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Political resistance, representation, and identity during English local government re-organisation: a micro-case study

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ABSTRACT
This paper examines the political and identity-based consequences of the 2019 Local Government Reorganisation (LGR) in Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole (BCP), where three historic towns were merged into a single unitary authority. Contrary to claims that LGR typically weakens local and independent representation, findings from BCP suggest that reorganisation spurred resistance and reassertions of local identity, which in turn mobilised support for independents and cross-party alliances. This paper explores how discontent with both local and national politics, strong town-based civic identities, and a perceived imbalance in power, fuelled enduring tensions. These dynamics, compounded by political instability and governance challenges, reveal how top-down amalgamation can deepen rather than resolve intra-local divides. In BCP, LGR became a site of political transformation, not merely administrative reform, highlighting the importance of identity, place, and local agency in shaping post-reform governance across England's evolving subnational landscape.

The re-organisation of local government in England

Local government in England operates within a highly centralised system, yet it is tasked with delivering a broad range of essential public services, ranging from education, adult and children's social care, housing and transport, to spatial planning, road maintenance and waste management. As the Local Government Association (LGA n.d.) explain, repeated changes to local government structures have led to a complicated and sometimes confusing system that differs across regions. In many parts of England, local governance

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is divided between two levels – county councils and district councils – each handling different services. In other areas, a single unitary authority (UA) manages all local services. UAs, often replace county and district councils, are greater (average size 348,000) and 'mostly based on existing counties' (Leach 2009, 63).

In 2000, the introduction by New Labour of the Local Government Act 2000 sought to undertake decentralisation and empower local councils to adopt different executive structures, with the aim of strengthening local democracy (Rao 2000). Here, decentralisation refers broadly to the redistribution of administrative or decision-making responsibilities away from central government (Copus, Roberts, and Wall 2017). Devolution, in contrast, is a formal transfer of powers from central to subnational governments (e.g., Scottish Parliament and Wales' Senedd Cymru). However, in England, this process has largely occurred through bespoke regional 'devolution deals', where selected powers – typically in areas such as transport, housing, and economic development – are granted to combined authorities (a formal collaboration between two or more councils) and their elected metro mayors (Lupton et al. 2018). However, unlike federal systems, this approach lacked territorial uniformity, with no constitutional guarantees of power. Consequently, the English model remains highly fragmented, centralised, and remains under negotiated terms with central government (Dunleavy and Stirvu 2018). This piecemeal approach stands in contrast to more structured and constitutionally protected systems of local governance found in countries such as Germany, Canada, or the United States (Jeffery 2009). It has been argued elsewhere that, without a devolved national parliament, England remains disadvantaged in terms of devolution (Baker 2024; Henderson and Jones 2021).

As the new century entered its second decade, austerity measures enforced by the 2010 Conservative-Liberal Democrat Coalition Government prompted budget cuts, driving councils to 'innovate' in service provision, significantly diverging from New Labour's approach to localism (Ayres, Flinders, and Sandford 2018; Lowndes and Prachett 2012). Since then, the last decade has been marked by local government's deepening crisis; much of the narratives on English local government have centred around decline and crisis, against a backdrop of entrenching neoliberal agendas, shrinking of the state, and shifting of political responsibility (Barnett, Giovannini, and Griggs 2020). Each crisis tells us that the local governance is weakening in terms of its function and capacity, as many face threat of full bankruptcy (LGA 2023).

In 2015, a Conservative Government was elected with a manifesto promising to further devolve powers and budgets to improve local development in England. This commitment was fulfilled through the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. This act enabled developments in devolution deals to emerge; mayoral combined

authorities (MCA) were established, fostering regional collaboration and strategic governance in metropolitan areas, reflecting ongoing efforts to balance local autonomy with efficient and resourceful governance (Paun, Nice, and Rycroft 2022). However, areas which do not come under an MCA, such as smaller cities, towns, and rural areas, it has been argued, suffered at the expense of these new developments, and are left behind and lacking in opportunities for investment (Shutt and Liddle 2019).

The Local Government Devolution Act 2016 also established a flexible legislative framework for implementing various local government reforms. Most notably, for the purpose of this paper, it introduced a fast-track mechanism for enacting the structural changes needed to establish UAs through local government re-organisation (LGR) (Blunkett, Flinders, and Prosser 2016). However, unitarisation through LGR is not new; proposals of large UAs and devolution in non-metropolitan areas of England were introduced in the 1970s. According to Leach and Copus (2023) this was due to Whitehall's preference that unitarisation results in simpler administrative duties centrally and strengthens central government's role in deploying policies to local level. These processes are frequently justified through emphasis on effectiveness, cost savings, and the broader goal of streamlining the state to enhance efficiency (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2021; Moisio and Paasi 2013). More recently in 2024, the Labour Government's English Devolution white paper proposed further nation-wide devolution, greater powers for mayors, and a phased replacement of two-tier local government with unitary authorities. It emphasised an incremental approach, strategically aligned with devolution deals, and restored ministerial powers to direct two-tier areas to submit proposals, giving central government discretion to initiate and approve changes where local consensus is lacking (Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government 2024).

