



Geographical Disparities & Political Polarisation



A review of how geographical disparities have impacted political polarisation in the UK between c1979-2020. – Eleanor Griffin | Sascha Entwistle | Rosa Skeete | Amber Jeens | 2022



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Abstract

Recent events have illustrated the proliferation of political polarisation in modern society. Political polarisation has, however, existed for many years – what has changed is how this is manifested. This paper aims to highlight how geographical disparities have been apparent since c.1979, and how they continue to perpetuate political polarisation in the 21st century. We examine the available and relevant literature concerning more specifically the north-south divide and the urban-rural divide in relation to general elections, as well as looking at Brexit and disparities not confined to the north-south divide or urban-rural divide in order to demonstrate the effect of spatial differences on general elections and the EU referendum.

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Introduction

Polarisation can be defined as ‘the act of dividing something, especially something that contains different people or opinions into two completely opposing groups.’

In theory, the UK has a multi-party system, however, in practice, there is a two-party system because minor parties cannot win a large number of seats. This is due to the disproportionality of the First Past the Post voting system in the UK, meaning that even though there are other parties which can be voted for, such as the Green Party or the Liberal Democrats, the UK system promotes a separation into the two opposing groups of Conservative and Labour.

Consequently, polarisation has gradually become more and more synonymous with the political scene of the UK, varying as political party shifts occur. This political polarisation has been worsened by the ever-increasing geographical disparities such as the north-south divide – a term given to the economic, infrastructural and social differences between the north and the south of the UK. Current circumstances have further separated the country in terms of political views, like Brexit which emphasised the differences in support of the EU between different regions of the country. As well as the North-South divide and Brexit, this paper will look at the political differences and voting behaviour between rural areas and major cities, such as London.

Origins of the North-South divide

The north-south divide is the term used to describe the economic and political split between the northern and southern areas of the United Kingdom; defined as ‘the difference in conditions, especially economic between the poorer areas in the north and the richer areas in the south of the country.’ Many people credit the origins of the North-south divide to be when Britain made a transition from one-nation politics to two-nation politics following the election of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 (Hudson, 2013).

However, this is not actually the case – the beginnings of the separation can be seen nearly 50 years earlier in the late 1920s and early 1930s. Before this period, the wealth across the country was spread more evenly – if not more concentrated around the northern industrial sectors (Martin, 1988); up until about 1914, the north was the more prosperous area of the country due to it holding much of the wealth forged by the industrial revolution (Young, 1987). On the other hand, unemployment was more of an issue in the south following the difficulties of the agricultural depression and the decline of handicraft industries (Martin, 1988). Though Lord Young – the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry from June 1987 until July 1989 - argued (Young, 1987) that this itself was a ‘North-South divide’, evidence on wages and wealth at the time showed that despite there being a high concentration of wealth surrounding the industrial counties, the highest wages were still situated around London and the home counties. The lowest wage areas were still situated in the southeast of the country at this point – showing how in this period there was a broader geographical spread in the national wealth distribution (Hunt, 1973).

However, this all changed after the First World War and the subsequent great depression as the industries of coal mining, shipbuilding and heavy engineering – which stood previously as the more successful industries of the nation – faced sudden decline which resulted in heavy unemployment and low-income (Peter Hall, 1987). The reasoning for this came from several factors – one being the sharp decline and collapse of the world economy in the 1920s which massively reduced demand for the ‘staple’ products being produced in the older industrial sector of the UK (Buxton, 1975). This was



because during the depression years the growth of consumer expenditure slowed down massively and when it began to rise, profit was invested much more in new industries to promote a more rapid economic growth for the country (Buxton, 1975). This may have been because the staple industries were beginning to lose their competitive advantage as well as access to a consumer base due to the massive contractions of British market shares in the 1920s and early 1930s. Firms in the troubled staple industries believed the way to resolve this would be to 'eliminate excess capacity and concentrate the productive structure', but this restructuring was blocked by unions and workers' strikes. Therefore, even though employment was perhaps higher than anticipated, wage levels were heavily depressed (Lazonick, 2014).

As a result, the 'staple' industries began to decline while the new industries bounced back in the later 1930s (Buxton, 1975). These new industries that grew in the 1930s were based on light engineering and electrical and consumer goods which became clustered around the south and east of the country and in the Midlands (Martin, 1988).

