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Fragmentation in English local elections, 1973-2018

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Abstract

Since the UK voted to leave the EU in 2016, much academic attention has been devoted to the fragmentation of English elections and the emerging 'new divides' of English politics, with a number of competing narratives seeking the best way to characterise the emerging electoral landscape. What many of these narratives have in common is a focus on polarisation, prioritising a binary categorisation of society between, for example, towns and cities, or the winners and losers of globalisation. It is the contention of this thesis that the prevalence of these narratives, as well as the focus on general and not local elections, obscures the true heterogeneity of the fragmentation of English electoral politics, with local systems fragmenting to different extents and at different rates to one another. Using a huge dataset of ward-level electoral and demographic data to generate a combination of descriptive statistics, regression analyses, and case studies, this thesis demonstrates that the fragmentation of English local elections is, in itself, a fragmented phenomenon, occurring at different rates and to varying extents across a multitude of local contexts. Fragmentation is not limited to one type of place, such as towns or cities, and the regression models of the demographic drivers of fragmentation show that no one single group is responsible for higher levels of fragmentation, with both the 'squeezed middle' and 'left-behind' demographics being associated with higher fragmentation. Furthermore, the case studies showed that even though there are clear demographic indicators that a place might be more prone to fragmentation, local contexts can easily override national trends. Overall, this thesis demonstrates that the story of fragmentation in English local elections is a far more nuanced and complex one than much of the literature has acknowledged, and that while both the 'left-behind' and 'squeezed middle' are associated with a higher likelihood of fragmentation, local context can play an even more significant role in determining fragmentation levels in certain cases.

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This feels like the end of an era, but I'm already looking forward to the next challenge!

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Chapter 1: Introduction

The study of electoral fragmentation, which is the process by which a greater number of parties become significant actors in a given electoral system, was for much of the previous century, a relatively minor area of academic interest in the UK, often centred on issues of operationalisation and measurement rather than deep analysis of political systems. The dominance of the UK's class cleavage in determining voting patterns and the two-party system that this resulted in (and which was bolstered by the stabilising effects of the first-past-the-post system) precluded the need for a great deal of attention to be paid to fragmentation. While a relatively large body of literature was devoted to the decline of the class cleavage towards the end of the 20th century, fragmentation remained a relatively under-examined aspect of UK politics through much of this period. However, in the wake of the UK's vote to leave the European Union on the 23rd June 2016, there has been a surge in interest in the way in which the cleavage structures of UK politics have altered, and the ramifications of this for party politics. It is the contention of this thesis that the best way to understand these processes is through a lens of fragmentation. As these cleavage structures change, new patterns of party competition and voting behaviour put pressure on the distribution of electoral support, which then becomes more dispersed across parties, especially with the emergence of new challenger parties. Focusing on fragmentation, rather than related concepts such as polarisation, provides a much more granular understanding of how electoral politics is changing in England, and allows for a more nuanced view that acknowledges that these changes are not occurring at the same rate or to the same extent, with substantial differences between places.

Since the Brexit vote, much attention has been devoted to the concepts of dealignment, fragmentation, polarisation and the emergence of new cleavage structures, and the prospects for realignment. The most prominent discourse has been one of polarisation, with many scholars describing a divide, or 'bifurcation', in British politics between highly-educated, geographically mobile people in cosmopolitan locations connected to global growth on the one hand, and less well-educated, less mobile people living in areas of economic decline on the

other (e.g. Duffy, Hewlett, Mccrae, & Hall, 2019; Ford & Goodwin, 2017; Goodhart, 2017; Jennings & Stoker, 2016). This focus on polarisation has been framed in many ways; as the 'winners and losers' of globalisation (Inglehart & Norris, 2016), as 'towns versus cities' (Jennings, 2018; Jennings, Stoker, & Warren, 2018), as the 'left behind' and the 'metropolitan liberal elite' (Ford & Goodwin, 2014b, 2017), or even as those with 'open' versus 'closed' personalities (Kaufmann, 2016). This focus on polarisation has led to a literature that is too binary and black-and-white, often failing to examine the potential heterogeneity of political fragmentation across places; while it is almost indisputable that, at the national level, the UK's electoral system is fragmenting, what is often overlooked is that this is not a homogenous process occurring at the same rate, or even at all, at the local level, and it is the key contention of this thesis that there are a variety of party systems across geographies and levels of government that are fragmenting at different rates and to differing degrees. This thesis seeks to fill these gaps in the research caused by the focus on the concept of polarisation and the understanding of fragmentation as a homogenous process, and thus contributing a more detailed and granular understanding of fragmentation than previous papers.

It will do so by analysing how fragmentation has occurred in the UK across the past 50 years and across different geographical areas and levels, as well as by building a model of the demographic factors that predict fragmentation, focusing in particular on the four-year local election cycle between 2015 and 2018, the most recent years for which complete data for the whole of England is available. Local election data represents an important and underused tool for electoral and political analysis, and is particularly relevant to the story of fragmentation, for a number of reasons. Local election data is more granular due to the availability of ward-level data, more continuous due to the fact that local elections are an annual event, and perhaps more importantly, there is a strong case to be made that local elections may be more reflective of political opinions, with some evidence suggesting that tactical voting is less prevalent in local elections, and they therefore provide a truer barometer of public perceptions of politics, as well as of electoral concepts such as fragmentation. The use of local election data in this thesis positions it at as an outlier in the study of this concept, and the work done to

gather, reformat, merge, and then analyse huge amounts of ward-level demographic and electoral data represents an important and long-overdue contribution to the field.

The key contention of this thesis is that fragmentation is not a homogenous process in England, and that a truly in-depth understanding of how the English electoral system is fragmenting must consider how and why levels of fragmentation change across time and across geographic areas based on a variety of systemic, demographic, and attitudinal factors. Based on the literature, it would be expected that fragmentation would be highest in areas that are more socially heterogeneous, or those in which the demographic composition has changed considerably over time. However, this is a rather simplistic view, and there are a number of complex and interrelated factors at play that may complicate matters, which the modelling included in this thesis will seek to uncover. Some of the factors that will be looked at will include an area's age structure, its population's social grade, education level, and ethnic composition, along with other factors that may emerge from further reading.

1.1 Research gap, aims and objectives

1.1.1 Research gap and significance of project

Aside from seeking to rectify the current binary nature of research into the political and social cleavages currently affecting English politics, this thesis will contribute to the knowledge of the factors underpinning fragmentation and contribute a theoretical stance on how and why the English electoral system has been fragmenting. While there has been a lot of work on individual factors that affect the likelihood of fragmentation occurring in a system, there is a dearth of work that combines these factors and is able to make predictions on the likelihood of fragmentation occurring in political systems at a multitude of geographic levels. Indeed, the granularity of the data used in this thesis is another contribution – while work has been done at the local authority level, very little work has sought to understand the drivers of fragmentation at even lower geographic levels, such as ward level. By doing so, this thesis is able to determine more accurately whether different factors affect the likelihood of fragmentation across both geographic locations and geographic levels.

As mentioned above, one of the major contributions of this thesis is the depth of the data being used, and the complexity involved in taking the raw data and transforming it into a format useful for analysis. The thesis uses national, regional, local authority, and ward-level local election data, as well as general election data, dating back to 1973. By using data from such a large time period, as well as for four distinct geographic levels, this thesis is able to provide a much clearer and more granular picture of patterns of fragmentation in the UK across both time and place. The data cleaning process has also been a significant effort; data was taken in its raw form mainly from The Elections Centre (Rallings & Thrasher, 2022) website, and was then cleaned into a format useful for the analytical chapters of this thesis. This involved homologating the wards and local authorities over time, as ward and authority boundaries have changed, adding regional classifications to each year (as this was not included in the original data), calculating the effective number of parties for each ward, authority, and region for each year, and other data cleaning tasks, without which the final analysis would not have been possible.

The intended result of this extensive data cleaning and analysis is a model that is able to predict fragmentation in electoral systems at the local level. This is an important contribution to the field for a number of reasons. The first is theoretical – gaining an understanding of the factors behind fragmentation at the local level will fill the gaps in the literature outlined above, and will allow us to better understand how electoral systems and demographics interact to create more or less stable election results. The second is a more practical contribution. Understanding the mechanisms underpinning fragmentation is an important element of political election strategy building, as being able to predict which areas are worth targeting allows parties to better focus resources and perform better. Thirdly, and perhaps more normatively, fragmentation as a phenomenon has often been associated with disaffection and distrust of mainstream politics. By identifying which areas are more prone to fragmentation, politicians and policy-makers may be better able to respond to the concerns of citizens, or at least to recognise when such concerns may have implications for their own success, thus spurring them to greater engagement and sympathy with voters.

1.1.2 Research questions, aims, and objectives

This thesis has two main research questions, with several sub-questions underpinning each main research goal. The first is to establish the extent to which electoral fragmentation in the UK is a heterogeneous process. In other words, the thesis will seek to determine whether there is significant variation in levels of fragmentation between different places and at different regional levels, or whether fragmentation has been following the same trends regardless of place. While the first question will largely focus on cross-sectional analysis of current levels of fragmentation, it will also examine the trends in fragmentation over time, seeking to determine whether the process is occurring uniformly or whether there are significant regional differences in the rate and extent to which fragmentation is occurring.

Building upon the first goal, the second objective is to build a demographic model of the drivers of fragmentation that enables us to determine the demographic factors that reveal an area's susceptibility to fragmentation or proclivity to stability. This will involve using a variety of demographic predictor variables, such as age structure, education levels, ethnic make-up, income levels, and other socio-economic indicators, to build regression models that determine the most significant predictors of fragmentation across geographies. Again, while this section will focus on cross-sectional analysis of the current drivers of fragmentation, it will also look briefly at whether these predictor variables have changed over time, and perhaps consider the impact of these trends on electoral politics.

To summarise, the two main research questions for this thesis are:

> ***Research question 1:*** *To what extent is the fragmentation of voting behaviour and party competition in local elections across England a homogenous process?*
>
> ***Research question 2:*** *What are the demographic drivers of fragmentation of voting behaviour and party competition in English local elections?*

1.2 Structure of thesis

Following this introductory chapter, the thesis proper will begin in Chapter 2 by laying out the theoretical framework that will define the arguments made in this thesis, and in particular the mechanisms by which socio-political factors have been theorised to impact electoral fragmentation. This chapter will begin by clarifying terminology and demarcating the differences between fragmentation, polarisation, de-alignment and re-alignment, before turning to examine the literature on how and why fragmentation occurs. It will briefly consider the institutional, or systemic, model, which focuses on the role of the electoral system and the distorting effects that plurality systems such as first-past-the-post can have on observed levels of electoral fragmentation when compared to more proportional systems, in which fragmentation in voting patterns will always translate into fragmentation of the parties that sit in Parliament, or on local councils. The discussion will then turn to the sociological model, which is more important to this thesis given that the electoral system is a constant in English elections, and look at the demographic factors that have been theorised to have the greatest effects on voting behaviour, and fragmentation in particular. This part of the chapter is particularly important as it will inform the selection of the predictor variables for the regression models of the demographic drivers of fragmentation in English local elections.

After considering the theoretical basis for considering the demographic drivers of fragmentation, the literature review in Chapter 3 will turn to an exploration of the key social cleavages and demographic drivers of voting behaviour in England, beginning with a relatively in-depth explanation of the historical context of the class cleavage in the UK, which is widely seen to be the most important demographic driver of voting behaviour in the country for much of the 20th century. We will trace the evolution of the class cleavage from the expansion of the franchise to the working class in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, to the decline of the class cleavage in the latter half of the last century. As well as looking at how voting evolved over this period, this section will consider the measurements that have been used to operationalise and measure class voting. It will then look at how and why the class cleavage declined, and then

move on to examine the current literature on polarisation in UK politics, focusing heavily on the debates around Brexit and the 'left-behind', as well as how these new divides have affected party politics and the party system more broadly.

Chapter 4 will look at the methodological approaches that will be used over the course of the thesis. It will begin by looking at available data that was considered when approaching this thesis topic, discussing the advantages and limitations of each potential source and justifying the selection of the data sources that were eventually decided upon. Following on from this, the next sub-section will discuss the exploratory and descriptive methods that are employed in the first empirical chapter of the thesis, which looks at how fragmentation patterns vary across different geographic areas and levels in the UK, and how these patterns have shifted over time. This will include looking at how best to measure fragmentation, discussing the major debates in the field and justifying the selection of Laakso and Taagepara's (1979) 'effective number of parties' (ENOP) as a measurement of fragmentation. isadvantages of regression techniques. The next section will move on to discuss the use of multiple linear regression modelling in the second empirical chapter, which aims to build a model predicting the effective number of parties in a local authority or ward based on the demographic constitution of that area. It will also cover the assumptions of regression and how they will be checked over the course of the analysis, as well as the methods by which variables could potentially be entered into the model. Finally, the methodology section will conclude with a brief overview of how the variables for the regression models will be chosen, and the compromises involved between selecting variables that fit coherently with the theoretical justifications for their inclusion and the realities of data availability in any thesis using only secondary data.

Following on from this, Chapter 5 will be the first substantive analytic chapter of the thesis. As mentioned above, it will describe and analyse how patterns of fragmentation differ across the UK, and how this has changed over time, seeking to fill the gaps in the current literature on fragmentation by utilising local election data, which allows for a more granular exploration of

fragmentation and party system variation than other papers have typically used. The chapter explores fragmentation at national, regional, local authority, and ward level, using ENOP as the measurement for fragmentation and a variety of different methods to tell the story of electoral fragmentation across all of these levels of analysis. Doing so allows the identification of numerous party systems throughout the UK, from the macro, national level down to variations in ward-level fragmentation within local authorities.

By approaching the study in this way, the chapter is able to explore a number of interesting research questions. Firstly, the chapter seeks to establish the trends in fragmentation in local elections from 1973 to the present day, looking at how patterns of fragmentation at the national and regional levels have been changing over this period. These trends are already relatively well-documented in relation to general elections, but it will nevertheless be a worthwhile exercise to examine any differences in these trends between national and local elections, and potentially explore the reasons for these differences, as well as key moments in the story of fragmentation across this time period. Secondly, the chapter will outline the current state of fragmentation at local authority and ward-level, focusing on the geographical differences in how fragmentation is occurring, as well as looking more specifically at the shape of fragmentation by examining the party configurations that exist in areas of differing fragmentation levels, with the aim of establishing the parties that challenge the dominant Conservative-Labour-Liberal Democrat configuration. In doing so, it is hoped that this chapter will add to the literature and understanding of fragmentation at every level of British politics, and will inform the analysis in the next chapter, which seeks to determine the demographic drivers of fragmentation at both the local authority and ward level.

Following on from the first analytical chapter, Chapter 6 will go further than simply describing the trends in fragmentation at the national, regional, local authority, and ward levels, and seek to build a socio-political model of fragmentation that explains the demographic drivers behind fragmentation in England. Using demographic data from the census, the chapter will use multiple linear regression to uncover the demographic factors that reveal an area's

susceptibility to fragmentation or proclivity to stability. The variables that will be studied will include age structure, education levels, ethnic diversity, social class, industrial occupation, religion, and some variables that measure change in these values over time. The outcome of this chapter will give us some idea of where we might expect fragmentation to be more likely, as well as to identify the key demographics behind the phenomenon, and how this feeds into existing analyses of electoral behaviour. In particular, based on the literature review we would expect to see those who fit into the group that has been called 'left behind' to be driving fragmentation, based on their disillusionment with mainstream politics and willingness to vote against the grain as a result, and indeed, this does prove to be the case, with those termed the 'left-behind' having a key role to play in driving fragmentation, along with the group known as the 'squeezed middle'.

