Taking back control post-Brexit isn't about redesigning the democratic system

The referendum was all about 'taking back control' from Brussels. The idea resonated with voters not only because of migration policy but due to a lack of control over economic and democratic matters, argues **Sarah Longlands**. *With the first anniversary of the referendum, we need to rethink how we approach 'control'.*

The central argument of the 'Vote leave' campaign during the EU Referendum campaign was based on the idea that a vote to leave was about 'taking back control from Brussels'. They argued that "we have repeatedly given away control in the hope of 'influence'. The loss of control was real. The hoped for influence was a mirage". In the bewilderment and confusion that has followed the EU referendum result, questions have begun to circulate about why the idea of having more control resonated so strongly with people across the UK, particularly in the North of England, where the majority of voters voted to leave the EU – 52% in the North West, 54% in the North East, and in Yorkshire and the Humber it was 58%. In some areas, like Hartlepool and Burnley, the vote to leave was nearly 70%.

Whilst the idea of greater control over our borders, immigration policy, and legal system was clearly attractive to some, it is becoming increasingly clear that the vote to 'take back control' tapped into wider societal concerns. Indeed, the universal appeal of 'taking back control' was underlined by how it was easily transferable to Donald Trump's campaign when he argued that "people want to take back control of their countries and they want to take back control of their lives and the lives of their family."

So why is the idea of giving people back control so appealing at the current time? Part of the answer is that the referendum result was an expression of many people's frustration with the political and economic system which they feel actively excludes their interests. Many don't feel in control of their own lives, whether that's about their job, income or security of housing tenure. So it's not surprising that they feel even less in control when it comes to national politics. Indeed, systems of democratic and economic power can actively reduce people's 'sense of agency', i.e. the freedom which they feel they have to shape and influence their own lives, to be their 'own master', as Isaiah Berlin puts it.

Helping people feel 'more in control' is therefore not simply a question of the *absence* of barriers to political participation but about the *presence* of human agency. The freedom to feel as if you can do something to change, to control and influence the shape of your life. It is also about what we, as human beings in Bolton, Darlington or Scarborough are actually able to do and to be during the course of our lives and the degree to which we can alter the course of our own fate, what we might describe as 'the alternative lives open to us'.

IPPR North is in the process of developing a 'Take back Control Taskforce' to examine the reasons behind the Brexit vote in the North of England by trying to understand the resonance of the 'take back control' slogan among voters. The point of the project is to develop a new system of democratic accountability for citizens in the North, particularly where the newly elected mayors are taking charge of combined authorities.

But, crucially, we want to use this project to help start a new conversation about what the 'presence' of human agency looks like in the context of the political and economic system in the North. In some ways, taking back control isn't about redesigning the democratic system – although this might help – but about redesigning the way we think about control as something which is emerging from the freedom and confidence of human beings in society, a sense of taking control which bubbles up from below rather than flooding down from above to sweep everything away in its path.

This article first appeared on the [BPP blog](#) and it gives the views of the author, and not the position of LSE Brexit, nor of the London School of Economics.

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