

Low-income voters' disinterest in the economy was reasonable and calculated, not an inexorable long-term trend



***Anna Killick** draws on an ethnographic study with residents of an English city in the two years following the referendum to explore what people think about 'the economy'. She finds that low-income residents are less interested in and more negative about the phenomenon of the economy compared with high income residents. However, their reasoning is based on post-2008 economic conditions, and any lack of interest in the economy may be more calculative and temporary than is often assumed.*

As Labour strategists try to win back working-class voters, they should re-evaluate the importance of 'the economy' to them. For too long in political science and political economy, the dominant argument has been that low-income voters are paying less attention to economic issues, and that this is a long-term and inexorable process. Some, such as [Guy Standing](#), even argued that low-income voters, in particular those in more precarious employment, are now so disinterested in economic issues as to be irrational and 'infantilised'.

Those who see low-income voters' disengagement with economic issues in this way are split on the solutions they propose for social democratic parties. Either, as Standing advocates, social democrats should push for a more radical 'post-work' economic agenda that challenges materialism and tries to convince voters they should shift to valuing security based on renewing community and creativity; or they should do what [Starmer's team](#) attempted – to regain whatever residual economic interest there might be by toning down their liberal stance in the culture war.

Less interested in 'the economy'

However, we should make sure we have correctly diagnosed the nature of declining low-income interest in the economy. Is it irrational and inexorable? In this recent [article](#) based on qualitative interviews on the south coast of England in the two years following the Brexit referendum, I compare high- and low-income residents' 'interest' in the economy.

In the wealthier district of the city, high-income residents such as Rebecca, in her 50s, say immediately that they are interested in the economy. Rebecca does not feel she understands all the graphs from financial commentators, but she thinks it is important to make the effort. In fact, many of these residents say the 'economic' sections of the news are the most important or weighty of all news items.

High-income residents give reasons for their interest that fall into two broad categories. First, they believe that the national economy also tracks and affects their personal economies. Second, they believe it is important to follow the progress because if the economy is strong, the country will be able to afford other goods like welfare. They call it 'the *economy*', seamlessly connected with their own, with the stress on the second word.

In the lower-income district, where most are renting and wages are low and casualised, with high incidence of household debt, residents put the stress on the first word '*the economy*', to distinguish it from their own. They say they are less interested, because those compiling the statistics do not, as one resident says 'live our lives' and because they are less affected by movements in Bank of England base rates or shares. They have little economic self-interest in following it. Moreover, they are not convinced that economic growth leads to higher welfare spending. The years of austerity hitting them disproportionately has made them see decisions about welfare spending as more political than economic.

Many regard the depoliticising rhetoric, dominant at least in the pre-Johnson era, that the economy is somehow beyond politicians' control as spurious, because in reality the 'rich write the rules'. Diane, a parent of young children on two minimum wage jobs, echoes her neighbours when she says she does not get her hooks into economic phenomena that might affect her unless she 'needs to know'.

Financial crisis and aftermath

So far, this picture fits with the Standing thesis of a lower level of interest. But the lack of interest is less despairing and more rational than he suggests. Low-income residents mention the injustice of the 2008 crisis as epitomising what is wrong with the phenomenon of the economy. Julie, retired clerical worker, defines 'economic' pejoratively; 'the bank thing's economic, all those years ago' when the banks' 'economic wrongdoing', was not punished. They 'paid' in the crisis itself, bailouts and austerity. They talk about the specific economic conditions that developed after the crisis, where whatever growth there was did not trickle down to them, even though official employment levels remained high. Such sentiments are reflected in [quantitative surveys](#) which show the decline from 2008 onwards in low-income respondents' expectations that improvements in the national economy would benefit them.

Both the economic conditions and the depoliticising elite narratives in the decade leading up to the onset of COVID-19 may have suppressed low-income participants' interest in the economy. The switching off may have contributed to attention being paid to more non-economic issues, like those that are perceived to have driven support for Brexit. But it did not go as far, as Standing claims, to lead people to change how they see themselves as political actors in such an emotional way as to amount to abandonment of reasoning.

Emergent local economic interest

The 2021 election results may indicate a partial renewal of interest in the economy, particularly in areas where devolved mayors or governments, whether SNP, Conservative or Labour, have been working hard to make the economy relevant at the more local level. They have narrowed the gulf between 'my economy' and '*the* economy'. And even the national Conservative government has abandoned depoliticising rhetoric that frames economic forces as beyond their control.

We are likely to face harsh economic conditions like unemployment that affect people negatively, and directly. If disengagement from the economy was temporary, reasonable and calculated rather than inexorable, it is clear that, whatever cultural strategy they have, the Labour leadership need to emulate the hard work of economically re-engaging low-income voters that local leaders are doing.

Note: the above draws on the author's [published work](#) in *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations*.

About the Author



Anna Killick is Research Fellow in the Department of Political Science at University College London.

Photo by [Alice Pasqual](#) on [Unsplash](#).