England's approach to LGR therefore stands out in the European context due to its piecemeal character (Jeffery 2009). Unlike the sweeping, territorially comprehensive reforms often seen in countries like Denmark and the Netherlands (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2021), England has favoured selective intervention – targeting specific localities rather than applying uniform restructuring across the entire nation. This ad hoc method reflects both a historical resistance to top-down centralisation and the political sensitivities surrounding local identities (John 2014). Notably, English reforms have often combined 'horizontal' mergers – joining units at the same tier – with 'vertical' consolidation, where multiple layers of governance are streamlined into unitary authorities. This hybrid strategy reflects a unique flexibility but also contributes to a patchwork governance landscape, with considerable variation in institutional form and administrative capacity across

regions. It highlights a broader pattern in English local government: reform through incrementalism rather than uniformity.

Copus and Leach (2023, 6) are critical of the unitisation agenda and its impact on local democracy, which has seen a reduction in number of local councillors spanning into the thousands, with many local actors being lost in reductions and reorganisations of local councils. They also argue that local government in England is progressively losing its relationship to places and communities which matter to local people. An outcome of this, they claim, is the increasing average size of local authorities in England, now 10 times bigger than European counterparts. They suggest that the role that local government plays in 'place-shaping' has been hindered and compromised for the benefit of delivering efficient services. They state that local government areas have thus become 'de-localised' (ibid; 2).

Implications of unitisation: identity, trust and engagement

Scholarship on local government amalgamation confirms that top-down mergers are usually 'coercive', meaning that municipalities can be forced to merge with neighbouring municipalities against the will of the municipality and its citizens (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2021; Steiner, Kaiser, and Eythórsson 2016, 26). Further, Steiner, Kaiser, and Eythórsson (2016) explain that reforms are typically driven by the ruling political parties, which can lead to visible tensions or disagreements between parties on the left and right of the political spectrum. Additionally, resistance often arises when smaller municipalities worry about being dominated or overshadowed by larger ones, thus the most significant challenges in amalgamation processes tend to stem from strong opposition by local politicians.

Furthermore, Passi (1986) emphasises that regional identities are constantly shaped and reshaped through the actions of individuals and institutions operating across multiple spatial scales. Focusing on these broader socio-spatial dynamics brings attention to key issues such as scale, boundaries, institutional development, where social and discursive constructs are produced and dismantled in the processes of institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation (Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013). In political debates, these identity discourses serve as mobilising tools – resisting top-down centralisation and defending local institutional structures. Zimmerbauer and Paasi (ibid), examining the Finnish context, show how regional identity becomes a central element in resisting top-down territorial reforms. They demonstrate that regions are actively constructed and mobilised as meaningful territorial entities when faced with forced deinstitutionalisation. Citizen resistance is not only driven by fears of losing autonomy and public services but also by a deep emotional attachment to the region. Such expressions of regional identity should therefore be recognised as significant components of LGR.

As Terlouw (2016, 2017, 2018) carefully explores through his work, opponents of LGR often use the threatened loss of local identity to resist amalgamation. This perception can give rise to a resistance identity discourse, which unites residents by emphasising their traditional municipal area, its historical background, and its distinctiveness from others. Terlouw's work focussing on case studies examining the role of local identity in Dutch municipalities during the amalgamation process revealed that individuals who felt threatened by amalgamation often developed resistance identity discourses, highlighting their differences from neighbouring communities. However, in other situations, these neighbours were also viewed as allies with similar identities. Thus, identity discourses can emphasise both cooperation and resistance among neighbours, united to protect their distinct yet similar local identities. These dynamics have also been found in international studies that explore the impact of amalgamation (Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew 2021; Farid Uddin 2018). However, not all have been universally met with negative reactions, there has also been evidence of mergers without antagonism and resistance, but these have included bottom-up strategies localist phases where local governments have merged without government coercion (Steiner, Kaiser, and Eythórsson 2016).

