

Political trust in the ‘places that don’t matter’

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Abstract

A popular explanation for the recent success of right-wing populist candidates, parties and movements is that this is the ‘revenge of the places that don’t matter’ (Rodríguez-Pose, 2018). Under this meso-level account, as economic development focuses on increasingly prosperous cities, voters in less dynamic and rural areas feel neglected by the political establishment, and back radical change. However, this premise is typically tested through the analysis of voting behaviour rather than directly through citizens’ feelings of political trust, and non-economic sources of grievance are not explored. We develop place-oriented measures of trust, perceived social marginality and perceived economic deprivation adapted from Gest *et al* (2018). We show that deprived and rural areas of Britain indeed lack trust in government. However, the accompanying sense of grievance for each type of area is different. Modelling these as separate outcomes, our analysis suggests that outside of cities, people lack trust because they feel socially marginal, whereas people in deprived areas lack trust owing to a combination of perceived economic deprivation and perceived social marginality. Our results speak to the need to recognise diversity among the ‘places that don’t matter’, and that people in these areas may reach a similar outlook on politics for different reasons.

1 Introduction

Political scientists often view electoral politics in geographical terms. However, a longstanding challenge for the discipline remains: understanding how the places where people live shape political attitudes and behaviours. Pronounced spatial patterns of voting in recent electoral events – Donald Trump’s victory in the 2016 US presidential election and the UK’s 2016 vote for Brexit to name just two – have re-energised the study of political geography. One key contribution has come from economic geographer Andrés Rodríguez-Pose (2018), who argues that as economic development focuses on increasingly prosperous cities, voters in declining and lagging-behind areas feel neglected by the political establishment, and back radical change. The causal chain – economic inequality breeds political distrust breeds populism – has proved an attractive and intuitive one. Its echoes can be felt in media narratives around these key political events, as well as in the response of policy communities, stressing the need to reduce spatial inequalities for the purpose of redressing grievances and thereby restoring political stability.

1 For political science, the argument has been a useful corrective to a tendency to see political
2 attitudes and behaviours either as a response to individual-level or national-level factors,
3 having less to say about the crucial ‘meso-level’ of our experiences of the places we live our
4 lives (Mutz and Mondak, 1997). However, the argument advanced by Rodríguez-Pose has
5 three notable limitations.

6 The first is its reliance upon aggregate level voting patterns. The fundamental premise is
7 explored through analysis of voting behaviour, specifically the tendency in recent elections
8 for more rural and economically deprived areas to vote for right-wing populists, as in the
9 2016 US (Monnat and Brown, 2017; Scala and Johnson, 2017) and Austrian (Gavenda and
10 Umit, 2016) presidential elections, the 2017 German federal election (Schwander and
11 Manow, 2017) and the 2017 French presidential election (Evans *et al*, 2019) and latterly
12 Boris Johnson’s success in flipping ‘Red Wall’ seats at the 2019 UK general election (Cutts,
13 Goodwin, Heath and Surridge, 2020). The votes of those places for Brexit, a cause
14 championed by right-wing populists and inflected with their concerns and rhetoric by the
15 Vote Leave campaign, is also put forward as evidence for this claim (Becker, Fetzer and
16 Novy, 2017).

17 Rodríguez-Pose cites several correlational studies and has since bolstered the case with
18 further aggregate-level analyses of anti-EU voting across Europe as a whole (Dijkstra *et al*,
19 2020) and voting for Donald Trump in 2016 (Rodríguez-Pose *et al*, 2020). Further research
20 has sought to determine whether these behaviours truly reflect contextual effects and if so,
21 how those effects operate (Ansell and Adler, 2019; Bolet, 2020; Colantone and Stanig, 2016;
22 Carreras, Carreras and Bowler, 2019). These studies conclude the claim that place matters
23 to right-wing populist voting remains plausible, although the magnitude of effects and their
24 mechanisms require further inquiry.

25 It remains important to be wary of inferring a wider political discontent or distrust based on
26 populist voting alone. Rooduijn (2018) argues that the voter bases of populist parties are
27 highly inconsistent across countries and time points, including with respect to their levels of
28 trust, while Geurkink (2020) argues that populist voting can be misattributed to low levels of
29 trust if populist attitudes are omitted from models. If our concern is to understand the
30 effects of place on discontent and trust, then populist voting may be a blunt instrument.
31 Surveys that directly measure feelings of discontent and distrust offer a potential alternative
32 to obtain these insights.

33 Our study utilises data from an original survey, designed to test contextual effects on a
34 place-sensitive measure of political trust: how much people feel politicians care about their
35 area. This speaks to the critical ‘intrinsic commitment’ component of trust¹, while also
36 corresponding to the ‘left behind’ worldview discussed by Rodríguez-Pose (2018). In the
37 economic voting literature, judgments about and based on individual circumstances have
38 been referred to as ‘egotropic’, while judgments about and based on local conditions have
39 been referred to as ‘communitropic’ (Rogers, 2014).² In keeping, we call the measure used
40 here ‘communitropic trust’, to reflect both the local focus of the trust judgment and its
41 expected basis in the (real and perceived) local environment.³

1 The second main limitation of the ‘places that don’t matter’ thesis is its tendency to flatten
2 the politics of place onto a single geographic axis between less-dense, economically
3 unsuccessful areas on the one hand and denser, more prosperous areas on the other hand.
4 After all, not all cities are economically vibrant and not all towns and villages are lagging.
5 More importantly, Rodríguez-Pose’s argument implies that different areas will politically
6 polarise only to the extent that they economically polarise. A rich literature on the rural-
7 urban or ‘density’ divide (Wilkinson, 2019) suggests something different: a broader social
8 conflict cutting across class and wealth gaps (Gimpel, Lovin, Moy and Reeves 2020), which
9 may also have consequences for trust. Our core research question stems from this: what
10 effect do the deprivation and density divides have on trust? We argue that – separating out
11 these spatial dimensions and including each as independent contextual predictors – more
12 deprived areas and low-density rural areas will be lower in (communitropic) trust.

