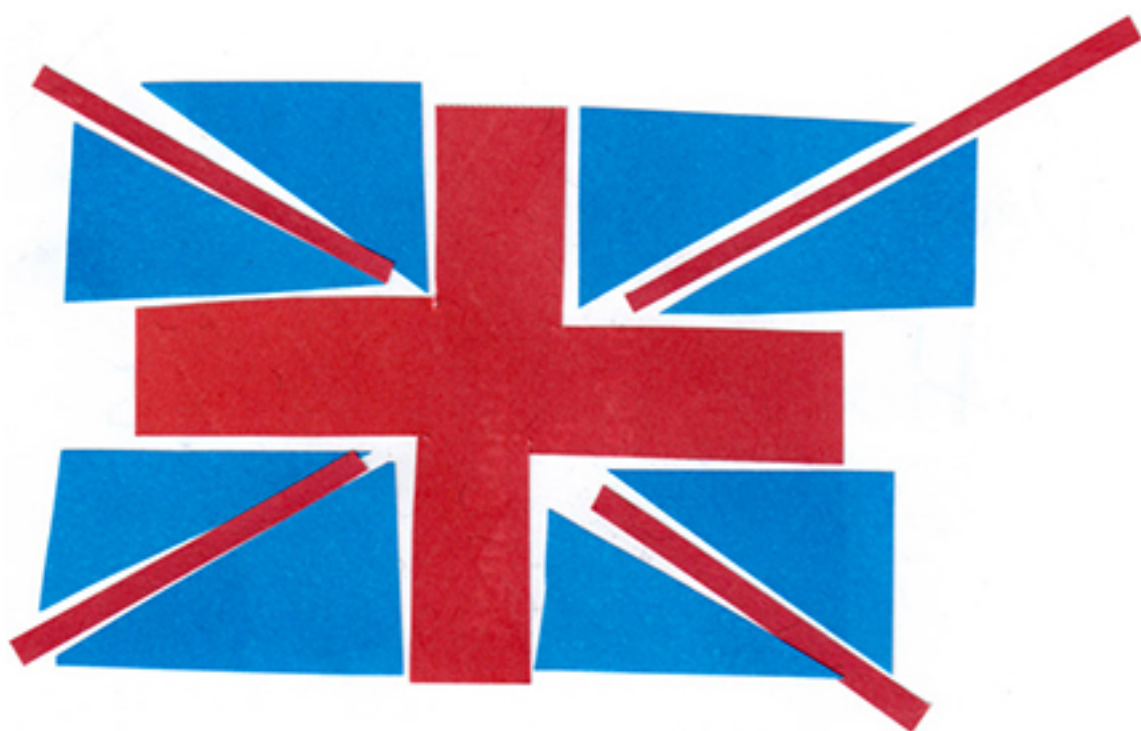


From Brexit to the Break-up of Britain?



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Introduction

Introduction

This free course, *From Brexit to the Break-up of Britain?*, is focused on the 2016 referendum vote on membership of the European Union. It aims to do so in ways that go beyond the familiar debates over whether the outcome was right or wrong. Instead it focuses on what the vote has to tell us about the United Kingdom and its future.

In the 23 June 2016 referendum, London recorded the largest pro-EU majority among English regions (59.9%) and the South-East the smallest pro-Brexit majority (51.8%). Every other English region, plus Wales, recorded solid pro-Brexit majorities. Only Scotland (62%), Northern Ireland (55.8%), and a few English and Welsh sub-regions (including South Cambridgeshire and St Albans) and several big cities (including Bristol, Cardiff, Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle) voted to Remain.

The vote for Brexit can only be understood in the context of the UK's reshaping and redefinition over recent decades. The course begins by analysing Brexit as a symptom of the political, economic and social geography of the UK, particularly its uneven development in a set of arrangements still dominated by London and South East England. The divisions within the UK (within England as well as between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) were reflected in the voting patterns of the 2016 referendum. The course reflects on the implications of this for the UK's future as a multinational state.

The course will explore the key factors that underlay the geographical patterns of voting in the 2016 referendum and consider their significance for the politics of the UK. It aims to highlight the importance of uneven development in generating significant political outcomes and embedding social difference in place. It draws on geographical concepts to understand the changing nature of the UK as a political and economic entity. The course reflects on a range of possible futures for the UK and its associated nations and regions.

The course lasts four weeks, with approximately three hours' study time each week. You can work through the course at your own pace, so if you have more time one week there is no problem with pushing on to complete another week's study. You will get plenty of opportunities as the course progresses to reflect on the arguments and examples that are presented and there are weekly quizzes to help bring your learning together.

After completing this course, you will be able to:

- identify the geographical patterns of voting expressed in the 2016 referendum, particularly as reflected in regional outcomes within England and differences across the territories and nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales)
- understand the underlying processes of uneven development that helped to shape those patterns and, in particular, understand how the development of the London city region affects patterns of development elsewhere in the UK
- understand how the UK is constituted as a state, and how this has been affected by the referendum vote and the move towards Brexit

- assess the role of nationalism and national identity in the context of the nations and territories that make up the UK
- use and interpret a range of statistical data, including survey data. Interpret maps and understand the significance of the different ways in which they may be put together

Week 1 Brexit as symptom: understanding the political geography of the vote

Introduction

A referendum on the UK's membership of the European Union (EU) was held on 23 June 2016 and 52% of those who voted recorded a vote to leave, while 48% voted for the UK to remain a member. The result came as a shock to governing elites both in the UK and in Europe and it led to the resignation of the previously unassailable Prime Minister, David Cameron, and his Chancellor of the Exchequer, George Osborne. They both also soon stood down as MPs.

Political debate around the nature of the campaign (the promises made and the strategies employed) and about the implications of the vote have been fierce in the period since it was held. The fault line between Remainers and Leavers is one that reflects different conceptions of the UK and its future. But in this course the aim is to highlight some of the geographical differentiation that was apparent in the vote, and link these voting trends to the underlying social, economic and political relations that shape them.

Studying the Brexit vote will allow you to reflect on the different identities – and nations – that come together (often rather uneasily) to make up the UK. Whatever your opinion on Brexit, a deeper knowledge of these underlying trends will be invaluable in trying to understand the long-standing divisions and bonds that cut across the UK. They will continue to shape its future in years to come.

By the end of this week, you will be able to:

- identify the geographical patterns of voting expressed in the 2016 referendum, particularly as reflected in regional outcomes within England and differences across the territories and nations of the UK (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales)
- use tables of statistical data effectively
- interpret maps and understand the significance of the different ways in which they may be put together.

1 Triggering the process of leaving the EU

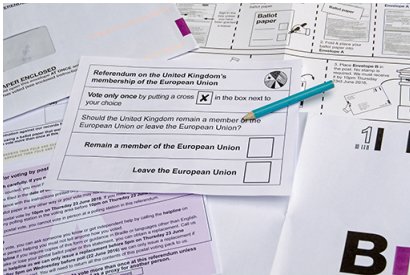


Figure 1 Image of ballot paper

The apparently simple referendum decision flowed from a very straightforward question, namely ‘Should the United Kingdom remain a member of the European Union or leave the European Union?’ But it was merely the first step into a tangle of legal (treaty-based) requirements and a series of complex negotiations. The formal process of leaving the EU was triggered by the UK government in March 2017 with the invocation of Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty, which sets out the rights of member nations to leave the EU and spells out the procedure for doing so within a two-year timetable.

Following the referendum Parliament held a series of votes around the decision to trigger Article 50, which are explained in the following video by Richard Heffernan. Watch the video and think about how the referendum vote of an apparently divided country translated into such positive majorities in the parliamentary votes for leaving the EU in a House of Commons where most MPs campaigned for a Remain vote in the referendum.

Video content is not available in this format.

[Brexit Open Minds Talk: What does Brexit tell us about Britain, 16th May, 2017. Richard Heffernan's presentation](#)

Despite this series of parliamentary votes, Theresa May (who became Prime Minister in the wake of David Cameron's resignation) decided that she needed a stronger electoral mandate – a larger parliamentary majority – in her negotiations with the European Commission, so she brought forward a proposal to hold a general election. That election was held on 8 July 2017, with an outcome rather different from what the Prime Minister had expected. The Conservative Party failed to gain an overall majority and had to rely on the support (or at least acquiescence) of Northern Ireland's Democratic Unionist Party to form a government. Incidentally, it also delivered a House of Commons in which the majority of MPs (in most parties, including the Conservative Party) had supported Remain in the referendum, although both the Conservative and Labour parties continued to express their commitment to withdrawing from the EU, in line with the outcome of the referendum.

In other words, over the course of a year, two sets of public votes took place, which highlighted the extent to which there continued to be significant political differences across the UK, and there continued to be some uncertainty about the precise path to be taken in leaving the EU.

But rather than discussing a series of possible electoral outcomes, the focus of this course is on exploring what the 2016 Brexit vote has to tell us about the UK as a political, social

and economic space. Our purpose here is not to revisit all the debates nor to discuss whether the referendum decision was the right one. Nor is it to comb over the arguments that were made either in the course of the referendum or subsequent general election campaigns – important though such arguments undoubtedly are. Instead it is to reflect on some of the underlying features of the Brexit vote, to consider what they mean for the UK as a social and political formation in the twenty-first century. In other words, while the focus of the political debate around Brexit was on relations with Europe, in practice it was also about the nature of the political and social settlement within the UK – which is what you will explore here.

This course sets the experience of Brexit in the context of the UK's reshaping and redefinition over recent decades. It first analyses Brexit as a symptom of the political, economic and social geography of the UK, particularly of its uneven development. This is expressed in the dominant position of London and South East England, and the political consequences of that dominance – or rather the dominance of the financial and business services industries located there. The divisions within the UK (within England as well as between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland) were reflected in the voting patterns of the 2016 referendum and the course reflects on the implications of this for the UK's future as a multinational state.

The first step in doing this is to look a bit more closely at the voting patterns themselves.

