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Red Wall politics and identity

A summary report of qualitative findings

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1. Research methodology

Research objectives

Ipsos MORI were initially commissioned by UK in a Changing Europe in early 2020, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, to carry out a programme of qualitative research relating to the changing political landscape following the 2019 general election, and the role Brexit played in the outcome. With the onset of the pandemic, the project was postponed with a view to continuing once restrictions would allow face-to-face research to restart. In August 2021, it was agreed that the research would instead be conducted online given the continued uncertainty around face-to-face research.

After the significant delay between commissioning and fieldwork, the research objectives were revised to focus more upon the present political climate, new leadership, and to reflect upon the impact of COVID-19 on the region. These revised objectives were to understand:

- Whether changes in political attitudes and behaviour – in areas of England where Labour previously had the advantage – are temporary, or more durable;

- If the post-pandemic economy provides a context for a political 'reset', whether economic values are likely to become more politically important, and, if so, what arguments might have greatest traction;

- How questions of national and regional identity are articulated and what associations are made between political parties and different aspects of identity; and

- What voters perceive the impact of Brexit to have been to date, and whether Leavers and Remainers now have any personal hopes for positive change resulting from Brexit.

Online focus groups

In line with government guidelines on social distancing at the time of fieldwork, participants were recruited through free-find on street recruitment via an external recruitment partner.

Participants were recruited from constituencies across Yorkshire, identified as seats that switched from Labour to Conservative control in the 2019 General Election or where Labour held with a significantly reduced majority.

Table 1.1: Recruitment constituencies

Conservative gains from Labour in GE2019	Labour holds with reduced majority in GE2019
Wakefield	Batley & Spen
Don Valley	Bradford South
Rother Valley	Halifax
Great Grimsby	Hemsworth and Normanton
Colne Valley	Pontefract
Dewsbury	Castleford
Keighley	
Penistone & Stocksbridge	
Scunthorpe	

Participants were asked several screening questions to establish if they were eligible to take part. Selection for the focus groups was determined by a sampling matrix, agreed in advance of the fieldwork, and shown below.

Table 1.2: Sampling matrix

Group	Pre-2019 voting	GE 2019 voting	Age	Gender	Religion
1	Labour	Conservative	Mix	Mix (min x2 female, min x2 male)	Mix
2	N/A	Labour	18-44		Mix
3	Always Conservative	Conservative	Mix		Mix
4	N/A	Labour	45+		Mix
5	UKIP/Brexit Party or other if BP in 2019	BP or other if voted UKIP/BP in previous election (Min x2 BP in 2019)	Mix		Mix
6	N/A	Did not vote in 2019 (but eligible by age)	Mix		Mix
7	N/A	Mix (Min x2 Labour, Min x2 Conservative)	Mix		Muslim only

For each two-hour discussion, seven participants were recruited, with between four and seven in attendance across the groups. Conversations with participants were structured by a discussion guide covering several topics reflecting the project objectives. All groups were conducted online using Zoom and video-recorded for transcription with the advance consent of participants. Fieldwork was conducted between 28th September and 13th October 2021.

2. Yorkshire

Participants were enthusiastic and positive about the places where they lived and Yorkshire more broadly. There was a tendency to contrast Yorkshire (or the North) with either the South or, specifically, London – the South and the capital were typically referred to interchangeably. It became clear that participants relied heavily on comparisons with the South and London. They typically framed Yorkshire as being culturally and economically distinct from the South, with far more in common with the rest of the North, specifically the North West and the North East.

Space and nature were mentioned frequently by participants, citing the rural feel and easy access to green spaces and places – typically in contrast to a more crowded and urban South.

> *"It's like a concrete jungle down South, isn't it? You don't get much greenery. You're lucky if you get a garden. At least up here in Yorkshire we get nice gardens, nice greenery."*
> *Female, 2019 Brexit Party voter*

Connectivity between places was a positive aspect of living in Yorkshire. Participants felt that they were well-connected to big cities within the county such as Sheffield and Leeds while, again, stressing that there is easy access to the countryside outside of the county itself, for example the Peak District. Participants also recognised good connectivity to other places around the country. London and Manchester were cited as two cities easily reached from Yorkshire by either car or rail.

