

Place matters: Analyzing the roots of political distrust and Brexit narratives at a local level

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Abstract

Based on comparative qualitative research in five local authority areas, this article argues that local context is key to understanding the roots of the U.K.'s crisis of political trust and the result of the 2016 E.U. referendum. The competing cultural and economic causes of discontent suggested by the literature were found to be deeply intertwined when analyzed from a local perspective. The sense of political disempowerment and negative attitudes toward migration were ingrained in and reinforced by locally specific socio-economic and political trajectories. These experiences were articulated and amplified by dominant discourses, which channeled frustration against the political elite and the E.U. These populist narratives, promoted by the Leave campaign and the tabloid press, became dominant in certain areas, decisively shaping citizens' voting behavior. Overall, the article highlights the value of studying how local experiences and interpretations mediate the interplay of cultural and economic causes of discontent and political distrust.

1 | INTRODUCTION

Brexit illustrates how rich countries, which have not necessarily experienced a significant loss of social trust or social capital since the 1970s (Newton, Stolle, & Zmerli, 2018, pp. 50–51), may

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undergo crises in political trust with far-reaching consequences. The 2016 European Union (E.U.) membership referendum has exposed and arguably exacerbated significant levels of political discontent and polarization in Britain (Murray, Plagnol, & Corr, 2017). It was the first time in the United Kingdom (U.K.) that a referendum result broke with the status quo and government recommendation. Moreover, not only the poorest or “left-behind” chose the “anti-government” option, but a significant percentage of middle-income citizens also voted Leave (Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, & Krouwell, 2017, pp. 224–225).

The referendum also unveiled great geographic discrepancies in terms of citizens' views across the UK that deserve closer attention; the Leave vote ranged from 21.4% in Lambeth to 75.6% in Boston. While most studies of the referendum have been conducted using nation-wide, individual-level analysis, and focused either on “cultural” or “economic” interpretations of Brexit, this article contextualizes the interplay between these factors in specific places. By zooming in at the local level, the article provides support for the view that “cultural” and “economic” factors are deeply intertwined (Carreras, Irepoglu Carreras, & Bowler, 2019; Gidron & Hall, 2017), and their interactions are shaped by place-specific local experiences, local interpretations and dominant narratives. To substantiate this position, the article compares five local authority areas of England and Wales: Barnet, Ceredigion, Mansfield, Pendle, and Southampton.

The main argument developed in this article is that place or local context matters as it mediates the interaction between cultural and economic factors and helps explain differences in attitudes vis-à-vis the E.U. In some areas local socio-economic and political trajectories fueled political distrust over time, and created a fertile ground for the development of dominant Brexit discourses, which have permeated among different socio-economic groups and channeled frustrations against the political establishment, particularly the E.U.

These dominant discursive frames combine national level narratives that place blame on the E.U., which were disseminated top-down by the Leave campaign and tabloid press, with bottom-up collective experiences and interpretations of local context. Relative economic decline, as a result of the casualization of job markets and the erosion of public services and infrastructure, ends up generating feelings of frustration and neglect, defensive perceptions of local identity, and a sense of local isolation. In this context, citizens are prone—or can be pushed—to develop a sense of distrust¹ of institutions which they consider distant and not benefiting them or their area. Citizens can then voice their frustration by supporting the anti-status quo and anti-government option.

2 | POLITICAL TRUST AND THE BREXIT REFERENDUM

The literature shows that Euroscepticism is not simply a reflection of the opposition to policies pursued by the E.U. but part of a wider trend of disenchantment with the establishment and political mainstream (Treib, 2014). Political trust can be construed as a variable mediating the relationship between public dissatisfaction and voting behavior (Eder, Mochmann, & Quandt, 2014, p. 8). As Britain is a paradigmatic case in a growing geography of regional discontent in the E.U. (Dijkstra, Poelman, & Rodríguez-Pose, 2019), and discontent fuels and manifests as political distrust, the outcome of the Brexit referendum cannot be explained without considering the political trust crisis that followed the global financial crisis. Political trust can be defined as a judgment of the performance of the government based on normative expectations, as well as on perceived competence and motivations (Hetherington, 1998, p. 792; Warren, 2017, p. 33). Trust is considered essential to the functioning of democracies, as it fosters

citizen compliance, facilitates cooperation, provides leaders with more leeway to govern effectively, and institutions with legitimacy which makes them less dependent on incumbents' performance (Hetherington, 1998, p. 803; Levi & Stoker, 2000, pp. 491–493).

Political trust can be associated with both *specific* support—satisfaction with a government—and *diffuse* or *generalized* support—satisfaction with the political establishment (Easton, 1965; Hetherington, 1998, p. 792). The former is usually strongly impacted by party preferences, more vulnerable to fluctuations and dependent on short-term contextual factors. The latter is expected to be more enduring and reflective of the long-term stability of a political system. Although these two dimensions of political trust are interconnected, they may fluctuate independently (Norris, 2017, pp. 21–24).

In the years prior to the Brexit referendum, the U.K. was experiencing a crisis of political trust. Jennings et al. (2017, pp. 756–757) show a long-term rise in discontent and a concomitant decline in diffuse support for politics in Britain over the last 50 years. Sixty percent of Britons felt the system was failing them and that life in the U.K. was not as fair as it used to be (Edelman, 2017). The global financial crisis and subsequent austerity policies contributed to the loss of political trust, and by 2016, only 26% of low-income Brits trusted the government (Edelman, 2016). Politicians were the least trusted profession in the U.K. and saw their support decline in 2016 even further (IPSOS-Mori, 2019). Moreover, Britain seemed to fit the paradox of distance (Frederickson & Frederickson, 1995, pp. 165–169) according to which citizens have increasingly negative views of the governments and officials who are further away (Figure 1).

Populist leaders capitalize on the lack of public confidence in institutions to advance their political agenda (Doyle, 2011, p. 1452, Dustmann et al., 2017, p. 60). In Britain, UKIP and other members of the Leave campaign fueled distrust in the political establishment and the E.U. (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018, p. 31; Hobolt, 2016, p. 1266) in an attempt to establish an antagonistic dynamic of “people” versus the “elites,” which is common to populist movements worldwide (Mudde, 2004, p. 543; Laclau, 2005, p. 39).