13 The insights from this literature bring us to the third (and critical) limitation: the need for a
14 better model of the diversity of place-based grievances beyond the economic. Borrowing
15 from both the populism literature, urban and rural politics literatures, and an important (if
16 U.S.-centric) strand of research into rural resentment, we begin to flesh out such a model.
17 The main feature of this is an extension to *social* grievances, specifically feelings that one’s
18 area is marginal to society. Alongside a measure of the area’s perceived economic
19 deprivation, our survey incorporates an adapted measure of an area’s perceived ‘social
20 marginality’. These are used in two ways: we explore the association between these place-
21 based grievances and communitropic trust, and we model each grievance as an outcome of
22 context. By doing so, we address another important question: what resentments are
23 associated with feelings of distrust in the ‘places that don’t matter’? We contend that there
24 will be a difference in which resentments dominate: as people from economically lagging
25 areas see their areas as both economically deprived and socially marginal, whereas people
26 from rural areas will tend to focus on the social marginality of their area.

27 Our empirical analysis tests the effects of geographic contexts corresponding to the ‘places
28 that don’t matter’. At a highly localised level, we use population density to proxy rurality
29 and the percentage of jobs in ‘routine’ occupations to proxy economic deprivation (that is,
30 the degree to which a local economy is reliant on low-skilled jobs, *contra* to the prevalence
31 of high skill, professional jobs in the places that ‘do matter’). We find that both density and
32 the proportion of routine jobs are linked to perceptions that one’s area is not cared about
33 by politicians. We then proceed to explore place-based resentments that are likely to be
34 associated with lower trust. We find both subjective economic deprivation and feelings of
35 social marginality predict lower trust, although we are cautious with regard to causal
36 inference. As well as lower trust, population density predicts social marginality but not
37 subjective economic deprivation, while routine jobs predict both subjective economic
38 deprivation and social marginality. We find that the larger and more consistent effects, on
39 both trust and the other outcomes, emerge from economic rather than urban-rural context.

40 Notwithstanding our concerns with his argument, our results support the focus of
41 Rodríguez-Pose (2018) on the damaging effects of the unequal economic geography found
42 in many countries. However, the ‘places that don’t matter’ manifest a multi-faceted sense

1 of grievance, encompassing a sense of being at the margins of today's society. The response
2 of political elites is liable to be more successful in increasing trust if it engages with this –
3 not least because an economic response is unlikely to reduce rural distrust, which does not
4 appear rooted in economic concerns. In our conclusion, we discuss what such a response
5 might entail, and the pitfalls of current policy agendas, especially in the UK context.

6

7 **2 A 'geography of discontent'? Big claims, bigger gaps**

8 While the 'geography of discontent' (McCann, 2019) is widely referred to in discussions of
9 contemporary politics, few studies directly or systematically test this thesis. Geographic
10 divides are comparatively well understood in some developing countries such as China,
11 where despite a high trust baseline, urbanites tend to be more distrusting of government
12 institutions (despite the greater affluence and education of city-dwellers), while ruralites
13 trust the central government, but less so its local arms (e.g. Wang and You, 2016; Li, 2004).

14 In developed, democratic countries, examples of a rather sparser literature include Gidengil
15 (1990), who finds significant regional variation in external efficacy in Canada, explained not
16 by compositional factors but by 'the region's location in the centre-periphery system'. In
17 'depressed' and 'industrial' areas, people are lower in efficacy than in 'centres' and
18 'secondary centres'. Stein, Buck and Bjørnå (2019) similarly show that trust is lower in
19 Norway's periphery than its centre: yet this was not explained by any third variables such as
20 economic performance (indeed, county-level GDP was not associated with greater trust).⁴ If
21 there is a pattern to these results, it may be that at a local level economic performance and
22 trust do not always march in lockstep.

23 However, highly unequal contexts (such as the US) may prime people to be more responsive
24 to their economic environment. Studies concerning the relationship between inequality and
25 political participation (e.g. Solt 2008, 2010; Stockemer and Scruggs, 2012; Jaime-Castillo,
26 2009), explore the possibility that local context can reduce the willingness of individuals to
27 participate. For example, Soss and Jacobs (2010) show that propensity to vote is
28 substantially lower in low-income counties of the US, a finding which they interpret as
29 reflecting a divide in 'collective efficacy' including 'beliefs in government responsiveness'
30 between neighbourhoods. Nonetheless, direct studies of these attitudes are lacking.

31 Another high-inequality context, the UK, is a modest exception in having more than one
32 recent analysis of the 'geography of discontent'. Jennings and Stoker (2016) identified two
33 types of area, 'cosmopolitan' and 'backwater', which they defined as having different levels
34 of access to high-skilled jobs and connectedness to the global economy. More peripheral
35 'backwaters', perhaps surprisingly, were not higher in political discontent, measured by
36 distrust in MPs/politicians and dissatisfaction with UK democracy, despite expressing higher
37 levels of other grievances such as anti-immigration and Eurosceptic attitudes. According to
38 this account the 'places that don't matter' could be characterised by social conservatism,
39 not political discontent. McKay (2019) follows a similar line of enquiry, finding that living in a
40 lower-income area was associated with the belief that local people were not listened to,

1 even controlling for individual economic circumstances and other demographics.
2 Furthermore, McKay (2019) notes that low population density was also a significant
3 predictor of discontent, reinforcing the importance of considering rurality and economic
4 position independently. Given the discordance between the results of these alternative
5 studies in the UK-context, and the relative lack of focus on urban-rural divides in political
6 trust more generally, further investigation is needed. We address this gap by testing two key
7 hypotheses relating to place and trust:

8 *H1*: The higher the proportion of routine jobs in an area, the lower the level of
9 communitropic trust.

10 *H2*: The lower the population density of an area, the lower the level of
11 communitropic trust.

12 We argue that these different place characteristics elicit a different mix of grievances, which
13 may help us to understand the roots of their lack of trust. The next section explores the
14 significance of *social marginality* to trust.

15

16 **3 Bringing *social marginality* in**

17 Although sparse, the empirical literature we have discussed suggests that economics and
18 economic perceptions can only take us so far in understanding how context is related to
19 trust attitudes. This leads us to a major point: we cannot understand geographic divisions in
20 contemporary societies without a better model of the diversity of place-based grievances.
21 The populism literature suggests one necessary extension; namely, understanding the social
22 as well as the economic focus of grievances.

