Is there hope for the West Country? Political sentiment amongst rural voters

Tabitha A. Baker

Rural voters' hostility to the UK's urban areas, and politicians seen as prioritising the needs of urban voters, is driven by hard lives, poverty and unmet needs. Nevertheless, they have pride in their local areas, and community spirit, as well as enthusism for changes such as devolution and electoral reform.

The rural-urban divide is defining politics worldwide. In Britain, this was clearly visible in the 2016 EU referendum, as well as the 2019 and 2017 general elections.[i] In rural areas in Europe and the United States, social attitudes and political behaviour are influenced by a spatial dimension that relates to underlying socio-demographic and economic features.[ii] In the UK, researchers have argued that towns and villages 'serve only as satellites to urban centres where economic activity is concentrated'; while towns are left 'high and dry', experiencing disconnect and loss of human and economic capital.[iii] Yet, these are places where people feel they belong; they are filled with meaning, embedded in a depth of history and collective experiences that serve as pillars of identity, shaping people's experiences of the world and structuring political perspectives, attitudes and behaviour.

Global economic development has created uneven growth and a divide in job prospects between those who have access to high-skilled jobs and those who do not.[iv] The English countryside, so often depicted romantically, is marked by the uncomfortable truths of rural poverty, declining public infrastructure, and a combination of low incomes and higher living costs, as well as the lowest levels of social mobility.[v] The steady decline of social and civic assets, such as the community centres, post offices, leisure centres, independent businesses and small farms that prop up rural economies, has caused rural communities to collapse into insecurity, political disillusionment and cynicism. This has arguably led these areas to revolt against the status quo at the ballot box; populist support is often territorially based, and it exists in these less dynamic areas. There has been a rebellion against the feeling of being forgotten and left behind.[vi] Many rural communities lack access to stable employment, opportunities for mobility, investment in the community, and diversity in the economy and social services. As increasingly socially and spatially isolated places, they are vulnerable to nationalist populist political ideas.

Many of the studies on UK deprivation, particularly recently, focus on juxtaposing cosmopolitan areas with places 'left behind' by economic globalisation. As argued in the 2018 Southern Policy Centre (SPC) report, these geographically-centred explanations of economic decline draw attention mainly to areas that have suffered large-scale and rapid economic decline, such as the North of England, Wales and the East coast of England.[vii] Meanwhile, individual experiences of deprivation and inequality in the South have been politically neglected and hidden amongst narratives that generalise the South as affluent and upwardly mobile.[viii]

In contrast, my research aims to provide understandings of citizens' experiences in rural areas in the South West of England, and to allow a more nuanced insight into the

ways that macro-level patterns and trends take shape and play out on the ground. It draws on the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs' 2021 Statistical Digest of Rural England; the 2018 Fabian policy report 'Labour Country'; and the Southern Policy Centre's 2018 report 'Making Ends Meet'; and combines findings from these with primary research data from qualitative interviews with residents in rural South West England.

The research
During spring and summer 2020, as part of my doctoral research, I spoke to residents of rural areas in the South West of England about their political and social attitudes. The twenty-nine participants ranged from nineteen to seventy-eight years old. The majority had voted Leave in the EU referendum, and the sample was more or less an even split across the left-right axis. All participants resided in either an isolated dwelling, a village, or a small town, in the South West counties of Gloucestershire, Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon and Cornwall.

As somebody who grew up in social housing in a rural Dorset village, I felt it important to give voice to those whose experiences are often hidden or generalised amongst larger statistical data. It is not hard to find research that oversimplifies, and generalises rural voters as backward-looking and closed-minded without taking into account deprivation and class-based injustices. Through analysing the interview data using a thematic analysis to identify repeated patterns, my aim was to further understanding of political thought and sentiment at a rural level, and to provide a space where such sentiments can be understood with nuance and attention to the wider forces at play. Many of the themes participants discussed related to localised issues, political discontent and disillusionment, and feelings of a distinct rural-urban divide. Feelings expressed ranged from hopelessness, frustration, fear, disappointment and betrayal to passion, solidarity and pride in the West Country. While we cannot make over-arching generalisations from this data, it does, I believe, suggest ways that political parties might begin to engage and mobilise rural voters.