There was a broad consensus that community spirit in Yorkshire was one of the most positive things about the region – the county's people, and Northerners more broadly, were described as polite, good natured, and always looking out for one another. This was typically highlighted as a contrast with those living in London, where participants described people as being more self-centred and less considerate.

> *"I suppose the best things for me is the community spirit. Coming from the south originally, I find the whole of the North is completely different…much friendlier, and just very accepting. Just a great community."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Alongside this broad positivity, several negative themes emerged across the groups. Participants mentioned crime as major concern where they lived, specifically knife crime and drug abuse. Homelessness in the region's bigger cities, pockets of persistent depravation, and abandoned or derelict buildings were also significant concerns.

3. The role of identity

While finding it relatively easy to identify with Yorkshire and the North, British and English identities were instinctively considered to be – and used – interchangeably by participants. Any potential differences between Englishness and Britishness seemed to be something that few gave much thought to.

Sport was one of the primary prisms through which participants were able to make a distinction between an English or British identity. For example, the English national football team was seen as emphasising participants' English identity while other international sports, such as the Olympics, would stress their sense of British identity. Legal procedures were another example of when participants would opt for their British rather than English identity – e.g. when filling out an official form such as a passport application.

> *"That's the only time I think, that I would differentiate it as actual English, when it's sport involved. And then when it's the Olympics, then it's obviously Britain and UK."*
> *Male, 2019 Non-voter*

Participants did not see Englishness and Britishness as clearly distinct from one another. The other devolved nations of Britain, however, were seen as being distinct – participants believed that feeling Scottish would be different from feeling British, and people would, they suggested, be less likely to switch between those two identities.

> *"I suppose, 'English' is the one I use most, and 'British' tends to be for, I don't know, on form-filling, or passports. I use both, but probably 'English' more than 'British'. I think 'British' sounds a bit dated."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Muslim participants also described themselves interchangeably as English or British. However, they were also likely to include a third identity pertaining to their family's heritage – e.g. highlighting their family's Pakistani heritage. This heritage identity, unlike Englishness and Britishness, was dependent on the context of the situation – for example, emphasising the Pakistani identity when visiting Muslim-majority countries.

> *"I went to Turkey about five years ago and they said, 'Where are you from?' And I said, 'I'm from England,' but he goes, 'Are you Pakistani?' I go, 'Yes,' and they treated me really well."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

4. The economy, Brexit, and the pandemic

The economy

Across the focus groups, there was a widespread consensus that the economy is not performing very well at the moment. It's important to note, however, that participants did not have a strong picture of "the economy" – there were struggles to initially answer questions about how they felt it was doing, largely due to difficulties in defining what the term meant to them, in a practical sense.

When pressed, it seemed that participants, at least in the current context, largely defined a strong economy as one in which you can buy what you want when you want it ,and where business are fully staffed. As far as these participants were concerned, neither of these things were currently the case.

This belief was rooted in three different types of shortage that participants had noted: petrol shortages (the fieldwork for these focus groups occurred just as this was headline news around the country), shortages of people to fill jobs (participants noted that businesses had positions that they couldn't fill), and increasingly empty supermarket shelves.

To an extent, these shortages were felt to be interlinked. A lack of people to fill jobs, for example lorry drivers or supermarket workers, and a lack of fuel, i.e. for lorries, were considered to be partially behind the lack of produce in shops.

Two things were largely felt to be to blame for this unhappy state of affairs: Brexit and the pandemic. Across the groups, the extent to which each of these was blamed tended to vary depending on participants' level of support for Brexit – i.e. Leave supporters tended to be more likely to suggest the pandemic was primarily responsible, while those opposed to Brexit seemed more inclined to feel that Britain's departure from the EU was the major cause.

However, this was not uniform or consistent across the groups. There were, for example, people who had supported leaving the EU and also felt that the government's mishandling, in their view, of the process meant that Brexit was partially to blame for the country's perceived economic woes.

Brexit

Two things stood out about the discussions regarding leaving the EU. Firstly, the heat seemed to have largely gone out of the conversation. Secondly, there was a widespread sense, regardless of how participants had voted in the 2016 referendum, that the process was not going well.