23 Weberian analysis draws attention to the ‘unequal award of *social honour*’ to occupations
24 or other social attributes, where we may observe differences between groups otherwise
25 similar in their economic circumstances (Carella and Ford, 2020). The literature suggests
26 that certain groups in society, defined along various axes, have developed a sense of status
27 anxiety or threat. Two social trends are believed to have triggered anxieties. First, as Sandel
28 (2020) and others have argued, status has become increasingly associated with merit – in
29 turn, strongly associated with educational attainment (see e.g. Bovens and Wille, 2017).
30 Those lacking in formal qualifications thus experience this anxiety or threat. Second, the
31 growth of migration to Europe and North America from Africa, Asia and Latin America, and
32 the challenges to ‘racial hierarchy’ emerging from this, have been linked to anxiety or threat
33 among white native majorities (e.g. Norris and Inglehart, 2019). Social marginality is thus
34 closely linked to the concept of relative deprivation (Runciman, 1966): a social psychological
35 concept which posits that ‘If comparisons to other people, groups, or even themselves at
36 different points in time lead people to believe that they do not have what they deserve,
37 they will be angry and resentful’ – at least in some cases, directing their anger at the wider
38 system (Smith et al, 2012).⁵

1 These anxieties are associated with Brexit support (Antonucci *et al*, 2017) and, crucially,
2 with political discontent. Gest *et al* (2018) show that, for the UK and US, people feeling less
3 socially central are also more likely to believe politicians don't care about people like them.
4 Gidron and Hall (2020) find that, controlling for occupation, income, education and a variety
5 of other factors, those lower in subjective social status were less satisfied with democracy
6 and less trusting in politicians or parliament. In short, early indications are that attitudes
7 around social status or centrality deserve more attention in political science, alongside
8 perceptions of economic deprivation, whether these are understood as direct antecedents
9 to (dis)trust or to develop alongside it.

10 In our view, it also seems clear that social status and significance is attached to places, as
11 well as demographic groups. Moreover, this can evolve over time and these changes can
12 evoke anxieties and threats of their own. Rodríguez-Pose uses Liverpool as an example of a
13 place in economic decline, but it can also be noted for the rich social meanings attached to
14 the city. Boland (2008) finds that locals were highly 'sensitised to negative images that still
15 cloud Liverpool in the national psyche', from the 'the unsavoury behaviour of local people
16 (e.g. thieving 'scallies'), place characteristics (e.g. violent, dirty, deprived) and a hangover
17 from earlier decades (e.g. radicalism, riots)'. This 'territorial stigmatisation' (Wacquant,
18 2008) is made apparent both in local-level interactions (Hall, 2003) and through the UK's
19 national entertainment and news media environment, in which people are often confronted
20 with the judgments of outsiders: since the 2000s, online 'Crap Towns' surveys, where
21 anyone can vote on and describe the worst places in Britain, have become fodder for
22 bestselling books and the national news (Gilmore, 2013).

23 Political science research suggests that trust judgments are linked to these status threats as
24 well as economic perceptions. However, these theories have not been extended to
25 perceptions of place – even though people have an acute sense of their area's economic
26 fortunes and position in society, as well as their own. Our next hypothesis tests this novel
27 extension of the theory.

28 *H3: The higher one's perceptions of economic deprivation and social marginality are,*
29 *the lower the level of communitropic trust.*

30

31 While the images and subjective status of places have long been a subject of urban
32 development and management studies, they have rarely been considered in political
33 science. While these literatures emphasise the local and specific, we are more interested in
34 generalisable theory: what are the kinds of places in which people will tend to feel socially
35 marginal, and why?

36

37 **3.1 The geography of social marginality**

38 In many societies, social class is a powerful driver of how we see ourselves and others
39 (Manstead, 2018). Loss of status among working-class people has been a major theme in

1 academic discussions of political discontent and populist backlash. According to Gest (2017),
2 his working-class interviewees in the outer London borough of Barking and Dagenham
3 'sense a positional shift to the fringe of British society', which is accompanied by the
4 tendency for working-class individuals and groups to receive derogatory labels such as
5 'chav' (also extensively discussed by Jones, 2011). However, the Liverpool example points to
6 how the (real and perceived) social marginalisation of working-class *people* becomes a
7 problem for *places*, also, as places are judged in large part through the image of their
8 inhabitants.

9 For Hancock and Mooney (2013), 'classed assumptions' are key to 'territorial stigmatization
10 in the contemporary UK'. In particular, the working-class council estate has played a role as
11 a generic symbol of a low-status, 'problem' area. This is again an example of where the
12 meanings attached to places have changed over time: social housing in the UK became more
13 'residualised' among low income groups since the 1970s (Farrall *et al*, 2016), facilitating a
14 change towards negative perceptions around estates and their residents (Pearce and Vine,
15 2014) which are to some degree internalised by residents themselves (Pearce and Milne,
16 2010). This suggests that – whatever locally specific dynamics are at work - working-class
17 spaces as a whole are liable to experience marginalisation. The following hypothesis tests
18 how this class dynamic structures not only economic experiences, but the sense of social
19 marginality.

20 *H4*: The higher the proportion of routine jobs in an area, the more likely people are
21 to perceive that their areas are economically deprived *and* socially marginal.

22

23 Our discussion so far of place and 'social marginality' is strongly informed by an urban
24 politics literature that, by its nature, excludes the rural. As the empirical literature suggests
25 – and we predict – that these are low trust areas, it is vital to understand them, and what
26 might explain these trust gaps compared to more densely populated areas. From US studies,
27 there is an emerging literature on rural resentment: Cramer (2016) conducted extensive
28 fieldwork in rural areas of Wisconsin which would be considered 'white working class'.
29 Discussions showed that respondents 'intertwined place and class' using categories that
30 'convey a perception of relative wealth and power': 'rural folks' being the game's losers. On
31 some level, this is understandable on a purely economic basis: in the US, there is more
32 deprivation in rural than urban areas (e.g. Albrecht and Albrecht, 2009). However, this was
33 integrated with a sense of being 'misunderstood and disrespected by city folks', reflecting
34 divides beyond the economic.

35 Quantitative research has since carried these insights forward, addressing concerns about
36 their generalisability. Munis (2020) conducts a nationwide US survey intended to measure
37 place resentment among rural areas, suburbs and towns towards cities/urban areas, and
38 among cities towards small towns/rural areas. Munis finds a highly asymmetric pattern of
39 resentments, wherein other areas are more resentful of cities than cities are of them.
40 Furthermore, resentment of cities was even higher in rural areas than suburbs and towns,

1 indicating that, as population density decreases, stronger feelings of marginality are
2 observed.