The inter-war years were what brought about the first shift towards a divide between the north and south of the country, centred mainly around economic inequality; with the north facing higher unemployment and lower wages, while the south experienced economic and business growth (Martin, 1988) (Buxton, 1975). Yet, at this point, no clear lines of separation were set and there was still fluidity on geographical disparities.

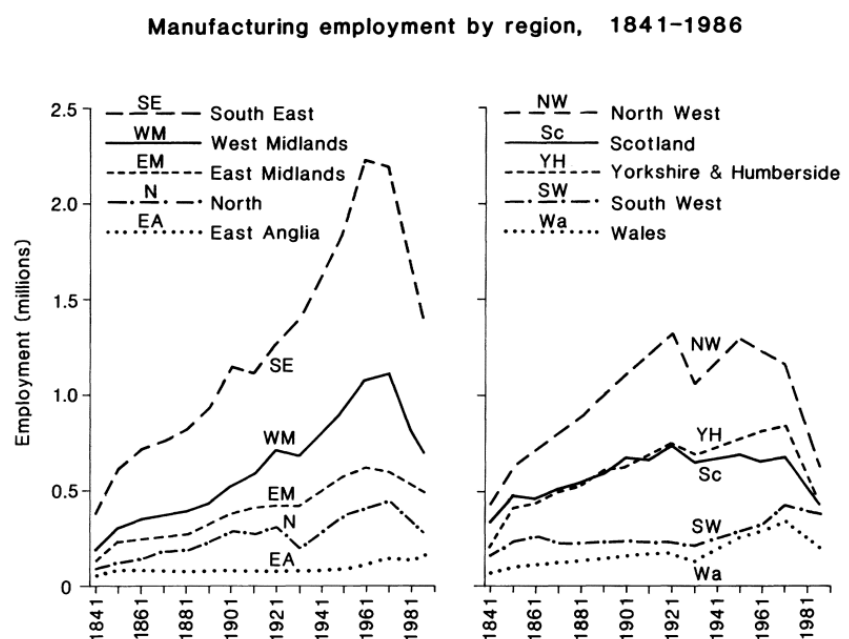


Figure 1: The rise and fall of manufacturing employment in the regions (Martin 1988)

Following the second world war, initially, the north-south divide wasn't acknowledged or seen as a major problem for the country as it was experiencing a post-war boom where unemployment levels were 'unprecedentedly low' (Martin, 1988) and manufacturing employment was on its way to its historical peak in 1966 (see Figure 1) Nevertheless, the unemployment rate in the 'industrial periphery' was twice that in the 'south and east' and most of the growth in manufacturing employment was also isolated to the southeast region and the west midlands (Martin, 1988). Following the post-war boom, the UK saw an increasing worsening of the regional divide due to changing industrial and occupational divisions of labour because manufacturers wanted to increase their profits, seeing the new southern industries, which were technologically advanced, as a way to achieve this (Hudson, 2013). From the early 1970s, Britain experienced a fierce and harsh de-industrialisation in the north (from 1971-1988 manufacturing employment fell by 36% (see Figure 1). Meanwhile, the second wave of technological innovation began in the early '70s once again showing the thriving nature of the new industries. Those who suffered the most economically from the de-



industrialisation were situated in regions in the north of England, Scotland and Wales whereas the South East, who previously stood as the most economically disadvantaged, now found themselves much less affected by de-industrialisation (Martin, 1988).

Nevertheless, this gradual economic separation between the north and south of the country began to transform in the late 70s through to the 80s as Britain switched from one-nation politics to two-nation politics (Hudson, 2013). Particularly since 1979, the widening of regional socio-economic inequalities began to be accompanied by an increased polarisation of support for the Conservative and Labour Parties (Johnston & Pattie, *A Dividing Nation? An Initial Exploration of the Changing Electoral Geography of Great Britain, 1979–1987*, 1987). De-industrialisation and social restructuring in the north underpinned what could have been a full national swing to the right, as much of the labour in the north was unionised and didn't align with Thatcher's 'popular capitalism' and 'enterprise culture' (Martin, 1988). Thatcher's government stated that 'the Conservative Government's first job will be to rebuild our economy and unite a divided and disillusioned people' (The Conservative party, 1979), but to do this she focused her government policies on encouraging entrepreneurship and the creation of small businesses which were much more successful in the south. Meanwhile, her government continued to pound the north with waves of de-industrialisation that resulted in mass unemployment and massive economic disparities in industrial locations (Hudson, 2013). Between 1979 and 1986, the UK's 40 largest manufacturing forms increased their non-UK employment by 125,000 while cutting their UK employment by 415,000 which had the largest impact on regions outside the southeast, especially the old industrial regions in the North, leading these communities to reject Thatcher's conservative government. (Hudson, 2013).

