

Do you get a say? How and why geography divides the British over their political influence

*The extent of discontent with established politics in the UK has been laid bare in recent years. One popular explanation puts geography centre-stage: positing a divide between Londoners' relative contentment and the angry North. Using data from fifteen years of surveys, **Lawrence McKay** explores geographic differences in perceived influence over national politics. This analysis shows the regional divides are real, accounting for key factors such as class, education and age. More work is needed to establish causes, but surveys suggest the drivers include the view that London is subject to favouritism in policy-making and the perception of a 'London-centric' political class.*



Photo by [Devon Saccente](#) on [Unsplash](#)

In the long shadow of the Brexit vote, much of the political establishment has been searching for answers to one simple question: why are people so angry with politics? One of the most popular suggestions has been to do with the places people live, and the relationship that these places have to where decisions are taken in Westminster. Upon visiting the 'Brexit heartlands', such as Stoke-on-Trent, many commentators have relayed a sense of – as John Harris put it – '[profound estrangement from Britain's dominant institutions](#)'.

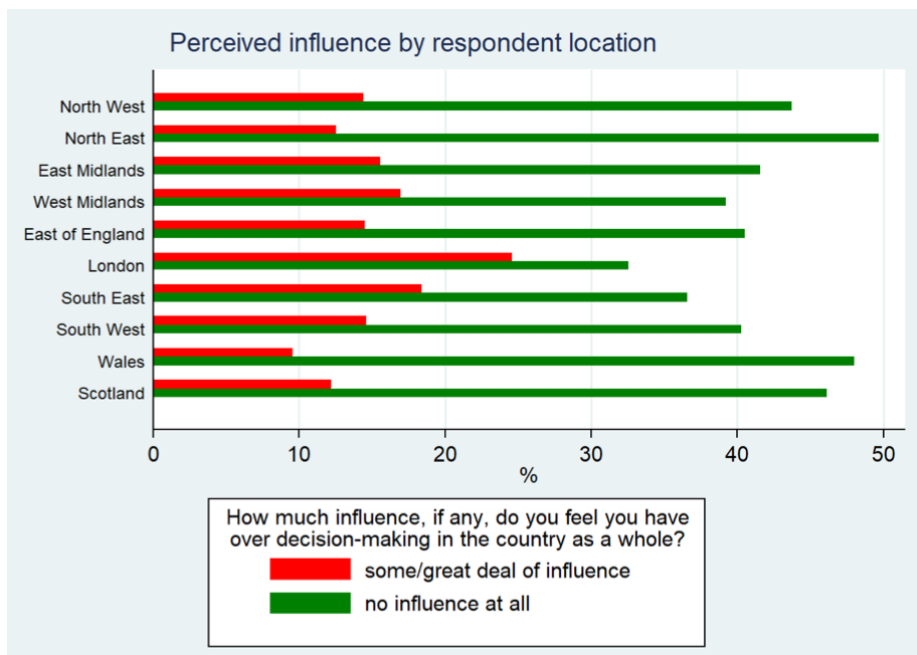
Nonetheless, the plural of anecdote is not data. There has been no systematic analysis of whether some places are more disaffected than others. For several reasons, this is a challenging thing to do. To obtain good estimates of differences across geography, expensive surveys with very large samples are usually needed. Even then, it is often difficult to know whether what appears to be geographical effects are not in fact to do with the demographic differences between regions. At the Hansard Society, through our annual [Audit of Political Engagement](#) surveys, we have dedicated a lot of time to exploring the factors driving political discontent. Yet, for these same regions, we have not – until now – been able to get a good handle on how geography matters.

However, after 15 years of data-gathering, it is possible to pool the data – creating large enough sample sizes for each area to compare them. This exercise shows that the geographical effects are real, persisting after the inclusion of key demographic factors and party support. I focus on one particular dependent variable, relating to people's sense of influence over decision-making in the country as a whole. This is because it speaks most directly to the wider debate on parts of the country that feel 'left behind' and discontented with politics.