Further contestation around LGR and amalgamation centre on the impact on local representation, with Copus (2022) highlighting that it can result in fewer independent and smaller party seats in local councils. England's main three parties (The Labour Party, Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats) have been found to be dominant, outperforming independents and smaller parties in local council (ibid). This situation is said to be exacerbated in large unitary authorities, as main parties can capitalise on the lack of connection to real places where communities have an affinity or identity, therefore it is more difficult for independents and smaller parties to succeed in large urban areas (Leach and Copus 2023). This has been evidenced by the abrupt reduction of independent councillors in England since LGR first began (Game and Leach 1996). Copus et al. (2009) also point out that the number of smaller party and independent councillors in local government is lower in England as compared across Western Europe, which sees between 50 and 60% of councillors having no membership to main national parties.

The exploration of local identity, independent party support and resistance in the context of LGR has not yet been explored in an English context; this article aims to fill this space. The case of the BCP unitarisation provides a unique case study to explore how in these aforementioned forces intersected and played out on-the-ground, in response to top-down amalgamation.

Methodology

This research used a qualitative case study methodology, which Orum et al. (Orum, Feagin, and Sjoberg 1991, 2), defines as a 'multi-faceted investigation' which "relies on the use of several data sources. Such an inquiry involves an 'intensive study of a single case or small number of cases' (Gerring 2017, 28) that investigates 'contemporary phenomena, in-depth, within it's real life context' (Yin 2009, 18). The case is usually bound by time and activities, in which detailed information is collected using a variety of procedures over a sustained period (Creswell 2014; Priya 2021). De Vaus (2001, 220) helpfully distinguishes the units of analysis of case study research, claiming that they may be 'a family, household, a community, an organisation, an event or even a decision'. The sources of evidence for case studies can include interviews, documentation, archival records, and direct observations, however the interview may be the most important source, while the documents and archival records can be used to corroborate and enhance the findings (Creswell 2014; Yin 2009). Unlike quantitative methods, the goal in qualitative case study research is not to generalise to the broader population (Yin 2009).

Using the unitarisation of BCP Council during the period of LGR between 2017 and 2020 as our case study, we had the following research aims:

(1) To understand how LGR impacted the political landscape of the region.
(2) To consider how local councillors framed the issue of LGR by examining the type of arguments used
(3) To assess the significance of LGR and the experience of the coalition for advancing, paradoxically, democratic gains and capacities.

To address the first aim, we collated evidence from local council and central government online document archives regarding the political make-up of the region prior and following LGR. We also used these documents to find out about formal opposition processes, such as the use and pursual of referenda and judicial reviews. These documents were also used to seek an illustration of electoral changes in terms of mainstream political party and independent representation in the region after the public had elected its councillors for the new unitary council. The second and third aims were addressed by conducting interviews with newly elected councillors who formed the first BCP administration.

This case study enabled us to provide a micro-level analysis, a perspective which involves a detailed focus of study of a specific event. As Willner (2011) explains, micro-analyses of political decision processes are rare, however they hold great potential for political research due to the micro-level focus. The analysis drew from the thematic tradition, outlined by Clarke and Braun (2017, 297) as a method which can 'identify patterns

within and across data in relation to participants lived experience, views and perspectives, and behaviour and practices'. This not only offers flexibility theoretically but also in terms of its approach to meaning generation. A benefit of thematic analysis on a micro-level case study is that it can be used to analyse smaller qualitative research, including case studies (ibid).

Case study: LGR and the formation of BCP council

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole are town boroughs in the county of Dorset, which is located on the southwest coast of England. Discussions about reorganising local government structures in Dorset were part of broader discussions and policies promoted by the central government. As detailed in the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole (Structural changes) order (2018), a public consultation was conducted in to gather feedback on the proposed reorganisation options, including the creation of a new unitary authority for BCP. This consultation was part of the process mandated by central government to ensure that residents had a say in the proposed changes. Central government required local authorities to engage in consultations to assess public opinion and address concerns before finalising any reorganisation plans. Although the consultation found 'clear and even emphatic support for moving to two councils' (ibid: 9), many councillors remained in opposition to the proposal. BCP's re-organised local boundary borders can be seen in Image 1, below. (BCP Council 2016).
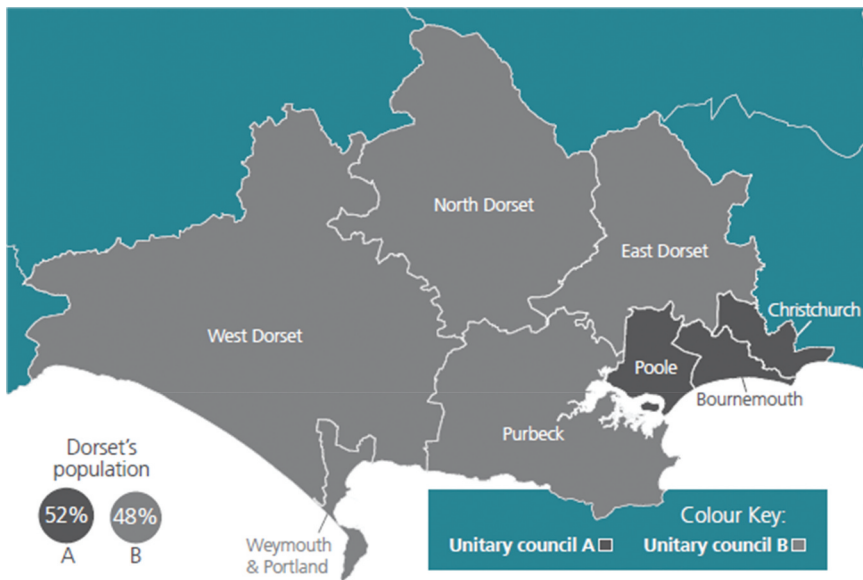