Under the first wave of Thatcherism, the south prospered and even when class and various other factors were controlled for, those in the south still showed a disproportionate tendency to vote conservative as a result (Russell, 1995). In contrast, the north of the country and the Celtic fringe (which includes Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland), who suffered disproportionately in the years of Thatcher's government, proved to be more resilient to "Thatcherite" values and became more likely to vote for non-conservative parties (Russell, 1995). In fact, regardless of individual job security, voters in northern areas characterised by high levels of unemployment were more inclined to consider unemployment an important issue and therefore take it into further regard when voting (Russell, 1995).

This highlights how voting behaviours and party affiliation correlated with geographical location due to experiences, such as employment, differing by region, and consequently the valuing of these factors also differing by region. Under Thatcher's government, in particular, the north-south divide developed from an economic divide to a political one too, which is evident as we see the influence of disparities between the north and south come into play in elections.

Presence of the North-South divide in general elections

To further examine how British voting results have been affected by the North-South divide between c1979 and c2020, it is important to look at general elections – those that this paper will be focusing on explicitly are 1979, 1983, 1992. These elections are important to study as they show electoral behaviour that both conforms and opposes predicted voting activities in the North and South. They are also key elections as they centre around the premiership of Margret Thatcher, this acts as a control variable in assessing data and allows for a more accurate analysis with a clear point of similarity. While it could

be an asset to look at all general elections within the time period of c1979 to c2020 the importance of this paper is to assess trends in voting behaviour, thus there are enough disparities in events in the three aforementioned elections to provide trends which are representative of voting behaviours over the time period of c1979 to c2020.

The general election of 1979 marked the beginning of Thatcher's term as prime minister, and the political setting at this time saw the expected north-south divide – the south experienced a generally conservative vote, and the north saw a vote steering towards the liberal and labour side, this is said to be due to growing economic decline in areas distant from London (Studlar, 1992). There three generally recognised behind the voting behaviours (Johnston R. J., *Regional Variations in the 1979 General Election Results for England , 1979*), these being:

- A regional hypothesis that suggests voting behaviours occur due to the desire from the voting public to tackle issues that are present in their regional area.
- The sectoral hypothesis which suggests that voting behaviours are affected by sectoral interest groups.
- The ecological hypothesis that suggests voting behaviour is influenced by the neighbourhood effect which is the idea that voters are influenced by popular or majority opinion

These three voting behaviours lead to the expected result of the 1979 election: a conservative win (Info, 1979). Arguably, the reason for this is that unless there is a key change or event that occurs in or around the election year, voting behaviours will conform to their natural setting in which the north of the country votes to the left while the south swings to the right.

In 1983, there was a growing sentiment against the economic policies of Thatcher's conservative government which would suggest a shift towards the left in voting behaviours. However, the influence of a key event, the Falklands War, distorted these predicted voting behaviours and the conservative government retained their power (Jenkins, 2013). Not only did the British victory in the Falklands war shine the conservative government in a positive light with a 59% satisfaction rate (the highest of Thatcher's premierships) (IPSOS, 2013), but also the labour government were unpopular due to internal divisions and a bad public image (Beckett, 2019). In the case of this election, the idea of voting behaviours conforming to expectations was almost reversed: before the Falklands War, there was the potential for the Conservatives to be ousted due to their low popularity rating, however following it, this popularity rating was offset, meaning voting behaviour remained in line with the expectations seen from the north-south divide (Jenkins, 2013).

The election of 1992 marked the first vote proceeding the loss of Margret Thatcher's premiership and is referred to as 'one of the mysteries of 20th-century politics'. The result of this election was a conservative victory, and considering the clear unpopularity of Thatcher's premiership nationwide, this came as a great surprise (Heath , Jowel, & Curtice, 1994). The expectation that the public had of labour victory can be attributed to the disproportionate economic effects that Margret Thatcher's policies played across the country and especially on the North of the UK (Mark Bailoni, 2014). While

Thatcher's policies targeted the whole of the country with the aim of bringing about economic reform, the North of England, who were disproportionately reliant on the primary and secondary sectors as opposed to the South who placed a growing reliance on secondary and tertiary sectors, paid a greater burden of these policies (Office for National Statistics, 2019). Resultantly, a left wing turn out, especially in the north was predicted, this prevailed in Northern England, however in Southern England this was not the case (Rallings & Thrasher, 1992).