Finally, Chapter 7 will use three case studies of local authorities with differing levels of fragmentation in order to bring together the observations made in the first two empirical chapters, and demonstrate how local context can either confirm or override the demographic associations with fragmentation that we have identified. By doing so, this chapter will enable us to gain a greater understanding of how fragmentation works, as well as to further demonstrate the complexity of the story of fragmentation in England, and emphasise that this is not a homogenous process. The chapter will look at case studies of high, medium, and low fragmentation areas. For the high fragmentation study, we will look at the situation in Forest of Dean, an mining town in Gloucestershire near the Welsh border that in many ways conforms to one of the main electoral stories in English politics in recent years; namely, the rightward shift in the political and electoral leanings of many working-class Labour strongholds. For the medium fragmentation area, we will consider Ipswich, a port town in the agricultural county of Suffolk that is the perfect example of a two-and-a-half party marginal seat. For the low fragmentation area, we will look at Liverpool, whose long and complex history, which includes the mass immigration of Irish Catholics and the complete breakdown of the city's relationship with the Conservative party provides an immensely interesting

illustration of how unique local contexts can completely buck the expectations about fragmentation levels that come from the regression models.

The thesis will conclude by bringing together the insights from the previous chapters to provide an overall picture of fragmentation in English local elections that emphasises the extreme heterogeneity of fragmentation and the plethora of different party systems in existence across the country, the demographic factors that might make an area more prone to fragmentation or stability, and the importance of understanding local context when talking about fragmentation in England. We will also consider the utility of the conclusions drawn in this thesis for electoral politics and academic research, and identify some areas for future research.

Chapter 2: Theoretical framework

Over the course of the last century, the UK's political system has undergone a number of serious changes that have fundamentally altered the political landscape in the country. At the beginning of the 20th century, the UK was very much a two-party system, with elections being a battleground between the Conservative and Liberal parties. However, the emergence of the Labour party from the trade union movement brought a new power into British politics, one that quickly supplanted the Liberals as the main competitor to the Conservatives, and that has remained so to this day. A key factor in British politics throughout most of the 20th century was the class cleavage, with Labour attracting the support of the working class and the Conservatives appealing to the middle class, with other social cleavages, such as religion, playing a more minor role in determining electoral outcomes. Over the past three to four decades, the importance of social class in determining voter behaviour has rapidly diminished, and new processes and divisions have been theorised to have replaced class as key factors in English politics. As a result of the de-alignment of working-class voters with Labour and middle-class voters with the Conservatives, and the emergence of new cleavage dimensions such as age and education level, the English party system has undergone a process of fragmentation; that is, a greater number of parties have become electorally relevant.

This chapter of the thesis will explore in detail the processes by which key cleavage dimensions have emerged, decreased in importance, and been replaced in the post-war period, as well as the theoretical underpinnings behind the study of fragmentation and similar concepts. We will begin with practical matters, defining fragmentation and distinguishing it from related concepts such as de-alignment, re-alignment, and polarisation, before examining the factors that have been theorised in the literature to affect party system fragmentation and the ways in which they interact with one another to determine fragmentation levels. We will begin by looking at the effects of the first-past-the-post electoral system in stymying the emergence of smaller parties and reducing fragmentation, before examining the sociological model of fragmentation, which is the theoretical framework underpinning this thesis. We will then

move on to look specifically at the rise and decline of the class and religious cleavages in the UK generally, and England more specifically, before considering what cleavages have arisen to replace them, with a focus on Brexit, which has served as the catalyst for a wealth of research on political divisions in the UK.

2.1 What is fragmentation?

The first question that this thesis must answer is what is meant by the term 'fragmentation' and how this differs from related concepts such as cleavage, polarisation, dealignment, and realignment. While the primary focus of this thesis is party system fragmentation, it is almost impossible to discuss recent developments in UK politics without reference to all four of these concepts. Furthermore, these concepts are heavily intertwined and interdependent, and to discuss one without reference to the others would be to ignore the full story and implications of the changes occurring in a political system.

At the most basic level, party system fragmentation 'simply refers to the number of important competitors in a party system' (Golosov, 2015, p. 42). The term is also used to describe a process; when the number of effective parties in a system increases over time and overall majorities in the legislative body become harder to achieve, the system is said to be undergoing a process of fragmentation (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 28). Fragmentation is an important indicator of the concentration of political power in a given party system, and also has implications for the way in which we understand electoral processes, coalitions, and the sustainability of party-political systems (Golosov, 2015, p. 42). There is an important distinction to be made between fragmentation in vote share, and fragmentation in seats in a political body. These are distinct concepts, and the latter only leads to the former in electoral systems that use only proportional representation, in which the proportion of votes a party receives translates exactly into the number of seats that party occupies in a parliament, council, or other legislative chamber. In the UK, both general and local elections use the first-past-the-post system, which is not proportional, and so distorts the true nature of fragmentation. To give one famous recent example, in the 2015 general election, UKIP won thirteen percent of the vote, making them

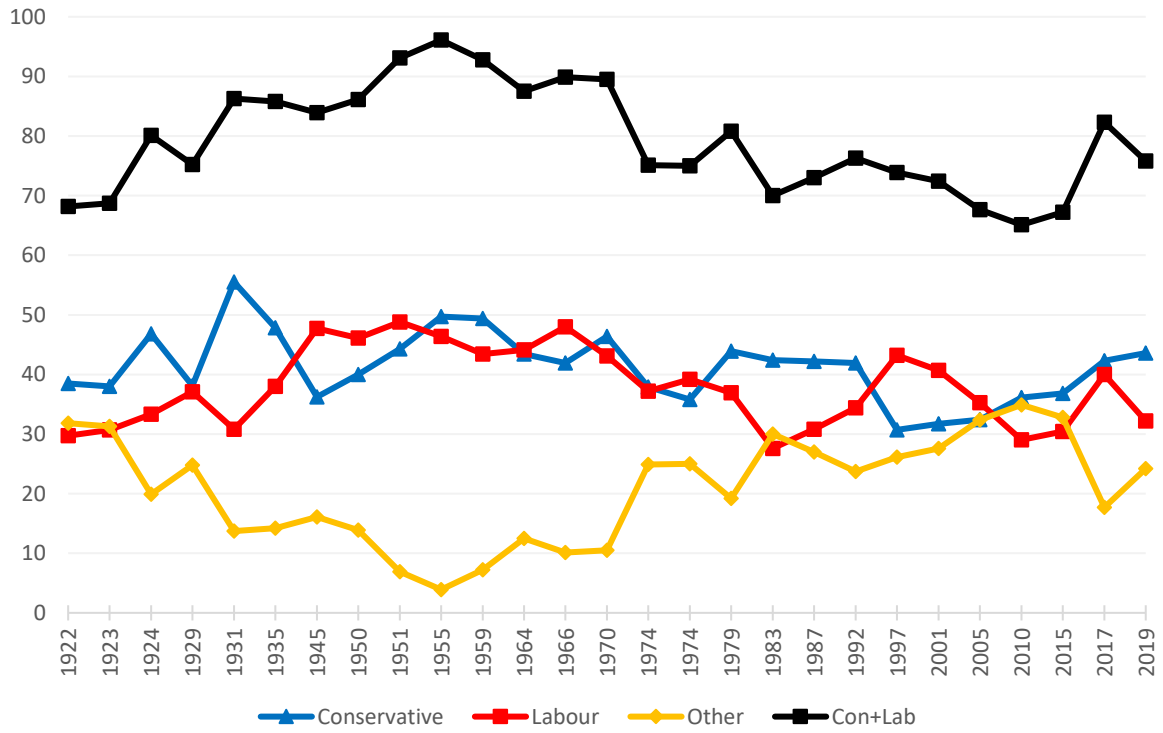
the third-largest party in the UK by vote share, and yet due to their lack of concentrated support in key constituencies, won only one seat in Parliament. Meanwhile, the Conservative and Labour parties shared 67 percent of the vote, and yet claimed 87 percent of the seats in Parliament. Measuring fragmentation purely by seats won would lead one to believe that this election took place in an almost entirely two-party system, whereas measuring fragmentation by vote share would tell an almost entirely different story.

Related to fragmentation is the concept of partisan dealignment, in which large sections of the electorate abandon their previous party affiliations, without developing new ones (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 28). Partisan dealignment has been particularly prevalent in UK politics in the post-war period; as can be seen in Figure 1 (below), the share of the electorate voting for Labour or the Conservatives in general elections fell from a high of 96 percent in 1955 to a low of 65 percent in 2015. While this figure rose to 82 percent in the 2017 general election, and stayed at that level for the 2019 general election, the highest it has been since 1970, the general trend has been for a decrease in voting for the two main parties in the UK system. Partisan realignment is simply the process by which a durable change in the party balance or the bases of support for a party occur (Asher, 1978, p. 725). One can occur without the other; for example, in the UK the Conservatives and the Labour party remain by far the two largest parties, thus not affecting the balance of parties in the system, yet their support bases have fundamentally changed over the past half-century.

Another important concept is that of polarisation, which is defined as the extent to which an electorate or other political body can be characterised by 'substantial differences in political perspectives across a single ideological dimension' (Campbell, 2016, p. 1). To give one example, it can be argued that the UK's referendum on EU membership revealed a polarisation of British society wherein an individual's preference for Leave or Remain revealed a great deal about their personality and their overall political attitudes. It is important to note that polarisation is not a binary state, but exists on a spectrum, with political systems ranging from 'relatively unpolarised' to 'highly polarised'. The level of polarisation in a polity's public

attitudes and its political parties determines the degree of difficulty faced by those governing it, with greater polarisation translating into more combative and difficult politics less likely to satisfy voters across the political spectrum (Campbell, 2016, p. 16). Like fragmentation, polarisation is both a state of being for a political system, as well as a process, and each of these should be treated as a separate analytical concept.

Figure 1: Vote share in UK General Elections for Labour, Conservatives, Other, and Lab-Con combined, 1922-2019 (note: non-continuous X-axis)



A final concept that is crucial to this thesis is that of social cleavages. Unlike the other concepts discussed in this section, social cleavages describe both demographic differences in a society, as well as their impact on the political system, rather than just a process happening in elections. In essence, cleavages are more of an explanation of the processes discussed above, rather than another definition of how electoral systems change. Cleavages can be defined as the difference in political alignment, or attitudes, among demographic groups comprising a certain dimension of social structure. To take an example that is particularly relevant to this thesis, we can look at the class cleavage. Social class plays an important role in English society,

and for most of the 20th century, there was a substantial political split between working-class and middle-class voters, the former usually voting for the Labour Party and the latter for the Conservative Party. Other important cleavages that are often mentioned in the literature include religion, the urban/rural divide, gender, educational level, and many more. Cleavages can, of course, vary considerably in their size; or, in other words, in the effect that they have on election or partisanship. The size of a cleavage increases when the difference in vote choice between two groups grows but decreases when this difference narrows (Brooks & Manza, 1997, p. 938). So, for example, if the total number of working-class people voting for Labour increased at the same time as the number of middle-class people voting for the Conservatives also increased, we could say that the significance of the class cleavage was growing. Conversely, if the number of middle-class voters casting their ballot for Labour increased, and the number of working-class people voting for the Conservatives also increased, we could say that the class cleavage was narrowing. The concept of cleavages will be discussed much more thoroughly in the next chapter.

2.2 Why should we care about fragmentation?

One of the most important questions that needs to be answered in order to justify this thesis is that of 'why should we care about fragmentation'? For anybody outside of electoral studies, it may seem a fairly abstract concept that on the surface bears little impact on the way politics is performed, and indeed on the way politics affects our lives. However, understanding fragmentation and its drivers, and the repercussions of different levels of fragmentation for political systems, is an important element of ensuring a healthy and functioning democracy in which voters' choices are translated into policy that works for them and for the system as a whole. The debate around the relative merits and disadvantages of fragmentation has two main positions; the first is that fragmentation is a negative phenomenon that is symptomatic of extreme voter disaffection and is a process that leads to coalition government (assumed in this case to be a negative in itself), political instability, and paralysis; the second is that fragmentation is a signifier of a more competitive political marketplace that gives voters

greater choice and better represents a plurality of positions within society. While there is little academic consensus, or indeed even empirical work on, the ramifications of fragmentation, the political discourse appears to favour the idea that fragmentation is a negative phenomenon. For example, a 2019 article in the *Financial Times* claims that fragmentation in European countries has been 'making it harder to form governing coalitions, creating political instability and giving a voice to new formations on the radical left and right', as well as making it harder for any government that forms to effectively govern (Hall, 2019).

The first argument that fragmentation is a negative phenomenon sees fragmentation as a symptom of voter disaffection, both with the incumbent party or parties specifically, and with the political establishment more broadly. For example, Shields (2006) argues that in the twenty-five years before 2002, a sequence of six elections in France in which the incumbent party was replaced and fragmentation rose were the result of 'a disjuncture between electoral demand and political supply' that led to 'an exacerbated expression of political disaffection' and paved the way for the rise of the nationalist *Front National* party (Shields, 2006, pp. 120–121). Stathopoulou (2012) argues that the two national elections in Greece in 2012 that ended the bipartisan rule that had prevailed in the country for over thirty years confirmed the relationship between fragmentation and disaffection, coming as they did after years of severe austerity measures and leading to a new Parliament formed between seven different parties (Stathopoulou, 2012, p. 63). Similarly, in Spain, the rise of two previously minor parties, *Podemos* and *Ciudadanos*, in the 2015 General Election, which ended the two-party system that had prevailed since Spain's democratisation in the late 1970s and heralded the beginning of a multi-party system, was seen as a result of extreme voter disaffection largely due to a corruption scandal and a consequent political crisis in which voters lost trust in the two main parties (Orriols & Cordero, 2016, p. 487).

Of course, the relationship between disaffection and fragmentation is not necessarily negative, as an increase in the number of parties represented in a nation's legislative chambers may simply be a sign of a functioning democracy that reflects its electorate's wishes. This is a view

held by Bergsen (2019), who argues that 'Dutchification' – an alternative name for fragmentation based on the proliferation of parties in the Dutch political system – should be seen as a sign of a more competitive political marketplace. Electorates nowadays, he argues, are 'more emancipated, demanding and politically engaged … than in the post-war decades', and voters are 'willing to shop around instead of merely vote according to socioeconomic class or other dividing lines' (Bergsen, 2019). Politicians in such societies should not be threatened by fragmentation, but instead see it as a sign of a functioning and representative democracy in which a plurality of social groups are represented in Parliament. He further argues that panic about fragmentation often sees it as symptomatic of a crisis of democracy, rather than the crisis of the mainstream parties that it actually represents. He evidences this claim with the observation that if the former were true, we would expect to see a positive correlation between voter dissatisfaction and fragmentation. However, this is not the case; the proliferation of parties in the Netherlands coincided with an increase in voter satisfaction with democracy, and similar observations were made in countries frequently governed by minority governments, such as Sweden and Denmark. Conversely, countries with less fragmented systems, such as the UK and France, have much higher levels of voter dissatisfaction with democracy.