Image 1. Map of BCP and Dorset council boundaries.

Opposition and referendum

The proposal to merge the borough councils of BCP into a single unitary authority was met with significant resistance (Smulian 2017). According to deposited papers of letters and emails sent to Sajid Javid MP responding to the Dorset proposal (UK Parliament 2018), key areas of opposition included concerns from Christchurch residents and officials about losing their town's unique identity, as well as widespread apprehensions regarding the financial and administrative challenges of such a merger. Many felt that Christchurch's interests would be overshadowed by the larger towns of Bournemouth and Poole. Critics also argued about the financial implications, potential job losses, and the complexities of merging different administrative systems.

In response to the strong local opposition, Christchurch held a local referendum in December 2017. The referendum asked residents whether they supported the merger with Bournemouth and Poole. The results are shown in Table 1:

BBC (2017)

Despite the overwhelming opposition in Christchurch, the referendum was not legally binding. Central government ultimately decided to proceed with the merger.

Judicial review

Christchurch Borough Council initiated a judicial review in the High Court to challenge the government's decision to reorganise local councils in Dorset, arguing that the regulations enabling this reorganisation were unlawful and exceeded the legal powers of the Secretary of State.

In (R Christchurch Borough Council v Secretary of State 2018) EWHC 2126 (Admin), Christchurch Borough Council was specifically challenging the retrospective use of secondary legislation under the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2016. They were also contending that the consultation process was flawed and did not adequately consider the views of Christchurch residents.

The High Court dismissed Christchurch Borough Council's judicial review challenge. The court ruled that the government's decision to reorganise local councils in Dorset was lawful and did not exceed the Secretary of State's powers. This meant the merger of Christchurch with Bournemouth and Poole councils to form a new unitary authority proceeded as planned.

Table 1. Christchurch referendum.

Against the Merger	84%
For the Merger	16%
Turnout: 53%	

2018 Shadow council

Statutory instruments to establish the new authority were issued on behalf of the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities, and Local Government on 25 May 2018. The next day, a shadow authority was created. This shadow authority consisted of the current borough councillors from Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, along with the county councillors representing Christchurch. This composition ensured that the new BCP Council would benefit from a wide range of perspectives, with the Conservative Party holding a significant majority during the transition. The shadow authority for BCP was responsible for overseeing the transition to the new unitary authority. Seats held by Bournemouth Borough Council, Poole Borough Council and Christchurch Council in 2015, prior to the formation of the shadow council are listed below in Tables 2-4:

Table 2. Bournemouth Borough Council 2015 local election results.

Bournemouth Borough Council	Seats
Conservative	51
Independent	1
UKIP	1
Green Party	1
Turnout: 58.15%	

Table 3. Poole Borough Council 2015 local election results.

Poole Borough Council	Seats
Conservative	32
Liberal Democrats	6
Poole People	3
UKIP	1
Turnout: 64.65%	

Table 4. Christchurch Borough Council 2015 local election results.

Christchurch Borough Council	Seats
Conservative	21
Independent	2
UKIP	1
Turnout: 74.24%	

(Ayres 2015; Borough of Poole 2015; Bournemouth Borough Council 2015; Christchurch Borough Council 2015).

The composition of local government in the BCP area prior to LGR shows the Conservative Party's traditional dominance across the region, reflecting a deep-rooted convention of Conservative control. This political strength has been evident in the substantial number of seats held by Conservatives in the borough councils of BCP over the years. However, with on-going strife over issues of LGR, and a faltering support of the Conservatives in central government due to issues such as Brexit and handling of austerity, the party lost their hold in BCP's local seats upon the election of the new unitary BCP Council, representing a significant shift in the region's representation.