- Northern England saw a 33.44 percent Conservative vote to a 50.6 percent Labour vote in the North, and 37.9 percent Conservative vote to a 44.3 percent Labour vote in Yorkshire and Humber (Rallings & Thrasher, 1992).
- Southern England saw a 55.4 percent Conservative vote to a 20.8 percent Labour vote in the area named 'Rest of South East', and a 47.6% conservative vote to a 19.2% Labour vote in the South West (Rallings & Thrasher, 1992).
- On the whole, the vote ended with a 45.5 percent Conservative vote, 33.9 percent Labour vote and a 19.2 percent Lib Dem vote.

While unexpected, what is clear is that support for the labour party was growing, even if not at the predicted level, as it saw a large increase in popularity from that of the 1987 general election (Heath, Jowel, & Curtice, 1994). Suggested reasons for this have been widely discussed and one largely recognised reason includes the idea of the popular press, and that Conservative supporting tabloids raised support, however this idea is easily refuted as polls taken show that support for the Conservatives from pro-Tory tabloids decreased by three percentage points (Heath, Jowel, & Curtice, 1994) The reasoning is shown to be a strong and consistent Tory support. Even when popularity depleted as it did in the form of this election, the strong and seemingly unwavering support for the Conservative party prevailed, especially in the more populous South (Clark, 2021), proving a Conservative win. This vote highlighted the idea of Labour being the 'minority party', that even when the general election should play into the hands of the Labour party the disproportionate strength of support for this party keeps the Conservatives in power. This vote suggests that while the North South divide does play a major role in the outcome of a general election, it doesn't have enough standalone momentum to properly shift the electoral result.

Thus, the north-south divide can be seen as a benchmark for voting behaviours. Its existence shows the expected voting results, and the case for that is a labour and liberal north with a conservative south. However, the north-south divide cannot be studied in isolation and does not categorially guarantee voting behaviours, as key events such as the Falklands War or a poor political term such as the last of Margret Thatcher's premiership will distort ordinary voting behaviours and, in this case, the influence of the North-South divide was nullified. Nevertheless, the analysis of voting behaviours in the context of the North-South divide can show the public approval of a government making the study of the North-South divide in general elections vital.



Origins of the urban-rural divide

Another way in which we see how geographical disparities in the UK have impacted political polarisation is in the divide between the urban and rural communities of the United Kingdom. They have had a profound impact on the results of general elections and there is a distinct separation of political ideas between countryside towns, and bigger cities. It is fundamental to look at the origins of the divide between urban and rural areas to understand the depth of impact that it can have and has had, on general elections, and politics in general.

There has always been a rural and urban divide in the UK – it has just taken different forms, and come from different origins throughout time. The political divide comes from the class divide that has existed in the UK for over five thousand years since the first cities were constructed. The urbanisation of these cities started to gain traction, but up to the industrial revolution, they relied heavily on agriculture and exports from the country's rural areas (Davoudi & Stead, 2002). Before 1850, there were no countries that could be said to have been urbanised, however by 1900, Britain became the only country (so far) to become mostly urbanised (Davis, 1965). It was this increase in urbanisation that created the gradual divide between rural and urban areas, as it created a stark contrast between the social classes that inhabit both types of areas.

During the Industrial Revolution, many cities began to turn from agricultural communities to industrial ones with factories. This made these cities, especially in Britain, much more prosperous, because of the invention of new machines such as the spinning jenny, the steam engine and coke smelting (Allen, 2011), which decreased job execution time as well as the number of people needed to work for these companies. As the cities and urban areas were getting richer and richer, there was an increasing dichotomy between the two groups. This was accentuated by the development of political policies that separated town and country and treated them “as separate entities” (Davoudi & Stead, 2002), which took the form of different development goals for cities compared to rural areas (Cullingworth & Nadin, 2006). This separation of people based on the amount of money they earned translated into the political polarisation that was felt.

Another reason for the rise in urbanisation and the consequent growing divide between the rural and urban areas was the increased internal immigration from said rural areas to bigger cities such as London and Manchester. This was because many people moved to the major cities for greater economic opportunities, due to many major manufacturer employers moving to, or already being located in, the bigger cities. However, this changed in the late 20th century, as there began to be a shift in employment location; it was now the rural areas of Britain which recorded the fastest growth of employment and had the least rapid decline in manufacturing employment (Keeble & Tyler, 1995). This showed that initially, the people living in the urban areas of the UK had more money because of their increased revenue from industrialisation, but it became more equal as time went on. Therefore, the level of urbanisation over the years has changed, and so have the political views of the people.