However, this is not a view shared by all commentators on electoral systems. One author, rather dramatically, claims that electoral fragmentation 'is the deepest and perhaps most enduring challenge to democratic governments across the West', a view perhaps fuelled by his definition of fragmentation as 'the dispersion of political power into so many different hands and centers of power that it becomes difficult to marshal enough political power and authority for democratic governments to function effectively' (Pildes, 2021, p. 1). Hyperbole aside, in Britain in particular, fragmentation is frequently viewed not simply as the result of a competitive electoral marketplace, but rather as antipathetic to strong government and an inevitable precursor to coalition governments, both key buzzword in many electoral debates and indeed in the public eye. As far back as 1852, Benjamin Disraeli observed that 'England does not love coalitions', and his observation rings true to this day (Mclean, 2012, p. 6). For

example, in December 2014, after nearly five years of a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition, 65 percent of the British public thought that no party winning a majority in the May 2015 general election would be a bad thing (Parker, 2015). Nowhere was this more evident than in the run-up to the 2011 referendum on switching the voting system in general elections from first-past-the-post to alternative voting (AV). The main claim of the 'No' campaign was that first-past-the-post prevents coalition governments and almost always guarantees a strong mandate for the ruling government (Mclean, 2012, p. 10), and 68 percent of the British population saw this, alongside other reasons, as enough to vote against changing the electoral system. Given that fragmentation of the vote share does not necessarily lead to fragmentation of the number of seats held in Parliament under Britain's first-past-the-post system, this result can almost be seen as the British public rejecting fragmentation of their electoral system. This scepticism also features heavily in the rhetoric of electoral debate, where the idea of coalition government is frequently used as a scare tactic to discourage voters from voting for smaller parties. A prime example of this is the run-up to the 2019 general election, in which Prime Minister Boris Johnson urged voters to avoid casting their ballot in favour of Labour or the Scottish National Party (SNP), warning of a 'nightmare on Downing Street' caused by a 'Corbyn-Sturgeon coalition of chaos' (BBC, 2019).

For the purposes of this thesis, no particular normative stance on fragmentation will be taken, especially because the arguments above are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Electoral fragmentation is, at the same time, a consequence of voter dissatisfaction, a challenge to mainstream parties, the first-past-the-post electoral system, and indeed, to democracy itself, as well as a sign of an emancipated political marketplace in which voters are not constrained by the absence of serious alternatives to the main parties. However, the latter is only true if fragmentation in voting patterns translates into fragmentation of the number of seats in Parliament or on local councils; if the electoral system stymies the impact of smaller parties by distorting their success at the ballot box, then this view of fragmentation is harder to justify. Of these arguments, the most important for this thesis is the idea that fragmentation is a symptom of disaffection. As we will see later in this thesis, the 'left-behind' thesis ties together

a number of major political developments in the UK, including Brexit, the rise of UKIP, and the de-alignment of working-class voters with the Labour Party, to political disaffection, and the demographic characteristics of 'left-behind' groups will form the core of the variables included in the regression analyses of the demographic drivers of fragmentation. The next sub-section will further explore the factors that have been theorised to underpin fragmentation, both demographic and otherwise.

2.3 What factors affect fragmentation?

Given that the core aim of this thesis is to understand the demographic drivers of fragmentation in English local elections, it is important to gain an understanding of the theory behind the causes of fragmentation, both as context and as a solid theoretical grounding upon which to base the variable selection for the regression models that will be built. Broadly speaking, the theoretical models explaining fragmentation fall into two main groups: the electoral system, or institutional, model, and the sociological model. This thesis is largely concerned with the sociological model; while the impact of the electoral system on fragmentation is a key part of the fragmentation equation, it is of less interest to this thesis due to the fact that the electoral system used in English local elections remains constant over both time and space, whereas demographic compositions do not. It is very difficult to test the impact of the first-past-the-post system on UK elections as there is no control group to which to compare it; there have never been UK general elections or council elections that have used a different electoral system. However, it is still important to understand how electoral systems impact fragmentation, and the effects it can have on the differences between fragmentation by vote share and fragmentation by seats won.

2.3.1 The institutional model

Most explorations of fragmentation begin with the work of French sociologist Maurice Duverger (1954), who observed that plurality-rule elections (such as first-past-the-post) with single-member districts largely result in two-party systems, while systems that use more proportional representation tend to have multi-party systems (Duverger, 1954). While

Duverger was not the first to make this observation, the idea that single-member plurality-rule elections produce two-party systems has nevertheless become known as 'Duverger's law' (Benoit, 2006, pp. 70–71). Duverger argued that the electoral system affects the number of parties in two ways. Firstly, there is a 'mechanical' factor, describing the degree to which votes for a party are converted into seats in office. An electoral system that gives legislative office to all parties that receive a share of the vote will be more conducive to the survival of smaller parties, and thus it can be expected that fragmentation will be higher in systems of proportional representation. The second factor is the 'psychological'. In non-proportional systems, voters may not vote for their preferred party if they perceive that party to have little chance of winning; in other words, they may vote tactically. This is likely to reduce the electoral chances of small parties, and thus the level of fragmentation (Coleman, 1995, pp. 141–2). According to Duverger, then, the degree of party system fragmentation is the result of the interplay between the election strategies of political parties and voters, each of which are constrained by the electoral system under which they operate (Coleman, 1995, p. 142).

Since Duverger's formulation of this law, many studies have tested its accuracy, with varying results, and numerous attempts have been made to reformulate the proposition in less deterministic terms. Rae (1971), for example, found that Canadian elections, despite being a plurality-rule system, routinely returned a voting share of more than 10 percent for a third party. Rae suggested a reformulation of the law that added an exception; 'plurality formulae are always associated with two-party competition except where strong local minority parties exist' (Rae, 1971, p. 95). Similarly, Sartori argued that the law should be replaced with a 'tendency law' stating that 'plurality formulas facilitate a two-party format and, conversely, obstruct multipartism' (Sartori, 1968, p. 64). Much of the problem is that Duverger's original law treated the relationship between electoral system and number of parties as deterministic; that is, a plurality-rule system will always produce a two-party system.

Subsequent scholarship on the topic has questioned Duverger's 'institutional' focus that solely highlights the role of the electoral system as the main force shaping the party system. The

'sociological' approach to party system fragmentation highlights the effects of socio-economic differences, or 'cleavages', in the population, and posits that these have a greater effect on the party system than the electoral system (Geys, 2006, p. 281). For much of the post-war period, the two approaches were often seen as incompatible. Some advocates of the sociological approach questioned whether Duverger's law serves 'any useful function at all' (Jesse, 1990, p. 62), while others have acknowledged that while electoral systems have an impact on party system fragmentation, it is a relatively unimportant variable when compared to social cleavages(Neto & Cox, 1997, p. 150). Institutionalists, meanwhile, questioned the assumption that any given set of social cleavages would automatically translate into a corresponding set of politically activated cleavages and thus a unique party system, pointing out that many factors prevent this from happening, ranging from collective action failures to the manipulations of social cleavages by established party politicians (Neto & Cox, 1997, p. 150).

As with many topics in the social sciences, this binary debate between institutional and sociological scholars eventually gave way to a middle ground that takes elements of both theories. As such, the consensus among scholars of party system fragmentation is now that while plurality-rule elections have a tendency to produce two-party systems, there are other social structures – such as social cleavages and ethnic heterogeneity – at play that frequently produce exceptions to this rule (Benoit, 2006, pp. 76–77). The argument is now that 'a polity will have many parties only if it *both* has many cleavages *and* has a permissive enough electoral system (Neto & Cox, 1997, p. 155). In other words, it is now assumed that there is an 'interactive rather than an additive effect of sociological and institutional factors' and that low fragmentation may occur in 'open' electoral systems (i.e. those that use proportional representation) in which there is strong demographic homogeneity, and thus little demand for different parties (Flick Witzig & Vatter, 2017, p. 3). Similarly, low fragmentation can exist in systems in which there is a high demand for alternative parties but the electoral system is not conducive to their electoral success (Tiemann, 2015).

One example of this that is particularly pertinent to this thesis is the observation that social divisions can be reinforced by federalism, allowing different party systems to exist at the subnational level, which is a key assertion of this thesis in that fragmentation is not a homogenous process across England, and that examining fragmentation in local elections, at ward level, may reveal substantially different party systems than those that exist at general elections. This relationship between social divisions and federalism is particularly true of Canada, a country that is commonly held up as the textbook exception to Duverger's law (Gaines, 1999). Canada's provinces often feature different national and provincial party systems, and a breakthrough for a smaller party at the provincial level often leads to corresponding success in national elections. While Canada's federalism doesn't fully account for its multipartism, it nevertheless plays a role in its higher-than-expected effective number of parties (Johnston & Cutler, 2009, p. 92). While England is not a federalised system, the ability for different party systems to exist within the same country is evidence that it is still worth examining fragmentation at the ward and local authority level, as there is a high likelihood that fragmentation levels will not be consistent across the country.

2.3.2 The sociological model

While the electoral system has a great degree of influence on the level of fragmentation of a party system, this thesis is more interested in the sociological factors underpinning fragmentation in the UK. The UK has employed a first-past-the-post system since the *Representation of the People Act 1948* abolished plural voting and university constituencies, and so this variable remains constant throughout the period with which this thesis is concerned. As such, it is more instructive to examine the sociological factors that affect fragmentation. Of course, it must be noted that the mechanism by which such sociological factors affect fragmentation is through party support; put simply, the demographics of a particular area will affect the party composition of that area, which will in turn affect the levels of fragmentation in that area. Of course, this mechanism is more complex, as certain demographics may be associated with more than one party in some places, giving rise to

fragmented competition, and be associated with concentrated support for a single party and thus low fragmentation in others. A good example of this would be the cosmopolitan demographics in cities such as Bristol, Bath, and Brighton leading to higher fragmentation as Labour, the Liberal Democrats, and the Green Party all compete for the liberal graduate vote, while the same demographics in cities such as Labour and Manchester are associated with dominance of the Labour party. Of course, this is why Chapter 7 of this thesis, which takes an in-depth, case study approach to voting patterns, is important to its overall argument, as it helps to reveal how local circumstances affect the relationship between demographics, party support, and fragmentation.

The sociological approach was pioneered by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) in their seminal work on the concept of social cleavages, in which they identify four dominant social cleavages, two stemming from historical national revolutions, and the other two from the Industrial Revolution. The cleavages coming from the national revolution are: *centre versus periphery*, which expresses itself in the form of regional nationalism or separatism, for example in Spain's Basque regions; and *state versus church*, expressed as the division between religious and secular voters. On the other side, the industrial revolution also produced two key cleavages: *owner versus worker*; which produced the class cleavage and the formation of parties representing the left and right; and *land versus industry*, expressed as conflict between industrial and agricultural sectors. The authors claim that all political parties that emerged in Wester Europe at the turn of the 20th century were representative of one or more of these issue dimensions, and that by the time of the writing of their book, these cleavages remained 'frozen' (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967, pp. 53–54).

Since the late 1960s, however, much of the literature suggests that these cleavages have started to 'unfreeze', with significant dealignment occurring that has made these traditional cleavages far less useful as predictors of voting behaviour and political attitudes than in previous years, both because of behavioural changes that have seen voters pay less attention to, or identify less with, the traditional cleavages, as well as 'a growing service sector, increases in white-

collar employment, declines in industrial labour, and increased secularism' reducing the numbers of working class or religious voters in Western societies (Best, 2011, p. 285). All of this has led to a situation in which it is 'undeniable' that blue-collar workers are still more likely to vote for left-leaning parties, and religious citizens for right-leaning, Christian conservative parties, but in which there are simply too few voters who fit neatly into these categories for this to be electorally relevant (Mair, 2008, p. 219). The literature suggests that this is highly likely to be the case in England. As we will see later in this chapter, the main cleavage in British society for much of the post-war period of the 20th century was the class divide, with the working class voting for Labour and the middle class voting for the Conservatives, as well as a less significant divide between Anglican and Catholic voters.

The prevailing wisdom is that the significance of the class divide, as well as the religious divide, in England has greatly reduced over the past 50 years, and that new divides have emerged to take its place, thus increasing the amount of electoral fragmentation. Parties with a clear class-based supporter base find it easy to gain votes from their key demographics, but a third-party trying to gather votes from both working-class Labour supporters and middle-class Conservative voters faces a much harder challenge. However, as the class cleavage weakens, it becomes much harder for the two main parties to maintain the support of their traditional voter base while attracting voters from outside it using non-class based messages, and commensurately, it becomes easier for third parties to make non-class-based appeals to voters and gather their support (Sanders, 2017, p. 110). As class-based voting has declined, parties have faced the need to engage in conscious efforts to focus debates and shape cleavages around new issue areas that are aligned to their own ideologies or interests (Sanders, 2017, p. 110).

The cleavage that has most frequently been hypothesised as characterising the shape of British politics is some variation on the idea of the 'left-behind' versus those who benefit from the changes brought about by a globalised and more progressive society. Broadly speaking, the left-behind have been characterised as largely white, working-class, living in former industrial towns, older, with a lower level of education, and less adaptable to a changing economy and

society. This is in contrast to the younger, usually university-educated, skilled, and geographically mobile class that benefits from the post-industrialisation and globalisation of society. In addition, the former group harbours a resentment towards the political and financial elite that they believe have failed them and ignored their interests for many decades (partly due to the blurring of the ideological lines between New Labour and the Conservative party), and consequently are more likely to look towards smaller parties that better represent their views. This was well-illustrated in the 2015 General Election, when UKIP won 12.6 percent of the vote.

Another cleavage that has been hypothesised is more values-oriented, and divides the population between those who are open versus closed, authoritarian versus liberal, or those who favour order versus openness, depending on the author's preferred terminology. This hypothesis states that the key differences in British society do not come from demographics, but instead from personalities. Proponents of this argument suggest that 'the visible differences between groups are less important than invisible differences between individuals' (Kaufmann, 2016, p. 1), with people's attitudes more important that their demographic characteristics in determining their likelihood to lean one way or another on the political spectrum. Taking the Brexit vote as an example, Kaufmann found that in a sample of 24,430 voters in the 2015 British Election Study, demographic factors such as age or education level only correctly predicted Brexit vote intentions in around 60 percent of cases. However, when looking at attitudinal variables, successful predictions rose to more than 70 percent in some cases. A respondent's attitude to European integration was the most important predictor of Leave voting – unsurprisingly, since this is essentially a proxy for Leave voting, minus the consideration of risk aversion. However, support for the death penalty correctly predicted vote intention in more than 70 percent of cases, a greater figure than for party support (including UKIP), where the respondent saw themselves on the left-right spectrum, or any demographic variable (Kaufmann, 2016, p. 3). This speaks to a deeper personality dimension not captured by focusing on demographic variables, but it is arguably the case that such attitudinal factors

are exogenous to the demographic drivers of such attitudes, which are more appropriate as dependent variables for that reason, and so will be focused on in this study.

2.3.2.1 Demographic homogeneity

While the above has discussed the demographic factors that the literature identifies as the most significant predictors of fragmentation, an arguably more influential metric of the social cleavage view of fragmentation is the relative homogeneity or heterogeneity of an area in terms of the cleavage structures present there. In the previous section, we saw that a number of cleavages have been theorised to exist in the UK, including along the lines of age, education level, income level, ethnic background, and employment sector. One possible explanation for fragmentation based on the literature would be the number of people who fit into certain sociological categories, such as the 'left-behind', present in a particular area. However, what may be more relevant than the absolute number of residents fitting into certain categories is the relative homogeneity of an area's demographic composition. So, for example, an area in which 60 percent of the population fall into the left-behind category may be less prone to fragmentation than one in which there is an even, one-third each split between those who could be considered to belong to the 'left-behind', the 'winners' of globalisation, and an intermediate group that falls somewhere between the two.