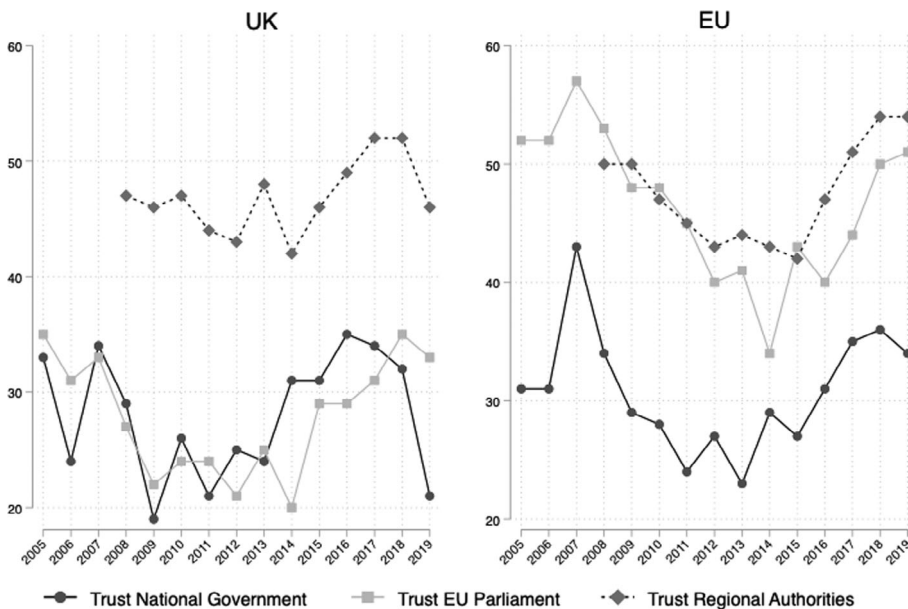


FIGURE 1 Trust in political institutions

The Leave vote in the Brexit referendum may be interpreted as the result of disenchanted citizens voicing distrust by supporting an anti-government position (Hirschman, 1970; Bélanger, 2017, p. 245). The reduction of trust in the E.U. seems directly related to the reduction of trust in national governments (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014). Political discontent did not manifest as disengagement from politics but as a sort of frustrated activism (Stoker, 2006). Empirical work confirms that distrust of politicians is correlated with voting Leave (Abrams & Travaglino, 2018; Hobolt, 2016, p. 1270). For many the referendum was the opportunity to punish the political establishment and “take back control” from the elites (Hobolt, 2016, pp. 1262–1,270). But what precisely are the origins of this growing distrust? Figure 2 below shows that trust in the European Parliament varies substantially across UK regions. Using as a starting point the idea that trust for particular categories of actors, in this case politicians, is created and lost based on those actors' observed behavior and ability to deliver (Farrell, 2009, p. 142), in the next section we develop the case that place-specific experiences and local interpretations are key to addressing this question.

3 | CULTURAL AND ECONOMIC FACTORS ARE MEDIATED BY PLACE

The Brexit referendum, and the political trust crisis more broadly, is often explained through either cultural or economic causes. However, most of these accounts have focused on nation-wide, individual-level analysis, which in itself is not sufficient to explain the highly asymmetric levels of support for the E.U. across the U.K. (Dahlgreen, 2016). Given that different constellations of factors interact in complex ways in different places, aggregate-level results are not always consistent with individual-level results (Carreras et al., 2019, pp. 1397–1398).

Several cultural factors have been identified as sources of political discontent and support for Leave at the 2016 referendum. English nationalism and negative attitudes toward migration are considered important cultural drivers of Euroscepticism and the Leave vote (Vasilopoulou, 2016, pp. 222–226; Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017; Virdee & McGeever, 2018). These

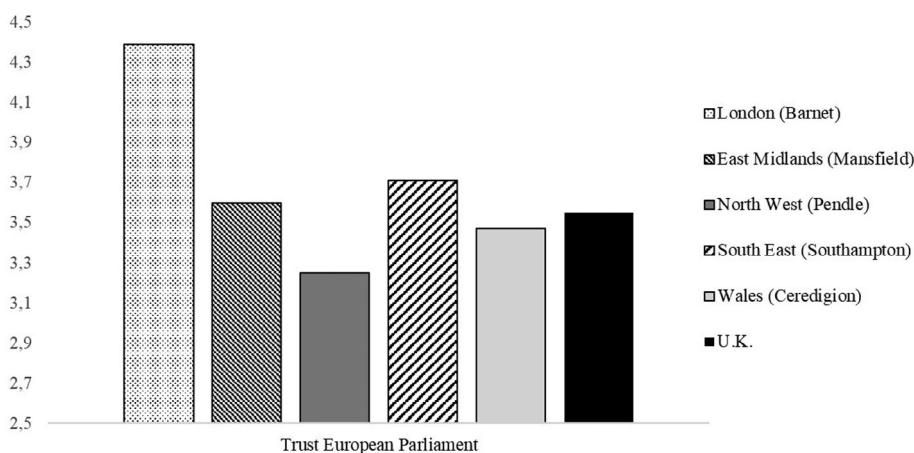


FIGURE 2 Trust in the European Parliament by region, 2016

drivers may be linked to the broader disempowerment and neglect that many Leave voters expressed (Curtice, 2017), which in turn often manifested in feelings of “loss” (Clarke, 2019) and being “left behind” (Watson, 2018; Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 331).

Conversely, a number of prominent accounts link political discontent with economic factors. For instance, Rodrik (2018, p. 3) argues that globalization has generated “winners” and “losers,” and the latter have developed a sense of unfairness that the system is rigged against them. Hopkin and Blyth (2019) attribute the rise of “anti-system parties” across the West to the failures of the neoliberal growth model. Algan et al. (2017, p. 374) argue that the national and E.U. politicians have been blamed for the negative economic fallout of the financial crisis.