Formation and confluence of independent parties

On 1 April 2019, under the Bournemouth, Dorset and Poole (Structural Changes) Order (2018), the boroughs of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole, along with each of their councils, were dissolved and replaced with a unitary council that comprised the three boroughs. Bournemouth and Poole had been unitary authorities since 1997, while Christchurch was a lower-tier district council with county-level services provided by Dorset County Council.

Since the first election in 2019, the council has comprised 76 councillors representing 33 wards, with each ward electing between two and three councillors. Due to the implementation of new ward boundaries, this resulted in a reduction of 49 councillors across the BCP area (LGBCE 2018).

From our interview with councillors, we learnt that rifts ensued amongst local councillors and mainstream political parties. This resulted in numerous councillors leaving their mainstream parties and standing as independents. Five Conservative party councillors in Christchurch, for example, were suspended from the party. Therefore, some of these independents formed a new local independent party, Christchurch Independents, which contributed to the growing presence of local independent parties, such as Poole People Party and the Alliance for Local Living. All three parties sought to capitalise on discontent over LGR.

Election of new BCP council 2019

The results of the 2019 BCP local election are shown in Table 5

Uberoi (2019)

The election resulted in no single party having an overall majority on the BCP Council. Despite winning the most seats, the Conservative Party did not achieve a majority, necessitating coalitions and agreements with other parties and independents. The result created a more diverse political landscape, with multiple parties and independents having representation, reflecting varied local interests and priorities across Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole. Following the election, a coalition administration

Table 5. BCP Council 2019 election results.

BCP Council	Seats
Conservative Party	36
Liberal Democrats	15
Independent (including Christchurch Independents)	11
Poole People	7
Labour Party	3
Green Party	2
Alliance for Local Living	1
UKIP	1
Turnout: 33.13%	

was formed, which was led by the Liberal Democrats, independent councillors, and other smaller groups, to govern the BCP Council. This coalition group was named Unity Alliance (UA) and consisted of councillors from all parties except for the Conservative party and the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP). The Liberal Democrats and Independents found themselves suddenly holding significant sway due to their combined numbers, thus playing a crucial role in the formation of the new unitary council's administration.

Interviews with the new Unity Alliance administration

Our interviews aimed to gain deeper insight into the BCP merger and the formation of the UA as the first administration of the newly formed BCP Council, a seismic political event given the traditional dominance of the Conservative Party in this region. We conducted eight in-depth interviews with some of the key participants involved in these processes, principally local councillors, who were elected in 2019 and formed the new multi-party coalition administration, UA. While far from offering an exhaustive analysis, we argue that studying the role and experience of local councillors offers a distinctive perspective from which to interrogate the political meaning and dynamics of the local that goes beyond electoral data. They are very often both local citizens living in the areas they represent and representatives engaged in policy and decision-making, acting as interfaces or mediators between communities and neighbourhoods, local political institutions and central government.

Inter-town strife

The theme of inter-town strife from our interviews relates to 1) the perception from councillors that LGR was both imposed anti-democratically and 2) that there was a strong sense of frustration and resentment towards the merger of Christchurch with BCP, especially with Bournemouth. Many felt that the

merger was imposed without proper democratic support or consideration of Christchurch and Poole towns' financial health and autonomy. For example, the councillors below felt that the process was unfair and manipulated, leading to a sense of injustice and dissatisfaction.

> They basically said, 'tough luck, if you don't like it, you're just gonna have to lump it, you're gonna come in with us, we've decided it'. It was never in any election manifesto of the tory party in the 2015 elections. So nobody ever voted for it. There was no mandate for it. [. . .] Christchurch was at that time debt free, we had no debt, we had quite a lot of reserves, all of those were swallowed up by Bournemouth council and the attitude was like it or lump it you're coming in with us. And there was a consultation that was done but that consultation was skewed, almost every answer you gave, it was effectively giving the green light to the merger. Christchurch Independent councillor #1

> Christchurch had the feeling that being a well-run council with quite a bit of money in the bank, it wasn't a merger, it was a takeover, and being right on the edge of Dorset, we were nothing to do with Bournemouth or Poole. Christchurch Independent councillor #2

The language of 'takeover' reflects a strong sense of resentment and indignation. Given Christchurch's financial stability and geographical distance from Bournemouth and Poole, there was a general perception that this was a coercive rather than cooperative move by Bournemouth Conservatives.