2 The regional and national geographies of the referendum vote

The overall UK vote to leave masked significant variation between the component parts of the UK as a state made up of four distinct territories (England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales). But it also masked significant variation within those units – within the territories and nations that make up the UK. The Electoral Commission reported the votes at a regional level in England and at the level of the nations and devolved administrations in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. In some respects this is an unusual scale at which to report results in England, since the regions have no governmental status, but it does help to highlight the broad pattern of the vote across the country. And it also confirms, if confirmation were needed, that it is necessary to recognise the extent to which the other parts of the UK are quite distinct political entities. In other words, there is no longer – if there ever was – a unified UK-wide set of more or less shared political understandings.

Anthony Barnett has summarised the outcome as follows:

There are five parts to the UK: Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, London and England-without-London. Scotland, a self-conscious country with its own parliament, voted to remain in the EU by 62 per cent to 38 per cent, a hugely impressive majority of 24 per cent. Northern Ireland, a province with an electorate of only 1.25 million, whose domestic government is now established by international treaty, known as the Good Friday agreement, voted on a low turnout of 62 per cent for Remain by 55.8 per cent to 44.2 per cent, a comfortable majority of 12 per cent. Wales, a small, long-colonised and linguistically divided country, voted Leave by 52.5 per cent to 47.5 per cent, a narrow majority of 5 per cent, and the only part to return a close result, well below double figures. London, a global city bursting at the seams, populated by 8.5 million, of whom 3 million are foreign-born, with an electorate of 5.5 million, voted Remain by 59.9 per cent to 40.1 per cent, an overwhelming 20 per cent majority. England-without-London, by far the largest of the five, with 46 million inhabitants, and with the highest turnout, voted Leave by 55.4 per cent to 44.6 per cent, a decisive majority of close on 11 per cent. By doing so, England-without-London swung the outcome. It voted by a majority of over 2½ million for Leave, the other four parts of the Kingdom combined voted by just under 1½ for Remain.'

(Source: Barnett, 2017, p. 101)

In the referendum, there was a substantial vote for Leave across England – over 53% of those who voted recorded a Leave vote. Some have suggested that the vote in England can even be understood as a reflection of the development of a form of English nationalism, perhaps also reflected in the rise of the UK Independence Party as a powerful political force, at least in the years up to 2016. But even in England, this vote masked significant geographical variation. In London nearly 60% voted Remain and in South East England only 51.8% (close to the UK average and almost identical to the proportion in Wales) voted Leave. Every other English region recorded solid Leave majorities, as is confirmed in Table 1 below.

By contrast, Scotland (62%) and Northern Ireland (55.7%) produced Remain majorities, while in Wales the Leave vote was a relatively modest 51.7%.

Table 1 Votes in the 2016 referendum (Source: The Electoral Commission, 2017)

Region/nation	Numbers Remain	Numbers Leave	Percentage Leave
East of England	1,448,616	1,880,367	56.5
East Midlands	1,033,036	1,475,479	58.8
London	2,263,519	1,513,232	40.1
North East	562,595	778,103	58.0
North West	1,699,020	1,966,925	53.7
South East	2,391,718	2,567,965	51.8
South West	1,503,019	1,669,711	52.6
West Midlands	1,207,175	1,755,687	59.2
Yorkshire and The Humber	1,158,298	1,580,937	57.7
<i>Northern Ireland</i>	440,707	349,442	42.2
<i>Scotland</i>	1,661,191	1,018,322	38.0
<i>Wales</i>	772,347	854,572	52.5

Activity 1 How people voted

Allow about 10 minutes

The data in Table 1 make it easy to see how people voted in the area in which you live, and it is useful in that respect. Examine the table and consider the following questions. You may like to make notes in the answer box below.

- How did your nation or, if you are in England, region vote?
- Did the results of your nation or region align with the way in which you or the area with which you identify most closely voted?
- What are the dangers of presenting data on the referendum in a table like Table 1?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Answers will vary depending on the nation or region in which you live and your own experience. However, the figures remain at such an aggregate level that it may be difficult for you to fit your own experience or the experience of the area with which you identify most closely with that of the region or even nation in which you live. There may also be a danger that presenting the figures in this way implies a greater level of shared political identity than there is, and may even mask more significant forms of differentiation. One reason for this may relate to the cities and urban areas currently obscured in these figures, and it would be useful to see whether there are differences

between them. And finally, aggregate figures like these may conceal other significant, community-based fault lines (for example, in the case of Northern Ireland).

3 Mapping the divisions

The outcomes of the referendum have been powerfully represented in maps. The process of mapping highlights the more complex patterns of the vote.

Three maps are presented in Figure 2. The one in the middle is a relatively familiar image of the UK, with patterns of Leave and Remain highlighted. It simply shows the majority outcome across the different areas, broken down to indicate sub-regional differences (at a Westminster parliamentary constituency level). So, for example, the map shows that despite the overall Remain majority in Northern Ireland, some areas voted Leave; and in Wales, despite the Leave majority, some voted Remain.

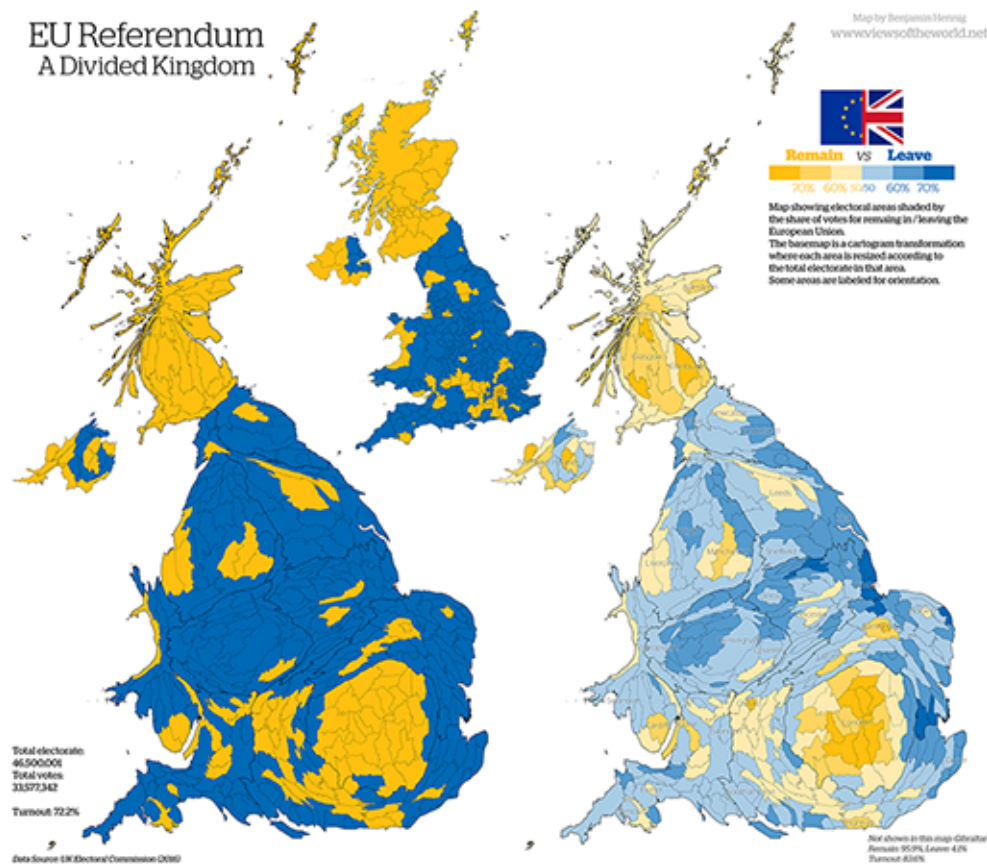


Figure 2 EU Referendum: A Divided Kingdom. Mapping the Regions and Nations. Source: The EU Referendum, Views of the World <http://www.viewsoftheworld.net/?p=4848>

The other two maps on the left and right of Figure 2 take rather different approaches to the geography of the UK, using methods that highlight things quite differently. In them a picture – or cartogram – is constructed based around the size of the electorate, rather than the territory on the ground. What is generated remains recognisable, but it is distorted to reflect the number of registered voters in different areas. It emphasises the ways in which the population is distributed and concentrated. It would be of little help if you wanted to use it to identify the distances between places or to plan a route for travelling from A to B.

The map on the left continues to rely on a simple blue/yellow distinction, with Remain areas identified as yellow and Leave as blue. In other words, it continues to show the majority outcome by constituency. But the one on the right offers a more nuanced picture.

It has the same base as a cartogram in which the size of the areas is defined through the number of potential voters, but this time an attempt is made to compare the intensity of the vote – the higher the proportion voting Remain, the deeper the blue; the higher the proportion voting Leave, the brighter the yellow. This makes it easier to see some of the complexities of voting patterns within regions and across national territories.

Activity 2 What the referendum cartograms show

Allow about 15 minutes

Look closely at the two cartograms in Figure 2. What interpretations can you draw from them?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

In the cartogram on the left, you may have noticed that the balance between the votes represented by the colours seems much closer, particularly in England. There is more yellow and less blue. Scotland is still clearly Remain. But adjusting for population means that the islands of yellow spread out rather more than they did – there is not only a fairly solid band of yellow around London, but there are significant patches stretching to Bristol, Cardiff and into East Anglia, and also big patches around some of England's northern cities. Meanwhile, by contrast, Northern Ireland seems to be rather more divided than is reflected in the more traditional map. In Wales, while the footprint of Cardiff becomes bigger, the Remain vote in West Wales finds a less powerful expression in the cartogram than in the more traditional map.

The most significant thing about the cartogram on the right is the way in which the sharpness of the colours fades because of the shading used. There are some areas in which the yellow is strong – there the Remain vote was close to 70%; and similarly in other areas the blue is strong – there the Leave vote was close to 70%. But elsewhere the differentiation is less sharply defined. Even in Scotland the Remain vote is not universally high, and even in the English Midlands and north of England the Leave vote is not universally strong. The UK may be deeply divided, but it may also be misleading to exaggerate the starkness of division, at least in geographical terms.

4 From patterns to complexity

The maps on the previous page in [Figure 2](#) do not explicitly identify particular places, but the swirling pattern that is apparent in the two cartograms confirms that, in England, a majority voted Remain in London and several other big (and some not so big) cities such as Liverpool, Manchester, Bristol, Newcastle, Leeds, Cambridge, Oxford, York, Exeter and Brighton. They also confirm that even as most of the suburban Home Counties of South East England (Oxfordshire, Surrey and Sussex) voted Remain, other parts of that supposedly prosperous region (including much of Kent and Hampshire) voted Leave. Even in London, several of the boroughs on the outer east of the city (including Barking and Dagenham) voted Leave.