However, recent research has found that the economics versus culture binary is empirically problematic. Economic developments can set into motion cultural reactions that multiply their initial effects (Gidron & Hall, 2017, p. S78). One consequence of this is that as an individual's subjective social status declines, amidst economic transformation, they are more likely to be distrustful of politicians and parliaments (Gidron & Hall, 2020, p. 1044). Hobolt shows that both economic and cultural factors, such as the economic effects of EU membership and attitudes toward immigration, were associated with Leave support (Hobolt, 2016, p. 1270). Even prominent advocates of the “cultural backlash” explanation, such as Inglehart & Norris (2017, p. 452), acknowledge that the backlash is underpinned by a growing sense of insecurity, which has been generated by the long-term rise in inequality.

In lieu of the growing recognition that the economics and culture binary is in fact complementary, it is important to shed light on how they interact at a local level to start building a plausible explanation on the geographic disparities observed in the 2016 referendum. By identifying the circumstances in which economic and cultural factors become fused, a local-level analysis can help to develop an understanding of the geographic disparity of both political trust and protest voting. The hypothesis explored in this article is that particular constellations of local experiences fuel political distrust and facilitate the emergence of dominant discourses which exploit existing grievances to channel discontent against the E.U.

In exploring this hypothesis, the article aims to contribute to the growing inter-disciplinary literature that emphasizes the importance of the “geography of discontent” in generating anti-system politics (Los, McCann, Springford, & Thissen, 2017, p. 788, 793; Alabrese, Becker, Fetzer, & Novy, 2019, pp. 136–138; Rodríguez-Pose, 2018, pp. 200–201). As shown in this literature, negative attitudes toward European and British governments may be rooted in territorially unequal trajectories of development and a revolt of the “places that do not matter” (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). E.U. discontent and a high share of the Leave vote are observed to a greater extent in areas affected by the rapid growth of Chinese imports competition (Colantone & Stanig, 2018, pp. 207–217) and which suffered the most from brain drain and deindustrialization (Manley, Jones, & Johnston, 2017, pp. 200–202; Dijkstra et al., 2019, p. 15). While British cities are integrated and prosper in today's globalized knowledge economy, towns and rural areas have faced significant jobs losses in traditional industries, a decrease in their young highly educated population, and a degradation of infrastructural provision (Jennings & Stoker, 2019, p. 156). People living in areas experiencing long-term economic decline are more likely to develop cultural grievances and Eurosceptic attitudes (Carreras et al., 2019).

Theoretical insights from the analysis of U.S. and European politics also show the relevance of place in understanding changing patterns in political support, and why the population may act contrary to predictions based on socio-demographic or economic attributes. Fitzgerald's (2018) analysis of France and Switzerland, shows a relationship between perceived attachment to local communities and radical right support. Likewise, McQuarrie (2017,

pp. S137–146) finds that Donald Trump's success “flipping” the American Mid-West can be explained by the way in which local institutions refracted the region's economic trajectory into a place specific sense of anger, mistrust and nostalgia. Similarly, Cramer (2016) shows how in Wisconsin rural consciousness fostered resentment toward cities and urban elites.

Citizens shape their political views through exchanges within their local contexts and networks (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987). Discussions with family members, neighbors, and work colleagues play a decisive role in developing and fixing preferences. Moreover, dominant interpretations seem to benefit from a process of informational coercion and members of the majority tend to ignore dissonant information (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987, p. 1213; Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1988). Those holding views that are in a minority within a community are more likely to be confronted with disagreement and reconsider their views (Huckfeldt, Ikeda, & Pappi, 2005, pp. 512–513). Interactional routines produce inertias and diverging paths in different areas (Molotch, Freudenburg, & Paulsen, 2000, p. 819).

Therefore, geographically contextualizing cultural and economic factors such as—a sense of disempowerment, discontent with migration, perceived threats to identity and economic decline—may help develop a better understanding of why people in different places may have radically different assessments about the performance of political institutions, which in turn, helps to account for the observed disparities in trust levels and protest vote in the U.K.

4 | METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Several studies have provided invaluable analyses in identifying a range of drivers of Euro-sceptic attitudes. However, the majority have focused on analysis at the national level and hence miss some of the contextual specificity through which these drivers operate locally. This article seeks to identify and analyze the role of these drivers through a participatory research design that is oriented around local-level analysis. The contributions of this article are based on a two-stage process of exchange with local stakeholders between May 2018 and January 2019, in five local case studies: Barnet, Ceredigion, Mansfield, Pendle and Southampton. These local authorities were purposively selected as “typical cases” that capture a variety of particular socio-economic and political profiles in Britain (Seawright & Gerring, 2008). As outlined in Table 1, our cases vary in terms of, the level of support for Leave at the 2016 referendum, partisan support in the 2015 and 2017 General Elections, the proportion of non-UK born residents, the dominant local industries and in rankings for social mobility (see Table 5 in Supporting Information for a full comparison across social, economic and political variables).

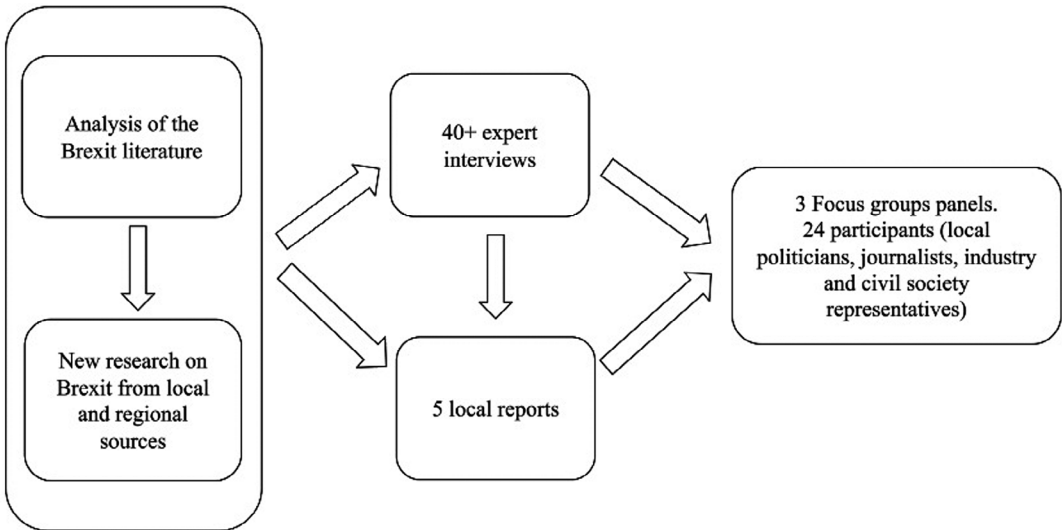
A team of eight social scientists with different disciplinary expertise were involved in the data collection process (Figure 3). The focus on five in-depth case studies enabled the researchers to explore the mechanisms through which different factors interact at the local level, identify common experiences invoked by community stakeholders, and trace how particular discourses came to dominate public debate in specific areas (George & Bennett, 2005, p. 207).