Since the 2016 referendum, focus group discussions about Brexit have tended to encounter participants who still felt strongly about leaving the EU, with particularly damning views on the "other side" of the Leave-Remain divide from themselves. However, it was striking how little was mentioned about participants' feelings towards Leave or Remain supporters. Perhaps as a consequence of the pandemic – 18 months in, at the time of fieldwork – and perhaps because of relative concern about the perceived negative impacts of Brexit, there was far less vehemence or conviction in the way it was discussed than has been typical over the past 5 years.

It also seemed clear that there was a consensus that Brexit – at least in the short-term – was having a negative effect on the country. Participants – even those who were most supportive of leaving the EU, who plainly stated that they felt some short-term economic pain was a price worth paying in order to ensure Britain's departure form the EU – believed that some of the shortages they were witnessing were, in part, due to Brexit and its consequences.

The staunchest supporters of remaining in the EU tended to believe that these negative effects were simply "baked in" and were inevitable. In contrast, less partisan participants felt that the negative effects that so many willingly acknowledged were largely a consequence of the current government's mishandling of the process – for example, a lack of foresight and planning had exacerbated the staff shortages mentioned so widely across the focus groups.

There was little recognition of the phrase "get Brexit done" – either these participants have simply forgotten ever hearing it or it had barely any cut-through in the first place.

The pandemic

The pandemic was believed to be a significant factor in the stuttering nature of the UK economy. It was generally felt that this was unavoidable, that such an unprecedented event would create economic problems alongside the obvious health crisis.

Ultimately, participants struggled to unpick the extent to which the pandemic or Brexit were to blame. What was clear to them was that the economy is struggling and that these two events are, in large part, responsible for that.

One final note on the pandemic. It was striking that when participants were asked to name the biggest issues facing the country, the pandemic was rarely mentioned directly. There were many mentions of related issues – challenges facing the NHS and the economic issues discussed above – but there was little discussion of COVID-19 directly. It seems that, by and large, people's attention had – perhaps temporarily, perhaps driven by the ending of lockdown a few months earlier, the initial success of the vaccination programme, and winter being a relatively distant prospect – moved elsewhere.

5. Levelling Up

Participants had little awareness of the phrase "levelling up" or what it might mean.

Indeed, when asked to speculate on what the term may refer to, participants produced a broad range of, essentially, guesses. These included video game references, a flattening of COVID-19 infection rates, attempts to address the gender pay gap, and house price rises.

> *"It sounds like a game, like a PlayStation game. Like you've got to the end of one stage and you go onto the next level. I just think you'd be playing a game on PlayStation or something."*
> *Female, Labour voter*

Participants struggled to place the phrase in any specific context. Despite its prevalence in Westminster discourse, levelling up was not a familiar concept, often causing extended pauses and general confusion during the discussions when raised by the moderator.

> *"I've heard the phrase and I did know what it was about. I believe it's Brexit related or economy relate? No, I can't remember. I have heard of the phrase."*
> *Male, Labour voter*

After being provided with a definition of levelling up, participants provided various perspectives on the likelihood of the programme's success. Although there was agreement that the idea in principle was a good one, particularly for communities like theirs and across the North, there was distrust on delivery in the current climate – i.e. the ongoing pandemic coupled with a slowdown in the economy.

There were doubts about the commitment of the current government to deliver a levelling up agenda. Participants questioned the substance of the concept, suggesting it was little more than a soundbite or slogan – even by Conservative voters.

> *"You often hear about the North-South divide, etc. From whom? Probably spin doctors in the government. By the government. I think it's a bit of a sales pitch for the Northern vote, personally. That's what I see it as."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Of more concern to these participants was their worry that the government would end up "levelling down" communities like their own. They saw evidence of this happening locally, with descriptions of boarded up and empty high streets, declining living standards, and a lack of opportunities for people in the region. Coupled with a long-standing belief that the government cares little for the region beyond winning votes, participants were pessimistic about the likelihood of matters improving in any material way.

"I have heard of levelling down...nothing's being levelled up. I watch a lot of politics, and I've seen years of how everything's gone. It's just shocking, you know what I mean? I don't know what they mean by levelling up, whereby everything is being levelled down."