In other words, to return to the summary prepared by Anthony Barnett (2017) and discussed in Section 2, it looks as if neither London nor England-without-London were quite such unified categories as he seems to imply. But, however nuanced the picture, in broad terms the outcome in England was relatively clear-cut. In the older industrial – or increasingly post-industrial – regions there was a vote to leave, in the more cosmopolitan urban areas there was a vote to remain. In some of the prosperous suburban areas around and connected into those cities, Remain votes were also high; but the traditionally conservative (and Conservative) shires tended to vote Leave.

A similar pattern of division was apparent in Wales: Cardiff voted strongly for Remain and in the older industrial regions of South Wales there was a strong Leave vote. But the Remain vote was also higher in parts of the country (such as Gwynedd and Ceredigion) where the Welsh-speaking population was greater. In Northern Ireland, the differences seem to have owed more to continuing, and deeper, divisions within the electorate – although there was an overall vote for Remain in Northern Ireland, the maps, of the referendum vote, suggest this masked divisions as the largest unionist party (the Democratic Unionist Party) campaigned for Brexit (70% of DUP voters voted Leave), while Sinn Féin was strongly Remain (86% of Sinn Féin voters voted Remain). Only in Scotland was there a Remain vote across all of the electoral and local authority areas, although there was a similar pattern of higher support for Remain in the main urban centres (Edinburgh and Glasgow both recorded Remain votes higher than the national average). Only in Moray, where just over 50% voted Remain, was the outcome relatively close.

Not surprisingly, there has been a great deal of analysis and debate around the outcome of the 2016 referendum, as commentators have sought to find an explanation for it. One way of approaching these issues is to look at the characteristics of voters in the different areas. Work by political scientists such as Harold Clarke and others (2017) has stressed the extent to which Leave voters can be characterised as the ‘left behind’, while Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker (2016) distinguish between (liberal) people who live in cosmopolitan areas and (illiberal) people who live in what they characterise as backwaters. Emphasis has been placed on the extent to which those with lower levels of education were more likely to vote Leave and on the gap between older and younger voters.

Stress has also been placed on the role of immigration as a factor in influencing how people voted – and certainly that was one of the issues emphasised by those campaigning for a Leave vote. Paradoxically, perhaps, those places experiencing relatively high levels of migration tended to vote Remain, while those which bordered on them were more likely to vote Leave (not the cosmopolitan cities but the neighbouring

suburban and peripheral areas). While these distinctions have some explanatory force, it is hard to escape the rather dismissive implications of the terms being used – the ‘left behind’, even the ‘white working class’, ‘poorly educated’ and ‘old people living in backwaters’ being implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) contrasted with the more dynamic, highly educated young people living in cosmopolitan areas. They also fit uneasily with voting patterns outside England and Wales.

The question posed here is, however, a rather different one – namely whether the divisions revealed by the maps in Figure 2 have anything more to tell us about the UK as a social and economic space as well as a (contested) political territory. Instead of identifying a particular set of voters as populists (or ‘left behind’), you will look at what the vote tells us about the way in which uneven development has left its mark in economic and social as well as political divisions. In other words, the task is to explore whether and to what extent the voting patterns are an expression of deeper economic and social realities, and what processes help to shape them.

It is important to recognise that a snapshot like that captured by the maps in Figure 2 fixes a particular moment in place and time. It does not necessarily tell us much about the social relations that underpin it or that have come together to construct it and bring it into being. What is captured and apparently fixed in the flat geographical surfaces of a map is the product of more complex sets of social relations and it is with those that this course is concerned.

5 Summary

During this week you have been introduced to some of the complex voting patterns that were apparent in the 2016 referendum. And you have also been introduced to some of the ways of interpreting the data emerging from the referendum.

You should now be able to:

- identify the shares of the vote in different parts of the UK – within as well as between the regions of England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- understand the value of mapping patterns of difference and similarity, and how cartograms may be used to highlight particular issues
- think about how patterns of voting may also be associated with evidence of inequality and uneven development.

Next week the focus will be on the political geography of the UK and its uneven economic development. The relationship between the two helps to explain some of the divisions apparent in the referendum vote, and is also an important aspect of arguments for devolution.

Week 2 Thinking beyond the divisions: understanding what they tell us

Introduction

The maps you looked at in Week 1 offered a snapshot of political divisions in the UK in June 2016. A related group of maps could be generated from any set of voting results – such as the general election which took place in June 2017, or any other general election. But the picture given by the 2016 vote is particularly stark, perhaps because it was a referendum in which there were only two choices.

The question is, however, whether the divisions revealed by the maps have anything more to tell us about the UK. If they are an expression of economic and social processes then what are those processes? It is important to recognise that a snapshot like these maps freezes a particular moment in place and time. But it does not necessarily tell us much about the social relations that underpin it, that have come together to construct it and bring it into being. What is captured in the flat geographical surfaces of a map is the product of more complex sets of interactions. As a result, what is apparently fixed is only a momentary representation of a continually shifting reality. It is difficult for any particular map to capture the dynamic processes that generate the images it presents.

The course this week focuses on ways of thinking about geographies of division and difference, and explores how they are generated and how they are reproduced. It draws heavily on the work of Doreen Massey, who was Professor of Geography at The Open University from 1982 to 2016. Later weeks will turn to consider the ways in which those geographies are reflected in the Brexit vote.

By the end of this week, you will be able to:

- understand the importance of uneven development as a way of thinking about geographies of social and economic change
- identify some of the key features of uneven development as a process as well as a fact on the ground expressed in differences in wealth and prosperity
- recognise the ways in which differing outcomes in areas, regions, territories and nations relate to and shape each other
- understand some of the economic arguments for greater devolution in the UK.

1 From patterns to processes

Doreen Massey, who worked at The Open University for many years, and who died a few months before the referendum, was a geographer and social thinker who spent much of her life probing below the surface. She recognised the importance of patterns but always wanted know why they emerged and how they reproduced themselves over time. The title of one book she wrote captured this in the idea of the *Spatial Divisions of Labour* (1995). Doreen thought 'relationally'. She was always seeking to identify political and economic relations as they found an expression in maps like those considered in Week 1, as well as in the lived experience of people in particular places.



Figure 1 Photograph of Doreen Massey

Activity 1 Understanding the geographies of uneven development

Allow about 15 minutes

The following audio was recorded at a conference focused on Doreen Massey's work. In response to comments made by other participants, she explains how she understands the power relations reflected in the UK's social and political geography. Play the audio and try to identify the key points Doreen Massey makes. In some ways, what Doreen has to say is deceptively simple, but it repays careful listening. (You may like to make notes in the box below.) Questions to bear in mind while considering the points she makes include:

- What is the 'regional' problem and how should it be understood?
- Why is it not enough simply to map the economic and social differences between areas of the UK?
- Can prosperity in one place be understood without recognising its relationship to poverty in another?

Audio content is not available in this format.

[Click here for transcript](#)

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Doreen Massey captures two very important points in this very brief argument.

First, she says that it is possible to identify significant differences in economic well-being and development between the regions (she might have added nations) of the UK. There is a long history of government policy (stretching back to the 1930s) which focuses attention on what have sometimes been identified as the distressed regions or declining regions. There has apparently always been a 'regional' problem. And, of course, the implication is generally that the problem belongs to those regions which are facing it. In a sense it is taken for granted that those living in such regions are somehow to blame, because they have low skills, because they have decaying infrastructure or old industrial plants, or because they are not prepared to move elsewhere to seek work, and so on.

Second, she questions any such simple interpretation, arguing instead that the outcomes we see (the managers being in London, the production workers in the north of England, the research workers in Berkshire and so on) have to be understood relationally. They cannot simply be presented on a map, however useful the mapping may be in highlighting patterns of difference that need to be explained. What matters is to identify the relations of power – the sets of social, political and economic relations – that help to generate forms of inequality and particular structures of difference.

Doreen Massey sets out to chart and identify a process of uneven development. Not only are there differences, she suggests, but they reflect a wider dynamic of uneven development, in which it is the process that matters, not just the outcome.

2 How uneven development works out in practice

Rather than simply noting the existence of uneven development – the differences expressed in mapping exercises of one sort or another – what matters is to think about uneven development as a process. From this perspective it is important to recognise that uneven development is not just a settled outcome, but rather a continuing and dynamic process. It incorporates its own tensions, rather than following some necessary linear pattern. A region is never fixed or finalised. What matters are the dynamics of region-making, rather than the fixing of a 'region' as a specimen on the page (or even on a map). So, for example, in *Spatial Divisions of Labour* Doreen Massey (1995) focused on places (like South Wales) that had been severely affected by economic decline and industrial restructuring, particularly the old heartlands of coal mining and heavy industry. But she did not stop there. Instead she reflected on the ways in which older industrial areas were reused and reworked to generate different ways of working as light industry replaced the old industries. The labour discipline and the various routines that underpinned the working of the old industries were translated into opportunities to generate profitable investment for new employers and businesses. The shift in employment patterns that she identified included an increase in part-time as well as full-time assembly work in light industrial units. As the older male dominated industries declined, more women found jobs in the new industries. In other words, uneven development is not simply a story of decline, but may be one of reshaping and redefinition.