Early proponents of this stance proposed a rule that 'the more axes of cleavage there are within a society, the greater will be the number of political parties' (Taagepara & Grofman, 1985, p. 343). However, later formulations of this stance pointed out that it is not necessarily the number of issue dimensions that represents a useful independent variable for studies of fragmentation, as they formed an exogenous component of the political system dependent on social heterogeneity indicators. As such, it is usually the case that 'social heterogeneity indicators, and not the political cleavages derived from them, should be singled out for empirical test' (Vatter, 2003, p. 449). An area's relative demographic homogeneity or heterogeneity should, in theory, have an impact on how prone to fragmentation that area is likely to be. As all of the variables included in the regression models in this thesis will be

expressed as the percentage of people in a ward or local authority fitting certain demographic characteristics, this will naturally form a component of the models examining the demographic drivers of fragmentation.

2.4 Why study local elections?

A major theoretical choice made for this thesis is to use local election data rather than national election data. The main justification for this is that local election data is an immensely useful source of insight into electoral trends, and yet is one that has been largely ignored in studies examining polarisation and fragmentation in favour of general election data. There are very few good reasons to ignore this data, other than the fact that working with such large data sources is often a hard and unglamorous effort, and one that often ends up receiving less attention even when researchers make the effort. However, because of the sheer amount of data, analysing it allows for a far more granular understanding of how the drivers of fragmentation vary by location, as data are available for far smaller geographic areas. As of the 2011 census, there were 7,218 census wards and a further 453 census electoral divisions in England (UK Data Service, 2011), as compared to just 650 constituencies in general elections. By analysing election results at this level, this thesis will be able to dig into the minutiae of fragmentation, which might reveal previously hidden facets to the story of fragmentation in England. An additional element of this granularity is that because local elections occur on a yearly basis, they provide a more continuous set of data points that allows more granular analysis than general elections, although this must be tempered by the acknowledgement that local elections still occur on a four-year cycle, meaning that each individual year of results could be considered 'incomplete' data as not all wards are elected in each local election.

While the above is perhaps justification in itself for using local election data, there are also important theoretical reasons for utilising local election data; namely, that there is significant evidence to suggest that voters take a different approach to local elections, and 'second-order' elections more broadly, than they do to general elections. The concept of second-order elections was introduced by Reif and Schmitt (1980), and simply refers to any elections

occurring in a parliamentary system that are not national parliamentary elections. This includes 'by-elections, municipal elections, various sets of regional elections, those to a second chamber[1] and the like' (Reif & Schmitt, 1980, p. 8). In the UK, second-order elections include both local elections and elections to the European Parliament (until 2020, at least), as well as other minor election types. Reif and Schmitt (1980) made various predictions regarding the differences between first- and second-order elections, including that second-order elections would have lower turnout than first-order elections; that small or new political parties would fare better in second-order elections; and that the governing party or parties would fare badly. They claim that voting in second-order elections is often based on 'the political situation of the first-order arena at the moment when the second-order election is being held' (Reif & Schmitt, 1980, p. 8). In other words, they are a means by which voters can 'communicate to the national government (and to the other political parties) their views on its current performance and electoral prospects' (Heath, McLean, Taylor, & Curtice, 1999, p. 390).

The main theoretical rationale behind these claims is that there is less at stake in second-order elections. Therefore, there is less incentive to actually turn out to vote; less need to worry about wasting one's vote and so greater incentive to vote for minor parties that have no realistic chances of forming a government in national elections; and less point in researching and voting based on information about the specific political arena (Heath et al., 1999, p. 390). To an extent, it is true that there is less at stake at local elections in the UK; local government is heavily constrained by central government, and while councils have some power in areas such as schools, roads, social services, and housing, this is always limited by how much central government allows them to spend, and on what.

[1] This mainly holds true in political systems that operate on a system of 'imperfect bicameralism', in which one chamber holds more legislative power than the other, as is the case in the UK, where the House of Commons holds significantly more legislative power than the House of Lords (although, of course, the House of Lords is not elected). It is arguable that in countries such as Italy or the United States of America that have a system of 'perfect bicameralism' in which both chambers hold equal, or nearly equal, legislative power (Baraggia, 2014), elections to this chamber should not be considered as being second-order elections.

It is a step too far, however, to claim that local elections are 'irrelevant elections', as Miller (1988) does in the title of his book *Irrelevant Elections? The Quality of Local Democracy in Britain*. Local councils retain a degree of scope for independent action in many areas and, in the services they deliver, are often the most direct link between a citizen and their government (Heath et al., 1999, p. 391). This is well-reflected in surveys on public trust in institutions; local councillors in Britain consistently rank as far more trusted than their counterparts in Parliament. For example, one recent survey asked respondents who they trust most to make decisions about their local area, and found that local councils were far more trusted than the national government to make decisions local services (54 percent vs. 12 percent), with local councillors trusted more than four times more than Members of Parliament (56 percent vs. 12 percent) and nine times more than government ministers (56 percent vs. 6 percent) (APSE, 2020, pp. 6–7). Another survey, by the *Local Government Association*, found an even starker difference: in their survey, 72 percent of respondents selected their local council when asked who they trust most to make decisions about their local area, compared to just 13 percent responding that they trust government more (LGA, 2022, p. 14).

In addition, there is also evidence to suggest that despite local elections seemingly being given less importance by voters than the first-order, parliamentary elections, they are still considered to be more worthy of attention than other second-order elections, such as elections to the European Parliament. For example, one study found that 'voters believe that there is even less at stake in European elections than in local elections' (Heath et al., 1999, p. 389), a conclusion that was reinforced by the work of Rallings and Thrasher (2005) on the 2004 combined local and European elections. They found that voters were more likely to have been motivated to turnout by the local elections than by their European counterparts, which leads them to conclude that the 'order' of elections is more of a continuum than a binary split between first- and second-order elections, given that within the category of second-order elections, local elections in the UK are clearly seen as the more important by voters (Rallings & Thrasher, 2005, p. 595).

Given all of this, it is clear to see that studying local elections is a worthwhile endeavour, and especially so given the lack of research on fragmentation using local government data. This thesis will hopefully fill in some large gaps in the literature and show the worth of local elections in helping to explain electoral phenomena in England.

2.5 Why only study England?

Another key theoretical choice made for this thesis is to only consider election data from England, rather than from Great Britain or the UK as a whole. The main reason that this decision was made is due to the unique political situations in Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales. Each of these countries could have many theses written about their electoral situations alone, with devolution and the pre-eminence of nationalist parties such as the Scottish National Party in Scotland and Plaid Cymru in Wales creating completely different electoral landscapes to that which exists in England, and to each other. Of course, there are a variety of electoral systems in operation in England alone – indeed, this is one of the central contentions of this thesis – but it was decided that in order to gain as deep an understanding as possible of the fragmentation story, it would be necessary to focus only on one of these nations, and England was the natural choice, being both the biggest country in the UK, as well as the one with which the author is most familiar. Of course, this does not mean that the story of fragmentation in England is any more important than in any other of these nations, but these stories are a topic for other theses or papers; a narrower focus allows for a deeper insight into the changing electoral patterns in the UK's largest nation, and may provide a starting point for future research on the electoral systems of the devolved assemblies.

2.6 Theoretical framework of this thesis

Based on the above discussion of the literature around fragmentation, the analysis generated in this thesis is based on a theoretical framework that sees changing demographic cleavage structures and ideological differences as the key determinants of party system fragmentation, while acknowledging that a plurality electoral system such as first-past-the-post will place constraints on the degree to which any system will fragment. It is important to note here that

the focus on how demographic cleavages drive fragmentation, rather than political parties themselves, is in itself an important theoretical decision. As was discussed in Chapter 2.3.2 on the sociological model of political cleavages, this thesis is driven by the argument pioneered by Lipset and Rokkan (1967) that the socio-economic and demographic conditions of a society are what matter for the emergence of parties, and so sees demographics as the fundamental units by which to analyse electoral phenomena such as party competition and fragmentation. Furthermore, focusing on parties as the base unit of analysis, rather than demographics, would result in a thesis that would have to overcome the objection that fragmentation is itself endogenous to party politics, making it extremely difficult to focus on parties as the drivers of fragmentation without making tautological arguments. Of course, party configurations remain an important part of this thesis, but the argument is that party configurations themselves are a result of demographic drivers, and so focusing on the demographic drivers of fragmentation allows this thesis to analyse both which party configurations are driving fragmentation, and which demographic drivers are behind these configurations.

As such, the key contention of this thesis is that despite the constant variable that is the UK's first-past-the-post electoral system that is used in both general and local elections, the level of fragmentation will vary between locations depending on their demographic structures, and namely the relative heterogeneity or homogeneity of that area's demographic structures. In other words, we can expect areas with high levels of a particular demographic indicator, for example university-educated residents, to have more stable local electoral systems than areas with a more even spread of educational levels. So, an area with 60 percent university graduates, 20 percent with A-Levels, and 20 percent with GCSEs could be expected to be less prone to fragmentation than an area with an even, 33 percent each split. Additionally, this thesis contends that the way demographics have changed over time may be an important piece of the puzzle; for example, an area with a high number of ethnic minority voters may still be more susceptible to fragmentation if this has happened rapidly over a small timeframe.

If this proves to be the case, then the models generated in the thesis will help to explain how and why levels of fragmentation vary both across time and between locations. The level of fragmentation in UK local elections has been consistently rising over the last half-century (see Chapter 5.1), and there are important differences across regions in the extent to which this has happened (see Chapter 5.2). By tracing the fragmentation patterns over time and across regions, as well as between local authorities and wards, and coupling this with data about demographic and ideological changes, we can determine the key explanatory demographic drivers of fragmentation, which will have important theoretical and practical implications for the study of political fragmentation and its impact on electoral politics.

Chapter 3: Changing cleavage structures in British politics: how class got left behind

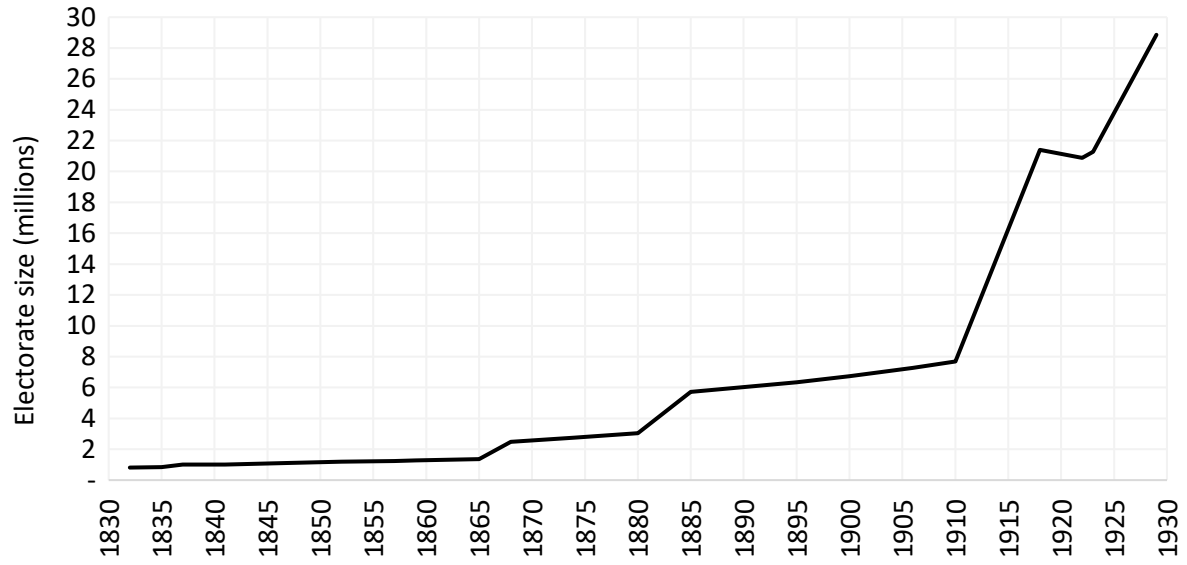
3.1 Class: the defining cleavage of 20th century Britain

As we have seen from the previous chapter, the sociological model of fragmentation sees social cleavages as the key determinant of fragmentation levels. The number of cleavages axes, and the magnitude of these cleavages, are key to determining the levels of fragmentation of an electoral system, given the constraints that come from the structure of electoral institutions themselves. Traditionally, especially from the 1930s to the 1960s, social class was seen to be the major division in British politics, with the working class far more likely to vote Labour and those belonging to the middle class more likely to cast their ballot for the Conservatives (Goldberg, 2014, p. 1). While class voting was a phenomenon observed worldwide, the general consensus among academics was that Britain had the highest level of class voting of anywhere in the world (Evans, 2000, p. 404). Alford (1973), for example, argued that 'considerable historical evidence indicates that the association of class and vote should be higher in Great Britain and Australia than in the United States and Canada' (Alford, 1973, p. 94), and indeed in his own study found that 'very little except class matters for politics in Great Britain' (Alford, 1973, p. 170). Similarly, Benney, Gray, and Pear (1956, p. 113) found that the factor 'most strongly associated with differences in vote is social class', and argue that 'of all the democracies, England is the one in which there is the most consciousness of class and most awareness of class distinctions' (Benney et al., 1956, p. 6).

A number of historical developments led to this disproportionate impact of class voting in British politics, which lasted from the post-war period well into the latter half of the twentieth century. During the first late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the electorate had expanded significantly thanks to a series of bills that extended suffrage beyond the wealthy male landowners who had traditionally been the only social group eligible to vote. This process began with the *Representation of the People Act 1867,* which gave the vote to parts of the male

urban working class for the first time, followed by an extension of these rights from urban to rural areas in 1884. More significantly, in the period following the end of the First World War, universal suffrage for men aged 21 and above and limited suffrage for women over 30 were introduced in 1918, followed by universal suffrage for all citizens over the age of 21 in 1928. These acts brought the number of the electorate up from around one million in the early 1860s to more than 28 million in 1928 (see Figure 2, below), and crucially, ensured that the working class became a major part of UK politics.

Figure 2: Electorate size in the UK, 1832-1929



Source: adapted from Craig (1989, pp. 66–69)

However, the expansion of suffrage to the working class is not enough to explain the significance and prevalence of class voting in the UK. Many other nations experienced similar expansions of enfranchisement, and yet did not experience such pronounced class cleavages in politics as the UK. The factor that catalysed this split was the emergence in the early 20th century of the Labour Party, which sprang from the trade union movement explicitly to represent the millions of urban, working-class men that had benefitted from the waves of enfranchisement of the late 19th and early 20th centuries (Pattie & Johnston, 2009, pp. 463–4). Labour replaced the Liberals as the 'party of progress' in British politics, an event that has generated a great deal of debate in the study of British political history (Childs, 1995, p. 123).