3 In the UK, concepts of rural resentment specifically, and place resentment more generally,
4 have not been explored in this level of depth in political science. Research in rural studies
5 has nonetheless debated whether similar resentments are felt by ruralites in the UK. With
6 the lack of a clear economic divide (Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs,
7 2019), a different divide – rooted in culture – has been more often discussed. The
8 Countryside Alliance protests of the early 2000s constituted an ‘identity politics centred on
9 locale’, pointedly marching on cities in defence of a ‘rural way of life’ made concrete in the
10 issue of fox hunting (Brooks, 2020). However, the notion that this reflected the concerns of
11 rural people in general has been widely disputed (Anderson, 2006). Furthermore, people in
12 Britain seem somewhat wary of a divide narrative: in a recent survey, when primed to think
13 about whether they live in an urban or a rural area, more people stated that they had
14 ‘most/some things in common’ than said they had ‘not much/nothing in common’, although
15 strikingly few (10%) said ‘most things in common’ (YouGov, 2017).

16 More broadly, British society is widely represented in culture and in political rhetoric as
17 diverse, inclusive and comfortable with change: for example, the 2012 Olympics hinged on a
18 ‘multicultural nationalism’ linked to the diversity of London (Winter, 2013). However, rural
19 areas are far more ethnically homogenous than urban areas (ONS 2013), with high social
20 trust that is specific to their neighbourhood in-group (ONS 2016). These aspects of their
21 environment and worldview may leave them feeling less central in this vision of
22 contemporary British society, even if they harbour no specific resentments towards urban
23 Britain per se, while residents of densely populated, diverse cities may feel the opposite,
24 compared to other rural areas and even many towns.

25 While these sentiments – a divide in cultural custom or outlook – may be less intensely felt
26 than American rural resentment, it is an important empirical question whether social
27 grievances accompany the political in the UK context. We therefore test the following
28 hypothesis:

29 *H5: The lower the population density of an area, the more likely people are to*
30 *perceive that their area is socially marginal.*

31

32 **4 Data and method**

33 Our data is from a nationally representative online survey of 1,634 adults carried out by Sky
34 Data in Britain (England, Wales and Scotland) between the 20th and 30th October, 2017.⁶ The
35 core feature, for our purposes, is the inclusion of measures adapted from those used by
36 Gest *et al* (2018). The measures were originally developed by Gest and colleagues through
37 extensive fieldwork in white working-class communities in the US and Britain, and sought to
38 measure relative deprivation in economic, social and political domains. We undertake two
39 key adaptations: our questions ask people about the relative deprivation of *their area*, as

1 well as them individually, and we interpret the social and political measures as referring to
2 slightly different concepts to those of Gest *et al* (2018).

3 We begin by discussing our measures of political trust:

- 4 • POLITICAL TRUST: “Using the 0-10 scale below, how much do you think politicians
5 care about [*your area/people like you*]?”

6 Following the logic of the earlier discussion, the former (‘your area’) can be considered to
7 denote communitropic trust, while the latter (‘people like you’) corresponds to egotropic
8 trust.

9 These survey items are novel (as they relate to place), and require justification as to the
10 degree to which they can be equated with *trust* judgments. We consider these as measures
11 which tap trust in the intrinsic commitment or benevolence of politicians towards the
12 individual and to their area, classically understood as a dimension of trust alongside
13 competence and others (van Elsas, 2015)⁷. Kasperson et al (1992) labelled this component
14 ‘care’, and this is helpfully reflected in the wording of the questions. To the extent that a
15 summary trust judgment exists about any object of trust, such as ‘politicians’, this is strongly
16 influenced by judgments of caring (van der Meer, 2010). Our trust items share some
17 phrasing with typical ‘external efficacy’ (EE) measures, but there are important (if subtle)
18 differences.⁸ First, EE items concentrate on how much politicians care about people’s wishes
19 and views, not how much they care about people: a patrician government which looked
20 after people’s best interests without adapting to their policy preferences could be trusted
21 but also make people less efficacious. Secondly, EE attitudes are outcome-focused
22 (Esaiaasson et al, 2015) but it is not necessary to expect favourable outcomes to trust that
23 politicians care. Rather than EE or summary trust judgments, we believe our items are best
24 interpreted as specific trust in politicians’ benevolence.

25 The communitropic item has specific benefits for our purposes. As well as measuring trust
26 in this sense, it closely approximates what it means to feel one’s area does or doesn’t
27 matter politically: thereby tapping the place-based sentiments of discontent discussed by
28 Rodriguez-Pose (2018). We expect the content of communitropic and egotropic judgments
29 to be different, not only in the different experiences they draw on (individual vs individuals
30 in their environment and community) but in the different, narrower range of considerations
31 which are cognitively accessible for communitropic trust (as people are less equipped to
32 assess, say, opinion-policy congruence between their area and government than between
33 themselves and government). Given we have single-item measures of egotropic and
34 communitropic trust, it is unfortunately not possible to conduct analysis of discriminant
35 validity between the items. However, two-thirds of respondents placed themselves at a
36 different point on the (identically scaled) egotropic and communitropic items, suggesting
37 that most people responded to the particularities of the items despite the fact these were
38 asked together. Our other key variables are as follows:

- 39 • ECONOMIC DEPRIVATION: “Using the 0 to 10 scale below, how financially well off do
40 you consider *your area* compared to other *areas* in the United Kingdom?” (reversed
41 so that 10 = ‘much less well off’, 0 = ‘much more well off’).

- 1 • SOCIAL MARGINALITY: respondents were presented with a diagram of four
2 concentric circles (see Figure A-1 of the appendix). The centre circle was labelled
3 with a '1' and the outer circle with a '4', and respondents were told that the
4 diagram depicted: "... how important *particular areas* are to your society. '1'
5 represents those *areas* that are considered the most central and important to
6 society, whereas '4' represents those *areas* that are considered the least central and
7 important to society'. Thinking about this, which group do you believe *the area*
8 *where you live belongs to?*"⁹

9 Again, as a consequence of having single-item measures for these concepts, we cannot test
10 discriminant validity between the communitropic measures of economic deprivation, social
11 marginality and trust. For the purposes of transparency, we present a correlation matrix of
12 these variables, and the egotropic trust variable, in Figure A-2 of the appendix.