Remoteness and inaccessibility
Discontent and resentment characterised the political sentiments of many of the interviewees, often related to economic concerns such as poor infrastructure, lack of funding for basic necessities and limited investment. Travel and transport was a dominant issue across all participants, as might be expected; statistics show that people living in rural settlements have poor access to key services such as hospitals, GP surgeries, schools, shops and centres of employment. In 2018-2019, people living in the most rural areas travelled almost twice as far per year as those residing in urban areas, mainly in cars, because of a lack of public transport.[ix] The impacts of this situation can best be understood through individual stories and experiences.

Celia, a sixty-nine-year-old woman who resided on a Romani traveller site in rural Somerset, told me how, if it wasn't for her car, she would be in 'serious trouble', as she lives over two miles from the local village. She explained that it had been left up to local volunteers to run a taxi service for those that live on the outskirts to take them into the nearest village and town to access services. Evidently, without these volunteer services, the older and young populations are particularly at risk of severe isolation. The lack of transport for those in villages had a profound effect on Samantha, a twenty-nine-year-old woman residing in a rural village in Devon with two young

children. She told me that her car had been in the garage getting fixed for the week, which meant she hadn't been able to leave her village, and had thus been unable to access shops. Without her car, she was finding it difficult to access childcare. She told me how the small work pool in the local area meant that there was a lack of opportunity, so that travelling was the only option. Travelling to her place of work sometimes took over an hour, leaving her feeling isolated and exhausted.

Rebecca, a forty-six-year-old woman living in rural Cornwall, echoed these issues, and explained how the lack of public transport made it extremely difficult to get anywhere to start a job before nine o'clock. Another participant, Josie, a thirty-three-year-old woman living in a small town in Devon, told me how it took one hour and a half to get to her workplace on the bus, which comes round hourly to her town; while the costliness of the train made it too expensive to get out of her area for other work opportunities. She felt that, in terms of investment in her area, things 'seem to be taken away, rather than being added'. She drew comparisons between the South East and the development of HS2 and the slow decaying of infrastructure in the South West, and felt that the attention of politicians and the media was primarily given to big cities such as London. Lee, a sixty-year-old living in a village in rural Dorset, also spoke of the slow removal of local transport: route closures had got much worse over the last decade, leaving 'outskirt villages like here horrendous if you don't drive'. Facing these issues brings worry and anxiety about the future, and participants expressed worries about the younger generation's lack of access to areas with employment, services and activities.

The issue of inaccessibility also emerged amongst interviewees in the form of health care anxiety, especially in terms of mental health services and social care for the elderly. Younger participants particularly noted concerns over accessing mental health services in their community. Participants also had concerns that social care services were over-stretched in the South West, due to the countryside having some of the highest proportions of the population aged 65 years and over.[x] Donna, a sixty-two-year-old living in a small town who used to work for her local council, told me that she believed elderly people are 'being abandoned' because of a lack of funding and social care provision. Likewise, social care workers felt they were not paid enough for the specialised and necessary job they were carrying out. Accessing health care was a substantial concern because of the local cut-backs in hospital facilities such as A&E and the length of travel-time to get to a larger hospital. Travelling long distances for hospital care brings with it issues of time, money and missed appointments, particularly if finances are tight and public transport is sparse.

Industry, infrastructure and services in decline
There was a unanimous understanding amongst all participants that the South West lacked industry and secure employment. Though there were opportunities in the services, agriculture, hospitality and social care industries, these often came in the form of insecure zero-hour contracts and seasonal work. Much of this insecurity had been exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic, leaving some participants unemployed. Along with the lack of employment protection, there were concerns over the level of deprivation that low wages and seasonal work bring. Sandra, a sixty two-year-old woman living in a small coastal town in Somerset, told me that what she once knew as a prosperous place was now becoming deprived due to the lack of employment opportunities: 'We have had to start our own foodbanks; the level of deprivation I've

seen here is devastating. On the surface it looks nice, comfortable, very middle-class and prosperous, but underneath it all is people with very hard lives'. Numerous participants also said that farms in rural communities are deprived. However, as Billy, a sixty-five-year-old Dorset local, told me, 'they keep the deprivation hidden'. There was anxiety over how farming communities are being looked after, and fear surrounding potential forces of privatisation. The number of County Farms owned by local authorities, which offer opportunities for young and first-time farmers, has halved in forty years.[xi] Sixty-year-old Lee from Dorset told me how he 'wished they would look after our farming communities better': 'what is more essential than the food that you eat?' he asked me. Some participants identified affluent city second-home owners as making matters worse. They 'rent out a shed in London to buy a whole farm in Somerset', making it difficult for young people to acquire property. Forty year-old Ian from Dorset told me that he felt this was causing the gentrification of villages, and working-class people were being 'pushed out'.