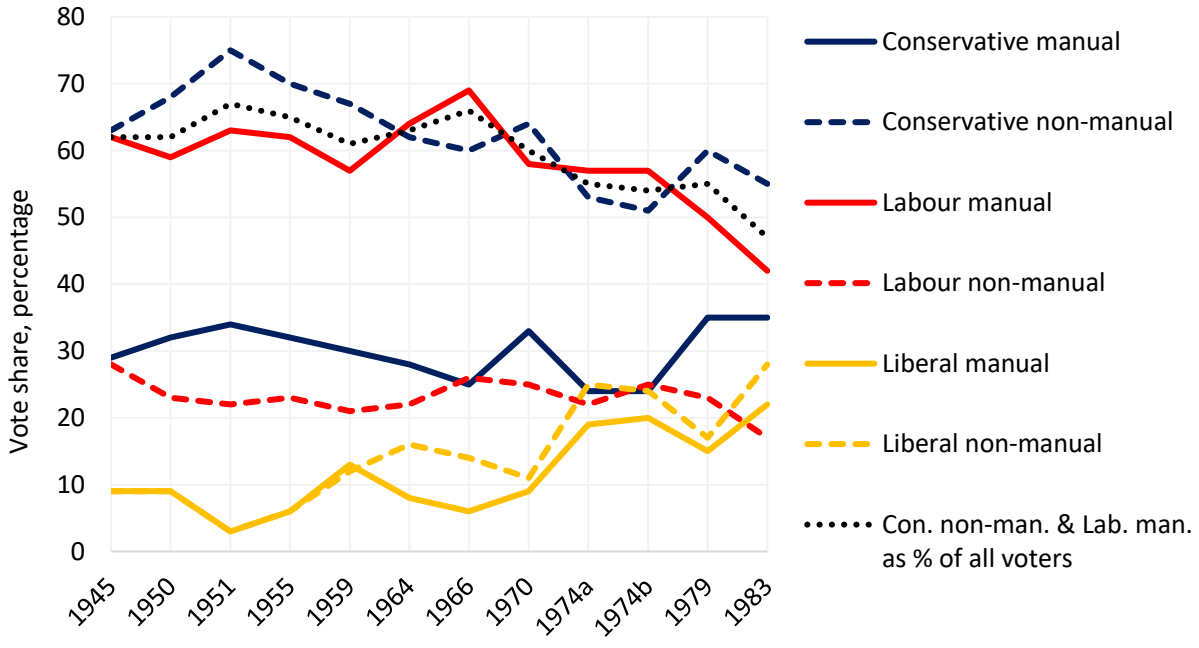
As Alford points out, it is not necessarily the case that Labour's links with the trade unions should have automatically ensured working class support (Alford, 1973, pp. 95–6). At the time of the 1906 General Election, the Liberal Party dominated UK politics, winning more than 50% of the vote and securing the largest majority in the House of Commons since the passing of the Reform Bill of 1832, benefitting from strong working-class backing and the support of the newly formed Labour party (Butler & Stokes, 1969, p. 249). However, by the 1929 General Election, the Liberal party were in almost terminal decline, winning only 23.6% of the vote, and not rising above 10% again for another 40 years (Audickas & Cracknell, 2018, p. 8). They had been almost entirely supplanted by Labour both as the party of the working-class and as one of two parties, alongside the Conservatives, that were capable of winning general elections and forming governments.

Labour's replacement of the Liberals as the party of the working class in the 1920s was due to a complex set of factors. However, one demographic factor above all others is crucial to understanding the rise of Labour as the party of the working class: age. While other scholars have focused on the ways in which previous legislation had discriminated against the working class, Michael Childs (1995) emphasises that this discrimination was felt most strongly by young workers. By 1891, almost 55% of disenfranchised males were below the age of 30 (Childs, 1995, pp. 130–131). Seeking an outlet for political engagement, many of these young workers became involved in the more left-wing, class-conscious trade union movements from which the Labour party sprang. These unions were markedly younger than their less socialist counterparts, whose political opinions and loyalties had been formed in an earlier and very different era in which the Liberals had been the only party representing working-class interests and in which social and religious fragmentation of the working-class community was more prominent. The consequence of this was that when all men over the age of 21 were given the vote in 1918, a process of generational realignment began in which the Liberal party failed to replace defecting or dying older supporters with younger working-class men, a majority of whom were allying themselves with the more progressive Labour party (Childs, 1995, p. 143). This is an assessment echoed by Butler and Stokes (1969, p. 260), who argue that Labour's

working-class roots 'converted to Labour many young voters whose fathers had been Conservative or Liberal'.

To summarise, by around 1930, Britain's party political system had reached a balance by which it would be characterised for most of the 20th century. The Conservatives and Labour were the two main parties, with the Liberals (and later Liberal Democrats) a distant third. Furthermore, at this stage in history, Labour were firmly the party of the working-class, while the Conservatives were the party of the middle- and upper-classes. This is clearly illustrated by Figure 3 (below) which shows the percentage of votes for each of the three major parties by manual and non-manual workers between 1945 and 1983. In the period between 1945 and 1970, the percentage of voters casting their ballot for their 'natural' party remained consistently above 60 percent. While this binary distinction between manual and non-manual workers is a problematic measurement of class for many reasons, it is nevertheless illustrative of the class divide in UK politics, and in any case is the best data available for much of the period covered (Heath, Jowell, & Curtice, 1985, p. 29).

Figure 3: Percentage of manual and non-manual workers voting for Conservatives, Labour, and Liberals in UK General Elections, 1945-1983



Source: adapted from Heath, Jowell, and Curtice (1985, p. 30).

3.2 Religion and voting

While there is little debate that class was the defining cleavage structure in British politics for much of the twentieth century, the role played by religious affiliation is more debatable. The religious cleavage was one of the defining cleavages of West European societies according to Lipset and Rokkan (1967), and while most scholars agree that before the First World War, religion was a major determinant of voting behaviour in Britain (Wald, 1983), the rise of the Labour party and the subsequent pre-eminence of the class cleavage in determining voting behaviour essentially rendered the effect of religion as weak at best, according to the majority of studies on the subject (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001, p. 523). However, there are important historical ties between voters of different religious denominations and the mainstream parties in English politics, and indeed, over the past century, England's Christian communities have often tended to support one of the major parties over the other.

Perhaps the most important of these historical links is that between the Anglican and Presbyterian churches and the Conservative party, who tended to represent the interests of the dominant Anglican group in British society, as well as of the Anglican church establishment. This link has historically been strong enough for the Church of England to be referred to as the 'the Conservative Party at prayer' (Fox & Kolpinskaya, 2021). On the other hand, Catholics and non-conformists, being socially divided from the Anglicans and historically persecuted by the Church of England, were always associated with radical, anti-establishment parties such as the Liberals and Labour. Catholics and other non-conformist sects were the mainstay of Liberal support in the time in which the Liberal party was the main opposition to the Conservatives, despite neither being an explicitly religious party. As they rose in prominence, the Labour Party took advantage of the minority status of voters of both sects to attract supporters, which worked particularly well with Catholics, who tended to be working-class and thus susceptible to Labour's class-based mobilisation efforts. Furthermore, both the Liberals and Labour supported Irish home rule, and so the large proportion of British Catholics who were descended from Irish migrants had another reason to support them

besides their credentials as the party of the trade union movement. A final boon to Labour was the fact that the Catholic population in England, unlike in other European countries, was too small for them to form an effective party to represent their interests, and were therefore attracted to Labour as the main opposition to the Conservative Party (Kolpinskaya & Fox, 2021; Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001, p. 528).

Of course, today none of the major political parties in England make overt appeals to religious groups, and social divisions between Anglicans, Catholics, and other Christian denominations have continued to fade. As such, it would be natural to conclude that the religious cleavage has all but disappeared in England. However, there is some limited evidence to suggest that religious affiliation still plays some role in how people vote in English elections, as well as in predicting a person's position on the authoritarian-libertarian scale. Interestingly, it seems that the erosion of the division between different Christian sects may have created a somewhat monolithic Christian voting bloc. Fox & Kolpinskaya (2021) find that between 1979 and 2001, support for the Conservative party among Anglicans was on average ten percentage points higher than among the general electorate, rising to twenty percentage points in the 2017 and 2019 general elections. On the other hand, in 1979, support for the Conservative Party among Catholics was seventeen percentage points lower than support among the general population. However, this anti-Tory sentiment among Catholics has been so eroded over the last forty years that Catholics are now two percentage points more likely to vote for the Conservative Party than the general population, and no more likely than the general population to vote for Labour. As such, Fox & Kolpinskaya (2021) conclude that despite the differences between Britain's Christian communities, their tendency to be more socially conservative than non-religious voters, combined with Boris Johnson's positioning of the Conservative party as the protectors of conservative social values, means that most Christians in Britain are now 'beyond the electoral reach of the Labour party'.

This begs the question: has the religious cleavage disappeared in importance, or has it simply changed shape, with the cleavage no longer dividing Anglicans and Catholics, but instead

Christians of all stripes from voters of other religions or non-religious voters? While research on the voting preferences of other religions outside of Christianity are less readily available, one study by Christian think tank Theos found that there are discernible voting patterns among non-religious and non-Christian populations, although with the caveat that populations are much smaller and so results must be taken with caution due to low sample sizes. Having said this, they found that in the 2010 general election, Muslims and Hindus favoured Labour, the Jewish vote was more for the Conservatives, the Sikh vote was evenly split between the two main parties, and Buddhists disproportionately voted for the Liberal Democrats (Clements & Spencer, 2014, pp. 10–11). Similarly, Kotler-Berkowitz (2001) finds a clear difference in voting patterns between Christians and members of other religions, and concludes that 'specifications of British voting behaviour are incomplete if they do not contain religious variables' (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001, p. 552).

3.3 The decline of class voting?

As previous sections of this chapter have demonstrated, class has been the most fundamental and important cleavage in British politics from the moment that the franchise was expanded to include the working class, becoming the defining political cleavage for much of the twentieth century. However, this is not to say that class was the only important factor in determining voting patterns, and much debate has occurred both on the impact of class on voting patterns full stop, as well as the supposed decline of class voting over the latter half of the twentieth century. As Figure 3 (above) shows, even at the peak of class voting, the share of the electorate voting for their 'natural' class party never rose above two-thirds. Labour's share of the non-manual vote remained in the low twenties for the two decades immediately following World War II, while the Conservatives generally enjoyed a higher, but declining, share of the manual vote, ranging from 34 percent in 1951 to 25 percent in 1966 (although this rose again to 33 percent in 1970). This significant portion of voters who cast their ballot against their presumed class interests were therefore a key electoral battleground for the two main parties, especially

for the Conservatives, whose electoral success relied heavily on gaining the support of a significant minority of working-class voters.

Indeed, there has historically been a strong element of working-class support for the Conservatives, which has been attributed to various factors by scholars in the field. Two of the most prominent explanations of this working-class Conservative support are deference and pragmatism. The former argument is that due to the prominence of hierarchical class systems in British society, many people had an exaggerated level of respect for individuals in positions of power (Parkin, 1967, p. 278). This led to a belief that certain segments of society – those belonging to a wealthy, well-educated, and 'born and bred' elite – are more suited to running the country 'simply by virtue of their social status at birth' (Samuel, 1960, p. 11). This was a position expressed by as much as 31 percent of voters in a 1960 study carried out in Clapham and Stevenage (Samuel, 1960, p. 9). Pragmatist working-class Conservative voters, on the other hand, did not necessarily believe that the working-class should defer to the middle- and upper-class, or are inherently less suited to ruling. Instead, they believed that because Conservative politicians of the time tended to be Eton-educated and wealthy, and thus to have 'achieved' more than their Labour counterparts, they would be in a better position to understand and react to the intricacies of national government (Nordlinger, 1967, pp. 64, 75).

Another frequent explanation is that working-class Conservativism can be explained better in terms not of researcher-formulated definitions of class, but in terms of an individual's conception of their own social class. In a national survey conducted by Runciman (1966), it was found that 'manual workers and their wives who describe themselves as "middle-class" and attach some orthodox meaning to this are consistently likelier to support the Conservative Party' than those who think of themselves as working-class. This was the case even when there was no difference in income or level of skill in their work (Runciman, 1966, p. 186). While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to provide a detailed analysis of the historical factors behind class cleavages in UK politics, this section has sought to demonstrate that even 60 to 100 years ago, British politics was never simply a case of left versus right. While in general, Labour were

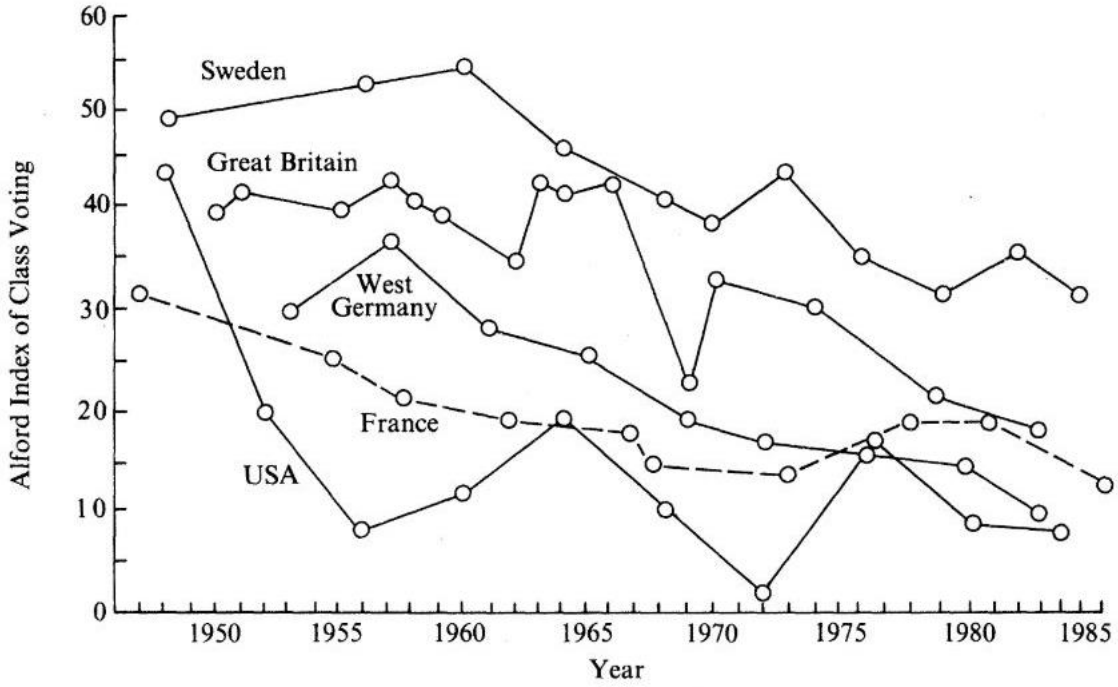
seen to be the party of the working class and the Conservatives the party of the upper class, the divide between the two was bridged by a significant minority of working-class Tories and a smaller, but still relevant, section of middle-class Labour voters.

Furthermore, as the twentieth century progressed, many have argued that these groups gained ever-greater significance in determining election results, sparking a debate over the extent to which the importance of class has declined in British electoral politics. This debate is multifaceted, and incorporates issues of methodology, definition, and interpretation of data, all of which can significantly affect the conclusions drawn about the decline of class voting in the UK. The conventional wisdom by the end of the millennium was that social class had significantly declined in its ability to explain political processes, and while it remained relevant, had been supplanted by other factors focusing on issues of identity and attitude (Clark, Lipset, & Rempel, 1993, p. 293). Much of the initial evidence for the decline of class politics came from the use of the Alford index, which was designed to provide a systematic measurement of both class and class voting, something that had been missing from previous studies on the topic. In Alford's (1973) book *Party and Society: The Anglo-American Democracies* (originally published in 1963), he examined class voting in Australia, Britain, Canada, and the USA between 1936 and 1962. He used a measure of socioeconomic position that aggregated occupation into a binary, manual vs. non-manual split, as well as a dichotomised measure of voting that categorised parties as simply left or non-left. These categories were used to create the 'Alford index', which defines class voting as the difference between the percentage of manual and non-manual workers voting for left-wing parties in a particular country (Evans, 2000, p. 404).