The first stage of the exchange involved 42 semi-structured interviews. The analysis of the extant literature on Brexit and preliminary research on local sources, served to identify interviewees and prepare an interview guide. Fieldwork took place in May and June 2018. Interviewees were selected following a purposive sampling logic (Lynch, 2013, p. 41). They held different positions within local communities, including local councilors and MPs from different political parties, business owners and employers from different local industries, public service

TABLE 1 Relevant characteristics of the case studies

	Geography	% Leave vote	Con-lab margin 2017	% Non U.K. born	Other relevant features
Barnet	Urban area. Borough of London	37.8	1.9%	39	Service economy, culturally and ethnically very diverse
Ceredigion	Small towns. Rural and coastal areas. Wales	45.4	-1.8%	6.7	Reliance on agricultural activity, 2 universities. Strong Welsh identity
Mansfield	Medium size town. East Midlands	70.9	1.9%	8.6	Former mining Centre. Historical labour bastion
Pendle	Small towns. North West	63.2	2.8%	8.9	Strong textile manufacturing heritage. Technology sector
Southampton	Port City, divided in two in terms of affluence and diversity. South East	53.8	-4.9%	22.9	Service economy, two universities

Source: Own elaboration based on ONS (2018), Electoral Commission (2017a, 2017b).

**FIGURE 3** Overview of the research process

providers, trade union leaders and local journalists (Appendix Table 4). Focusing on a subset of local stakeholders in each of the areas constitutes an efficient way of gathering information about the case study areas as they can provide insider knowledge and act as proxy for a wider number of people in their community (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009, pp. 1–2; Beckmann & Hall, 2013). Semi-structured interviews offer the flexibility necessary to explore contextual influences and specific local narratives with participants, which structured interviews or survey questionnaires may miss (Galletta, 2013, p. 2). They also help to examine the validity and resonance of national level explanations and narratives in specific local contexts. Moreover, over twenty short

interviews were conducted with ordinary people in the street (“vox pops”). In addition to those interviews, local press articles and reports about the case study areas were analyzed, in order to gather a more comprehensive picture of the socioeconomic and political situation each area, as well as to triangulate and validate the information obtained through the interviews. The empirical section of the article contains references to this diverse range of primary sources.

The second stage of the research exchange was based on three focus groups, which took place between December and January 2019. The aim of the focus groups was to identify the ways in which local actors made sense of the causes and impacts of Brexit, thus meeting the call for triangulation of disciplinary angles and methods (Flick, 1992; Gaskell & Bauer, 2000). Key findings from the first stage of the exchange were shared with focus group participants and served as the basis for discussion in these sessions. By facilitating interaction between participants, these focus groups were important in empowering local stakeholders to discuss and question the findings from the first stage (Morgan, 1997). This interactive step enabled the researchers to document how participants deployed local repertoires of “facts and stories” in these discussions (Kitzinger, 1994, p. 116; Belzile & Oburg, 2012). Documenting the way in which participants drew on narratives in their interaction with each other, rather than just with researchers, was important in corroborating or disconfirming our initial findings and gaining a better understanding of the discourses that were invoked to understand Brexit.

On the whole, repeated exchanges with members of these local communities at each stage of the research process helped shed light on the interplay between different drivers of attitudes around Brexit. Moreover, our participatory approach enabled us to engage in a process of reciprocal knowledge exchange and meaningful deliberation with local communities, following calls to address the distrust of expert opinion in the wake of the referendum (Clarke & Newman, 2017, pp. 110–111).

5 | ANALYSIS OF FACTORS ERODING POLITICAL TRUST IN CONTEXT

This section dissects the main findings from the fieldwork in the five cases. It outlines the most important factors usually associated with cultural and economic explanations. It shows that these factors produced political distrust, which was capitalized on in the narratives that cast blame on the political establishment, particularly the E.U. Political disempowerment and anti-migration sentiments became the core components of the dominant anti-E.U. discourses. These cultural factors were, nonetheless, rooted in local socio-economic and geographical characteristics.

5.1 | Sense of political disempowerment

A strong sense of disempowerment and loss of sovereignty emerged as a source of political dissatisfaction. Interviewees suggested that these grievances transcended individuals and were attributed to the entire community, “Mansfield as a town, like many others in Britain, has been overlooked [...] In many ways, it’s a town that’s been left-behind” (Andy Done-Johnson, journalist, June 18, 2018). Town residents felt “left-behind in terms of the government caring about things outside of London” (Ben Bradley, MP for Mansfield, interview, June 11, 2018). Some cities, like London, Manchester and Sheffield, have seen the powers of their local authorities grow to quasi-devolved governments, while regional authorities have had their fiscal autonomy cut

in the wake of the financial crisis (Huggins, 2018, pp. 135–137). At the same time, the substitution of Regional Development Agencies by Local Enterprise Partnerships (L.E.P.s) has contributed to an asymmetric regional policy making system, which has hampered economic local economic regeneration policies (Sandford, 2018). “In the U.K., we have been hot and cold on regions, we have been consistently kind of centralist in our funding policy” (Matthew Wheatley, CEO of D2N2 Local Enterprise Partnership, interview, May 25, 2018). In part, the neglect of post-industrial areas was attributed to a lack of political attention, which some believed could be overcome through more devolved decision making. For instance, in the Pendle focus group, two participants argued that the North of England should request devolution like Wales and Scotland in order to receive more political attention (Tony Greaves, Liberal Democrat peer, and Steve Whitehead, CEO Training 2000, focus group in Nelson, January 22, 2019).

