

Don't forget the 'local' in local democracy: the 2022 elections and attitudes to democracy and governance in the North of England



Ryan Swift explains how people's views of democracy are different across the country and why this matters for the 2022 local elections, especially when it comes to the north of England.

Voters in different parts of the country will soon head to the polls to choose local decisionmakers. Many commentators will try to frame these local elections through a national lens, but it is necessary to recognise that people's perceptions on national issues are likely to be shaped by their local context. Importantly, people's experiences and views about democracy are different across the country. In particular, in the north of England, attitudes to democracy, trust, and political participation are lower than elsewhere. Peoples' views on how they want to be governed are also different.

While the local dimension is often overlooked, given the over-centralised nature of politics in England, it remains that policy decisions taken in Westminster have an important bearing on localities and public attitudes in them. Research suggests that government could improve democracy by addressing issues of both political [performance and process](#). On performance, it is essential that levelling up – closing our regional divides so that everyone can live a good life – is delivered. And on process, devolution must be expanded and deepened. At present, it is within national government's gift to enable both of these to happen.

Democracy, Trust, and Participation

While democracy [faces challenges](#) across the UK, it is especially troubled in the north of England. When it comes to political trust, recent research by IPPR finds that the [further away from Westminster](#) people are within England, the less trust they have in politicians. This is concerning because a lack of trust can undermine liberal democratic norms and may act as a barrier to economic and social progress.

Connected to this, there is a sense amongst people in the North that the government [cares less](#) about their area. Work by [Will Jennings and colleagues](#) finds that almost two in three people in the North believe that government cares less about their area than those elsewhere in the country. In comparison, agreement with this statement drops to 36% in the Midlands, 31% in London, and 23% in southern England outside of London.

This should not come as a surprise given that the region is at the sharp end of deep regional divides. This regional inequality is the direct result of inaction by successive national governments to rebalance the UK economy. It [negatively impacts](#) health outcomes, educational attainment, employment opportunities, and living standards for people across the north of England.

This lack of trust plays a role in lower levels of political participation in parts of the North. While there is variation in turnout across constituencies, at the 2019 general election three out of four of the regions with the lowest turnout in England were those that make up the North – the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and Humber (the other was West Midlands). This was despite the emergence of the levelling up agenda, designed to speak directly to people in these regions.

So when it comes to national government and political performance, it is essential that the levelling up agenda urgently moves from rhetoric to reality. The government was elected on the promise of improving opportunities in places like the North. If they fail to make good on these pledges, it is likely that this will further erode political trust and participation in places where it is already low.

Governance

Attitudes to how people want to be governed are also different in the North. In areas of the region where devolution is already embedded, it enjoys [strong public backing](#). Polling last year found that support for devolution was as high as 87% in Tees Valley, and 85% in Greater Manchester. In these places and in the other mayoral combined authorities across the North, metro mayors are having a [positive impact](#) and delivering for their areas.

There is also a desire for devolution to be strengthened across the region. Evidence suggests that the further away you move from Westminster, the higher support for more devolution or increased local power is. Polling commissioned for a recent IPPR paper, [Road to Renewal](#), finds that in the North, over 50% agree with the statement that 'in general, more decisions should be made by devolved and local governments'. This is likely to be a result of the injustices that arise from being distant from the centre of political power, and the [many disadvantages](#) that come with that. Support for devolution may also be influenced by stronger [local](#) and [regional](#) attachments in the North compared to elsewhere in England.

Nevertheless, somewhat surprisingly, whilst people in the North have significantly higher levels of [trust in local politicians](#) compared to national politicians, turnout in local and devolved authority elections is lower than in national elections. Yet, this low turnout may owe more to the long running perceptions of such elections being 'second order'. Additionally, [dissatisfaction](#) with national politics coupled with the tendency for local and regional elections to be framed and interpreted in the national context rather than on their own terms may also serve to turn voters off.

Therefore, when it comes to the political process, the government must recognise the importance of committing to further devolution and empowering local leadership across regions like the North. Recent commitments from the government to push ahead with devolution in areas such as North Yorkshire and Cumbria are welcome. Nevertheless, there are still significant areas across the region that do not benefit from any form of devolution.

Moreover, where devolution arrangements are in place, [many flaws](#) in the process remain. It is still centre-driven, competition focused, and mayoral combined authorities, like local government more broadly, continue to lack significant powers and to be under resourced. All of these issues need addressing in order to strengthen governance in the North.

As we look ahead to the local elections and beyond, it is essential to keep these differences in attitudes to democracy and governance in mind when thinking about democracy in the North. Only then will democracy at the local and national level begin to work for everyone, everywhere.

About the Author



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