Using this index, many commentators have pointed out a decline in class voting over the course of the 20th century. For example, in their paper *Are Social Classes Dying?*, Clark and Lipset (1991) argue that 'the Alford Index has declined in every country for which data are available' (Clark & Lipset, 1991, p. 403), as can be seen in Figure 4 (below). Using this measurement of class voting, there was an unmistakeable, if slightly erratic, decline in class

voting in not just Great Britain but across the Western world from 1947 to 1986. However, the Alford Index is not an ideal measurement of either social class or class voting. Firstly, it is a measure of absolute class voting, as opposed to relative class voting. As such, it is vulnerable to fluctuations in the general popularity of the parties. For example, if Labour win 60 percent of the manual vote and 20 percent of the non-manual vote in an election, the Alford Index score would be 40. If in the next election, their popularity among the population as a whole exactly halves, and they achieve only 30 percent of the manual vote and 10 percent of the non-manual vote, the Alford Index score would be only 20, despite the ratio of manual to non-manual voters remaining static at 3:1.

Figure 4: Alford Index of class voting for selected Western democracies, 1947-1986



Source: Clark and Lipset (1991, p. 403)

Secondly, the index relies on dichotomous variables (manual and non-manual, left and non-left), which can mask a number of subtleties in class structure that drastically change conclusions about levels of class voting. For example, if skilled manual workers were more right-wing than their non-skilled counterparts and thus voted for non-left parties, and the number of skilled manual workers increased, the Alford index score would decrease even if

the voting preferences of skilled manual, non-skilled manual, and non-manual stayed exactly the same (Evans, 2017, p. 183). This example also alludes to the argument that the binary distinction between manual and non-manual workers is a gross oversimplification of class structure in the UK. While there is no general agreement on exactly how finely we can categorise classes, very few would argue that the division is as simple as manual and non-manual. Many academics studying social class at the end of the 20th century began to use the class scheme developed by Goldthorpe (1980), a seven-class scheme (later expanded to eleven classes to incorporate 'women's jobs'). One of the most prominent uses of this scheme was by Heath et al. (1985, p. 16), who use a slightly modified version with five classes. These classes are: the *working class* – manual employees in industry and agriculture; *foremen and technicians* – those with supervisory positions in traditionally working class occupations; the *petty bourgeoisie* – farmers and small business owners, including self-employed manual workers; *routine non-manual* – office workers such as clerks or secretaries; and the *salariat* – managers and professionals, typically with high incomes. While this class classification is obviously up for debate, it nevertheless illustrates the richness of data lost by employing a simple binary distinction between manual and non-manual workers.

While this class scheme provided a much greater level of nuance than the binary distinction used in the Alford Index, this posed a methodological problem. Previous studies that used the Alford Index, or variations thereof, could only work with dichotomous variables presented in two-by-two, class-by-party tables, which was no longer possible due to the use of a five-class scheme(Goldthorpe, 1999, p. 60). In order to counter this problem, Heath et al. (1985) pioneered the use of loglinear modelling rather than simple indices, which proved to be a major advancement in the study of class voting. Not only did it allow the expansion of variables away from simple binaries, but it also enabled hypotheses about class voting to be submitted to formal tests, which was not possible by comparing index scores (Goldthorpe, 1999, pp. 59–60). Since their methodological breakthrough, 'nearly all research on class voting employs some version of statistical modelling for qualitative dependent variables based on the odds-ratio – loglinear models, logistic regression' (Manza, Hout, & Brooks, 1995, p. 153).

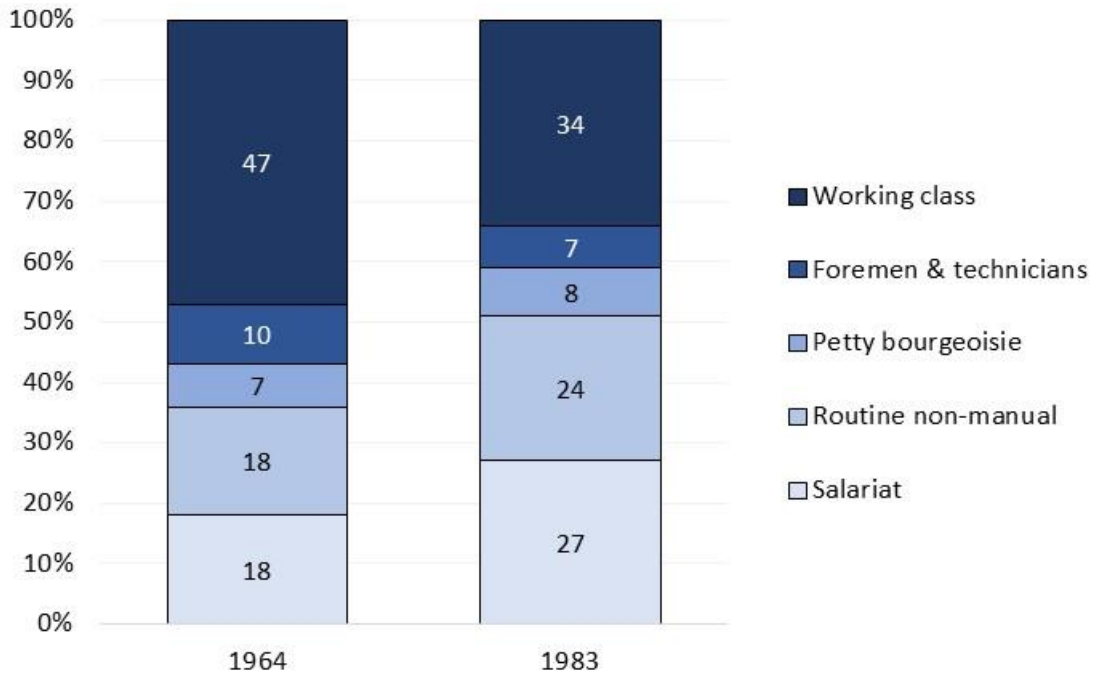
Utilising this five-class scheme and loglinear modelling, Heath et al. (1985) argue that rather than there having been a fall in the importance of class voting in post-war Britain, as the Alford Index suggests, the period between 1964 and 1983 is better analysed in terms of 'trendless fluctuation' rather than party de-alignment (Heath et al., 1985, p. 35). They point out that 1964 represented a peak in class voting, but unfortunately has come to be used as a baseline in electoral class analysis, as it was the first year in which surveys and polls began to use a more refined class classification system. This has inevitably led to claims of a decrease in class voting, despite longer-term analysis showing little change. Furthermore, they argue that using the five-class scheme reveals a dramatic change in the class composition of the UK that has had a far greater impact on electoral politics than class de-alignment (see Figure 5, below). The percentage of the electorate belonging to the working class shrank by 13 points over the 19-year period, while the salariat grew by nine percentage points. Put another way, the ratio of working class to salariat halved from 2.6:1 in 1964 to just 1.3:1 in 1983. This erosion of Labour's traditional voting base was the real cause of their electoral malaise in this period, explaining more than half of their fall in the overall vote share (Heath et al., 1985, p. 37). Therefore, rather than looking at the apparent decline in importance of class, they argue, 'the political scientist does better to search for the political sources of the parties' success and failure' (Heath et al., 1985, p. 35).

Indeed, the conclusion that class remains important as a predictor of vote is echoed by many studies in the literature. In their study of class voting in Britain, France, and the USA from the 1930s to 1992, Weakliem and Heath (1999b) find little evidence of a decline in class voting in Britain. Using association models[2], they find that while class voting in Britain has been declining since the 1951, this only came after an increase of almost the same magnitude

[2] Association models are a category of modified loglinear models that allow the statistician to predict which variables in a dataset are most likely to appear together, and predict the strength of the relationship between them – as long as all variables can be placed on a numerical scale, which association models do by obtaining the estimates of the 'positions' that best explain the association between variables (IBM, 2021; Weakliem & Heath, 1999a, pp. 286–7). In this case, the model measures the strength of the association between class (or occupation) and voting behaviour.

between 1935 and 1951, with the result that class voting is actually at a very similar level in 1990 than it was in 1930 (Weakliem & Heath, 1999b, p. 113). They conclude that while 'the influence of class on mass political behaviour was never as strong as is often assumed', it is also the case that 'class influences have not declined as much as is commonly believed' (Weakliem & Heath, 1999b, p. 132). Similarly, using a topological loglinear model, Goldthorpe (1999) demonstrates that between 1964 and 1992, 'the net association between class and vote in British elections did not progressively weaken but in fact remained rather little changed' (Goldthorpe, 1999, p. 79).

Figure 5: Class composition of UK electorate, 1964-1983



Source: adapted from Heath et al. (1985)

That is not to say, however, that this is a unanimous conclusion among social scientists studying class voting in Britain. There are many supporters of the conclusion originally reached by Alford about the decline in importance of class politics, even when more

sophisticated methods are used. For example, using a lambda index[3] consisting of a multinomial logistic regression model with party choice as the dependent variable followed by predicted probabilities of party choice based on the regression coefficients, Goldberg (2014) finds that between 1964 and 2015, 'class voting lost almost linearly in importance' in Great Britain (Goldberg, 2014, p. 12). This represents the clearest decline in the importance of the social class cleavage in any of the four countries included in the study (Netherlands, Switzerland, USA, UK), and is especially clear in the most recent elections. Furthermore, many of the seminal studies on class voting, especially the ones included in this review, were carried out in the late 1980s and early 1990s. As will be demonstrated in the next section, by the turn of the century scholars almost unanimously agreed that the importance of class to voting patterns had dwindled almost to the point of irrelevance, and that new cleavage structures were now shaping the party system in the UK.

3.4 The death of class voting and emergence of new cleavages

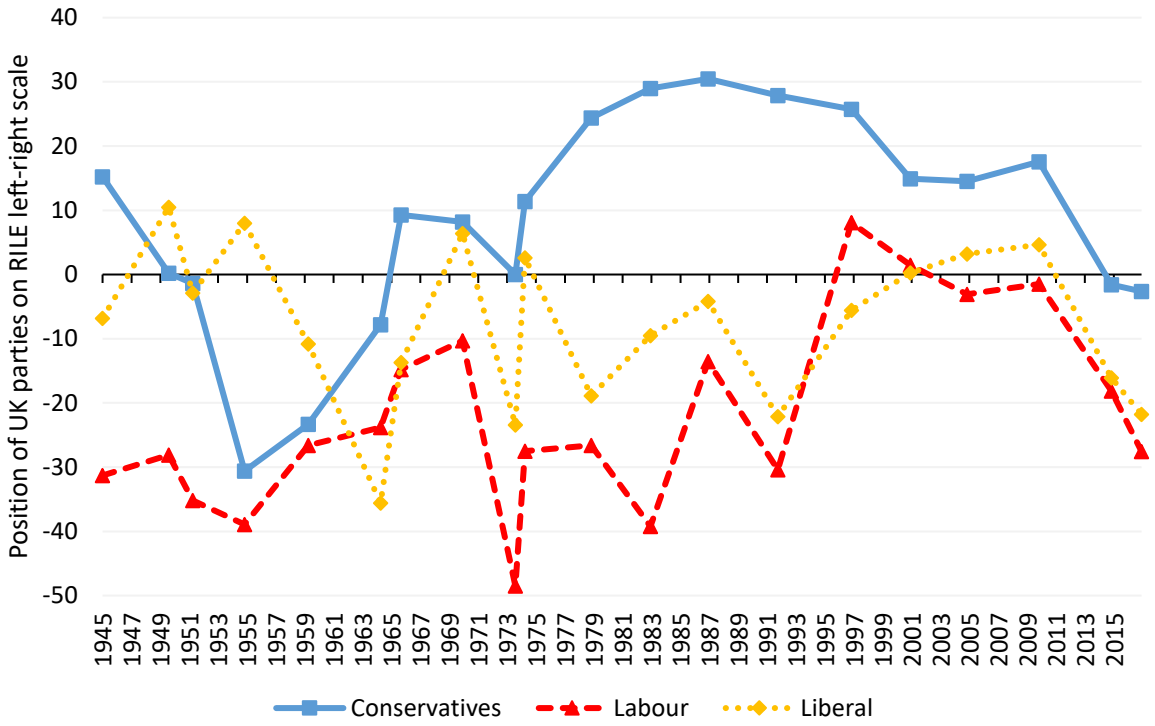
As can be seen from the previous section, the study of political cleavages in Britain in the latter half of the twentieth century involved significant debate over the declining importance of class in UK General Elections, as well as the best method by which to measure class voting. However, by the mid-1990s, this debate had largely disappeared. Class had 'declined in salience to such a degree that even proponents of the persistence of class voting in the 1980s observed that by the late 1990s class no longer seemed to matter that much for vote choice' (Evans & Tilley, 2012, p. 963). Two main reasons have been given for this. The first, and perhaps most popular, is that the transition from an industrial to post-industrial society meant

[3] A lambda index is a modified version of the kappa index, which was designed to measure differences in voting behaviour between social groups while allowing a separation of effects due to behavioural changes and structural changes. However, the kappa index could only do so with binary dependent variables, while the lambda index allows it to be extended to multinomial settings with more than two parties, and also takes into account the size of the corresponding groups and parties. The method starts with the construction of a multinomial logistic regression model with party choice as dependent variable and cleavage measurements as the independent variables, and then based on the regression coefficients, predicted probabilities of party choice for each independent variable are estimated (Goldberg, 2014, p. 9).

that ‘class boundaries have become increasingly fluid’ (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart, & Whitely, 2004, p. 2) to such an extent that ‘few individuals now possess exclusively middle class or working class social characteristics’ (Dalton, 2008, p. 156). As such, class as a concept, and by extension, class voting, has lost analytical relevance. The second reason is that political parties responded to this decline in the importance of class by moving to the ideological centre in an attempt to become ‘catch-all’ parties that hold appeal for those across the political spectrum and not just those in their traditional class base (Webb, 2004). The prime example of this was the Labour Party under Tony Blair in the 1997 General Election. New Labour’s ‘Third Way’ shifted the party to the centre, and resulted in a period of electoral dominance that lasted for 13 years. This was followed by the Conservatives moving leftwards (although remaining a centre-right party), creating a system in which there was very little real difference between the ideologies of the main parties, thus further eroding the relevance of class to vote choice.

To illustrate this convergence of ideologies between the major parties in British elections, Figure 6 (below) shows the position of the three main parties on the RILE index, a measurement of the ideological position of party manifestos on a left-right scale (with a negative score indicating left-wing ideology and a positive score indicating right-wing), from 1945 to 2017 (Volkens et al., 2019). As can be seen, from around 1973 to 1991, there was a vast ideological gulf between Labour and the Conservatives, with Labour firmly on the left of the spectrum and the Conservatives just as far on the right. The 1997 election saw Labour jump towards the centre-right, moving from a score of minus 30 in 1991 to plus 8 in 1997, and closing the ideological gap between the two parties from around 58 points in 1991 to just 17 points in 1997. This ‘weakening of the left-right ideological signals sent to voters by the two main parties’, coupled with the decreasing relevance of class as an analytical concept in modern society, had all but eliminated class as a factor in electoral decision making at this point (Evans & Tilley, 2012, p. 974).