13 In order to undertake contextual analysis, respondents are matched at the postcode district
14 level to official statistical measures. As a proxy for economic deprivation, we use data on the
15 occupational composition of each area in 2011 (the date of the last census).¹⁰ The National
16 Statistics Socio-economic classification (NS-SEC) breaks occupations down into eight analytic
17 classes. We collapse the lower end of the NS-SEC scheme into a 'routine jobs' measure that
18 combines semi-routine occupations, routine-occupations and those who have never worked
19 or are long-term unemployed. We then calculate this as a proportion of usual residents aged
20 16 to 74 in each postcode district. There is large geographic variation: in EC4A, a Central
21 London location home to the headquarters of Goldman Sachs International, just 3% work in
22 routine jobs, while in the Easterhouse area of Glasgow, 75% are classified as doing so¹¹.

23 Second, owing to the lack of an official urban-rural indicator at the postcode district level
24 (the most fine-grained areal unit within which we can locate respondents) we use a proxy
25 measure for how rural or urban an area is. We do this by collecting data on the population
26 density of each area, dividing its estimated total population (using mid-year population
27 estimates at the time of the survey in 2017) by its area in hectares. Although the literature
28 has noted certain problems with such a proxy, rural-urban classification by bodies such as
29 the OECD and European Commission is still predominantly or solely based on the population
30 density of areas (Pagliacci, 2016). This continuous measure also has the advantage of
31 enhanced ability to detect a non-linear relationship between rural-urban context and the
32 dependent variable(s). To reduce skew, for use in all analysis, we log-transform this measure
33 after adding a constant of 1, such that near-zero values are transformed to near-zero on the
34 logged scale and the scale runs to a maximum of 5.3.

35 In testing contextual effects, it is generally appropriate to use multilevel regression. We
36 utilise multilevel models (with postcode districts at the level-2 unit) where the macro
37 indicators are introduced as explanatory variables, and cluster standard errors where they
38 are not. We establish for each of our outcomes that there is variation to be explained at the
39 postcode district level before introducing macro-indicators. As there are a small number of
40 observations per group (1.5), it could be questioned whether this approach is appropriate,
41 though Bell et al (2008) show that unbiased point estimates and standard errors can still be

1 obtained with sparse data structures. We replicate our analysis with single-level models and
2 find no substantive differences, increasing our confidence in our findings.

3

4 **5 Results**

5 **5.1 Bivariate analysis**

6 To begin to understand the relationship between objective context and our outcomes, we
7 fit a series of local polynomial regressions. Firstly, we explore the relationship between the
8 key outcome variable, what we call communitropic trust, and our two measures of
9 context.¹² These results are shown in Figure 1.

10 INSERT HERE: Figure 1. Graphs of local polynomial regressions of routine jobs and
11 population density on communitropic trust

12

13 This analysis shows that, as the proportion of routine jobs in an area increases, people tend
14 to be lower in communitropic trust: although in the most deprived communities the effect
15 may slightly diminish. Meanwhile, as population density increases, people's views are not
16 quite so negative, with a marked increase in trust in the most densely populated postcode
17 districts.

18 We can also explore the relationship between these contexts and perceptions of what we
19 call 'economic' and 'social' deprivation. Figures 2 and 3 apply the same method to these
20 alternative measures.

21

22 INSERT HERE: Figure 2. Graphs of local polynomial regressions of routine jobs and
23 population density on perceived economic deprivation.

24 INSERT HERE: Figure 3. Graphs of local polynomial regressions of routine jobs and
25 population density on perceived social marginality.

26 As expected, communities with higher proportions of routine jobs have a strong tendency to
27 view their area as worse off than others. Beyond this, they also have stronger feelings of
28 social marginality. In contrast, less densely populated areas, often assumed to be 'places
29 that don't matter' in economic terms, are no more likely to perceive themselves as worse
30 off compared to other areas. However, they do have a stronger sense of social marginality,
31 feelings of social unimportance, than highly dense areas.

32 This initial analysis begins to indicate support for our hypotheses around contextual effects
33 (H1-H2, H4-H5). However, to explore this properly, we must control for individual-level
34 demographics and political attitudes.

35

36 **5.2 Regression analysis**

1 We next run a series of regression models, including a range of individual-level controls
2 which we keep consistent across the models.

3 Firstly, we control for which of the UK's constituent nations the respondent lives in, as these
4 are correlated with both the contextual variables and plausibly with economic, social and
5 political grievances.

6 Next, we control for a number of demographic predictors based on the existing studies of
7 economic, social and political discontent and grievances (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). We
8 include gender, as men are thought to be more inclined to believe they are losing status in
9 today's society and to be leading the 'backlash' against a political order which enables this
10 loss. We include a dummy for ethnicity (white vs. non-white), as white people appear more
11 inclined to a similar set of beliefs, perhaps as a direct consequence of rising numbers and
12 perceived socio-political importance of ethnic minorities. In addition, we include an age
13 variable, measured continuously in years, as older people are widely perceived to feel more
14 discomfited by these changes.

15 We also control for the vote intention of respondents, as an approximation of both their
16 level of political engagement and their underlying partisan preferences. Less engaged voters
17 may be precisely those most inclined to the grievances measured here: voters for the radical
18 right UKIP party have been noted for their greater social, economic and political deprivation
19 (Gest *et al*, 2018), while there is a well-known 'winner-loser effect' wherein major party
20 supporters are more politically dissatisfied when their party is out of power (Anderson,
21 2005). We also control for the respondent's Leave/Remain vote in the 2016 EU referendum.
22 The relationship between economic, social and political grievances and people's 2016 votes
23 is widely debated (see Ford and Sobolewska, 2020, for a summary). However, the fact that
24 this study took place in a context where the referendum was the last salient electoral event
25 in voters' minds means that Remainers could behave like typical political 'losers' and show
26 greater dissatisfaction. Voting at elections is heavily geographically polarised in the UK
27 context, and this extended to the EU referendum, so correlations with the contextual
28 variables are also likely.

29 The output for each model, including these various controls, is displayed in Table 1. Below,
30 we discuss these results one-by-one.