It was widely accepted that prospering in life required moving away into an urban area. Younger participants told me they felt as if they had no choice but to try and 'make it' in a larger urban area, despite their desire to stay local, near their family and friends. It is worth pointing out that a quarter of all participants had served or aspired to serve in the British Army at some point in their lives, which is perhaps an indicator of the lack of economic opportunities available; South West England, alongside Yorkshire and the North West, has higher levels of military recruitment than elsewhere in England.[xii]

The lack of local well-paid work for younger participants was evident. Tom, a twenty-year-old living in a rural village in Dorset, working in hospitality and aspiring to join the British Army, told me: 'Unless I really get my act together, I'm never going to be able to afford a house in the village or the town I grew up in'. The large proportion of the younger population employed in hospitality, services and social care in the South West brings about high levels of insecure employment contracts, affecting young people's livelihoods and their ability to survive, or to invest in their future. This was a factor significantly exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic: the number of people aged between eighteen and twenty-four claiming Universal Credit rose by 171 per cent in the South West during the pandemic.[xiii] Tom told me he felt isolated: irregular bus services limited his ability to meet others outside of the village, and the poor quality of internet connection hindered his ability to communicate with friends and access remote health-care services, especially during periods of lockdown. Similarly, twenty-three-year-old Charlie, living in a small town in Wiltshire, told me he felt 'trapped' and annoyed at how 'nothing ever gets done here'. Sandra, a sixty-two-year-old living in a small coastal village in Somerset, similarly stated that in the smaller villages 'there is nothing'; everything had 'gone'. From post offices, to pubs, to buses, to shops, these much-needed community pillars required for social cohesion and support have disappeared.

Participants' discussion of lack of affordable housing and decaying community life should be set in the context of increasing second-home ownership, which has been enabled by online holiday rental marketplaces such as Airbnb, and government subsidies and tax breaks on second homes.[xiv] The South West of England is being hit hard by this; according to recent research, rural house prices have increased by 14.2 per cent across England and Wales in the past year, rising twice as fast as cities.[xv]

Research in Devon villages found that between two thirds and ninety five per cent of houses were second homes;[xvi] while in Cornwall Airbnb properties for holiday rentals outnumber those on *Rightmove* for permanent rental.[xvii] This can lead to displaced demand, and a domino effect as people are knocked along the housing chain. Participants expressed antagonism towards those outside of rural areas, or 'grockles' as they are commonly called, particularly the city-based politicians that they felt favoured urban populations.

Rural-urban divide and lack of representation
There was a strong sense of hostility and division between rural and city areas in England across many of the participants. Concerns were expressed across a wide variety of issues, relating to centralisation, policy, decision-making and the lack of rural voices in politics

Participants talked about the 'toffs' that come to the West Country; as seventy-seven-year-old Neil from Somerset told me, West Country people will 'walk around locally in their dirty wellies, dirty coat, et cetera', whereas those that arrive to the West Country have 'nice brand new wellies, the nice brand, new Barbour, that have never seen the light of dirt, and a big old 4x4 that's never been on grass'. Others, including sixty-year-old Elliott, felt that visitors to the West Country see it as a 'playground' rather than a 'working place'. The idea that others lacked an authentic understanding of the countryside was also articulated by Derek, a fifty-three-year-old farmer living in Gloucestershire, who felt that political decisions from policy-makers sway more towards London, despite of the fact that 'all those people are spending quite a bit of the time in the Cotswolds' in second homes. The perception that politicians are London and South-East centric and appear to have no genuine understanding of life in the West Country was common across participants. Rebecca, a forty-six-year-old living in rural Cornwall, told me: 'London is a thousand miles away from me and it's totally different, they haven't got any idea of what a lot of the country needs or what they're going through. It might as well be on a different continent or country'.

People also felt that, regardless of whether or not an MP was from a rural area, their party would still prioritise urban areas due to party allegiances. Derek told me: 'I don't think that rural areas are a priority in politics. Even when we have an MP from an area that is predominantly rural, they are a member of a political party that's a city and urban based party and that's what their policies are driven by'. Rural voters understand that MPs are largely influenced by party membership and may not have much control over which issues they personally prioritise. The idea that political parties are solely urban and therefore prioritise these areas is one that requires attention, given the acute need for policies to address rural problems.