Figure 6: Position of Conservative, Labour, and Liberal/Lib. Dem. parties on Manifesto Project's RILE left-right scale, 1945-2017



Source: data from Volkens et al. (2019)

So given that the traditional class cleavage that defined the party-political system had apparently all but completely broken down by the turn of the century, the question remains as to the best way to classify the current state of affairs. There is significant debate as to whether the contemporary system can be seen as polarised, fragmented, undergoing a process of dealignment and realignment, or some combination of these options. So far, polarisation appears to have gained the most traction in the wake of Brexit. To take just a small snapshot of the literature on polarisation, Jennings and Stoker (2016, p. 1) write about 'two Englands' made up of 'cosmopolitan areas of growth' and 'provincial backwaters'; Goodhart (2017) divides the population between geographically mobile 'anywheres' and geographically rooted 'somewheres'; Inglehart and Norris (2016, p. 11) and Hobolt (2016) talk about the 'winners and losers' of globalisation; and Kaufmann (2016, p. 3) talks about those who favour 'order' versus 'openness'. Running throughout these arguments is the role of the so-called 'left-

behind', which has been perhaps the most prominent narrative in both the news media and academic analysis. While this PhD thesis is not directly concerned with the 'left-behind' and the results of the EU referendum, an understanding of the emergence of this group and the narrative surrounding their role in UK politics is crucial to understanding how the dividing lines in British politics are changing.

3.5 Brexit, the 'left-behind', and polarisation

Put briefly, the left-behind argument begins with the relatively unproblematic premise that more economically developed countries in North America and Europe have seen great economic growth accompanied by widening wealth inequality over the past three or four decades. This has multiple causes, including the decline of manufacturing and rise of tertiary industries, globalisation, immigration, and austerity politics (Goodwin & Heath, 2016; Inglehart & Norris, 2016; Ishkanian, 2018). According to the left-behind hypothesis, this has resulted in a split between the so-called 'winners and losers' of these forces. The left-behind fall into the latter category, and as a result are characterised by 'a general sense of insecurity, pessimism, and marginalisation', as well as a resentment of the elites that they feel do not represent them or empathise with their situation (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 331). While there is some disagreement as to exactly which social groups constitute the left-behind, most of the literature argues that the group consists mainly of older, working-class, white people with few qualifications and low incomes, who have struggled or failed to adapt and succeed in a modern, post-industrial economy (Ford & Goodwin, 2014a; Goodwin & Heath, 2016). To these factors, some academics have added gender and religion, with men and the more religious seen to be more likely to belong to this group (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, p. 28).

While discussion of the 'left behind' has greatly intensified since the British public voted to leave the EU, work was being done on the concept long before the referendum was even announced. In their analysis of the emergence of UKIP as a major force in UK politics in the run-up to the 2015 General Election, Ford and Goodwin (2014b) argue that both economic and social changes have pushed a group of older, white, less-educated, and working-class voters to

mobilise against the political mainstream and lend their support instead to UKIP. These voters, who lack the education or skills to adapt to changing labour markets, have been sidelined by the post-industrialisation of the UK economy. In addition, they feel that they have also been pushed to the margins politically and socially, as both Labour and the Conservatives have moved to the ideological centre at the same time as the group's views on social issues such as immigration, gender, and national identity have come to be seen as parochial and bigoted by a younger generation of better-educated and more socially liberal people (Ford & Goodwin, 2014b, pp. 278–9). Consequently, they have sought political representation away from the centre ground of the mainstream parties, and turned to parties such as UKIP to represent their interests and provide them with a voice.

Writing after the 2015 General Election, Goodwin (2015) reiterated this view, arguing that UKIP's performance 'entrenched the relationship between the party and Britain's economically left behind, working-class voters' (Goodwin, 2015, p. 14). In the run up to the election, UKIP's leaders knew that they needed to carefully target their campaign to the places in which it had the most concentrated support in order to maximise impact under the first-past-the-post system (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015, p. 57). This support was 'anchored in left-behind communities that had struggled to get by and had few good reasons to feel optimistic about the future' (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015), and while 'Farage could attract support in slightly more prosperous areas, the real source of his electoral strength was left-behind Britain' (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015). This campaign strategy bore fruit for UKIP, with the party registering their strongest-ever performance in a General Election and supplanting the Liberal Democrats as the UK's third largest party by national vote share. UKIP's strongest performances were in areas along the 'more financially disadvantaged east coast, in Kent, Essex, Norfolk, Lincolnshire, and Yorkshire, and also in the north east' with most of its support coming from 'financially vulnerable, disaffected working-class and, to a lesser extent, self-employed voters who tended to be older, white, and with few, if any, qualifications' (Goodwin, 2015, p. 14).

While the academic focus on the left-behind has intensified since the rise of UKIP and the Brexit referendum, it is important to note that the literature also highlights that these events, far from coming out of the blue, are the result of long-term trends that are finally crystallising into meaningful political consequences. For example, Jennings and Stoker (2016), writing before the date of the referendum, emphasise the growing bifurcation in England between those living in growing cosmopolitan areas and those in declining 'backwaters'. These geographical differences, they argue, are not only becoming sharper but are now developing a strong cultural dimension; in cosmopolitan areas, people are on aggregate more global in outlook, pro-EU, pro-immigration, more comfortable with rights for social minorities, and forward-looking, while in 'backwaters', people are generally inward-looking, anti-EU, anti-immigration, socially conservative, and nostalgic (Jennings & Stoker, 2016, p. 1). They argue that this bifurcation has been growing for the past twenty years, and was already affecting British politics by the time of the 2015 General Election, with the result reflecting the Conservatives' ability to better straddle the divide between the 'left behind' and other voters. In their conclusion, they predict that this fracturing of the English electorate will lead to 'intractable dilemmas for national leaders' (Jennings & Stoker, 2016, p. 10), and this prediction was starkly emphasised by the results of the 2016 membership on Britain's membership of the EU.

3.5.1 The left-behind and Brexit

In the weeks and months following the referendum, the focus on the left-behind intensified, with the group almost universally identified as the driving force behind the outcome in both academic papers and media analysis. Following on from his pre-referendum work on UKIP, Matthew Goodwin, along with Oliver Heath (2016), analysed local authority-level aggregate data of Leave voting, testing the hypothesis that the Brexit vote represents a deepening of the divisions between the 'haves and have nots' of British society (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 325). Their conclusion is worth quoting at length, as it summarises the left behind argument that

has dominated both academic and journalistic discussions of the drivers of Brexit. They argue that:

> 'The public vote for Brexit was anchored predominantly, albeit not exclusively, in areas of the country that are filled with pensioners, low-skilled and less well-educated blue-collar workers and citizens who have been pushed to the margins not only by the economic transformation of the country over recent decades but also by the values that have come to dominate a more socially liberal media and political class. In this respect the vote for Brexit was delivered by the 'left behind' – social groups that are united by a general sense of insecurity, pessimism and marginalisation, who do not feel as though elites, whether in Brussels or Westminster, share their values, represent their interests and genuinely empathise with their intense angst about rapid social, economic and cultural change' (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 331).

While the authors do emphasise that the left behind hypothesis cannot fully explain the Brexit vote, they nevertheless see people dubbed 'left behind' as the key demographic in determining the outcome of the referendum, and point to them as the key challenge to be met as Britain negotiates its future relationship with the European Union.

In a similar vein, Hobolt (2016) argued that rather than the Leave vote being seen as a manifestation of British exceptionalism, it is better understood as the outcome of a trend towards societal divides that can be observed in many European nations, a direct consequence of the polarising nature of globalisation on national societies. Hobolt's individual-level analysis, using data from the 7th wave of the British Election Study, shows that the 'winners' of globalisation – the young, well-educated and wealthy – were far more likely to vote Remain that those who feel left behind by globalisation and who feel threatened by a changing job market and immigration. Additionally, she argues, 'the results of the Brexit referendum portray a deeply divided country, not only along class, education and generational lines, but also in terms of geography' (Hobolt, 2016), with strong support for Remain in large, multicultural cities, and Leave dominating in more rural areas and northern post-industrial

towns with large working class populations. This division between the winners and losers of globalisation, she argues, can be observed in nations across Europe, and has been exploited with varying degrees of success by populist parties across the continent, highlighting the need for national politicians to find a way to address the concerns of citizens who have not benefitted from globalisation.

Since the emergence of the left behind hypothesis as an explanation for political polarisation, numerous studies have emerged using the concept as a springboard for analysis. Sensier and Devine (2017), for example, study the relationship between social mobility and voting in the EU referendum, seeking to understand if social mobility and leave voting are correlated across England. They use various measurements from the Social Mobility Commission's social mobility index alongside voting data from 324 local authorities to run correlation and regression analyses comparing social mobility and Leave voting. They find that 'lower levels of social mobility … is [sic] correlated with higher leave votes in the EU referendum across England' (Sensier & Devine, 2017, p. 17). Their analysis shows that in areas with higher Remain voting, the median salary and share of professionals and managers is higher, while the share of people earning less than the minimum wage is lower. Their results show that this relationship exists across England, and is not a simple case of North versus South. They argue that their findings support the arguments of Goodwin and Heath(2016) with regards to Brexit being related to social inequality.

3.5.2 Economic or cultural insecurity?

While there has been relatively broad agreement as to the importance of the 'left-behind' to political divisions in the UK, Western Europe, and the USA, there has been some debate as to whether the key insecurity that leads to their support of more right-wing policies and politicians is economic or cultural. In contrast to the works discussed above, Inglehart and Norris (2016) emphasise backlash over changing cultural values, rather than economic insecurity, as the main driver of both the election of Donald Trump and the outcome of the EU referendum. Using both aggregate- and individual-level data, they build a number of models

seeking to explain the rise of populist politics across the Western world, finding that a model combining demographic variables with cultural values variables provides the best account of this trend. They argue that the growing emphasis on post-materialist and individualistic values in affluent societies has brought about an increasing focus on issues such as environmental protection, same-sex marriage, and gender equality in public debate, spurred on by younger generations who reject the values of their older counterparts. As a result of this evolution of social values, less educated, older, usually white male, citizens feel 'left behind' by cultural change, and resent being told that their views are now seen as bigoted or politically incorrect. Increasing levels of immigration only reinforce their feelings that the norms and values they hold dear are rapidly disappearing (Inglehart & Norris, 2016, pp. 29–30). While the focus on cultural values rather than economic factors provides a contrast to the other papers discussed thus far, the conclusions are the same with regard to the demographics of the people driving populist politics, and fragmentation by extension, in Western societies; that it is predominantly older, less well-educated, less economically secure, white men that are the root cause of this trend.

The 'cultural backlash' thesis is also supported by the work of Kaufmann (2016). 'Nothing could be further from the truth', he says, than the argument that the decision to Leave the EU was motivated purely by economic factors and the divide between the winners and losers of globalisation (Kaufmann, 2016). Instead, Brexit should be seen primarily as the result of identity and values, not economics. Interestingly, he argues that the 'invisible' differences between groups are much less important than the 'visible' differences; that is, differences in people's personality are the key factor, rather than in their demographic characteristics. There is a marked difference between those who prefer 'order' and those who value 'openness', and this has become the key political cleavage in contemporary society, overshadowing the traditional, economic left/right divide. This divide is exemplified by the statistic that in the run-up to the EU referendum, one of the strongest single predictors of an intention to vote Leave was being in favour of capital punishment; 71 percent of people in favour of the death penalty intended to vote Leave, as opposed to only 20 percent of those opposed to it. This was

a better indication of intended Leave voting than party support, age, education, where the respondent fell on the left-right scale, and region (Kaufmann, 2016). Clearly, Kaufmann concludes, 'the Brexit story is mainly about values, not economic inequality' (Kaufmann, 2016).

3.5.3 Problematising the narrative of the left-behind

Furthermore, the idea of 'cultural backlash' is not the only challenge to the dominant narrative that Brexit was delivered by those left behind economically by globalisation. Others have challenged the title of 'left behind' itself (Watson, 2018), the definition or characteristics of the left behind (Furlong, 2018), the 'methodological whiteness' of the concept that excludes all non-white members of the working class (Bhambra, 2017), and the idea that the left behind were the social group most responsible for the outcome of the referendum (Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, & Krouwel, 2017). While, for the purposes of this thesis, the 'left-behind' will feature prominently in the analysis, due to its importance to the literature on polarisation and fragmentation, it is nevertheless important to point out that it is not an unchallenged concept. For example, Watson (2018) argues that the focus on the left behind, and indeed often the blame that is laid at their door in explaining the Brexit vote, is misplaced, and that a far more accurate descriptor for this social group would be the 'let down'. He argues that 'the economy' as it is discussed in mainstream political discourse is little more than an abstraction, and one that does not resonate with many voters who have been bombarded with messages about the importance of the economy and yet have seen economic opportunities in their areas disappear (Watson, 2018, p. 18). In tandem with this, the social welfare reforms of New Labour essentially made many rights conditional on people's ability to find work, and work that would provide them with enough resources to be the perfect worker-consumers of this new social contract (Watson, 2018, p. 23). Finding that even hard work could not guarantee access to the rewards the government was promising, it is no surprise that many have become disillusioned with 'the economy', and that many voted against what many experts warned to be the country's

best economic interests. As such, Watson argues, 'left behind' is a misnomer; the 'let down' would be a far more accurate term.

While Watson's paper provides an interesting counter-point to the narrative of the left-behind (or 'let down'), it nevertheless retains focus on them as the key constituency that swung the referendum outcome in favour of Leave, despite his acknowledgement that they represented 'only a single Leave-voting constituency amongst many' (Watson, 2018, p. 23). By contrast, Antonucci, Horvath, Kutiyski, and Krouwel (2017) argue that Brexit is best explained by looking at the social malaise of intermediate classes who have experienced financial decline in recent years, a group they call the 'squeezed middle' (Antonucci et al., 2017, p. 212). People in this group are characterised by holding intermediate/upper-intermediate levels of education and stable jobs, but are increasingly struggling to maintain their current lifestyle and standard of living. The authors use mixed-effects logistic regression to analyse individual-level data from a mixture of British Election Study and self-collected datasets. By contrast with most other studies on the subject, they find that the highest proportion of Leave votes were cast by those with high GCSE grades or A-Levels rather than those with low grades or no GCSEs. They argue that the positive correlation between education level and Remain voting seen in other studies is driven almost entirely by those holding at least an undergraduate degree. Furthermore, they found that Leave voters were associated with very specific feelings: of being worthless; that life has become more complicated; and of being left out of society (but only when associated with worsening financial conditions). These feelings could be summarised as a 'failure in managing risks of globalization', and point 'to the dynamics experienced by the squeezed middle rather than to the presence of a crystallized left behind group (Antonucci et al., 2017, p. 225).

Furthermore, those in so-called left behind areas have criticised the patronising nature of the classification, and the fact that it does not resonate with many residents living in these places. Furlong (2018) cites Lisa Nandy (2017), the current (at the time of writing) Labour MP for Wigan and founder of the think-tank Centre for Towns, who rejects the moniker 'left-behind',

arguing that it 'simply doesn't resonate with the millions who live in towns' and 'value the sense of community, stability and quality of life it affords'. She describes the left behind narrative as 'an industry … where journalists would come to towns like mine and start talking about the wastelands that were found; the people with no hope and the lack of any good service or good jobs' (Rodgers, 2018). On the contrary, she argues, these are not people that 'have nothing left to lose and dream of escaping to the cities', but are instead trying to preserve what they have, defending it against what they see as negative social changes brought about by a political class dismissive of and condescending towards their concerns (Nandy, 2017).