31 INSERT HERE: Table 1. *Regression models of communitropic trust, economic deprivation and*
32 *social marginality.*

33

34 Model 1 tests the effects of each contextual variable on communitropic trust. The
35 coefficient of routine jobs is negative and highly statistically significant, meaning that the
36 more routine jobs in a postcode district, the less likely people are to believe politicians care
37 about the area. Meanwhile, the coefficient for (logged) population density is positive: in less
38 dense areas, communitropic trust is therefore lower. These results conform with the
39 bivariate correlations shown above, and further support Hypotheses 1 and 2.

1 Model 2 adds a control for egotropic trust the sense that politicians care about people
2 individually. It is important that the contextual effects should survive the addition of this
3 variable because the theory is that people develop a distinctive sense of their *place* not
4 mattering. Furthermore, we are conscious that our models do not include other
5 demographics key to the 'left-behind' story, principally education and social class, which
6 may be correlated with contextual factors but were not collected as part of the survey.
7 These demographics should only be associated with the DV through egotropic trust, so
8 controlling for egotropic trust also minimises omitted variable bias that might occur due to
9 absent individual-level demographic factors.

10 We observe in column 2 that these effects are resilient, increasing our confidence in
11 rejecting the null for both Hypothesis 1 and Hypothesis 2. This model provides the best
12 grounds for evaluating the substantive size of contextual effects. A one standard deviation
13 increase in routine jobs is associated with an 0.19 standard deviation decrease in
14 communtropic trust, while a one standard deviation increase in (logged) population density
15 is associated with a 0.08 standard deviation increase in communtropic trust. Therefore,
16 while both make a meaningful contribution to perceptions, the effect of economic rather
17 than urban-rural context appears more substantial on how much people feel politicians care
18 about their area.

19 Interestingly, effects of election/referendum voting behaviours in Model (1) are by contrast
20 attenuated or eliminated, suggesting that effects observed in Model (1) are a spill-over of
21 their effects on egocentric trust. By contrast, we find that an age effect emerges whereby
22 older people are more likely to be low in communtropic trust when egocentric trust is held
23 constant.

24 In Model 3, we test for an effect of perceived economic deprivation and social marginality
25 on communtropic trust, controlling for other factors. Our theory, as set out by Hypothesis
26 3, is that each of these will be associated with lower communtropic trust, though we must
27 reiterate that this is not a causal claim. We find, in column 3, that this is indeed the case.
28 However, the (standardised) effect of economic deprivation is more than twice that of social
29 marginality. Among our control variables, the coefficients for nation are worth noting.
30 Controlling for economic deprivation and social marginality, communtropic trust is higher
31 in Wales and lower in Scotland than would be expected.

32 In Models 4 and 5, we use perceived economic deprivation and social marginality as
33 outcomes. As our earlier analysis suggested, column 4 indicates that the proportion of
34 routine jobs in an area is a strong predictor of feelings of economic deprivation, but
35 population density is not a predictor. For social marginality, both contextual variables are
36 predictors. Together, these results support Hypotheses 4 and 5. For these significant effects,
37 the effect sizes are large. A one standard deviation increase in the share of routine jobs in
38 an area is associated with an 0.47 standard deviation increase in perceived economic
39 deprivation and a 0.26 standard deviation increase in perceived social marginality.
40 Meanwhile, a one standard deviation increase in population density, while not associated
41 with perceived economic deprivation, is associated with a 0.08 standard deviation decrease
42 in perceived social marginality.

1 Among our control variables, the patterns of partisan support and referendum voting that
2 are linked to low communitropic trust are also linked to social and economic deprivation.
3 Namely, these are voting Labour, UKIP and Leave, but the greater dissatisfaction is also
4 observed among undecided voters and non-voters.

5 Note that across all models, individual-level demographics have virtually zero capacity to
6 predict the belief that one's area is ignored, or perceptions of social marginality. This is
7 intriguing, in that particular demographic groups have been widely believed to be hotbeds
8 of political and social discontent more generally. Namely, older white men are often
9 considered to constitute a 'left-behind' cohort whose dissatisfaction with a changing social
10 and political order has, in many countries, found expression in voting for the radical right
11 (Inglehart and Norris, 2016). Yet neither gender nor ethnicity are significant in even one
12 model, while age is significant in just one. However, it could be the case that our models do
13 not include other demographics key to the left-behind story, principally education and social
14 class. We must therefore be cautious: we cannot say that these attitudes are entirely about
15 places not people, but our analysis gives stronger support to the former, owing to strong
16 and consistent effects of context on perceptions of the economic, social and political
17 standing of one's area.

18

19 **6 Conclusion**

20 Political events of recent years have drawn attention to the relationship between geography
21 and political attitudes and behaviours. In many studies, broad claims are made with direct
22 relevance to the role of political trust (and discontent), yet the links between geography and
23 trust are still poorly understood. We focus on Rodriguez-Pose (2018), both as an influential
24 study in its own right and one indicative of broader strains in analysis and commentary. We
25 have three concerns relating to most existing studies that relate to this topic: inferring
26 attitudes from voting behaviours (since not all populist right voters are discontented
27 voters); assuming a single axis of geographic division (since not all cities are economically
28 vibrant, and not all towns are lagging); and the neglect of place-based grievances other than
29 the economic (since we must also consider people's sense of being at society's fringes). This
30 article addresses these concerns through an enhanced theoretical framework, and an
31 empirical analysis testing the attitudinal component of the framework.

32 We offer novel and original survey data that asks questions about place to tap multiple
33 sources of grievance (economic, social, political) which are important to our framework, and
34 allows us to analyse the effects of different contexts on these grievances. Our results speak
35 to the need to unpick the 'places which don't matter'. These are a diverse group of places in
36 their own right, reaching a similar (discontented) outlook on politics for different reasons.
37 To recap our results, we find that economically worse-off areas and more rural areas, as
38 measured according to our proxies, are significantly lower in communitropic trust – that is,
39 less likely to believe that politicians care about their area. These results hold controlling for
40 various individual-level demographics and political characteristics, and holding constant
41 egotropic trust, or a *personal* sense of being uncared for by politicians. People who see their

1 areas as more economically and socially deprived are also lower in communitropic trust.
2 This could suggest that these perceptions are a relevant basis for trust judgments, although
3 observational data does not allow us to be certain in making this causal inference. In turn, in
4 line with expectations, population density predicts feelings of social marginality but not
5 subjective economic deprivation, while the proportion of routine jobs in an area predicts
6 both subjective economic deprivation and social marginality. These results are consistent
7 with each of our five hypotheses.