Within this context, in the Leave authorities we observed a distinct parochialism. Respondents not only negatively compared their community to cities, “[cities] are grabbing everything” while “towns are left-behind” (focus groups in Nelson), but also to other towns. For instance, “the decline of the market in Mansfield has been significant... but you go to Ashton-under-Lyne, similar demographic to Mansfield, 50 miles from Manchester, thriving market, you go to Bury in the North West, thriving market” (Sonya Ward, Mansfield Labour Party, focus group in Mansfield, January 24, 2019). A similar theme was noted in Pendle, where residents of Nelson and Colne each feel that the other town is doing better than the other (Joe Cooney, interview, June 1, 2018). The feeling of neglect exhibited here can be interpreted as frustration that their community’s perceived weakness lies in their distance from decision-making centers, which has contributed to the sense of disempowerment and erosion of trust in the system.

These localized feelings of neglect and disempowerment were ripe for mobilization by the Leave campaign’s call to “take back control”; “people feel abandoned by the elites” (Steve Whitehead, focus group in Nelson). In this way, a vote to Leave signified a vote against the political system that many had identified as the source of their disempowerment. In this context, the Leave campaign promised that Brexit would allow citizens to regain sovereignty and thus “take back control” of their own future. Significantly, the efficacy of this message was echoed by pro-Remain activists: “when people cast a vote, they want to cast a vote on hope. If you look at the Leave side, they were trying to convey a positive message, that we are gaining independence” (Nathan Wade, Green campaigner, interview, May 18, 2018).

5.2 | Anti-migration sentiment

Although migration attitudes diverge widely across the U.K. (Figure 4), discontent with immigration was a recurrent argument encountered during fieldwork. This was the case in Remain areas as much as Leave areas. In Barnet, Brexit was described as “all about migration,” including non-E.U. migrants (Nik Haidar, Director at Four23 Management, interview, May 18, 2018; vox pops, October 28, 2018). In Ceredigion, the increasing salience of migration was seen to begin in the 2015 General Election and was attributed to anti-migrant discourses in tabloid newspapers, which were carried through into the 2016 referendum campaign (Alun Williams, Ceredigion County Council, interview, May 24, 2018). In all of the Leave areas studied, migration was widely acknowledged to be the “main issue” that local Leave campaigns emphasized (interviews with Andy Done-Johnson, journalist, May 25, 2018; Jim Burley, LEADER Program Officer for North Nottinghamshire, May 23, 2018; Sue Kirk, Financial Director of Mansfield Garage Doors, May 24, 2018; James Lowe, CEO of Brightbuster, May 29, 2018; Joe Cooney, June

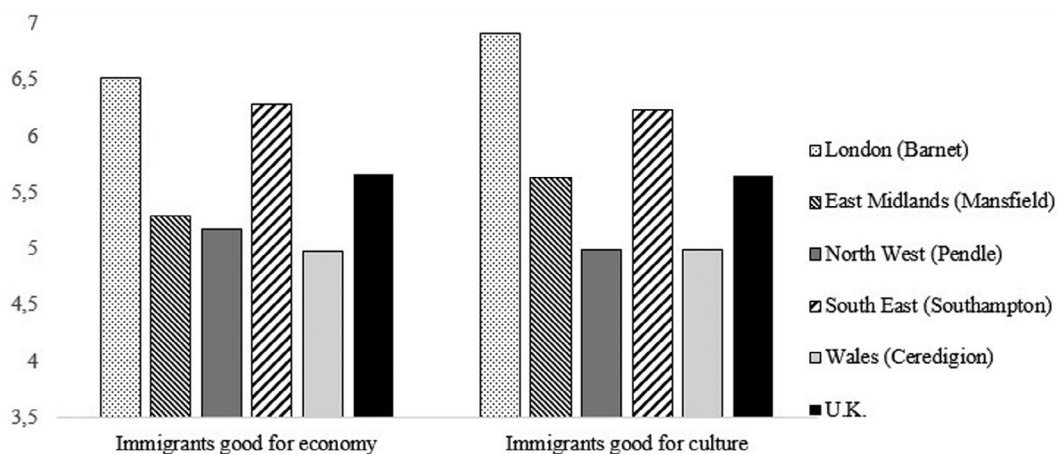


FIGURE 4 Average attitudes toward immigrants per region (0 bad to 10 good), 2016

1, 2018; Gordon Lishman, May 30, 2018; Wayne Blackburn, May 30, 2018; Andrew Pope, Independent Councilor; Denise Wyatt, Redbridge Ward Council candidate, June 6, 2018). In these areas, Eastern European migrants were often specifically identified as likely to take low-skill jobs as they were “prepared to work for a below living wage” (Joe Cooney, interview, June 1, 2018; similar frames were used in discussions in the Mansfield focus group, January 24, 2019; and in Southampton by Alan Whitehead MP, interview, May 22, 2018).

It is important to note that these subjective perceptions do not necessarily align with the objective realities. For instance, wage stagnation in the UK has been found to be associated with the financial crisis and not migration (Wadsworth, Dhingra, Ottaviano, & Van Reenen, 2016, p. 16). Moreover, our findings appear to support the conclusion that anti-migrant sentiments are not correlated with the size of the migrant population in a specific area (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2017; Vasilopoulou, 2016). The two areas analyzed with the highest percentage of Eurosceptic vote, Mansfield and Pendle, have a percentage of migrant population significantly below the U.K. average (Figure 5). In Southampton, the Eastern part of the city, which has far fewer immigrants, had a higher Leave vote (Alan Whitehead MP, interview, May 22, 2018). While, across our cases the inflow of short-term migrants grew in the 3 years prior to the referendum vis-à-vis the period from 2010–13 (Table 2), only in Southampton (2.25%) can the inflow of migrants be considered very significant relative to the local population. In Pendle (0.47%) and Mansfield (0.34%) the relative inflow of international migrants during the 3 years before the election was lower than the average of England and Wales (0.9%).