Female, Labour voter

6. The Conservative Party

Evaluations of the Conservative party were diverse and varied across the focus groups. Longer-term Conservative voters were quick to describe the party as trustworthy or good at managing the economy. Those who switched their vote for the Conservatives in 2019 General Election were less positive with their descriptions of the party than were the more traditional Conservative voters – unimpressed by the Labour Party, they tended to see the Conservative Party as the best electoral option available to them but had little enthusiasm for their choice.

> *"They're the best of a bad bunch."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Perceptions of the Conservative Party among the party's newer voters were, therefore, shaped in relation to perceptions of the Labour Party, in particular their long-standing view of the Labour Party as fiscally irresponsible. Ongoing austerity programmes were seen as a necessary corrective to Labour's overspending in government, a belief found across the focus groups (with the exception of Labour voters).

The current government's handling of the pandemic wasn't particularly well-regarded across the groups, though nor was it especially criticised. Participants largely gave the government the benefit of the doubt, suggesting implicitly that there were no good responses available and that no alternative government would've fared any better. The furlough scheme and the vaccine rollout were seen as exceptional moments for the party, exemplifying good governance.

> *"It hasn't saved all the businesses but then the implementation of that [furlough and the vaccine] was just phenomenal, you know. I dread to think what would've happened under Labour, in the same circumstances."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Despite being described as the party best able to manage the British economy, there were signs that increasing anxiety over the current state of the economy could reduce the sympathy gained by the Conservative Party over the course of the pandemic – participants highlighted petrol shortages, lack of produce on supermarket shelves, and businesses struggling to fill jobs. This was particularly relevant for those who switched their vote to the Conservatives in 2019.

> *"With the pandemic, with all the economy and everything surrounding it, I think they'll take a good knock at the next election."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

There were also some signs of dissatisfaction with the government's handling of Brexit. Even those who strongly supported Britain leaving the European Union were critical of the government's Brexit approach. They suspected that inadequate preparations by government were, in part, to blame for recent food and petrol shortages.

> *"I know there are driver shortages, but it was obvious it was going to happen. When they said no foreign workers to do our jobs, that was obvious, wasn't it?"*
> *Male, 2019 Non-voter*

Those who switched their vote to the Conservatives in 2019 showed little attachment to the party, with their vote at the next election seeming to be largely dependent on how the post-pandemic recovery goes. And there was little evidence of these voters feeling strongly about switching their support to the Labour Party – participants suggested that they were willing to shop around and vote for a party that they felt would better represent them than either of the two main parties.

> *"No, I think I'd probably go with what she said, let's go for something different, you know, let's go for the Green Party."*
> *Female, Conservative voter*

Participants were asked to describe the "typical Conservative voter". The descriptions that were mentioned first tended to be those that might be seen as more traditional stereotypes – someone who is well educated, went to public school, inherited wealth, has a substantial income, and is largely interested in policy which preserves their wealth. Muslim participants also mentioned that Conservative voters tend not to be Asian.

Those who switched their vote to the Conservatives in 2019 highlighted that the party's image has changed over recent years, describing Conservative voters as more likely to be working class than in the past. When these participants were asked why more working class individuals now support the Conservative Party, issues around patriotism and being proud of the country were typically mentioned – these voters felt that the Conservatives allowed them to feel this way, whereas the Labour Party frowned on such attitudes.

> *"Whether it's taking back your country, or waving a flag, or boosting your economy, it was a biting point because I think people just wanted to feel a bit proud again, have some respect about them again."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

7. The Labour Party

There was sense that the Labour Party had lost its way in recent years as participants struggled to articulate what the party now stood for, despite being able to describe what the party stood for historically. Participants used the past tense when describing how they *used to* stand up for the working classes and putting people first whereas now the party was deemed untrustworthy, especially on the economy.

> *"I wanted somebody else to give it a try, because they offered up other stuff to do, and I thought they could do a better job than what Labour have done previously."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

A persistent theme across the focus groups was a belief that Labour's economic record in office was poor, with the financial crisis of 2008 being a focal point for criticism. Despite being out of power for over 11 years, this was a deeply-held assumption – that Labour cannot be trusted with the economy – and served to strongly undermine the party's credibility with potential voters.