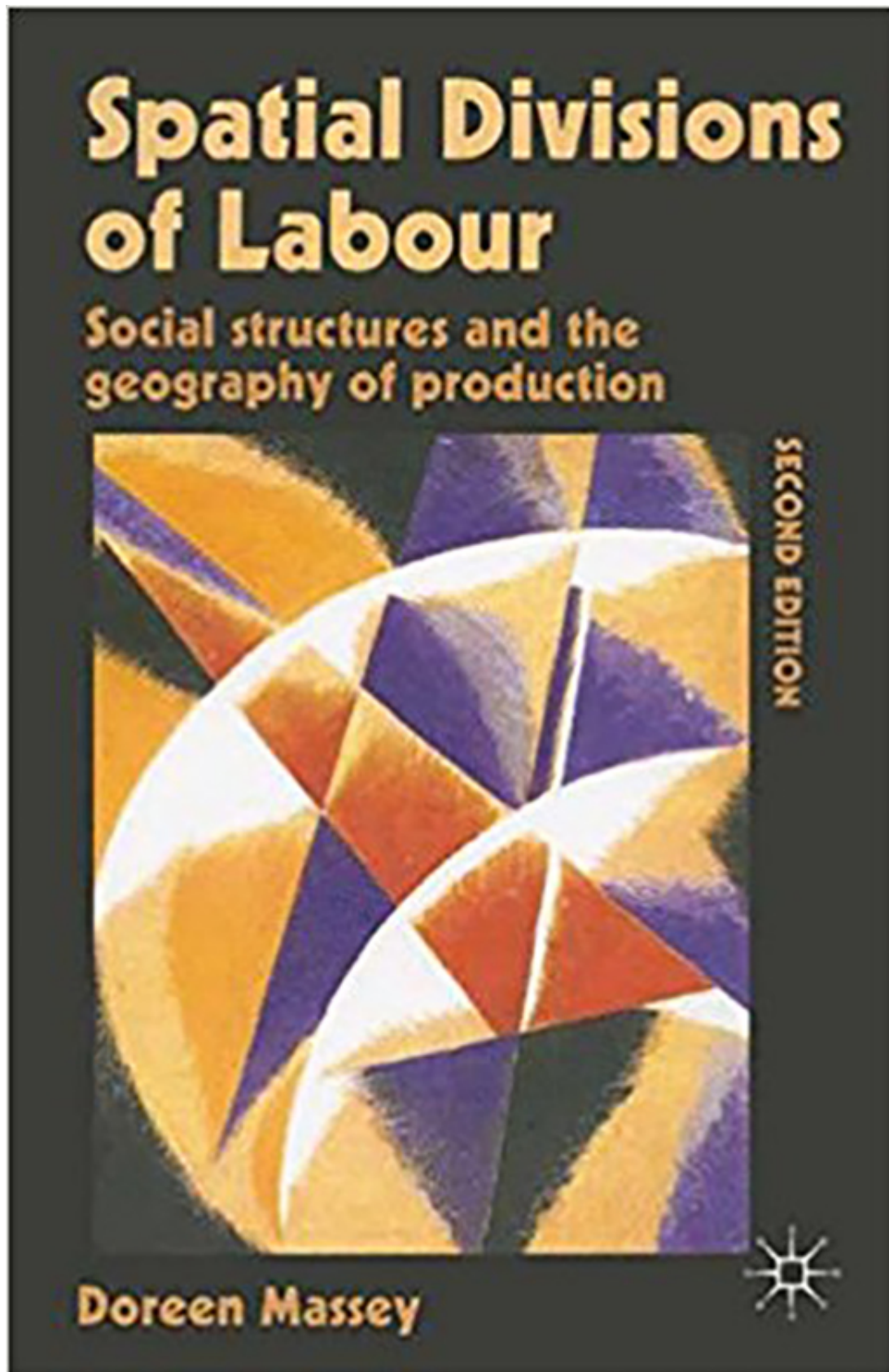


Figure 2 Cover of Spatial Divisions of Labour

The point here is not that the emergent divisions of labour identified by Doreen Massey are the only ones. It is, rather, to emphasise that uneven development is about much more than the generation (or reshaping) of inequality – even if that is one of its

consequences. From one perspective, uneven development may generate new opportunities for investment and profitable production. And from another, it may provide a basis for forms of social solidarity and political action, whether in those areas suffering decline or in those where growth is taking place. It may, however, also work to transform some places as changing economic drivers in turn bring different ways of working and different ways of living.

Activity 2 Thinking about economic and social change in your area

Allow about 20 minutes

Think of the area in which you live and make notes on the following questions in the box below.

- Can you identify any changes in the nature of the local economy that have taken place over the last twenty years or so? (You may have experienced them directly yourself or simply be aware of how the opportunities have shifted between generations.)
- As older industries have declined, have new ones replaced them – if so what form have those changes taken?
- How have local job markets changed and who has tended to benefit and who lose out?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

The Open University is based in Milton Keynes, and answering these questions here is a particular challenge. Milton Keynes is a new town on the edge of South East England. The main story of its development over the past twenty years is one of growth and expansion. The population has probably doubled over the period and is now around a quarter of a million. But it is important to remember that there is a longer history for some parts of today's Milton Keynes. Until the 1980s, it had a large works dedicated to the construction and maintenance of railway carriages, as well as a significant presence in light engineering and food processing. Today the industries are very different, dominated by logistics (reflected in large warehouses close to the motorway) as well as financial and business services, alongside a very strong retail sector. There are also some high tech employers and, of course, The Open University is itself a major employer.

Meanwhile, the population mix of Milton Keynes has also changed. The town – often called a city because of its size – has become increasingly multicultural or cosmopolitan. Over the years between the censuses of 2001 and 2011 Milton Keynes' black and minority ethnic population doubled from 13.2 % to 26.1 %. It now has a significant presence both of people who identified as black African in the census and of people born in EU accession countries, especially Poland (Milton Keynes Council, 2014). The local job market is a divided one, around the poles of highly skilled, white-collar employment and relatively low skilled employment (in warehousing and retail). Milton Keynes is generally understood to be one of the UK's 'fast growth cities', and is often presented as a model to be followed elsewhere (Williams, 2016). Of course, how that is experienced by those who live there is a more complex and difficult question.

And no doubt your own experience will be quite different, although the area in which you live is also likely to have faced major changes over the past twenty years.

3 Devolution as a response to uneven development

The process of devolution in the UK is generally understood through the experience of the three devolved administrations of Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Each of these takes its own distinctive form. It is, in other words, presented as a political process – a response to demands generated from those territories and nations. But devolution may also be understood as a means of challenging some of the underlying tensions associated with uneven development across the UK (which is potentially of relevance within all of the UK's territories and nations as well as between them). Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have historically been defined through their particular roles in an imperial Britain, within which England was a continuing core. The end of empire has undermined the dominance of England within the UK and left the UK's other territories and nations to find new roles, even as England itself has become less confident and coherent. London has moved from being imperial capital to global city and financial centre.

Doreen Massey never directly engaged with the political geography of Brexit and what it might mean for the UK. The vote took place some months after her death. But her work was highly prescient, indeed almost prophetic, in the context of that vote. One of the issues she identified, which has also been noted by others, concerns the relationship of London and South East England to the other regions of England and the other nations of the UK. And what matters is that this is a continuing relationship, not just a fact of life in which one area is identified as prosperous and dynamic while others are somehow backwaters, or even simply 'left behind'. She focuses on this in a book published in 2007 – *World City*. This is a book about London, but it is also about uneven development. Rather than celebrating London's position, it sets out to explore the contradictory, ambiguous and often negative role that London plays in shaping the UK's economic, political and social geography, as well as positioning it in the context of a particular form of globalisation.

Activity 3 Thinking about devolution in England and across the UK

Allow about 15 minutes

Before the Brexit referendum Diane Coyle, who is a professor at the University of Manchester, wrote a blog post setting out the case for thinking more critically about the political and economic geography of the UK, and suggesting that greater devolution would not only encourage more even development across the country, but also generate more economic growth.

Read Diane Coyle's blog post by clicking on the link below and then return here to answer the following question.

- Coyle, D. (2015) ['Why devolution is good for the economy' Manchester Policy Blogs, 2 March \[Blog\]](http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2015/03/why-devolution-is-good-for-the-economy/). Available at <http://blog.policy.manchester.ac.uk/featured/2015/03/why-devolution-is-good-for-the-economy/> (Accessed 10 November 2017).

What does Diane Coyle see as the barriers to economic growth and how does she suggest overcoming them?

Feedback

Diane Coyle recognises that there are real advantages of concentrating economic activity in urban areas and she also acknowledges that London is thriving. But she believes that the economy should not be run on the basis of a 'single engine'. She sees this is a particular issue because over-centralisation and the pressures of concentration bring their own problems. In the case of London, the additional costs of housing and transport make it difficult to provide jobs for those on 'normal' wages. But Diane Coyle's arguments go beyond these concerns about what she calls 'the diseconomies of agglomeration'. Concentration in one place makes it impossible for a wider range of specialist industries to develop. For that to happen effectively, other cities need to be able to grow existing (and develop new) areas of specialism. She argues that the existing UK economic model, which tends to favour the financial services industries, is at the root of the geographical imbalance you have been exploring in this course. And that geographical imbalance, with its focus on London, ensures that the economic imbalance is maintained as 'people and activity' are sucked back into the city. To overcome these barriers, Diana Coyle proposes a comprehensive approach based around the UK's cities, one which is underpinned by significant infrastructural investment in those cities.

The point here is not that it is necessary to agree with the approach being presented or the solutions being put forward. But Diane Coyle's arguments are important because they require us to think more carefully about current arrangements – and current development patterns – rather than accepting them as simply a necessary outcome of wider and uncontrollable economic forces.

4 Summary

This week you were introduced to ways of thinking about some of the differences between the parts of the UK. It is important to be able to identify the ways in which those differences also reflect inequalities of income and power. Some of the processes that generate those inequalities were explained with the help of the notion of uneven development. The extent to which the apparent success of one area might be connected to weaknesses elsewhere was highlighted. And some of the wider consequences of historic patterns of economic (and political) centralisation were explored in a discussion of devolution within and beyond England.

You should now be able to:

- recognise how uneven development is expressed in the UK's political and economic geography
- understand that uneven development is a dynamic process, not just a pattern that can be identified on a map
- actively reflect on some of the implications of uneven development in the UK both for those areas that are disadvantaged by it and for the broader political economy.

Next week, in Week 3, the course will focus on the particular case of London, not in its own right but as a way into untying some of the complicated knots that surround debates about national identity in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, as well as in the UK (or Britain) in the wake of the Brexit vote. In Week 1, Anthony Barnett's (2017) distinction between the five component parts of the UK was introduced – London, England-without-London, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. Often London is simply taken for granted as the driver of the UK's growth and the epitome of a new economic model based around services and finance. In some versions of this way of thinking, the rest of the UK is imagined as dependent on London's success. Week 3 starts from the London experience, but in a way that questions those assumptions in order to explore the ways in which London's dominance has provided the dynamic underpinnings of uneven development across the UK.