In considering why anti-migrant sentiments were latent for mobilization by the Leave campaign despite the relatively small effect of migration in these areas, we find that immigrants were perceived to threaten local idiosyncrasies. East European and Polish migrants seem to be the main target of anti-migrant narratives. For instance, in Mansfield, where immigration was historically low, “all of a sudden Polish shops spring up everywhere, they have got Polish neighbors, they see their Polish neighbors go out to work...” (Andy Done-Johnson, interview, May 25, 2018). References to problems of integration and to how the proliferation of East European shops was altering local landscapes were commonly made in Mansfield, Pendle and Southampton. (interviews with Andrew Pope; Denise Wyatt; Joe Cooney; Ivan White, Councilor Bitterne Park Ward; Matthew Claisse, Councilor Portswood Ward; Steve Whitehead, Nelson focus group, January 22, 2019).

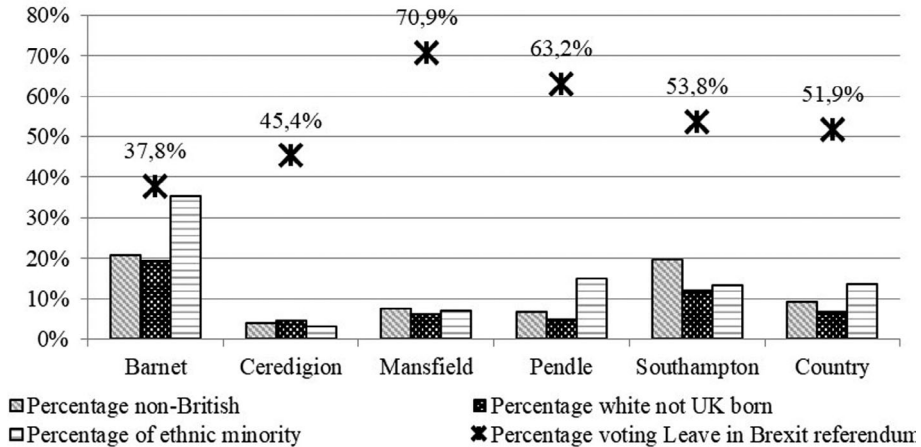


FIGURE 5 Leave vote and migrant population

TABLE 2 Short-term international migration inflows

	Short-term international migration inflow mid 2010-mid 2013	Short-term international migration inflow mid 2013-mid 2016	Total population mid 2016	Increase in short-term inflow 2016–2013/2013–2010
Southampton	3,057	5,646	250,377	184.7%
Pendle	168	426	90,515	252.9%
Mansfield	709	370	107,880	52.2%
Barnet	7,841	5,267	384,774	67.2%
Ceredigion	1,008	446	73,665	44.3%
England + Wales	325,213	528,221	58,381,217	162.4%

Source: Own elaboration based on ONS (2018).

Negative attitudes toward non-E.U. citizens and British ethnic minorities were also associated with Brexit (focus groups in Barnet, 28 September, and Nelson). For instance, in Pendle, the visible contrast between migrant and non-migrant communities reflected a lack of integration between the white community and the sizeable Pakistani community (Engel, 2017). This dynamic was identified by several interviewees as a critical factor for some Leave voters in the area (Dominic Collis, journalist, Burnley Express, interview, May 30, 2018; Wayne Blackburn, interview, May 30, 2018; Nelson focus group). Differences between non-migrant and migrant communities appeared as an important thread in the descriptions of frustration in the lack of local community development. It is interesting to note that the Leave campaign sought to portray national and local identities as threatened by emphasizing the quantity and origin of recent migrants to the U.K. and, as this research shows, experiences within local communities were important in articulating a latent demand for this kind of argument (Zappettini, 2019).

Similar dynamics played out in Ceredigion, albeit in an idiosyncratic way due to the role of Welsh identity. Specifically, the areas of Ceredigion where Leave prevailed coincided with those

where internal migrants from England had settled. This is connected to the fact that while Euroscepticism is associated with Englishness (Virdee & McGeever, 2018), Welsh nationalism was in favor, although not uniformly, of Remain. Fifty eight per cent of those who identify themselves as both Welsh and British voted Leave. Conversely, only 16% of those who are fluent in Welsh and do not identify themselves as British, but only Welsh, voted for an E.U. exit (Wyn Jones, 2018). Welsh nationalists from Plaid Cymru do not see the E.U. as a threat to their identity but as a custodian that shields them from the dominant English or British identities (interviews with Alun Williams; Elin Jones AM, May 25, 2018, and Ben Lake MP, June 5, 2018).

5.3 | Local economic decline

Local economic conditions interacted with other sources of discontent and shaped collective interpretations and choices in the Brexit referendum (Los et al., 2017, p. 793). Regeneration policies failed in many towns, particularly in the North of England, which created visible imbalances (Martin, Pike, Tyler, & Gardiner, 2016, pp. 344–346). In areas with a declining or stagnating economy, residents were increasingly concerned with a perceived lack of opportunities and government neglect. Several of the problems associated with migration in Leave discourses in the cases analyzed, such as decreasing wages, scarcity of job opportunities and strain in public services, were found to be largely caused by long-term economic issues in the area (interviews with Andrew Pope, Andy Done-Johnson and Joe Cooney; focus group in Mansfield).

The painful, decades-long, industrial restructuring process of Mansfield had led to “quite high levels of deprivation” (Ben Bradley, interview, June 25, 2018) and “a sense of poverty” (Andy Done-Johnson, interview). Its economy became increasingly dependent on low-wage and low-skilled growth and the reliance on agency workers and zero-hour contracts became very widespread (Business, Innovation and Skills Committee, 2016). This economic model and Mansfield’s relative insularity hindered social mobility, reduced local youth expectations and strengthened the sense of being “left-behind” (Table 3). This is acknowledged locally, “I feel sorry for the young today (...) there’s nothing there for them, nothing. (...) It’s all gone. They’ve let it all go” (former miner quoted in Chaffin, 2018). In this context, the reaction of Mansfield’s community against the arrival of Eastern European immigrants in the early 2000s, can be interpreted as another sign of discontent against a governance model which enabled the proliferation low-skilled, low-paid labor recruited on zero-hour contracts via agencies.