> *"...every single time Labour introduce a new policy or tell me they can do this, they can do that, they can do that, I just look at it and go, 'You show me where you can find that money from and I'll back you.' But I can't work out where on Earth, when the country is already in debt, they're going to find that extra money to pay for all these things they want to do."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Another issue for the Labour party (with loyal voters and switchers alike) was its leadership. Sir Keir Starmer had made little impression on these participants. For those who were more familiar with the Labour leader, participants struggled to identify with him and did not know what his values or vision for the party and country were.

> *"I'm not sure what I think about Keir Starmer at the minute. I don't think he's great. I don't really feel as though I know who he is or what his values are. You want someone with good core values".*
> *Female, Labour voter*

Former leader Jeremy Corbyn still evoked strong opinions, however. Those who had stopped voting for the Labour Party in recent years or were dedicated Conservative voters did not trust his economic vision or manifesto promises, further tarnishing their opinion of Labour's economic competence.

> *"I also thought that, to be honest with you, that I just couldn't see how Labour could afford what they were saying they could do. I just thought, if you want to do all that, you're just going to put us in more debt, and my taxes are going to go up in the end."*
> *Male, Conservative voter*

Participants who were more positive about Corbyn's impact blamed "the media" and campaigning from the Conservative Party for some of the current struggles of the Labour Party and recent electoral losses.

There was a sense that the Labour Party is failing to take advantage of a political climate that could be favourable to an opposition party. Participants discussed how negative impacts of Brexit, the pandemic, and public policy – cuts to Universal Credit, Free School Meals, and public sector pay were all mentioned – have not been capitalised on.

> *"…for the last eight, ten, twelve years, all we've had is the Tories in government, isn't it? We've not had a Labour leader that's shown their constituents or their people how, hopefully, they're going to get hold of the country by the short and curlies and sort it out."*
>
> *Female, Labour voter*

Participants described the more traditional Labour voter as elderly (with several references to older parents and grandparents), with an industrial background such as a miner or pitman, working class, hard-working, Northern, or from an ethnic minority background.

However, when describing who they thought of as a contemporary Labour voter, participants identified that some of those factors have eroded. Another stereotype of a Labour voter seemed to have taken root among these participants – young, university educated, female, and "woke". Indeed, this image stood in stark contrast, for these participants, to the working class and hard-working, family-oriented individuals more likely to vote Conservative.

> *"I think a typical Labour voter, right now, she's young. Obviously female. She's early to mid-twenties. She wants to save the world. She wants to include everybody. She wants to travel around Europe with her friends."*
>
> *Male, Conservative voter*

8. Conclusion

There are several lessons to take from what participants have said in these focus groups:

- There was little sense that the region's shift towards the Conservatives is permanent. Newer Conservative voters did not describe themselves as being particularly strongly attached to the party and had several issues with the way Brexit and the pandemic have been handled. There was a real feeling that these voters, no longer attached to the Labour Party, are still shopping around.

- Yet there was noting to indicate that these voters are merely "lending their vote" to the Conservative Party. There was little love for the Labour Party. Participants who voted Labour in the past felt that continuing to vote Labour meant continuing to vote for a failed economic policy, leading some to vote Conservative for the first time in 2019. Their previous Labour votes had not resulted in their lives or local areas demonstrably improving, thus prompting disillusionment and a change in voting preference.

- Participants consider English and British identities to be interchangeable. And there was a strong suspicion across the groups that the Labour Party did not speak to this identity and, in fact, found such notions distasteful.

- Levelling up means little-to-nothing among these voters. Indeed, when prompted, it seemed to be more likely to generate cynicism and pessimism about the government's intentions, rather than a positive vison of the region's future.

- The heat seems to have – at least temporarily – faced from discussions about Brexit. Even the staunchest Leave supporters feel that the process is having negative consequences for the country's economy. That said, there was little consensus on the extent to which the clear economic pessimism across the focus groups is also being influenced by the pandemic.

- Speaking of which, it was striking the extent to which these participants did not express any tangible fear or worry about the pandemic – it was rarely mentioned directly as a major issue facing the country.

- These voters are, it seems, "up for grabs" to any party which can offer the right mix of a credible economic vision and national pride.

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