An initial attempt by Bournemouth councillors to label the new BCP conglomerate as a 'city by-the-sea' for marketing purposes was roundly seized upon by councillors from other areas, particularly Christchurch. The defence against encroachment from the younger, larger neighbour relies on a heritage-based identity involving a familiar depiction of small-town or pastoral life in England: old, traditional, unchanging, anti-modern.

> We are not a city, we're a tiny sleepy little provincial borough, we have loads of history, dating from 11 something onwards. We're not a city by-the-sea. Christchurch Independent councillor #2

Both LGR and the neighbourhood town of Bournemouth itself are framed as threats to Christchurch's distinctive character and its local heritage and cultural identity. For other councillors, in this case a Liberal Democrat in Poole, the defence of local autonomy and resistance to LGR rested on suspicions about Bournemouth's real motivations in exploiting the opportunity to acquire valuable land from Poole rather than develop genuine regional benefits.

> Everyone we spoke to agreed with us that the only reason that Bournemouth wanted Poole, apart from to create a Tory city by-the-sea, was because Poole had loads of land, which was all greenbelt. And we thought, you just want our

land. We also had no debt, we were a pretty well organised, well-run council. We'd always felt that Bournemouth had not been a very well-run council, you know all the dramas, the surf reef, winter gardens, it was just car crash city. We didn't want to know. [...] We all submitted our representations all saying this isn't right, it's not good, but of course we knew it was inevitable. Liberal Democrats councillor

Again, the sentiment here is one of mistrust and dissatisfaction with the perceived motives behind the merger, which are representative of internal and historic political strife within the region.

The dynamics of the local, asymmetries in size, differences in history and outlook, and intra-regional mistrust and discord, amplified more established criticism of LGR from a democratic standpoint. The quote below expresses opposition to centralisation on the grounds of its detrimental impact on local interests and needs. Again, this has local dimensions owing to the peculiar geographical configuration of the area and its polycentric structure. Here the centralising, unifying thrust of LGR is seen as running against the infrastructural design and even psychological makeup.

All the local councillors were controlled by the Conservatives, and they grouped together the leaders of those councils to force centralisation both in Dorset and in BCP and we were opposed to it because we feel that centralisation is itself not particularly helpful, and organisations would become too big and hierarchal and stop serving in the interest of ordinary people. It's not helpful in this area because we don't have a town that is in the centre of our region, you know we have a strip of towns [...] we are three towns that sit next to each other and therefore, just psychologically and from a movement perspective, we're more suited to polycentric model than a single town centre. Poole People councillor #1

Strong opposition to the centralisation of local government driven by the Conservative Party is criticised here as detrimental to local interests (Lowndes and Pratchett 2012). The feeling is that centralisation would create an overly large and hierarchical organisation, which would not effectively serve the diverse needs and geographical makeup of the region.

Uniting against LGR

Once it became clear that LGR was going ahead, opponent councillors to LGR sought to draw on the animosities caused by the merger to challenge the dominance of the Conservative Party in the region. Christchurch Conservative councillors who opposed the merger were encouraged to run as independents, forming the Christchurch Independent group. As local journalist and later independent councillor recalled:

I went and spoke to, and I knew most the councillors as a journalist and as a resident of Christchurch, so I went to all those who were fighting against being

taken over by Bournemouth and Poole and said if you want Christchurch to have a voice in this new super big council, then you cannot stand as a Conservative because you will have no voice, you will basically have to do what the leadership in Bournemouth tells you to do. So why don't you stand as independents, and one by one most of those who fought against the merger said yeah. So I basically came up with a name the CI, got ten candidates and while we didn't have a great expectation of winning any more than a couple of seats, because Christchurch was previously solidly conservative, we actually ended up in the main 2019 elections winning 8 out of the 10 seats in Christchurch. And that alone, denied the Conservatives their majority so they could not form effectively, an administration. Christchurch Independent councillor #1

The below excerpt highlights the unexpected alliances formed in opposition to the merger, indicating a spirit of collaboration among those who opposed the changes. There is a sense of solidarity and cooperation among diverse groups united by a common cause:

What became really interesting was in that year lead up to LGR, when we were in that shadow situation, there were people who turned out to be Christchurch independents who reached out to us in that year, as sort of allies, not in any expectation that we would ever need to work together or choose to, but in an anti-spirit. And some of those relationships carry on today. Liberal Democrats councillor

Here, we see how LGR became a meeting point for councillors to reach out across party lines, in solidarity and allyship, to begin cooperating.

