the University of Westminster. Will Jennings is Professor of Political Science at the University of Southampton. They are co-authors of The Changing Electoral Map of England and Wales, published by Oxford University Press in August 2024.