Brexit as a protest vote against the political consequences a decade of austerity, deprivation, lack of representation and overall discontent in British politics is very well documented;[xviii] but the vivid explanations of the interview participants of all ages help us understand more precisely what Brexit means for rural Leave voters. Phil, a fifty-seven-year-old living in Somerset, felt that the South East of England 'has been allowed to dominate' the British economy at the 'expense of almost every other region', meaning that 'everywhere else is being left behind'. He went on to tell me that this sentiment was a large factor in his decision to vote Leave in the 2016 European Union referendum. Although his natural position was Remain, he felt

ignored by his local MP when confronting him with issues of unemployment in the area, and told me: 'At the end of the day I thought, well, you're a fifty-seven-year-old, you just got this one protest, they don't even answer your emails anymore, protest. So I did.' Ruby, a sixty-year-old participant from rural Dorset, felt that she wasn't well represented in the political system, 'No matter how I vote, because I'm in rural Dorset, the Conservatives will always get in … the only time I felt my vote really made a difference was in Brexit'.

The perceived lack of representation and ability to change things was apparent across all interviews; this was articulated by ex-British Army soldier Shane, a forty-six-year-old living in small town in Dorset. He identified differences between himself and the serving MP in his constituency, which were predominantly class-based; 'he's a multi-millionaire … he can't identify with myself who's from a council estate and working-class'. Similarly, Mandy, a woman living in a coastal town in Cornwall, asked me 'you know, how can a public school boy or girl know what it's like to live in a Cornish fishing village?'. Meanwhile, younger voters also felt excluded from representation: Liam, a nineteen-year-old living in a small Dorset village, felt that his MP was solely representing the older populations in his area; 'he's not gonna try to represent someone like me'.

Amongst participants who were not Conservative voters in the 2019 general election, there was a particular feeling of disenfranchisement, that their vote was meaningless, had 'gone to waste' and been 'completely lost'. This caused one participant, forty-nine-year-old Susanna, who resided in a coastal village in West Dorset, to use a vote-swapping website, where she could swap her vote with someone in an area where her vote could have 'made more difference'.[xix] Other participants, such as sixty-year-old Simon from Devon, abstained from the election, telling me he wasn't politically motivated: 'I don't belong to a political party. I'll be honest. I've voted Conservatives for probably 80 per cent of my life but recently I have questioned whether they've lost the plot'. Aside from lack of representation in Westminster, one participant did note that, although she felt unrepresented nationally, she did feel that locally there was a greater range of councillors from diverse parties. 'I feel my vote maybe has a bit more meaning in a local council election than it does in national elections where I feel like I may as well not go', said thirty-three-year-old Josie from Devon.

Looking to the future: solutions and hope
As well as their concerns and frustrations, I sought to find where the interviewees saw the solutions. Aside from macro-level change such as new prime ministerial leadership and a change of government, participants expressed interest in other political changes such as devolution, decentralisation, electoral reform, and altering the mode of funding for councils. The potential offered by these solutions, as well as the opportunity to reflect on them as part of the research process, gave the participants hope and a sense of aspiration: as twenty-nine-year-old Samantha told me, being listened to and having the opportunity to talk about these matters and locating solutions felt 'good': 'it keeps my interest going and keeps me thinking'. Forty-six-year-old Shane from Dorset also found that the interview process itself increased his feelings of efficacy: 'I think being involved in things like this is really good, people need to start having their say on what they feel strongly about and not to be scared to have their say'. There is clearly a desire for platforms that can facilitate constructive discussion.

Regional devolution was fairly popular. Although some participants felt it would further divide the country, others felt that it would help hold politicians more accountable. Sixty-one-year-old Sam, living in rural Devon, told me: 'I think for me that would make the biggest difference having a Southwest assembly … I think our politicians would be more accountable. That would be my hope … I just hope that we will one day get to it'. Similarly Simon, also from Devon, felt devolving powers regionally would increase engagement from local people, create more accountability for local politicians, and enable policy to be better tailored to local and regional needs. In addition to this, there were also participants who were in favour of further UK devolution, feeling that England. Too, should have its own assembly along with the devolved nations. Ian, for example, a forty-year-old living in Dorset, told me that devolution in 1998 'seemed to work off the basis that we had regional mayors and that was enough … being run by London doesn't work for me'. Participants such as Jenny, fifty-six, and living in rural Wiltshire, also felt that it was important for matters to be decided locally, rather than in Westminster. Other indications from participants not wanting the country to feel further divided are hopeful, as it signifies progression from the divisive social environment of the UKs post-Brexit limbo.