Re-generating local representation through multi-alliance coalition administration

There was a feeling of shock at the unexpected victory amongst some councillors. For example, a Liberal Democrat councillor expresses excitement and surprise at the unexpected outcome of an election where non-Conservative candidates won seats, leading to the formation of an administration opposed to the Conservatives, with determination to seize the opportunity to work together in cooperation against the previously dominant party.

It was like oh my god, this is really weird, loads of people are winning who weren't supposed to win. So, we started chatting and saying we're gonna have to all work together in opposition. […] At the end of the evening just as we were getting to the end, someone came and whispered in my ear, 'they haven't done it'. And I was like, 'what are you talking about, they haven't done it?' They said 'they haven't done it. The Tories, they haven't done it, it's not gonna be a Tory council'. I was going 'don't be stupid!' and then I was told 'you've got to go and tell the Chief Exec, that you're gonna form an alliance, an administration', and that's what we did. Liberal Democrat councillor

This was similarly felt by independent councillors, there was a sense of optimism about the prospect of a new multi-party alliance that included independents expressed. Below, the Alliance for Local Living councillor discusses the potential for independents to successfully run a council, particularly in an environment where voters were disillusioned with major parties due to issues like Brexit. Here, there is a sense of confidence in the ability of independents to appeal to voters and provide effective governance.

> I knew there was this opportunity for a slightly different mix and that was exciting in itself. From the political parties, there was a lot of talk of 'it is very hard for an independent to get in' and it was also around the time of Brexit so in my area people were really annoyed with the major parties. In my area it was very Conservative traditionally and they wanted Brexit. And so, they were frustrated that the Conservatives hadn't got on and delivered Brexit. Alliance for Local Living councillor

There was an opportunistic nature to this coalition too:

> We were keen to present an alternative because most of them had stood on the basis that Conservatives had not been performing in various ways or done things that the public were opposed to, like the merger, and therefore when you give them the opportunity then you should take it. Poole People councillor

The Poole People councillor reflects on the ease of forming a coalition among non-Conservative parties due to a shared desire to present an alternative to Conservative governance. The sentiment is one of optimism about the ability to work collaboratively in response to public discontent with the Conservatives.

> I know in negotiations that when we tried to discuss the makeup of the cabinet structure . . . One of my perspectives in the room was that was it only right that Labour should have a seat at the table. So, it was agreed that we should have a portfolio holder. That was the first portfolio holder that Labour ever had. Labour Party councillor

The Labour councillor above highlights the historic moment of Labour gaining a seat at the table and a portfolio holder position in local government. Below, the Poole People councillor highlights the collective desire to maintain the distinct identities and agency of each town:

> Essentially, although we wanted to put the breaks on the centralisation, we couldn't turn round and reverse the process of merger. So we wanted to make it clear that the three towns should be treated as three towns rather than as Greater Bournemouth. Poole People councillor

This sentiment is one of resistance to centralisation and a commitment to preserving local autonomy and identity. Furthermore, this was echoed by other independent councillors. The below excerpt discusses how the merger

of the three towns, paradoxically, strengthened their individual identities and challenged the tradition of political representation in the area. Satisfaction in the breaking of traditional voting patterns and the emergence of more localised political identities is evident here.

> It's broken the mould in the sense that people over here vote for Christchurch and I think in Poole People they vote for Poole, Bournemouth sails along not noticing anything is different … And that has totally broken the three towns into far more separate units than if they'd not been merged, oddly enough. I think politically you can't now depend, if you're a Conservative, on getting elected, which at one point you could. Christchurch Independent councillor #1

Similarly, there was also reflection on the increased political engagement among voters, who are now thinking more critically about their choices rather than automatically voting for the Conservative Party. There is a sense of hope here for further political change and a belief in the importance of pluralistic and active democracy:

> I think also it's resulted in a victory for people thinking for once when they go to the ballot box. Oh dear, where am I going to put my tick, we don't automatically look for the little Conservative tree, and think oh that's for me, I'm ticking that one. They actually think. And so many more people now are interested in politics which is again a victory for democracy. Christchurch Independent councillor #2

The recognition of a shift in public sentiment reflects the wider impact of LGR and the election of a new council in the BCP region. LGR is highlighted as having been a vehicle in which allowed for greater political plurality in the BCP region.

Discussion and conclusion

Using BCP LGR as a case study, this paper examined how political affiliations and identities at the local level were contested and reshaped. It argues that support for non-Conservative parties and independents was driven not only by dissatisfaction with the national government but also through resistance to LGR, and a reassertion of local identity as a vehicle for political agency. Although academic literature suggests LGR typically weakens independent representation (Copus 2022), we found that, paradoxically, it strengthened independent candidates in BCP. This was driven by widespread resistance to reorganisation and disillusionment with mainstream parties. Terlouw (2016, 2017, 2018) concept of resistance identity discourses help explain how opposition to LGR fostered political mobilisation. This was particularly evident in the case of the UA administration, which united all parties except Conservatives and UKIP.