Nevertheless, there is still political polarisation between the rural and urban areas, which is largely because once the rural towns and villages became more prosperous and more urbanised, planners



like Patrick Geddes, Raymond Unwin and Patrick Abercrombie (Munton, 1983) wanted to protect the countryside from urban expansion. This resulted in the further separation of the urban areas from the rural areas, and very quickly the towns in the countryside became a place for the middle class or above to settle (Davoudi & Stead, 2002). These classes generally brought with them conservative political ideas due to their wealth and left the cities with the working class. In addition, since the height of the British Empire in the 1800s, there has been an increased number of ethnic minorities in England and the UK, as more people move to try and find jobs (Rickardsson, 2021). Typically, ethnic minorities are more drawn to cities, as there are higher employment rates, better-developed transport links, and more inclusive and accepting people who live there (Rickardsson, 2021). This extends the disparities between cities and towns. It is therefore possible to say that this history of a social and financial divide between the rural and urban areas can be seen in the modern-day in the form of political polarization, which is prevalent in the different ways that people vote in general elections.

Presence of the urban-rural divide in general elections

Geographical disparities in Britain can be seen in the difference between the voting behaviour of people who live in cities and people who live in other areas of the UK. To comprehend this, it is important to examine the results of general elections from the years 1979 to 2020, and more specifically, how various regions voted in said elections. Elections that will be studied, are the 1979 election to have a good comparative study, the 1997 election to see a change in election results for the first time in 18 years, and the 2015 election to see the coalition government.

The 1979 election was famous for having a swing vote of 5.2%, the largest since 1945 (Särilvik, Crewe, & MacDermid, 1983) In London in the 1979 election, there was 45.3% for conservatives, and a combined 52.15% for labour and liberal democrats, which can be compared with the 50.7% for the conservatives and a combined 48.8% in East Anglia for labour and liberal democrats (McAllister & Studlar, 1992), where there are more towns, with less major cities, with access to easy transport links. This demonstrates the level of disparity between the urban and rural areas at the time in 1979, which is limited, as there is quite a small margin.

The next election is the 1997 election, in which Tony Blair became the labour Prime minister. In Manchester, the conservative result was 35%, with labour at 65%. Whereas, in the West Midlands, which is considered to be more rural than cities like Manchester or London, the conservatives had 37% and labour had 52% (Johnston, Jones, Propper, & Burgess, 2007). Although in both the 1979 and the 1997 elections they both were supporting the same parties, it is obvious that there is an increased level of separation, which is evident in the higher difference between the percentage of votes for each party in urban and rural areas.

A surface-level look into the 2015 general election result points toward a north-south divide due to the Conservatives securing 55% of their votes in the south (Cox E., 2015), however, one in four voted for the Conservatives in the northeast, and one in three in the northwest (Cox E., 2015). The Labour Party, securing just under a third of the votes in the north, where we might expect them to garner the most support, gained 37% of its votes in the south (Cox E., 2015). In fact, this data by (Cox E., 2015)

shows a growth in Labour support in many of the UK's major cities, suggesting that this election was another example of the urban-rural divide that we know exists in the UK. In Birmingham, Labour went up by 4.8 points while the Tories went down by 0.4; in Greater, Manchester Labour went up by 5.8 points with the Tories going down by 0.9 and similar figures arose in West Yorkshire and Merseyside. (Elledge, 2015)

From these elections, we can see that the geographical disparities between people living in urban areas, like Manchester and London, and people living in rural areas like the midlands and other countryside areas, have increased, and shows trends for a continued increase. This emphasises that geographical disparities have a high impact on the politics of the United Kingdom and therefore, have created more political polarisation.

