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LSE Research Online URL for this paper: <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/104128/>

Version: Published Version

Online resource:

Oliver, Tim and Westwood, Andy (2020) Britain in one room: reflection on a focus group of undecided voters during GE2019. LSE Brexit (19 Feb 2020), 1 - 2. Blog Entry.

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Britain in one room: reflection on a focus group of undecided voters during GE2019

During the 2019 election campaign, the University of Manchester hosted a series of focus groups of then undecided voters, organised with *The Times* and Public First. **Timothy J Oliver** and **Andy Westwood (University of Manchester)** reflect on the experience of helping to run this event.

Understanding how voters are behaving is an ongoing struggle for many in our field – to which we can take qualitative and quantitative tools with equal vigour. Whilst all of us had seen plenty of polling data during the election campaign, and before, it is always sound practice to bring in qualitative evidence as well – to hear the voters give full flow to their views on the issues confronting the country, and to watch them respond to others do the same.



'Voters felt as though Brexit was a roadblock to discussing issues like health, crime, education, and social services.' Photo: [Hugh Kimura](#) via a [CC BY 2.0 licence](#)

The event '[Britain In One Room](#)' had been inspired by a similar, albeit larger scale event, in the US, run by the New York Times called '[America in One Room](#)'. Whilst the New York Times had high hopes that their project might find a 'better way to disagree', the British event was more focused on discovering what voters might agree or disagree about. To that end, in November 2019, we gathered 100 undecided voters on campus, and set about circulating them between different rooms, running different topics in each.

These voters were selected by a polling company, with subsets from four regions – London, the South, the Midlands and Wales, and the North. Scotland and Northern Ireland were excluded due to the different nature of the election campaigns being fought there. Demographically, we sought a broad balance of gender in each of the groups, and focused on selecting voters in the C1 and C2 categories, though there were still others from higher or lower sets. Politically, they were mixed by Remain and Leave in rough proportion to the result, and mostly had voted Conservative or Labour before, though all were now choosing between at least two, if not more, parties in the upcoming election.

In each room, there was a moderator – often a university academic – and a journalist from *The Times*, who would have space to ask some final questions. These included *Times* policy editor Oliver Wright, political editor Francis Elliott, and former deputy speaker of the House of Commons Natascha Engel. The topics set ranged from the inevitable discussion of Brexit, through the policies that voters had heard about, on to the question of Labour's relationship with its Northern voters.

This was not, of course, a purely academic exercise – *The Times* had an interest in generating stories from it, which gave a different flavour to the procedure. A different form of output, aimed at a different audience, meant the journalists often asked what seemed to be simple questions – asking participants to raise their hands if they had changed their mind about how they would vote in a hypothetical second Brexit referendum, for example. This provided a clear background to their analysis, but also crystallised their views in a way that a more open-ended discussion might not – and by bookending it, provided a neat insight into perhaps some more surprising choices among the participants.

For the academics who took part, such as ourselves, this offered a fascinating layer of colour to the evidence already available to us on this election campaign. We knew, for example, that Jeremy Corbyn was deeply unpopular from the polling data – but in the groups that discussed the Labour Party, the depth of his unpopularity amongst these voters came to vivid life. We knew that voters were bored of Brexit – but, again, the colour added here was how angry many of them, from both sides of the referendum debate, were that the topic was still up for discussion. Voters felt as though Brexit was a roadblock to discussing issues like health, crime, education, and social services, that they felt badly needed attention they were being starved of by a Westminster hyper-fixated on an issue they thought would be settled by now. Many of them voiced concern that their communities were being neglected because Brexit was taking up so much air time, and that real issues confronting them – rising crime, lower quality public services, and so on – simply were not on the agenda for politicians as a result.

These voters clearly were frustrated, angry, and cynical – on the whole – about the course British politics had taken. Their trust in most politicians and the institutions of government was lower than it had been before the referendum, which in many cases had been a low starting point. Leave voters often expressed the notion that, given Britain hadn't left the EU so long after the referendum, there was no point in them voting again. Remain voters often were simply weary of hearing about it, and just didn't want to be reminded again.

But what united these voters was that they were also eager to engage again. All of them reflected that they knew very little about the Withdrawal Agreement but expressed a desire to learn about it, as well as a frustration it was not playing a bigger role in the campaign. Similar views were expressed on the future relationship with the EU, where voters wanted to know what different outcomes might mean for them, and the country at large, and felt neither politicians nor the media were effectively communicating on these issues.

We went into this event aware that voters were more cynical than before, frustrated and angry with politicians and events. But what we also found was that voters were eager for things to get better – for politicians to communicate with them directly and honestly, for the media and academia to discuss things like the Withdrawal Agreement. The layer of colour added bears hope for the future of British democracy in a way that headline figures about trust in politicians might not. Voters are eager to regain trust in their institutions: they just need to meet them on the ground they want to be met on. That, perhaps, was the most surprising – and most refreshing – discovery of all, when we put Britain in one room.

This post represents the views of the authors and not those of the Brexit blog, nor LSE. It first appeared at LSE British Politics and Policy.