Three key themes emerge from the analysis:

1. Londoners are uniquely likely to feel influential, compared to every other area of Britain.
2. Residents of Wales and Scotland are particularly unlikely to feel influential.
3. Rather than a North–South divide *per se*, it is the North East in particular where we observe the weakest sense of influence over national decision-making.

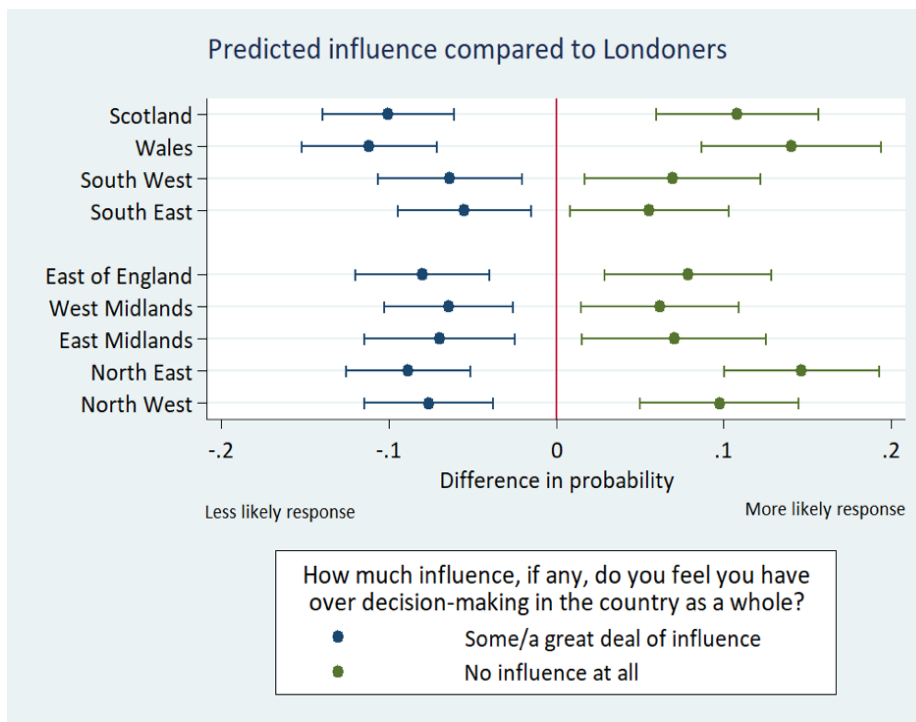
The chart below shows the geographical differences in their raw form – plotting the positive responses (those who thought they had a reasonable degree of influence) and the most negative responses (those who thought they had no influence at all).



Source: [Hansard Society](#)

From this chart, we can see that influence does appear to differ across geographical divides. While even in London more people give negative than positive responses, the gap is much smaller than in the rest of the country. We can also see that Wales and Scotland stand out compared to most regions of England. In these areas, nearly half of the population believe that they have no influence at all on national decision-making. Finally, compared to other regions of England, people living in the North are especially likely to feel they have no influence, particularly if they live in the North East.