Impact of geographical disparities on Brexit

The EU membership referendum of 2016 is perhaps one of the most striking examples of political polarisation in the UK (Maher, Igou, & van Tilburg, 2018), with the result of 48.1% voting to remain, and 51.9% to leave (News, 2016) showing how the nation was divided almost in half over a hugely impactful and important political decision. Some of the main reasons for voting either to leave or remain included immigration, sovereignty and nationalism, but cross-analysis of voting behaviour and regional differences sheds light on the less overt factors that underpin the Brexit result (Becker, 2017). Support for leaving the EU varied regionally, both on a larger scale concerning England, Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales and on a regional scale concerning individual constituencies within the UK, which is what a lot of the literature focuses on (Johnston R. M., 2018) (Los, 2017) (Finlay, 2019). (Goodwin & Heath, 2016) found that support for leaving the EU was strongest in areas where much of the population did not have any qualifications and were not well-positioned to prosper in the modern economy; 15 of the 20 'least-educated' areas voted to leave but all 20 of the 'highest educated' areas voted to remain – a clear indicator of how geographical disparities due to educational level had an impact on the Brexit vote. This is corroborated by Becker et al. (2017), who found that areas with educational deprivation were more likely to vote to leave the EU. The connection between educational outcomes and geographical location has been proven by a report (Rural England, 2019) which shows that only 45.5% of 16-18-year-olds living in rural areas of the UK continued to higher education, compared to 50.9% of those living in predominantly urban areas. Therefore, it seems that the geographical disparities in terms of education that affected Brexit are related to the divide between urban and rural areas.

Research into the stagnation of wages and support for the UK Independence Party (UKIP), which since its creation has been Eurosceptic and called for the UK to leave the EU, has shown a significant correlation between consistently low wages and the proportion of the vote secured by UKIP (Neville, 2016). The most profound example of this was in the borough of Castle Point in Essex, where the median wage decreased by 13% between 1997 and 2015, and UKIP received 31% of the votes in the 2015 general election. While the median wage did increase by £157 per week from 1997 to 2015, prices also rose by 43%, which meant that the effect was marginal (Neville, 2016) Furthermore, this gain did

not permeate through England equally; 62 out of 370 local authorities saw a decrease in the median wage during this same period, and it was these areas that UKIP gained the most support from in the 2015 general election (Neville, 2016). Finally, areas that experienced the smallest growth in median wage, even if the wages were not among the lowest in Britain, similarly showed a greater tendency for voting UKIP (Neville, 2016).

Considering the lack of economic growth experienced by these areas in the decade leading up to the referendum despite gains being made nationally, the report by (Neville, 2016) suggests that the pro-remain argument surrounding the economic impact of Brexit will have had little effect on these areas, as they had minimal reason to believe this. This increased alignment with an anti-EU party, and consequently support for Brexit, was another way in which spatial differences contributed to the polarising Brexit result. These findings are consistent with (Darvas, 2016) and (Becker, 2017), who found that greater income inequality and poverty boosted leave votes.

Immigration was regularly cited as a reason for Brexit at the time of the referendum by votes (Clery, 2017), but analyses and regressions have not illustrated a strong link between the presence of immigrants and the Brexit result (Darvas, 2016). Instead, individual-level analyses show that it was perceptions of and attitudes towards immigration that were related to voting decisions in the referendum (Colantone & Stanig, 2016). Colantone and Stanig (2016) posit that the 'economic globalisation shock of the last three decades', which has driven the displacement of British manufacturing, is a core factor in the referendum result. They found a systematically higher share of leave votes in regions that experienced greater import shocks, demonstrating an explicit relationship between import shock and support for Brexit. This clearly shows the effect of regional variations on the outcome of the referendum.

Conclusion and Discussion

By exploring the effect of geographical disparities on general elections and the EU referendum, it can be concluded that they do play a role in the advancement and sustainment of political polarisation. The literature analysed in this paper suggests that the prevalence of the north-south divide in voting behaviours has decreased as time progresses, impacting election results only when a general election is not held during a significant political event or time period.

In regard to the urban-rural divide, the findings are that it is present in general elections from c.1979 to 2015 and has therefore contributed quite strongly towards the political polarisation of Labour and Conservative which aligns with urban and rural areas respectively. Furthermore, there are clear links between regional differences and support for the very polarising Brexit referendum; such that it seems these differences are a significant reason people voted the way they did. With regard to the research on the influence that the North-South divide plays on general elections, it would be of benefit to look in detail at a larger range of general elections both before and after those focused on in this paper. This paper has the intent of showing the broader effects of the North-South divide on political polarisation, and with this it provides a sufficient idea of the trends surrounding voting behaviour and the North-South divide. However, by looking at each individual general election in more depth



it would be possible to identify a greater number of anomalies than those seen in the elections that are explored in this paper. A key election that would be recommended is that of 1997 in which the Labour government was elected for the first time in 18 years (History.com editors, 2010) with this being a turning point in British Politics, this would be a beneficial election to study.



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