These findings reflect the dynamics found in other cases of resistance identities forming as a result of top-down amalgamation (cf. Zimmerbauer and Paasi 2013), as LGR in BCP revealed how long-standing municipal units function not only as administrative and institutional structures but also as key sources of local identity and attachment. Despite official narratives invoking efficiency and effectiveness, the merger generated significant emotional responses – especially in Christchurch, where residents expressed a strong sense of loss tied to the dissolution of their municipality. This sense of loss underscores how regional identity, symbolic boundaries, and historical affiliations can become focal points of contestation during processes of territorial restructuring (Passi 1986). Furthermore, the absence of clear, immediate economic necessity and the reliance on abstract justifications of LGR from central government contributed to heightened political tensions both horizontally and vertically in BCP, and provided a vivid demonstration of how these broader trends identified by Blom-Hansen, Houlberg, and Serritzlew (2021) in an international context, play out on-the-ground.

These findings also resonate with previous research suggesting that top-down central government-initiated reforms often encounter local resistance and generate tensions between different levels and scales of local government (Steiner, Kaiser, and Eythórsson 2016). In the case of BCP, similar dynamics emerged, as Poole and Christchurch perceived themselves as at threat of being marginalised and overruled by the more dominant Bournemouth, which was viewed as politically and financially problematic, yet likely to shape policy priorities to its own advantage at the expense of its neighbours. It should be noted that national political sentiment also played a role in BCP's political transformation. The unpopularity of the ruling Conservative government over Brexit benefited independents in the 2019 elections, which reflected broader national political re-alignment trends (BES 2021).

BCP Council had a challenging start, not only because it was grappling with the COVID-19 pandemic, but because the tumultuous internal political and inter-town strife from LGR remained. Evidence from the LGA's corporate peer review challenge between 2021 and 2022 found that in the wake of LGR, the politics of BCP Council had been characterised by instability, fragmentation, and ongoing struggles over identity and representation (Kenyon 2023). The LGA's report claimed that the absence of an overall political majority since its formation in 2019, combined with five leadership changes in as many years, reflected a persistent difficulty in achieving political consensus. This instability was further exacerbated by broader governance challenges, as highlighted in a 2023 external assurance review commissioned by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (2023), which identified strained relationships both amongst and between councillors and officers. Much of the reported tension stems from the challenges posed by town-based allegiances within a newly merged unitary authority, which can in turn fuel concerns about the equitable

distribution of resources, investment, and policy attention across the conurbation. While explicit data on public spending inequalities is limited, the persistence of identity-based grievances suggests a deeper anxiety around fairness and local representation.

Disputes over civic branding further illuminate these divisions. The proposal to frame BCP as a 'city by the sea' was contested by our interviewees, particularly by Christchurch, whose residents often reject this urban-centric identity in favour of a more rural or small-town character. In response to such tensions, the council has retained ceremonial mayors for each historic town through charter trustees, signalling an institutional recognition of enduring local allegiances. Similarly, at the time of writing there are current consultations on the creation of six new parish councils, which suggest a demand for restoring hyper-local governance mechanisms-ones that safeguard local pride, community voice, and place-based heritage (Webb 2025).

It is clear that post-amalgamation politics in BCP remain defined by efforts to reconcile competing local identities, to legitimise new governing arrangements and to address longstanding concerns over symbolic and material equity. This paper's findings underscore the complex and often contested terrain of regional restructuring, where questions of governance, identity, and recognition are far from settled.

The 2024 English Devolution white paper signals that such dynamics are far from unique to BCP, as national reforms propose wider devolution, stronger mayoral powers and a phased shift to unitary governance. By restoring ministerial discretion to steer and approve local restructuring, these reforms highlight how questions of authority, identity, and legitimacy will continue to shape the evolving landscape of local government in England.

As Zimmerbauer and Paasi (2013) state, regions are not static entities but dynamic processes shaped by multiple actors and competing interests. As localities and regions continue to emerge and disappear (likely at an increasing pace), they should be understood in terms of ongoing institutionalisation and deinstitutionalisation (Zimmerbauer, Suutari, and Saartenoja 2012). Within these shifting processes, regional boundaries are continually being formed, dismantled, expressed, and challenged. We therefore emphasise that local and regional identities and local power relations are understood as important elements of England's LGR and wider devolution strategies.

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