Week 3 Looking out through the lens of London

Introduction

In many respects the UK still has a highly centralised social, economic and even political geography, with London (or the wider London city region) at its core, even if its political centrality is increasingly challenged by the existence of elected institutions in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. The referendum vote and the consequences of Brexit highlight some of the tensions between London not only across the UK, but also specifically within England.

This week, rather than taking London for granted and assuming the centrality of its position, you will begin to reflect more fully on its relationship with the regions and nations of the UK. The aim is to understand some key aspects of the dynamics that shape London, but also to reflect on some of the ways in which they effectively shape uneven development and inequality across the UK. By looking through the lens of London, it becomes possible to explain some of the divisions reflected in the pattern of votes cast in the referendum and to highlight some of the tensions associated with the UK as a multinational state – and England as a particular nation within it.

By the end of this week, you will be able to:

- assess the arguments that London has a distinctive and determinant role within the economy and politics of the UK
- understand how the development of London affects the development and patterns of development elsewhere in the UK
- consider the ways in which those factors were reflected in voting patterns expressed in the referendum vote
- Understand how uneven development has implications within London as well as in terms of London's relationship with the regions of England.

1 The (peculiar) case of London

The tensions associated with those places like London which are identified as global city regions are continuing ones. Are they part of the nation states in which they find themselves or better understood through their connections within wider networks? These questions are still more intense when the city – as in the case of London – has been the metropolitan centre of an imperial project, remains a capital city and is at the centre of an extensive urban mega-region. Since the referendum, some have begun to argue that

London needs to be understood as a political territory in its own right, positioned within a global network. Others by contrast have complained about its role in stunting development possibilities elsewhere in the UK.

Activity 1 London as a city state

Allow about 15 minutes

In an article published in the *Evening Standard* David Lammy, MP for Tottenham, argued that London should be recognised as a 'city state'.

Read David Lammy's article by clicking on the link below and then return here to answer the following question.

- Lammy, D. (2017) ['London must look to be a city-state if hard Brexit goes ahead' *Evening Standard*, 20 March \[Online\]](https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/david-lammy-london-must-look-to-be-a-citystate-if-hard-brex-it-goes-ahead-a3494221.html). Available at <https://www.standard.co.uk/comment/comment/david-lammy-london-must-look-to-be-a-citystate-if-hard-brex-it-goes-ahead-a3494221.html> (Accessed 16 July 2017).

What are the main points that David Lammy makes in setting out his view of the special position of London?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

David Lammy quite explicitly (if not entirely convincingly) sets out to equate London's position with that of Scotland, both in introducing his argument and concluding it. He cannot, of course, point to a continuing national story for London along the lines that are apparent in Scotland, but he does point to a historical record of past city states. He suggests that the position of London in a changed global context opens up new possibilities. He mobilises the language of devolution and stresses how different London is from the rest of the UK. It recorded a 60% Remain vote and has an economic base that runs counter to the visions he identifies with Brexit, that is, 'smalltown conservatism, resurgent nationalism and anti-immigrant sentiment'. In this context, of course, the nationalism to which he is referring is that of England (or the UK), rather than that of Scotland, Wales or Ireland.

Lammy identifies particular priorities for the emergent city state – increased tax raising powers and separate visa arrangements to enable labour migration to London, even as controls are imposed elsewhere. He stresses what he sees as the need for huge investment to meet London's housing crisis and the need for policies to challenge the sharp divide between the (sometimes very) rich and poor in the city. From David Lammy's perspective, London is already a *de facto* city state even if the institutional arrangements are lagging behind. And he argues that it will become increasingly necessary to recognise this. For good measure, even as he identifies London's special status, he suggest that the tax raised in London provides a crucial underpinning for social spending elsewhere in the UK. In other words, he argues that money is being extracted from London that should be spent in the city.

David Lammy's (2017) position is not one that has been taken up consistently as a policy option. There is little active interest in any major new institutional settlement for London. But the general direction of his argument, with its stress on the special status of London, is a powerful one. In his article he refers to a report prepared by the London Finance Commission (which advises the Mayor of London). It was titled *Devolution: A Capital Idea* (London Finance Commission, 2017) and made a strong case for increased tax raising powers to be transferred to London as a base for investing in transport and other infrastructure as well as housing. Again, a direct reference is made to Wales and Scotland, with the claim that, 'The precedent for the sub-national operation of tax and equalisation has already been met' (in this context at least, for the authors of the report take the UK as the nation in question although, of course, that may be understood rather differently from a Welsh and Scottish perspective; 2017, p. 10). London is presented as a possible model for wider devolution in England, particularly in the context of initiatives to create combined authorities and elect mayors for the country's city regions.

From this perspective London is understood to be a major (maybe *the* major) metropolitan centre of the UK – the UK's only global city. In some discussions it feels as if London is somehow floating free in a globalised world, only touching down reluctantly because of the crude expectations and requirements of material existence. But that understates the depth and significance of its connections to the rest of the UK, as well as the role of London in shaping uneven development beyond its borders. The sets of relations through which the city region is defined have a range of consequences – negative as much as positive – for the ways in which uneven development is maintained and generated across the UK. In the next section you will begin to reflect on the implications of recognising that role.

2 Connection and disconnection

A focus on London's role as a world city has tended to highlight the importance of its connections in wider global networks of finance or advanced producer services. In that context, London is understood to 'compete' with other global cities. It is sometimes even suggested that a new networked global politics is emerging that is based around those connections and that it will supersede forms of international relations organised around national state structures. From this perspective, it is these connections which have come to define it, to the extent that its relationship with the rest of the British economy and society might be seen to be vestigial, and certainly secondary. London is home to the headquarters of the most profitable companies and the highest paid employees.



Figure 1 Photograph of high rise offices in London

Yet the sets of relations through which the mega region is defined are stubbornly connected through a range of spatial practices, which find a clear expression in the uneven development across the UK. London's role as a world city (or with a particular position within world city networks) does not mean that its economy (and society) are effectively divorced from the rest of the UK. It is also defined through its connections to elsewhere within the UK. London's tentacles stretch out to incorporate economic and social actors (particularly in the financial sector) in many other cities, as well as in many of the quasi rural enclaves of privilege to be found dotted around those cities.

Activity 2 Thinking about London

Allow about 10 minutes

Pause for a moment to think of your own attitudes to London.

- Is it a place in which you want to live (whether you live there now or would like to move there)? If so, why? If not, why not?
- Do you think London has too high a profile in the UK's political and economic system?
- Is London a driver of economic growth and cultural creativity across the UK, or does it undermine the potential of growth and creativity elsewhere?
- How would you describe those who live in London? How would you describe London as a place you know from the inside or know of from the outside?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Your responses to the questions about London are your own, but how you view London provides an important starting point for what comes next. You might want to reflect back on your answers here at the end of this week's work. The aim in what follows is to provide some evidence to help you think through the sometimes uneasy position of London and its wider city region within the UK as a political, economic and social entity. Your answers to the questions above will already provide some evidence of what you think about that.

In a slightly distorted echo of Anthony Barnett's (2017) description of the politics of Brexit discussed in Week 1, Philip McCann (2016) argues that the UK now has to be understood as being made up of three economies: London and what he calls its hinterland (the London city region as it stretches to South West England); the north of England, the English Midlands; Northern Ireland and Wales; and Scotland. Almost half of the UK's population, he says, now live in regions where productivity is similar to or below that of many regions in the post-communist economies of Central and Eastern Europe (including what was East Germany). Scotland is now more prosperous than many English regions and other devolved nations. Meanwhile, he argues that the core of the UK economy has 'gone south' towards the region around London and decoupled from the rest of the UK. Recognising the extent to which London has taken on this role is not the end of the story, however. On the contrary, there is a sharp tension between those who see London as a driver of the economy and those who see it as an active agent in generating wider geographical inequality. So, for example, (in the first of a series prepared for the City of London Corporation) Ian Gordon and others (2003) strongly argue that London is a net contributor to the rest of the country through its taxes and the public expenditure for which they pay. Not surprisingly, this is a position that has been endorsed by a series of London mayors, from Ken Livingston and Boris Johnson to Sadiq Khan.

Peter Hall (in Hall et al., 2009) goes further to argue that one solution to regional inequality (at least in England) might be for the London city region simply to expand its footprint to incorporate other cities, starting with Birmingham.

From another perspective, however, the matter has been understood quite differently. London's position within the UK's space economy reflects a deeply unequal set of social and economic relations. There is a bigger gap between the wealth and economic prosperity of London and the more disadvantaged regions and territories of the UK than there is in most advanced economies. As Philip McCann (2016, p. 1) puts it: 'the economic geography of the UK nowadays increasingly reflects the patterns typically observed in developing or former-transition economies rather than in other advanced economies'. Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift (2003) argue that the centralisation of power in London means that a significant element of UK 'policy making effectively functions as an unacknowledged regional policy for the South Eastern part of England' (Amin et al., 2003, p. 17). As a result, they argue that economic policy is overly influenced by the state of the regional economy in London and the South East. They complain that steps are taken to restrain the economy when the region is 'overheating', even when the rest of the UK still has significant capacity for growth.

Despite a rhetorical shift in the language of national policy in England towards other possible growth regions (such as the 'Northern Powerhouse' or the 'Midlands Engine') and towards forms of devolved government in the UK's nations, the logics of development continue to reinforce the centrality of the Greater South East in public policy practice. The recent history of mega projects certainly points in this direction. So, for example, the

success of London's bid for the 2012 Olympic Games was a reflection of London's position as a world city (and previous attempts by UK cities were said to have failed because of their more lowly position in urban hierarchies). The Olympics itself is a globalised and globalising phenomenon. The bidding process was a UK initiative, with London at its core, and the bid was underpinned by the promise to transform (regenerate or remake) a significant area of East London. The infrastructural investment that followed has been reinforced since then (in the form of Crossrail as well as parkland and support for building new residential areas and new forms of commercial development).