There was also strong support for changing the voting system to a proportional representation system, which was seen to offer more geographical representation. Thirty-three-year-old Josie from Devon told me it would make her feel that her vote would 'mean something more; first-past-the-post is just ridiculous and not fair'. Like many participants, sixty-year-old Lee from Dorset felt that his vote has never made a difference where he lives. He told me he felt his voice and vote was lost: 'we need more and more pressure to get to the one person one vote system … how can we not have proportional representation in this day and age?'. There was also wide acknowledgement of the lack of council funding and how perhaps local government should be centrally funded, particularly for basic amenities.

Participants' willingness to think about solutions and articulate their hope for the future is encouraging; it contradicts notions of widespread cynicism amongst disillusioned groups. Despite negative experiences of lacking political agency, there were signs of hope, pride and passion. For example, thirty-three-year-old Leanne, despite feeling frustrated at her lack of representation and agency, told me it gave her more motivation to try and put effort in: 'it makes me want to get more involved. It's good in a sense because it gives you more fight'. Similarly, thirty-three-year-old Josie felt that it was important to vote regardless of being in a 'safe seat' as there was always a chance. The opportunity to contribute to wider statistics was important for some participants in getting their voice heard in a safe seat. Sandra, sixty-two and living in Somerset, noted the importance of a salient piece of South West England's rural history, the Tolpuddle Martyrs; she told me that she felt she had a personal connection, and therefore it was important to her to vote and have her voice heard. Furthermore, there was an overall sense of pride amongst participants of the strength of community spirit in the rural South West, highlighted by the pandemic. Sixty-five-year-old Dorset man Billy told me how recently there had been a homeless man living in a tent in his village: 'the community rallied round and made sure that he was fed and watered … he was being looked after and I think in cities you lose that'. Jenny, fifty-six and from Wiltshire, also noted there was much more 'community spirit', which makes 'an awful lot of difference'. Sam, sixty-one, noted how his local

community in rural Devon was an important part of his identity. Interest and passion in one's local community is an important factor in rallying citizens together to act in the interest of those around them, and engaging them in a politics that is meaningful and based on solidarity, unity and shared goals.

Recommendations

Whilst larger scale research is needed to understand the wider resonance of these themes, in-depth qualitative research helps us understand how people in rural areas talk about their lives and how they make sense of broader political trends. Political engagement strategies need to go beyond 'left-behind' rhetoric and instead develop tailored policies that address opportunity, prosperity and deprivation in England's rural areas. As argued by the Bennett Institute for Public Policy, the Labour Party's unwillingness to engage with these frustrations and disillusionments drove many working-class voters to abandon it.[xx] The idea of a 'rural idyll' and romanticised ideas of the English countryside are contradictory and illusionary; nationwide policy-making can hit rural communities 'inappropriately' and therefore requires rural proofing.[xxi] Policy should be adapted to focus on regional needs such as transport, housing and land-based injustice;[xxii] and on employment and accessibility to services, where third sector and community organisations should be supported to encourage engagement, support and solidarity. Unions should focus on engagement with the younger workforce, altering participation approaches to suit the differing nature of rural industries and their changing nature.[xxiii] Sentiments of disenfranchisement amongst rural voters must be met with attentiveness and consideration from political parties and policy-makers. Platforms and space for constructive discussion with rural voters must be made available, and political parties must show keen interest in participating in such discussions with rural voters, so that thoughtful policy can follow. The prospects of citizen's assemblies or more deliberative democracy are potential solutions that Labour should champion. Rural areas hold potential for engagement, mobilisation and participation. It is important that political parties show authentic understandings of the nature of rural deprivation and discontent, and learn to mobilise rural voters' pride and passion in their area and community, to organise and offer tangible change.

All study participants were given pseudonyms and all identifying information was anonymised. The study received ethical clearance form Bournemouth University research governance board and complied with the university's research ethics code of practice.

Tabitha A. Baker is a PhD Candidate at Bournemouth University.

Notes

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