8 Our claims must be clearly qualified here, for several reasons. First, our original constructs
9 are tapped by single items and were not fielded with any conventional trust items, making it
10 difficult to ascertain an attitude of communitropic trust and its precise relationship to
11 broader trust judgments. The wording of the items encourage a focus on perceptions of
12 benevolence over other dimensions of trustworthiness, such as competence and integrity
13 and it is possible to believe that politicians care for one's community while thinking that
14 they cannot be trusted to deliver for it. However, this study opens the door for further
15 research (both quantitative and qualitative) on how people trust X to do Y *for* Z – Z being
16 their community or other relevant in-group.

17 We must also note that our empirical analysis is bound to a specific place and time. While
18 other research (e.g. Rodriguez-Pose, 2018) suggests the UK is indicative of wider trends, the
19 theories here should be tested in other countries and regions. We expect that the specific
20 geographical predictors could change in different country-contexts, and researchers should
21 be sensitive how the same types of places might be experienced differently in these varied
22 contexts. For example, studies suggest that in the developing world trust may be *higher* in
23 rural than in urban areas (Brinkerhoff et al, 2017; Carreras and Bowler, 2019): this contrast
24 with studies such as ours and the US rural resentment literature is a compelling puzzle for
25 future investigation. Temporally, our opinion data was collected at a snapshot in time
26 (October 2017) during a turbulent period in British politics. Many accounts, including
27 Rodriguez-Pose (2018) posit a long-term geographical polarisation, which we cannot speak
28 to. If such a polarisation has taken place, however, our analysis leads us to expect that the
29 changing *status* attached to places might be as important as economic change.

30 The attitudes we explore here have come to the fore owing to significant disruptions to
31 mainstream politics, but their effects on political behaviour remain to be demonstrated.
32 Rodriguez-Pose (2018) argues that right-wing populists have been the beneficiaries of loss
33 of trust among people in the 'places that don't matter'. We consider this to be plausible:
34 political distrust is often though not always linked to radical right voting (Roodjuin, 2018).
35 Furthermore, right-wing populists may be effective at capitalising on underlying place
36 based-grievances both economic and socio-cultural. For example, Trump's promise to bring
37 back the mines to places such as Minnesota's 'Iron Range' combined an economic message
38 with an appeal to the masculinity associated with the industry framed in opposition to 'elite
39 urban environmentalists' (Kojola, 2018). However, other possibilities should be explored by
40 researchers, including whether radical left parties can benefit, whether people simply
41 disengage (Soss and Jacobs, 2009), or indeed, whether mainstream parties can adapt to
42 these challenges and secure voter loyalty. To understand why mainstream parties lose

1 diffuse support in particular places will also involve engaging with party images: how do
2 parties become associated with places and types of places in the minds of voters? And,
3 through local campaigning or political communication and messaging, can parties reshape
4 these images?

5 Despite these unresolved puzzles, we join the literature in arguing that geographic divides
6 present a problem for mainstream politics in two respects: risking loss of (certain forms of)
7 trust in political systems and potentially eroding support for mainstream parties. However,
8 we should not ignore the efforts that mainstream parties and politicians have made, and are
9 currently making, to (re)connect with the places that are said not to matter. Returning to
10 the example of Liverpool, the Conservative Michael Heseltine was made 'minister for
11 Merseyside' in the 1980s and presided over a programme of urban regeneration, while New
12 Labour showed 'commitment to regional policy' focused on 'pockets' of deprivation
13 (Dalingwater, 2011). Likewise, the incumbent Conservative government, as of 2021, has
14 made much of its agenda for 'levelling up' areas of the country that have experienced less
15 economic growth. Our study, like Rodriguez-Pose (2018), suggests that this focus on
16 economic grievance is valuable. However, it has been widely questioned whether these
17 policies will deliver effective outcomes or follow impartial and transparent processes, both
18 of which are typically understood as critical for trust (Hibbing and Theiss-Morse, 2001). Any
19 genuine process for healing divides must give the impression of the 'care' which, based on
20 our data, people plainly believe is lacking.

21 As evidenced by our findings, politicians must also recognise that these are areas that,
22 beyond their economic grievances, feel pushed to the margins of contemporary society
23 (indeed, in rural areas, only the latter grievance appears relevant). We have discussed this
24 social marginality as a perception of being judged (negatively) by outsiders, a problem for
25 which there is no obvious policy prescription. However, these grievances connect with trust
26 because the key image of government in people's lives is a national government consisting
27 of outsiders. People express higher trust the more localised the institution that they are
28 asked about (Gerring and Veenendaal, 2020), partly because the political actors involved are
29 'like us' not 'like them', and expected to be more sympathetic to and knowledgeable about
30 their constituents. Decentralisation may thus curb the damaging effects of place-based
31 grievances on national politics

32 To conclude, we regard the increasing focus on place and politics as a clear positive, and
33 have added to the growing body of knowledge on the topic. We have shown that, in a
34 country held up as indicative of geographic divides, different local contexts are associated
35 with different kinds of grievance, and this appears to have consequences for political trust.
36 We have pointed out certain pitfalls to avoid in subsequent research, and pointed the way
37 to a research agenda that might produce vital knowledge and even inform policy debates. If
38 the 'places that don't matter' truly matter to political scientists, then we must make every
39 effort to develop our understanding of them.