Figure 2 Image of the Olympic Park

Major infrastructural development associated with Crossrail (a new underground line cutting across London from east to west) and a new high speed railway line (HS2) providing faster connections between London and North West England also provides the basis for major state sponsored and private sector led development around two new rail terminals in a previously run-down area in the west of London (Old Oak and Park Royal). National priorities and national investments seem to have a continuing role in reinforcing London's position within the national space economy. As Ian Gordon puts it, one consequence of London's ability to draw upon the generosity of the national state is that it has received 'bail-outs, implicit subsidy and quantitative easing ... [that] have been translated specifically into employment/spending power within London – and overseas – rather than elsewhere within the UK' (Gordon, 2016, p. 336).

Doreen Massey (2007) goes further to argue that the political emphasis on London's global role is a political strategy (as much as an economic reality) because of the way in which it reinforces particular ways of thinking (which she identifies as neo-liberal). The 'geographical concentration' of the very wealthy in London and the South East, 'into a self-referential echo chamber reinforces their distance from the rest of us' (Massey, 2007, p. 66), and serves to reinforce a policy agenda which includes a commitment to deregulation, an emphasis on the 'untouchability' of the financial sector, and a drive to privatisation of various sorts (including 'competitive individualism and personal self-reliance') (Massey, 2007, pp. 38-40). The 'global' is mobilised precisely to reinforce the city's national dominance to the extent that the 'Reinvigoration of London...represents the rise of a new elite, and the culture in which it is embedded' (Massey, 2007, p. 49).

3 Disunited England, divided London?

The referendum vote on 23 June 2016 highlighted key aspects of the disconnection between the London city region and the rest of England.

As discussed earlier, all of England's regions outside London recorded a vote to leave the EU, although a majority in most of the larger (more cosmopolitan) cities voted for the UK to remain a member. A majority also voted to leave in Wales, although there were majorities to remain in Northern Ireland and Scotland, where the politics are very different. Of course, the regions and nations should not be seen as homogenous entities and there was significant variation between and within them. But what matters here is to recognise that the regional pattern of voting did reflect patterns of uneven development within the UK. Paradoxically, perhaps, that helped to explain the outcome in Northern Ireland and Scotland. A Remain vote reflected the linkages to another economic and political entity in the case of Ireland, and in the case of Scotland a readiness to develop a more autonomous (and possibly even independent) relationship with Europe that went beyond the UK.



Figure 3a Mrs Thatcher, then Prime Minister, strides across industrial wasteland in the 1980s with the promise of regeneration



Figure 3b New industrial parks in the 21st Century

But in England and Wales in a sense the vote was a rejection of the existing set of arrangements, even if the nature of the alternative was not clear. In many of the older industrial (and deindustrialising or post-industrial) regions, the European Union (EU) and its precursors had been active participants in the process of restructuring and consolidation that shaped their changing regional economies. The payments made through various regional development schemes hardly helped to compensate for those shifts. To put it at its most modest, people living in these regions had little reason to feel positively about the EU. The referendum threw up a strange alliance between those in the Conservative Party's rural and suburban heartlands (for whom traditional forms of social and political security were fading in a post-imperial age) and those in the deindustrialised regions for whom the promise of 'Europe' was always tarnished.

In this context the overwhelming evidence that the regions which voted to leave are the ones most dependent on trade with Europe, or indeed most reliant on grants from Europe,

becomes irrelevant. The argument has been that those who have been 'left behind' by globalisation and the patterns of growth associated with it were those who voted to leave. Once, however, it is recognised that uneven development is a process which actively repositions places and people through forms of economic restructuring – in other words, a process in which there is a continuing relationship between the geographies of 'growth' and 'decline' – then a rather different set of conclusions can be drawn. The vote can be seen as a reaction to the process by which forms of spatial and social inequality are generated and maintained. London may be less reliant on the EU than some other regions of England, precisely because it is connected into much more extensive global networks. But voting to leave the EU was also a way of voting against the effects of uneven development driven through an economic and political system focused on London and the needs of its elites. Incidentally, this also raises some fundamental questions for those who see the English vote as representing the rise of a new English nationalism – it may do, but it also highlights the extent to which 'England' itself is fundamentally divided, rather than united around some clear cut nationalist agenda.

However, London, itself, is also deeply divided. London's role as a financial centre has shaped its relationship with the rest of the UK, but it has also helped to construct a deeply divided city. Uneven development is a complex process to the extent that series of inequalities and exclusions go alongside the defence of privilege in the city and its region. As a result, there may also be a danger of failing sufficiently to recognise the ambiguity of London's position. In emphasising the role of the elite two other aspects of change may be underplayed. The first is simply to recognise that the industrial sectors dominated by the elite (particularly business services, higher education, and the media, publishing and tech industries) require a workforce that is not reducible to that elite. London draws in young people from across the UK and beyond seeking to work in the new post-industrial industries that dominate within it, even as they face dramatically increased living costs in doing so. They may not be poor, but nor are they (yet) part of the elite.

The second is that non-elite transnational aspects of the London experience may be downplayed in this narrative. London's success relies on the more mundane contributions of migrant labour and production. The white British population as defined by UK censuses has become a minority (as the number identifying as white British has declined from 60% to 45% between 1991 and 2011). The linkages and connections to elsewhere that are implied by such a population highlight what it means to imagine a global city region from below as well as above. Despite undoubted tensions, London is one of the places within which living with difference is a 'taken for granted' rather than an exceptional experience, being made up (as Stuart Hall puts it) of an intricate lattice of differences (Hall, 2006). In his book *This is London*, published in 2016, Ben Judah powerfully charts the experience of those who are often marginalised in stories of London's domination by elites of one sort or another. He ranges across London's neighbourhoods to tell the story of a global city's underside, the poor and the excluded, struggling for survival.

While the outcome of the Brexit vote was undoubtedly a reaction to some of the concerns identified by Massey and others, it is also important to recognise the extent to which the vote in London was also a reflection of the emergence of forms of transnational and different cosmopolitan politics – in which those who live in London often (as the example of David Lammy illustrates) stress a London identity above a national one. These individuals are not necessarily members of a global elite (the divisions within London and the wider city region make it impossible to identify them in this way) which begins to open up the possibility of a different sort of political identity, within and beyond England and the UK.

Activity 3 Reflecting on your thoughts about London

Allow about 5 minutes

Look back at the points you made in response to Activity 2. Have you changed your mind about the conclusions you drew there? Or have your views been confirmed by the evidence and discussion that you have read?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

London is the UK's world city and in that role it has helped to maintain and reinforce patterns of inequality across the wider geography of the UK. The interests of its elites have tended to dominate political and economic decision-making, and that has been reflected in the patterns of infrastructural investment as well as the language of politics. But London is more than its elites – uneven development is complex and ambiguous, generating difference within as well as between regions and nations. The Remain vote in London was not just a vote of the elites (many of whom live in the wider South East): it was a vote of the young, the multicultural and the dispossessed as well as the privileged.

4 Summary

Over the last week the focus has been on exploring some of the ways in which uneven development found an expression in the referendum vote by looking out through the lens of London to the rest of the UK. You have been introduced to the role that London and its wider city region play in shaping the UK's economic geography, as well as in framing political debate. The idea that London's position should be taken for granted as a necessary outcome of wider (global) forces has been questioned. As well as highlighting London's role in the uneven development of the UK, the importance of recognising the significance of division and inequality within London was also stressed. The Remain vote in London was not simply a vote of those benefiting from its role as world city.

You should now be able to:

- work confidently with the notion of uneven development, drawing on the experience of London within the UK to do so
- understand that uneven development is not a one way process, recognising the significance of inequality within London, as well as between London, Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and the regions of England beyond the South East
- identify how the complex patterns and processes of uneven development found expression in the referendum vote.

The weight of London and South East England at the heart of the UK's political settlement is not a new phenomenon. But its particular contemporary form certainly is, because of the ways in which today's London is linked into wider global circuits of finance and service industries. It is no longer at the centre of a global empire, even a declining and fading one, but is one node among others. It no longer has the central position of capital city of the UK as imperial state. Its repositioning is a response to living in a post-imperial, yet increasingly globalised, world. The networks that matter are international and even transnational, linked through financial transactions and complex patterns of trade.

In this new world London is sometimes understood to be *in* but no longer really *of* the UK (as the article by David Lammy implied). And that means that its centrality in UK-wide debates can no longer be assumed. As Ash Amin, Doreen Massey and Nigel Thrift (2003) suggest, the UK becomes decentred. And this process is reinforced by processes elsewhere in the UK because the end of empire has also had fundamental implications for its other cities. Many of them, including Glasgow and Belfast, were also once deeply embedded in the imperial project, supplying ships and heavy engineering (as well as people), but that is no longer an option. As a result, some of the political and economic glue that held together the UK in the context of empire is no longer able to do so.

Next week, the course turns to consider some of the effects of these shifts on the UK and its future as a multinational state.

Week 4 From European Union to Disunited Kingdom?

Introduction

It is possible to read the maps which you explored in Week 1 through the lens of the UK's constitutional fix, and the uneasy ways in which England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are brought together in a single governmental territory. Indeed, discussion of the break-up of Britain is usually approached through a consideration of the challenge presented by the rise of a range of nationalisms in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and – more recently – England. As the maps presented in Week 1 demonstrate, some of those tensions are apparent in the voting patterns of the referendum, but the messages are by no means clear-cut.

The course this week focuses on some of the issues that arise from the referendum and the messages of Brexit for Northern Ireland, Wales and Scotland, in each of which (although in different ways) debates around the nature of the nation with which people identify are of fundamental importance.

By the end of this week you will be able to:

- understand how the UK is constituted as a state, and how this has been affected by the referendum vote and the move towards Brexit
- understand the extent to which the votes reflected the devolution process in each of the UK's component parts
- assess the role of nationalism and national identity in the context of the nations and territories that make up the UK, particularly with respect to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland
- reflect on and assess the significance of overlapping forms of identity
- use survey data (from British Election Study and elsewhere) confidently.

1 Interrogating the British state

In some ways even the notion of Britain (and hence Brexit) can be seen as problematic. 'Britain' is, of course, not a political entity in its own right and even Great Britain (defined to include England, Scotland and Wales) is only a part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which is made up of a series of quite distinct territories. Brendan O'Leary (2016, p. 518) has gone so far as to argue that, 'To use BREXIT is to do

verbal violence to the nature of the UK, which is a double union, not a British nation-state'. He favours the term 'UKEXIT'.