Pendle was also suffering from relative economic decline and displayed little to no skills-based growth. When questioned as to why this skills gap existed, 28% of businesses in Pendle, and neighboring Burnley, claimed that workers had not received appropriate training, while 24% state that employees lacked the required motivation to learn (Lancashire Enterprise Partnership, 2018). This lack of aspiration was associated with “the pervasive belief that there’s no point” (Gordon Lishman, Liberal Democrat candidate, interview, May 31, 2018). The people who used to work at the pits or mills work now in call centers. Big cities attract skilled jobs and workers (focus group, Nelson). After a decade of austerity policies, Pendle was ranked 38th out of 326 in the Index of Multiple Deprivation (Pendle Borough Council, 2015). Growing deprivation and precariousness fed into resentment about immigration and top-down decision making that does not consider local needs.

In both areas there was a palpable discontent with the state of infrastructure, which residents perceived as a strong competitive handicap. Mansfield was described as, “a long way off

TABLE 3 Education, social mobility, and leave vote

	Barnet	Ceredigion	Mansfield	Pendle	Southampton	Country
Percentage with NVQ level 4+, aged 16–64	54.0%	31.4%	17.5%	21.5%	36.0%	38.4%
Percentage with no qualifications, aged 16–64	5.5%	7.6%	11.2%	9.1%	7.4%	8.0%
Social Mobility Index 2017 (ranking out of 324)	9	Not available in Wales	315	144	247	Not applicable
Median gross weekly earnings (full-time)	£580	£468	£454	£551	£571	£569
Percentage voting leave in Brexit referendum	37.8%	45.4%	70.9%	63.2%	53.8%	51.9%

Source: Annual Population Survey (APS), Social Mobility Commission (2017), and Electoral Commission (2017b). Social Mobility Index (Nomis, 2018a, 2018b).

the motorway; the rail network is not fit for purpose. (...)getting in and out is a nightmare.” (Andy Done-Johnson, interview, focus group). Similarly, Pendle was repeatedly described as “the cul-de-sac” of Lancashire, due to the poor infrastructure and investment links with the rest of the county (interviews with Joe Cooney; Gordon Lishman; Dennis Mendoros, Director of Euravia, May 30, 2018). The perception that these local authorities were removed, economically and culturally, from the rest of the country therefore appears to be a strong factor in the generation of feelings of being “left-behind”. It is worth noting that this insular approach in Mansfield and Pendle contrasts with Barnet where “most people would be working in industries which are tied up in Europe, (...) they are very aware of the connections we have with Europe” (Sachin Patel, Lib-Dem candidate in Barnet, interview, May 14, 2018).

Economic geography also helps in understanding the results in Southampton. There is a clear geographic divide in this port city between the more ethnically diverse and slightly more affluent Southampton Test, which supported Remain, and the prominently white working-class east part of the city, Southampton Itchen, which voted Leave (Will Jennings, University of Southampton, interview, May 17, 2018). In the aftermath of the financial crisis, the rapid influx of the migrant population, mainly from Poland, aggravated the shortages in housing and school places in some parts of the city (Andrew Pope, Councilor, interview, June 6, 2018). Additionally, the controversial approach to local economic development, which prioritized the refurbishment of the city center over providing basic needs to local populations, contributed to dissatisfaction (Adams, 2016).

5.4 | Dominant discourses, identity preservation and economic disruption

Distrust of political elites and E.U. institutions in the areas studied can be explained by the interplay of cultural and economic factors within specific local contexts which filters and shapes individual and collective interpretations. The Leave victory may be construed as a reaction against the political establishment. Leave narratives contributed to generate a widespread sense

of being “left-behind”. The E.U. was mostly associated in the British collective imaginary with a loss of political sovereignty, immigration and industrial delocalization. Distrust of the system was fueled by the perceived lack of governance solutions to redress disappointing socio-economic trends, and to provide an alternative model of local economic development in some parts of the country. The relation between cultural and economic factors was mediated and shaped by discourses which in some areas, such as Mansfield and Pendle, became dominant and contributed to intensify frustration and attribute blame to the E.U.

In this case, political preferences were not so much shaped by the “objective information” possessed by citizens concerning overarching British socio-economic problems and their relationship with the E.U. Instead, they demonstrate that citizens interpret facts “in relation to their own lives and with attention to their immediate social context” (Cramer & Toff, 2017, p. 756). Their political understanding is constructed and constrained by “common-sense assumptions and routinized practices” that are available to an individual (White, 2011, p. 40). The slogans and simplistic arguments of populist undertones disseminated nation-wide by the Leave campaign and reproduced by the tabloid press (Chadwick, Vaccari, & O’Loughlin, 2018, p. 4259) gradually became internalized and routinized in some communities, combined with bottom-up interpretations of specific local cultural and socio-economic issues.

These discourses, which became predominant in areas such as Mansfield and Pendle, contributed to entrench views that hindered meaningful discussion post-referendum (Wayne Blackburn, interview). There was a shared sense of pride in “sticking to their decision” and an anti-elite sentiment: “you cannot tell the people that they were wrong voting Leave (...) [or] what to think” (focus group, Nelson). Several of the participants frequently showed reluctance to question certain assumptions and others were reticent to reveal their support for Remain in public or on the record. This seems to reflect processes of informational coercion and certain levels of cognitive dissonance (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987). The strength of these narratives partially explains why people and areas, which according to most predictions were likely going to be negatively impacted by Brexit (Dhingra, Machin, & Overman, 2017; H.M. Government, 2018a), still chose to support Leave and did not pay attention to the data provided by experts showing that some of the accusations against the E.U. were baseless or exaggerated.