40

41

1 **7 Tables**

2 *Table 1. Regression models of communitropic trust, economic deprivation and social*
 3 *marginality.*

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)
	Communitropic trust			Subjective economic deprivation of area	Subjective social marginality of area
% Routine jobs	-0.007***	-0.005***		0.014***	0.008***
Population density (log)	0.017**	0.017***		-0.005	-0.019**
Egotropic trust		0.588***			
Area subjective economic deprivation			-0.406***		
Area subjective social marginality			-0.159***		
Female	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Gender: male (base: female)	-0.008	-0.003	-0.009	-0.005	-0.005
Ethnicity (base: white)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Non-white	0.010	0.027	0.019	0.004	-0.026
Prefer not to say	0.032	0.069	0.060	0.026	0.040
Age (years)	0.000	-0.001*	0.000	0.000	-0.000
Nation (base: England)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Wales	0.063*	0.031	0.080***	0.064*	0.001
Scotland	-0.039	-0.012	-0.066**	-0.024	-0.060*
EU vote: Leave (base: Remain)	-0.078***	-0.018	-0.054***	0.045***	0.047**
Vote intention (base: Conservative)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Labour	-0.093***	-0.030*	-0.043**	0.093***	0.069***
Lib Dem	-0.039	-0.023	-0.023	0.020	0.063
UKIP	-0.173***	-0.068***	-0.107***	0.130***	0.072*
Green	-0.074	0.029	-0.032	0.072	0.119
SNP	0.041	0.060	0.067	0.041	0.052
Other minor	-0.195**	-0.090	-0.101	0.170*	0.138
Don't Know	-0.137***	-0.051**	-0.083***	0.100***	0.077**
None - won't vote	-0.178***	-0.078**	-0.129***	0.091**	0.035
Observations	1514	1514	1515	1514	1514
Level-2 unit:	Postcode district	Postcode district	None; but SEs clustered at postcode district	Postcode district	Postcode district

4

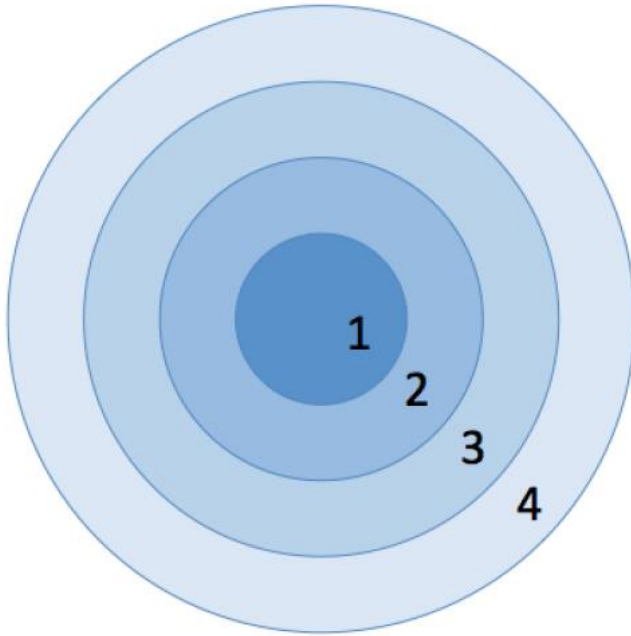
5 *[figures uploaded separately, as requested]*

6

1 **8 Appendix**

2 [also uploaded separately]

3 *Figure A-1. Social centrality question.*



4

5 Above is a diagram which represents how central and important **particular areas** are to your society.
6 '1' represents those **areas** that are considered the most central and important to society, whereas '4'
7 represents those **areas** that are considered the least central and important to society. Thinking
8 about this, which group do you believe **the area where you live belongs to?**

- 9
- 10 • 1 'Most important/central' (1)
 - 11 • 2 (2)
 - 12 • 3 (3)
 - 13 • 4 – 'Least important/central' (4)
- 14

15 *Figure A-2. Matrix of correlations.*

16

Variables	Communitropic trust	Egotropic trust	Perceived economic deprivation	Perceived social marginality
Communitropic trust	1.000			
Egotropic trust	0.630	1.000		
Perceived economic deprivation	-0.540	-0.331	1.000	
Perceived social marginality	-0.395	-0.215	0.460	1.000

17 N=1,514.

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32 **Endnotes**

¹ As discussed in Section 4 ('Data and method').

² According to Rogers (2014), communitropic considerations are conceptually distinguished from egotropic considerations by being 'other-regarding' – but the 'others' are those in your geographic community (however the individual defines this) who you are more likely to consider your in-group than others outside it. Rogers goes on to show that 'communitropic' perceptions of the economy are predicted by objective economic conditions in the area, but egotropic perceptions are not – thus they are distinguished at an empirical as well as conceptual level. He further finds that 'communitropic' economic perceptions, controlling for national and personal (egotropic) perceptions, contribute to approval of the president and of Congress, showing that people weigh communitropic considerations in making judgments about political actors.

³ For the purposes of clarity, 'communitropic trust' does not refer to the tendency to trust people within one's community: i.e. it is not a form of social trust, but a form of political trust.

⁴ Gidengil (1990) and Stein, Buck and Bjørnå (2019) frame and interpret their results with regard to centre-periphery divides. However, while we agree that such divides could be significant, they are distinct from the divides centred by Rodriguez-Pose (2018) and therefore we do not pursue the study of their effects. These papers are discussed to give a full account of the literature of the geography of discontent.

⁵ Despite this conceptual link, we choose not to frame our contribution in terms of relative deprivation primarily because our items do not demand that respondents make comparisons between their ingroup and other (specific) reference groups (which is the core analytical approach of relative deprivation theory), but to offer their sense of its status within society as a whole. It remains unclear which intergroup comparisons are likely to be consequential for anti-system attitudes such as distrust as opposed to prejudice against the outgroup (Smith et al, 2012).

⁶ Sky Data is a member of the British Polling Council.

⁷ We understand this as identical to benevolence, which is a widely-used term in trust studies.

⁸ E.g. the American National Election Study uses two items, "People like me don't have any say about what the government does" (NOSAY); and "I don't think public officials care much what people like me think" (NOCARE). The reliability and validity of external efficacy items was notably discussed by Craig et al (1990), who also show that "External efficacy is distinguished from political trust"

⁹ The dataset contains equivalent 'egotropic' measures of economic deprivation and social centrality, but these are not used in the analysis.

¹⁰ We use a proxy due to the somewhat unintuitive nature of the official deprivation statistics in the UK. These measure deprivation in a deliberately multidimensional way according to whether households meet one or more of four conditions relating to employment, education, health and disability and housing. Using such a measure in a regression would mean that the 'moving part' driving the relationship would be hard to pin down. We confirm that at the postcode district level, our proxy measure correlates very highly with multidimensional deprivation: for example, at .9 with deprivation measured in two dimensions.

¹¹ Easterhouse is, notably, the neighbourhood which, in 2002, was identified by former Conservative leader Iain Duncan Smith as an example of an area that had been failed by previous Conservative governments (Collins, 2002).

¹² For the 'routine jobs' variable, the graphs below do not use the whole range of data due to large confidence intervals at each extreme: only the 5 to 95 percentile range is used.