One common way of understanding the UK state has been to see it as a unitary – or centralised – one. That is, one in which all power flows from the centre, from Parliament in Westminster. Because the UK does not have a written constitution, it is assumed that its Parliament (or strictly speaking the Crown in Parliament) is sovereign, able to decide on any policy or piece of legislation. The role of government becomes to implement it throughout the kingdom. But matters have always been more complex and uncertain than that. So, for example, the EU can be seen as one recent constraint on that power and the demand to 'take back control' which was so significant in the Brexit campaign reflected a popular concern about that.

However, it is also important to recognise that the UK's own formation has left important legacies, as a result of which its component parts have some distinctive arrangements and characteristics of their own. There is a long and uneasy tradition of self-rule in Northern Ireland (dating back to its formation in the wake of Irish independence), which has generated a particular set of political arrangements and institutions. And Scotland's legal, education and religious systems have always been distinctive. These aspects of social and political life have become still more institutionalised and have developed further in the context of processes of devolution since the late 1990s. These have led to the creation of the National Assembly in Wales, the Scottish Parliament and a rather different settlement for the Northern Ireland Assembly. The form taken by devolution has been different in each territory, but the limits being placed on the decision-making powers of Westminster are clear enough, even if formally the Westminster Parliament may claim ultimate authority.



Figure 1 Picture of Westminster Parliament

There are no specific government institutions for England. There is no separate English Parliament, although there are now issues that are deemed only to affect England (or England and Wales) on which only MPs elected for English constituencies may vote (or English and Welsh MPs, where appropriate). But in a sense, England's constitutional position reflects the extent to which England has in practice been positioned as the norm against which other national formations are assumed to define themselves. For many years it was not uncommon for England and Britain to be used interchangeably in popular speech, at least in England and by many of those commenting from outside the UK. So, for example, the UK's current Queen is always identified as Queen Elizabeth II, although the first Queen Elizabeth was only Queen of England and Wales (which had already been incorporated into England). England was understood to be the foundation on which Britain, Great Britain and the United Kingdom were built. Tom Nairn has powerfully identified what he sees as 'the core of the problem' with this, in arguing that:

... behind England's Britain there lies England's England, the country which has not merely 'not spoken yet', but, in effect, refrained from speaking because

a British-imperial class and ethos have been in possession for so long of its vocal chords (Source: Nairn, 2000, p. 100).

It may be, of course, that for the first time the referendum has enabled that 'England' to speak.

Each of the UK's nations and territories has its own distinctive history. Not only is that reflected in the pattern of the referendum vote, but the vote also highlights the extent to which the UK needs to be understood through its divisions as much as through what holds it together.

2 The significance of national identity

The votes in the Brexit referendum reflected some significant differences between the ways in which national identity is understood in the various nations and territories that make up the UK. In England it has been argued that the Leave vote and evidence of support for the UK Independence Party leading up to the vote was (at least in part) an expression of English nationalism. The strongest and most united national identity reflected in the vote was probably in Scotland where there was a Remain majority across all of the electoral areas. And – initially at least – it appeared the vote might be the trigger for a second independence referendum. In Northern Ireland the Remain majority reflected a shifting balance in (although possibly also a softening of the politics across) the religious and political divide, as Catholics voted 85/15 Remain and Protestants 60/40 Leave. In Wales the pattern was similar to that in England with older industrial areas voting Leave and Cardiff voting Remain, while the Welsh speaking rural areas also tended to vote Remain.

This suggests that ‘nationalism’ has a rather uncertain presence. In England it seems to have led to a Leave vote; in Scotland to a strong Remain vote; in Northern Ireland a greater affinity with Irish nationalism seems to have encouraged a Remain vote, while a closer affinity to the UK (itself perhaps a form of nationalism) made a Leave vote more likely; in Wales, there is some evidence that Welsh language and a greater sympathy for Plaid Cymru made a Remain vote more likely.

Activity 1 Thinking about nationalism

Allow about 15 minutes

How do you understand ‘nationalism’? In considering this question you might like to think about the following:

- Is it a positive process, opening up new ways of living in a complex world?
- Is it a reactionary process resisting the drive to globalisation and international openness?
- Does it unleash negative forces creating unpleasant divisions between people?
- Does it have the potential to break up old relations of dominance and foster positive communal initiatives in the face of an increasingly uncertain world?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Nationalism is not a simple phenomenon. That means it is not easy – or even possible – to give straightforward answers to the questions posed above. It can be all those things at different times and in different contexts. Some nationalisms may be exclusionary – coping with complexity by shutting particular groups out of ‘national’ society. Others may be inclusionary – using the frame of a ‘nation’ to invite a range of groups into a shared project of nation-building.

One way of highlighting these tensions is to draw a distinction between what has been called ‘civic nationalism’ and ‘ethnic nationalism’. The former can be understood to be territorial and based on common values and institutions. In this model it is possible to

become a member of a national community by choosing to join it. Such a nationalism is likely to be open and outwardly directed. By contrast, ethnic nationalism is based around membership of a national community as a given, whether by place of birth or by lineage (often evocatively described as 'by blood'). The assumption is that there is a shared and largely homogenous national culture, which works to exclude as much as to include.

This is a helpful distinction and some nationalist parties (such as the Scottish National Party) specifically identify themselves with civic rather than ethnic nationalism, even as other movements and parties stress their roots in ethnic identity. Like all simple distinctions, however, there may be a danger that it fails to capture the ways in which nationalism often works across both axes in practice – appealing to a shared (and often romanticised past) even as it points towards a positive national future. The 'whole family' of nationalisms, as Tom Nairn reminds us, 'is spotted' rather than simply one thing or the other (Nairn, 1975, p. 18).

As a way into a discussion of what the patterns of the referendum vote may have to tell us about the UK as a multinational state, you should first complete Activity 2 in order to reflect on the outcome in Scotland, where it appears that there was a more or less shared national consensus.



Figure 2 Photograph of Scottish Parliament

Activity 2 Understanding the vote in Scotland

Allow about 10 minutes

Play the following video in which George Callaghan explores some of the issues surrounding the impact of nationalism on the Brexit vote. He brings together many of the arguments that emerged in the wake of the Scottish vote.

What are the main points made by George Callaghan? Write your notes in the answer box below.

Video content is not available in this format.



Part 1

Video content is not available in this format.



Part 2

Student Hub Brexit Debate

Provide your answer...

Feedback

George Callaghan argues that it is important to reflect back on a longer history, suggesting that Scotland's relationship with Europe stretches back beyond the

formation of the UK in 1707. More recently (since the first devolution vote in 1979, and in an accelerated form since the formation of the Scottish Parliament in 1998) he notes that there has been an increasing divergence between the political priorities being pursued in Scotland and those of Westminster (which George identifies as English). He highlights the strong irony that in Scotland's own independence referendum (in 2014) one of the arguments put by those campaigning against independence was that the only way to remain in the EU was to remain in the UK. The Remain vote, says George Callaghan, was an expression of national identity – which he sees as more European and internationalist than is true for the English national identity. In other words, it could be seen as further evidence that some of the glue that previously held the UK together was beginning to lose its strength, and such a view seemed to underpin the argument for a second independence referendum as initially put forward by the Scottish National Party in the wake of the European referendum.

3 Identities in tension

The arguments George Callaghan presents in the video you played in Activity 2 are powerful ones which need to be taken seriously. But some of the evidence is less clear-cut. In his analysis of opinion poll data around the referendum, John Curtice (2017) identified some key features that underpinned the difference between England and Scotland in the final vote. For example, the proportion of Scots who think the economy will suffer from leaving the EU was higher than in England and the issue of immigration was of less concern in Scotland. In addition, the vote was also underpinned by an understanding of Scotland's distinctive position, associated with the campaigning of the Scottish National Party and the possibility of maintaining an autonomous Scotland. However, this does not translate directly back into the view that voters would rather be in the EU than the UK, if that were the choice. The vote translated a more complex reality into a single set of figures as while 62% voted Remain polls taken at the same time suggested that only 45% would vote for independence.

Activity 3 Voting and national identities

Allow about 15 minutes

In the following blog, Chris Pattie and Ron Johnston draw on data from the British Election Study, undertaken following the Brexit Referendum, to explore some of these issues from a slightly different angle. They review the extent to which voters in England, Scotland and Wales identify with different perceptions of the nations to which they belong.

Read Pattie and Johnston's blog post by clicking on the following link. You may want to read the blog as a whole, but for the purpose of this activity you should focus your attention on the text starting with the paragraph beginning 'But, when all is said and done, Indyref #2 will turn on issues of the heart as well as on those of the head...' to the end of the end of the blog. When you have finished return here to answer the question below.

-

[Pattie, C. and Johnston, R. \(2017\) 'Scottish national identity: why the question of Europe could actually keep the UK together' *LSE British Politics and Policy*, 20 March \[Blog\].](#)

What are the main results from the study and the issues Pattie and Johnston identify?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

Using a scale of 1 to 7, Pattie and Johnston (2017) confirm that Scots tend to identify more with Scottishness than Britishness (average of 5.7 to 4.54). The bar graph in their blog demonstrates how this contrasts with the English and Welsh respondents, both of whom tend to identify more as British than as English or Welsh, respectively. Scots also identify as European more than either English or Welsh (with the Welsh respondents reporting the lowest levels of feeling European). This is all consistent with the points made by George Callaghan (in Activity 2). However, Pattie and Johnston

conclude that the message is not quite as unequivocal as George Callaghan seems to suggest. As they note, the score for Britishness remains significantly higher than that for Europeanness (at 3.87) and the pie chart in their blog confirms that a majority of Scots see themselves as more British than European, with only 30% seeing themselves as more European than British.

In other words, the survey suggests that Scotland's position within the UK remains uneasy and there remain significant tensions around questions of national identity. But it also indicates that the political outcome of those tensions is still in the balance. Both those seeking independence and those opposed to it can draw comfort from this.

4 Contrasts and differences

The contrast with Wales that emerges from the British Election Study data analysed by Pattie and Johnston (2017) is also striking. Since the formation of the Welsh Assembly the main political parties in Wales have seen themselves as closely aligned with the EU and its institutions, not least because Wales has been a net beneficiary from EU sources due to the way in which the various EU regional and cohesion funds have worked to redistribute resources across the European space. The expectation was that the Welsh government would be in receipt of around three billion Euros over the years 2014–2020, with the majority being allocated to rural West Wales and the post-industrial Valleys of South Wales. As a result, the referendum vote was seen as a surprise by the Welsh political establishment.