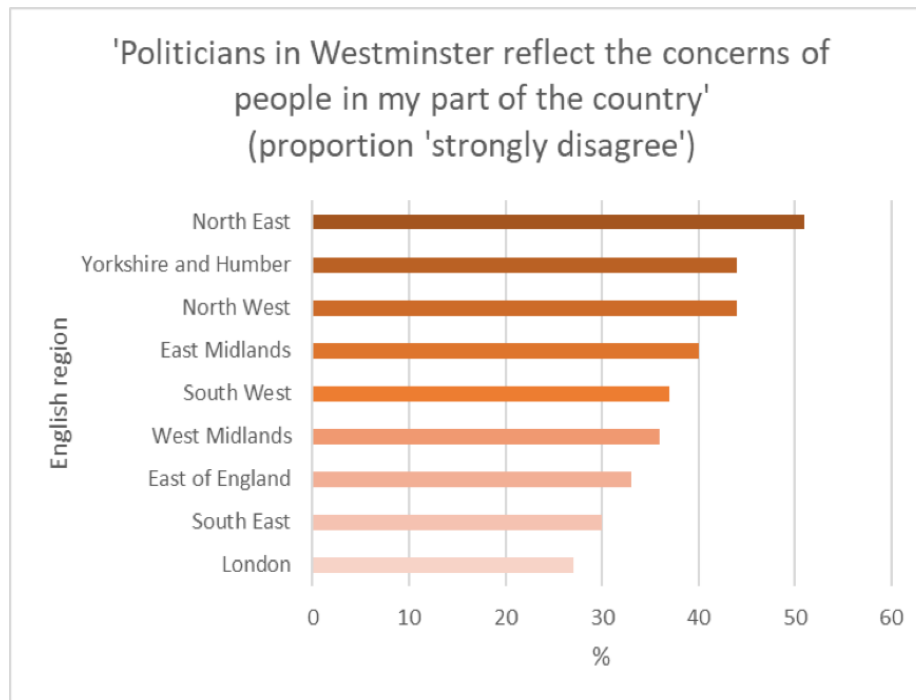
However, while it gives a useful indication, the chart above may exaggerate the ‘true’ geographic effect, since parts of the UK differ on the basis of demographics and party choice. What happens to these effects when we account for this? The graph below shows the effects of geography, controlling for key variables (social class, education, ethnicity, tenure and vote intention).



Again, the geographical differences persist, and we therefore have strong evidence that geography appears to be of some significance to people’s attitudes. However, we can go further: where you live may, in some cases, be more important than who you are (in terms of demographic characteristics). The increase in perceived influence from living in London, as compared to living in the North East, is more than twice as strong as the effect of having a degree compared to having no qualifications, and of being in the highest social classes (AB) compared to the lowest (DE).

It is not yet clear what exactly might drive geographic divides. One possibility is that people more physically distant from the seat of power in Westminster feel left out of what happens there – whereas, for some Londoners, their status as the power centre of the country rubs off on their sense of influence. It is also possible that geographic divides are driven by a sense of grievance about who government policy has tended to benefit. [YouGov find](#) that nearly three-in-five Brits believe that London gets more than its fair share of public spending compared to the rest of the country: among Northerners, this view is even more overwhelming, with 75% in agreement.

A third theory is that people in certain areas feel they lack influence because they don’t see those areas as being well represented within the ‘political class’. This belief carries a grain of truth. The backgrounds of our representatives in Parliament skew heavily towards London and the South: [research conducted in 2013 by Richard Berry for Democratic Audit](#) found that nearly half of MPs had been working in London prior to their election to Parliament. [A recent survey by YouGov](#) gives an indication of the depth of feeling that exists in many parts of the country. Panellists were asked whether ‘politicians in Westminster reflect the concerns of people in my part of the country’. The graph below shows the proportion of people who ‘strongly disagreed’ with that statement by English region. Just as with influence, we see a clear hierarchy – with Londoners least unhappy with politicians and residents of the North East the most.



Data source: [YouGov](#)

In conclusion, there is clear evidence that geography really matters: to some extent, at least, how influential you feel depends on where you live. Further work is needed concerning the key drivers of geographic divisions. Nonetheless, it seems plausible that both the perception of losing out to London in policy terms and the public's image of a London-centric political class are damaging to non-Londoners, and particularly Northerners', sense that they can influence things.

This article represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit. It is adapted from the author's article for the Hansard Society, ['How influential you feel depends on where you live: the role of nation and region in attitudes to politics'](#).

About the author



Lawrence McKay (Twitter [@sonoffire94](#)) is a PhD candidate at the University of Manchester studying political representation and public discontent with politics. His work is supported the Hansard Society, with whom he is working on design, analysis and interpretation of the annual Audit of Political Engagement surveys.

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