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyze the referendum campaign or provide an account of the different agents involved in it. However, it is worth noting that the weak to non-existent local Remain campaigns, described by many interviewees in Mansfield and Pendle, may have further contributed to the preponderance of Leave discourses (Huckfeldt & Sprague, 1987, 1988). The lack of a strong Remain campaign can help explain why the negative impacts of Brexit and the benefits of E.U. membership were less salient in some areas (Olivas Osuna et al., 2019, p. 5, 17). For instance, fieldwork revealed serious post-Brexit concerns about recruitment and retention of skilled workers (Miranda Barker, CEO, East Lancashire Chamber of Commerce, June 28, 2018; Matthew Wheatley, CEO D2N2 LEP, May 25, 2018, interviews), the survival of some universities (interviews with John Grattan, Aberystwyth University, May 25, 2018, Will Jennings; University of Southampton, 2016), and the substitution of E.U. regional economic development, R&D and agricultural funding with national funds (Huw Rhys Thomas, National Farmers’ Union Cymru, May 24, 2018; Andrew Leeming, Senior Programme Manager, Boost Growth Lancashire, May 30, 2018; Nik Haidar; interviews). The distinction between *specific* and *diffuse* support for the political establishment (Easton, 1965) and the fact that both of these dimensions of political trust fluctuate independently (Norris, 2017) may have allowed Leave politicians, who were also part of the establishment, to fuel anti-elite sentiment and enjoy significant level of specific support among those feeling increasing levels of diffuse political discontent.

Leave discourses in our case study areas drew on some common themes at the national level, such as the lack of sovereignty and dangers of migration, but were adapted to the local context to capitalize on pre-existing local concerns, as those analyzed earlier. The selective use of references to tangible issues in the community, such as the transformation in local economic activity, changes in local landscape, decay of infrastructures, grievances with neighboring cities, and strain in public health and education provision, strengthened the resonance of Leave discourses. Overall, those discourses offered a view of the British people as betrayed by the metropolitan and European elites (Clarke & Newman, 2017, pp. 112–113). Brexit was framed as an opportunity for change and a way to restore a sense of pride and ownership in the community, which had been lost through the decline of traditional professions and the process of globalization: “One door is going to close, another is going to open. And I will say this: I think this is the best town in the world to live in, and I think it will be post-Brexit. I would not want to live anywhere else” (Lee Anderson, Mansfield focus group, January 24, 2019). Nostalgia played an important role too as Brexit could be considered “a vote for some version of the past” (Calhoun, 2017, p. 60). Resilience and optimism were also common ingredients which helped dismiss the predicted risks or justify Brexit as a “necessary evil,” as reflected in the statement that “people would say look, my wages have been stagnant for the past 10 years, (...) it’s already been pretty bad, so why not take a gamble, why not see if it is better than what it is predicted?” (Sachin Patel, interview).

In sum, Leave discourses reflect both a search for *stasis* and preservation of the status quo in terms of culture and identity, and a sort of gamble that intends to create a juncture and disrupt the current path of relative economic decline and political disempowerment.

6 | CONCLUSION

Most studies on Brexit and the underpinning political trust crisis have focused on the national level, assuming that individual variables operate uniformly across space and not paying sufficient attention to local realities and contextually specific configurations of factors. This article shows that local experiences and concerns may exacerbate certain sources of political discontent, fuel political distrust and help anchor populist discourses that channel frustration against political elites and the E.U. Trust in European Institutions is not just contingent on national political circumstances (Armingeon & Ceka, 2014; Torcal, Bonet, & Costa Lobo, 2012). Local socio-economic and political contexts are key to understand the emerging “geography of discontent” and the very disparate referendum results across the U.K., and as such they deserve further academic attention.

The comparative analysis of five local areas –Barnet, Ceredigion, Mansfield, Pendle and Southampton– confirms that the Leave vote can be understood as a protest vote against the political elites. Large segments of the population perceived that they, or the places where they lived, were “left-behind” and their concerns were not heard by what they considered to be “out-of-touch” elites. Leaving the E.U. was interpreted as a way to “take back control” and mitigate the sense of political disempowerment. Immigrants were construed as threats to local identities and associated with job insecurity and low wages. These grievances and fears were ingrained in, and reinforced by, specific local socio-economic features. In zones which experienced industrial decline and where regeneration policies failed to attract high value-added businesses, such as Mansfield and Pendle, it became hard to compete with cities that attract skilled jobs. Many of these towns displayed limited social mobility and became increasingly dependent on an economic

model based on low-skill and low-paid jobs. These local dynamics were also stimulated by the geographic insularity and poor infrastructures. Limited decentralization, distance from political decision-making hubs and the lack of resources of local authorities, due to austerity policies, also contributed to the break-down of trust in politicians and political institutions.

Moreover, the article suggests that locally dominant political narratives shaped the interactions between cultural and economic sources of discontent in each area. Grievances were articulated and reinforced by discourses which selectively overemphasized and underplayed problems and policy solutions, and directed blame toward global elites and the E.U. Leave discourses, that were disseminated by national politicians and the tabloid press, thrived particularly in places where local identities were perceived at risk, there was a sense of territorial neglect, and widespread political distrust. In areas such as Mansfield and Pendle, these discourses promoted a sense of nostalgia, peripheralization and local resilience. This exploratory analysis suggests that interactional routines within local networks, united to the weakness of Remain campaigns, may have generated processes of informational coercion and contributed to the dominance of some interpretative frames. The dominance of these collective interpretations could explain why in some places many voted against what socio-demographic attributes would have predicted. Further research is required to better understand how these anti-establishment discourses became much more popular in some areas than in others and the specific mechanisms of social pressure at work. Similarly, comparative survey analysis could contribute to better defining the relative salience of key local elements in these discourses.

Overall, Brexit provides a paradigmatic case in which political trust influenced voting behavior but did not act purely as an exogenous variable. This article contributes to a better understanding of the locally specific underpinnings of declining political trust, which itself was then purposely further undermined to trigger a protest vote against the British and E.U. establishment. This illustrates how disengaged citizens may be turned into frustrated activists. Further research should be devoted to understanding how populist leaders and movements take advantage of the cognitive distinction between specific and diffuse political support to gain voters' trust while undermining the confidence in the political establishment.

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ENDNOTE

¹ For simplicity's sake this article does not analytically differentiate concepts of "distrust" (usually understood as the opposite of trust) and "mistrust" (absence of trust) (Van der Meer & Zmerli, 2017).

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information may be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

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