Figure 3 The Welsh Assembly building

In an article published in the *Guardian* on 27 June 2016, Richard Wyn Jones (a professor at Cardiff University) posed the question: ‘Why did Wales shoot itself in the foot in this referendum?’ That it had done so was a common perception, precisely because of the resources the country was receiving from European sources. The strongest Leave votes were recorded in some of the older industrial areas receiving the most money. But Professor Jones explains things differently, implicitly contrasting the Welsh and Scottish experiences and noting that the devolved Welsh institutions were predominately seen as forms of protection against Westminster, rather than as the basis of positive alternatives, as is the case in Scotland. Few electors, he concluded, viewed the referendum through a Welsh lens. The focus of the political class, he says, had in any case been on the Assembly elections which preceded the referendum by a few weeks, although turn out for the referendum (at over 70%) was substantially higher than that for the Assembly (just over 45%).

It is also worth noting that while the European funds may have represented a significant source of income to the Welsh government, the extent to which they had a positive impact on the places where the money was spent (particularly where it was spent on infrastructure) may have been less obvious. Those living in many of the areas in which majorities voted to leave had not seen improvements in living standards over the past decade or more. Paradoxically, perhaps, because eligibility for EU funding implies economic and social disadvantage, it also made it difficult to generate a positive vote for the politics of the EU. Apart from those areas with a strong Welsh speaking tradition, which also tend to be the areas in which support for Welsh nationalism is stronger, such as Ceredigion and Gwynedd, the pattern of voting in Wales followed very similar lines to that in England, where cities and prosperous regions voted Remain and older industrial or post-industrial areas voted Leave.

If the contrast between Scotland and Wales is apparent, the contrast with the experience in Northern Ireland is equally noticeable. Superficially, as you have seen, there are

similarities – like Scotland, Northern Ireland voted Remain. But unlike Scotland, in Northern Ireland the pattern of the vote was much more divided. It largely reflected existing divisions, although it appears that around 30% of traditional unionists voted Remain, despite the active campaigning of the Democratic Unionist Party for Leave. Northern Ireland is the only part of the UK with a land border with another member of the EU. In his own 'personal reflection on the changing geographical relationship between the UK and Ireland', Philip O'Sullivan (who is a senior lecturer in geography at The Open University) notes that:

You can now drive from Belfast to Dublin and only know you have crossed the border when the traffic sign changes the speed limit from miles per hour to kilometres per hour; if you couldn't notice it, maybe it didn't matter anymore. Similarly, the Good Friday Agreement allowed people in Northern Ireland to choose Irish, British, or even both as their national identity and to hold passports from Ireland, Britain, or one of each. Now that the UK, including Northern Ireland of course, is making steps to leave the EU, the separateness and binary otherness of the UK and Ireland has been spectacularly amplified (Source: O'Sullivan, 2017).



Figure 4 Approaching the border in 2017

The border helps to shape the nature of debate around the EU in Northern Ireland, but also opens up debate around the status of Northern Ireland. In the wake of the Brexit vote, and in an echo of calls for an independence referendum in Scotland, Sinn Féin suggested that the time might be approaching for a referendum on Irish unification. The extent to which there is widespread support for such a referendum remains unclear, but all political parties in Northern Ireland, however they recommended voting on EU membership, are eager to preserve an open – or at least highly porous – border with the south.

An open border and a referendum on re-unification may or may not be realistic in the longer term, but it highlights the role that the EU has played in framing Northern Ireland's political settlement – the power-sharing system between unionist and nationalist parties that has largely been in place since the Good Friday Agreement of 1998. The UK's membership of the EU has been part of the process by which it has been possible to have a system in which the different interests are able to work through consent, however uneasily. As some commentators have suggested, the EU offered another way of '*not* talking about the border' (Gormley-Hennan and Aughey, 2017, p. 502), making it possible to govern on a range of issues without confronting the most contentious issue of politics in Northern Ireland. The UK-wide vote to leave the EU and the UK government's decision to move towards Brexit has raised a series of questions about the existing arrangements.

As Cathy Gormley-Heenan and Arthur Aughey put it, '[t]he spectre haunting Brexit has a unique reference point in Northern Ireland: the border' (2017, p. 498). They quote Malachi

O'Doherty, writing in the *Belfast Telegraph* on 25 June 2016. He argued that those 'pragmatists' on the nationalist side (with their own Irish identity and little attachment to Britishness) who had been prepared to work with unionists with a strong commitment to the UK might begin to rethink their position now that they find themselves still in the UK, but 'without the protections that come from Europe – and the underpinning of a common identity with the Irish that also comes from Europe' (p. 503). In this context, it may also be worth reflecting briefly from the perspective of the Republic of Ireland. Fintan O'Toole argues that there they have had to accept '[t]hings that nation-states do not like – ambiguity, contingency, multiplicity – would have to be lived with and perhaps even embraced. Irish people, for the most part, have come to terms with this necessity. The English, as the Brexit referendum suggested, have not' (O'Toole, 2017). One expression of this, under the Good Friday Agreement of 1998, is that those born in Northern Ireland have the right 'to identify themselves and be accepted as Irish or British, or both', and consequently to have either or both Irish and British passports.



Figure 5 Photograph of Stormont

The point here is not to suggest that anything has been settled in Northern Ireland by the referendum result, any more than it has been in Scotland. Polls suggest that a significant majority of voters in Northern Ireland would support remaining in the UK. One conducted for the BBC soon after the referendum found that 63% would favour staying in the UK, with only 22% saying they would vote to join a united Ireland. But what matters is to recognise that not only did the vote itself highlight some of the key tensions around national identity, it also provided evidence of voting across the presumed political and religious divide. Membership of the EU helped to cover over some of the divisions and acted as a means of avoiding border talk, and the consequences of moves towards Brexit are likely to raise continuing questions, possibly reinforcing tensions and even generating more serious conflict.

5 Summary

This week the emphasis shifted away from a direct focus on uneven development and the particular case of London and the South East in shaping the UK's political and economic geography. It moved towards a concern with the ways in which the UK has been constructed as a multinational state. You have been introduced to some of the tensions reflected in the referendum vote, particularly as they have been expressed through national identity in the different parts of the UK. Data from the British Election Study have been used to help with this.

You should now be able to:

- actively reflect on the extent to which the vote for the UK to leave the European Union has also highlighted tensions within the UK itself as a multinational state
- recognise different expressions of nationalism within the UK and some of the complexities of overlapping national identity in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales
- use a range of data from different sources (including video and survey evidence) to support you in analysing processes of political change.

It is now possible with the help of the work you have undertaken across the weeks of the course to draw some tentative conclusions about the political geography of the referendum and what it means for the UK.

6 Drawing some conclusions

Here the intention is to reflect back on the course as a whole and seek to draw out some tentative conclusions about what the referendum vote has to tell us about the political geography of the UK and its future as a multinational state. You have been introduced to some ways of thinking and presented with a wide range of evidence to help make that possible.

Activity 1 The implications of Brexit for the future of the UK

Allow about 20 minutes

What are the main conclusions you would draw from the course for the future of the UK?

Provide your answer...

Feedback

First, the vote highlights some real divisions across the component parts of the UK, between and within Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales, London and England-without-London. These divisions are rooted in material experience. They cannot be dismissed on the one hand as the product of ignorance and a lack of education or, on the other, as simply reflecting privilege and cosmopolitan indifference. To that extent, it is an expression of the working out of uneven development across the UK.

Second, this is not a straightforward story of the break-up of Britain, both because the divisions do not neatly play across the territorial constitution of the UK, and because the national identities involved are more complex and ambiguous than any such conclusion would require. In one sense, the UK is more divided than the break-up story might suggest – ‘England’ is by no means a unified territory (or nation) and the tensions that cut across any attempt to define its national identity are deep. The vote in England clearly reflected those divisions, whether from the perspective of London (and most of the larger cities) or those of the ‘regions’.

However, the voting patterns also confirmed the changing balance between the different parts of the UK. Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales all have their own specific and distinct governing institutions, but it is equally important to recognise that the national understandings to which they relate and with which their citizens identify more or less clearly are rooted in their own histories and cultural formations. While they may all (alongside England) be located within the UK state, they have an existence that goes beyond that state. Instead of any clear-cut and sharp ‘break up’, the devolution process may simply continue in ways that mean there is a form of unacknowledged break up (or drifting apart) over time.

During this course you have been introduced to some important theoretical approaches around uneven development, and have drawn on survey and election data of various sorts. The course has explored how divisions apparent in maps of voting patterns may actually reflect the unfolding of deep-rooted social and economic processes. Maps (and tables of data) present snapshots of particular moments, but it is important to work

through them, to use them as starting points in looking for explanations and identifying dynamics.

The dynamics set in motion by the Brexit vote and its underlying drivers remain uncertain. But they do not only concern the relationship between the UK and the EU and its remaining members: they also highlight some of the tensions, divisions and possibilities that are raised for the UK itself.

The question remains whether the UK will itself survive in its current form and, if so, how. Does the rise of a form of English nationalism (even if it is often framed through a language of Britishness) imply that a new settlement is required for England? Should London become a city state? Is Scotland on the path to independence? Are we on the road to a united Ireland? And what are the implications of all this for Wales?

There are no simple answers to these questions. But it is important to understand and critically reflect on the tensions that were revealed by the vote. The tools and ways of thinking to which you have been introduced in this course should make it possible to do so in ways that identify directions of change while acknowledging important continuities.

Other resources

If you want to know more about Brexit, from short articles to free courses, visit The Open University's [Brexit Hub](#).

7 Quiz

You've almost reached the end of the course. Now it's time to test your knowledge by completing the quiz. (Open the quiz in a new tab or window and come back here when you're finished.)

[From Brexit to break-up of Britain quiz.](#)

Tell us what you think

Now you've completed the course we would again appreciate a few minutes of your time to tell us a bit about your experience of studying it and what you plan to do next. We will use this information to provide better online experiences for all our learners and to share our findings with others. If you'd like to help, please fill in this [optional survey](#)

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This free course was written by Allan Cochrane.

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