This anecdotal evidence is supplemented by the work of Lisa Mckenzie (2017), who carried out ethnographic research in working class communities in East London and in ex-mining towns in Nottinghamshire in an effort to capture the real meaning of the Leave vote in underprivileged communities. The common argument that the working class Leave vote was an expression of anger, apathy, and frustration, she argues, has essentially been taken as a given, without any meaningful attempts to actually engage with the people that seemingly voted against their own self-interest in backing Leave, or the conditions that brought them to this position. She argues that in fact, 'the marginalisation of these groups is so significant that their democratic rejection of the UK's membership of the EU is entirely understandable' (Mckenzie, 2017, p. 201). Many people in such communities, apathetic to mainstream politics and feeling unable to express themselves in national elections, saw the EU referendum as possibly their only genuine opportunity to voice their anger to the Westminster elite 'that they felt let down by' (Mckenzie, 2017, p. 205). This is a choice of phrase that echoes and reinforces the argument made by Watson (2018). Consequently, the left-behind rhetoric, Mckenzie argues, is 'incorrect and disingenuous when one considers the depth and intensity of what has happened to working class people, their communities and their identities for over 30 years' (Mckenzie, 2017, p. 207).

3.5.3.1 Race and class in the left-behind narrative

Mckenzie further criticises the left-behind rhetoric for its problematisation of the 'white working class', who have become 'named and known as not only economically impoverished but also culturally impoverished, represented as "excess and nothing, in the sense of having and being of no value" (Reay et al., 2007, p. 1049)' (Mckenzie, 2017, pp. 207–208. The left-behind argument relies on these stereotypes and prejudices, positioning the white working class simply as old-fashioned, un-modern, and cradling a sense of misplaced nostalgia, rather than making any serious attempt to understand the structural nature of deindustrialisation, class inequality, and class prejudice. This has helped fan the flames of the commentariat backlash that has placed the 'blame' for Brexit squarely on the shoulders of the white working class, and ignores the fact that a larger proportion of Brexit voters belonged to the middle classes (Antonucci et al., 2017).

Mckenzie is not the only commentator to problematise the treatment of race and class in the left-behind narrative. Others have criticised the left-behind narrative for focusing solely on the white working class and drawing attention away from the plurality of voters who cast their ballot in favour of leaving the EU, as well as for racialising austerity and the negative effects of globalisation by ignoring members of the often even more disadvantaged non-white working class. Virdee and McGeever (2018) argue that the academic and media focus on the 'white working class' has reified 'whiteness' as a crucial element of British working class identity, 'such that some working class men and women now understand and make sense of the real economic pain they suffer through such a racialised frame of white working class victimhood' (Virdee & McGeever, 2018). This development has created a situation in which members of the white working class have invested politically in seeing themselves as the main victims of globalisation, thus legitimising the move to the far right of those holding this view. Furthermore, it has privileged one sector of Britain's working class over the others, erasing black and brown Britons from the category of working class as it is commonly understood and eliding their experiences of intersectional austerity (Virdee & McGeever, 2018).

This understanding of the left behind as being the white working class has also been challenged by Furlong (2018), who argues that the concept of left behind is theoretically fuzzy, racialised, and patronising. He argues that the left behind argument is problematic from its very inception, due to the way Ford and Goodwin (2014a) initially identify the group in their analysis of UKIP support. He argues that instead of identifying the group based on economic characteristics, they instead identify the sociological characteristics associated with UKIP voting and simply label this group as 'left behind', sparking a tautological argument that the left behind were the catalyst for Brexit (Furlong, 2018). This tautology also has the effect of introducing an ethnic bias into the definition, a critique that echoes Virdee and McGeever's (2018) argument concerning the academic focus on the white working class. Because the vast majority of UKIP voters are white, Ford and Goodwin's definition of the left behind made whiteness an intrinsic element of 'left-behindedness', with the effect that economically disadvantaged ethnic minorities living in 'relatively affluent' but incredibly unequal areas such as Hackney or Tower Hamlets are excluded, despite perhaps most accurately reflecting the moniker (Furlong, 2018).

Furlong's critique of the racialized nature of the 'left behind' argument is shared by Bhambra (2017), who questions the 'methodological whiteness' of the treatment of race and class in discussions of Brexit and the election of Donald Trump. She argues that there is ample evidence to suggest that the 'left behind' narrative is deeply flawed, and that the white middle class was a more important demographic in delivering both Brexit and Trump. Like Furlong (2018), Bhambra questions why it is that the 'left behind' classification does not include black and minority ethnic populations in the UK, given that these groups are far more likely to suffer the negative effects of austerity and have worse outcomes in health, education, and employment than white populations (Bhambra, 2017, p. S216). She argues that this is due to a methodological whiteness that prioritises the experience of white people over people of colour, as well as misidentifying societal privilege such that white people are seen as more disadvantaged than people of colour. As this argument goes, the post-war push for gender and racial equality has led to historically disadvantaged populations actually being given

advantages in modern society, and the experiences of the white working class have become ignored and marginalised. Bhambra argues that as minority populations came closer to achieving equality, the relative advantage of the white population reduced, which has been perceived by many as a decline in their importance (Bhambra, 2017, p. S221).

3.5.3.2 Justifications for the use of the 'left-behind' in this thesis

With all this in mind, it is prudent to note that this author has serious ideological concerns with the concept and use of the 'left-behind' moniker. Methodologically, the classification suffers from being tautological in nature when applied to voting behaviour, stemming from a paper which identified the key demographics voting for UKIP and then classifying people fitting this description as left-behind. Ethically, the classification has issues with potentially being racially contentious, focusing as it does on only White British voters and obscuring the suffering of ethnic minority groups under austerity policies. The label has also faced accusations of being patronising to those it describes, placing the blame on them for failing to keep up with globalisation and not on the politicians who have let them down.

However, it is a reality that the idea of the 'left-behind', or variations of it, are a cornerstone of contemporary political debates on cleavage structures in England, and therefore, on fragmentation and its implications for the English party-political system. As such, the concept of the 'left-behind' is almost unavoidable in one guise or another when trying to add to existing literature on the nature of fragmentation in modern England, as this group is overwhelmingly identified as being the defining socio-political cleavage of this political moment, with wealthier, city-dwelling, university-educated people forming the opposite end of the spectrum. Demographic variables capturing the characteristics of the 'left-behind' – in particular, higher age, lower social grade and education levels, and White British or Irish ethnicity – must therefore be considered as key variables for the regression models to be found later in this thesis, even if there is debate over the exact name or characteristics that identify this group. As a compromise, while this thesis will frequently refer to the 'left-behind' as shorthand for this set of demographic characteristics, it will do so with the caveat that this is not an

endorsement of the term, and as the focus of this thesis is not on the correct terminology for this group or the ramifications of different terms, it will use the term 'left-behind' simply because it is the most prevalent terminology in the literature within which this thesis sits.

3.6 New divides and party politics

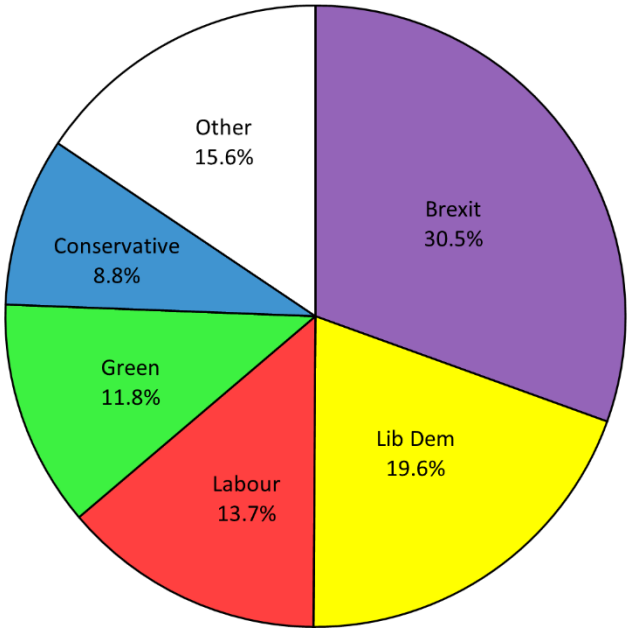
Regardless of the debate over where exactly the new cleavages of British politics lie, it is clear that over the last quarter of a century, British politics has undergone a number of transitions as old cleavages have become less relevant, and new cleavages have emerged to replace them. This raises further questions, especially concerning the impact these new divides will have on party politics. As has been shown, the relative stability of the class cleavage in 20th century British politics was largely due to the alignment of the working class with Labour and the middle class with the Conservatives. As the British economy shifted away from manufacturing and towards a service economy, the middle classes grew in size and the old class cleavage diminished in importance. Political parties reacted by shifting towards the centre, which led to unprecedented success for the Labour party in the years following Blair's election in 1997 and his 'New Labour' manifesto. This shift to the centre alienated many traditional Labour voters, and because the Conservative party followed suit and also moved to the centre, voters found themselves facing a paucity of choice in elections, especially if their views fell outside of a relatively narrow ideological band. As such, political parties in the UK are now attempting to recapture voters outside of the centre ground, with the Conservatives moving rightwards both economically and socially, while Labour under Corbyn moved away from Blairite centrism and back towards the left-wing policies that characterised the party for much of the 20th century, although this has been somewhat reversed under Keir Starmer's leadership.

Given the apparent polarisation of the British public on economic and social issues that was put into the spotlight by the Brexit vote, a key question remains regarding the effects that this attitudinal polarisation is having on the party system. With the decline of the class cleavage, the party system is also undergoing a period of transition as the parties attempt to react to evolving preferences and priorities in the electorate and win the support of voters outside of

their traditional bases. It is clear that 'the party-political landscape has not yet fully come to terms with the new identities that Brexit has revealed and reinforced' (Duffy et al., 2019, p. 10), and it remains to be seen how the party-political system might realign itself to take advantage of this situation. Sanders, for example, argues that the UK system 'is ripe for a party realignment around the political centre' (Sanders, 2017, p. 115). He argues that the Conservatives are in a prime position to reinforce their support among those in what he calls the 'authoritarian populist centre' and the 'authoritarian populist right', two groups who combined account for 48 percent of the population. Meanwhile, he argues, Labour's shift to the radical left has given it access to the largest single 'tribe' in British politics, the 'liberal internationalist, pro-EU left', who make up 37 percent of the population. However, they must compete for support in this group with other liberal parties, and furthermore, their move leftwards has left them unable to compete for those on the centre-left and centre-right, thus 'condemning the British electorate to the electoral hegemony of an increasingly authoritarian Conservative government' (Sanders, 2017, p. 116). As such, he argues, a new centre party, or indeed the Liberal Democrats, could conceivably command the support of a large chunk of the centre-minded electorate and seriously challenge the Conservatives.

Despite the talk of fragmentation and realignment, the 2017 General Election seemed to herald more of a return to business as usual in terms of the dominance of the Conservative and Labour parties, who received a combined 82.4 percent of the vote, their highest combined vote share since 1970. Despite Sanders' (2017) predictions, centre parties failed to gain any significant support. However, the performance of the two main parties in this election seem to be anomalous; the results of the 2019 European Parliamentary Elections and Local Elections reveal a much more fragmented system than the 2017 General Election results. This was shown most clearly by the European election; for the first time since Labour became the second-largest UK party in 1922, neither they nor the Conservatives finished in the top two in a nationwide UK election (see Figure 7, below).

Figure 7: Vote share (%) by party in 2019 European Parliament election in United Kingdom



The 2017 local elections told a similar story. While Labour and the Conservatives won a combined 58 percent of the vote, the latter lost more than 1,300 council seats and control of 44 councils, marking their worst performance in a local election since 1995. Labour also performed poorly, losing control of six councils and more than 80 seats. Meanwhile, the Liberal Democrat and Green parties made significant gains. Together, they commanded more than a quarter of the total vote, and the Lib Dems gained 704 councillors and control of 10 councils, while the Greens gained 194 councillors. Additionally, independents made 'unusually large gains', which altogether amounted to a 'stinging rebuke to the two main parties' (BBC News, 2019). Following the Conservatives' decision to call a snap general election to be held in December 2019 after the resignation of Theresa May and appointment of Boris Johnson as leader of the party, the combined vote share fell to 75.7 percent. While this figure was still the highest since the 1997 election (barring 2017), it was nevertheless a move back to a more fragmented general election system, largely driven by a drastic drop in support for the Labour Party.

More recently, we have seen a return to Conservative dominance, with a similar pattern to the 2017 elections being seen in the 2021 elections. As with the 2017 elections, there was a large

increase in support for Conservative candidates in wards with more manual workers and people in routine occupations. Their vote rose most in wards that had recorded a strong vote for Leave in the 2016 Brexit referendum; for many voters, the Conservative support for Brexit 'has prompted a change in voting behaviour and the Conservatives are now regarded as the party of English national identity', and have mopped up former UKIP voters left without a home after the party's decline following its success in achieving its aim of Britain's exit from the European Union (Rallings & Thrasher, 2021). In other words, the higher level of fragmentation seen in the 2015 and 2016 elections was driven by rising support for UKIP, while the return to slightly lower levels of fragmentation in the following years was driven largely by these voters moving to the Conservative Party due to their positioning themselves as the party of English pride and national identity. This is a perfect illustration of both how party politics is driving fragmentation, and fragmentation is driving party politics; the greater fragmentation brought about by the unrest many voters felt at Britain's EU membership led to a major shake-up in party politics, while the changing status of the Conservatives as they moved to the right to mop up ex-UKIP voters then led to less fragmentation.

While this thesis is not principally concerned with party politics *per se*, being more focused on fragmentation as a phenomenon in and of itself and not its effects on the party-political system, the above is an important illustration of exactly why understanding fragmentation is an important element of electoral analysis. It demonstrates how the high levels of fragmentation seen from the early 1990s to the mid-2010s have are symptomatic of substantial voter dealignment, the emergence of new cleavage structures and the subsequent success of single-issue parties such as UKIP, which has had major ramifications on UK politics, and the current process of re-alignment in which the main parties are beginning to claw back support, albeit from vastly different sources than would have been the case for much of the 20th century. Further research would do well to build on the insights of the demographic causes of fragmentation that will hopefully be generated over the course of this thesis to better predict where fragmentation is most likely, what parties can do to capitalise on this, and how this will translate into electoral outcomes. Before beginning this analysis, this thesis will now turn to

an examination of the data and methodology that will be used in the upcoming empirical chapters.

Chapter 4: Data and methodology

This chapter will examine the available electoral and demographic data that will be used in the thesis, weighing up the relative merits and drawbacks of each, and justifying the use of the data sources selected for the final analysis. We will look first at local election data, which is available from a number of sources but which, because of the decentralised nature of local election reporting, is collected and collated using a variety of methods and so is not necessarily formatted and presented in a way that is useful for the analysis in this thesis without significant reformatting. We will then look at potential sources of demographic data and highlight any data issues that arose over the course of writing this thesis, as well as provide brief descriptions of how the data was cleaned, reformatted, and merged. The chapter will then move on to discuss the methods and tools used to analyse this data, and the advantages and disadvantages of these. In particular, this will focus on the selection of variables for the regression models in Chapter 6.

4.1 Data sources

4.1.1 Local election data

Local election data is, of course, freely available to the public, and as such, gaining access to the raw data presents no difficulties. However, the collection and collation of local election data is an extremely difficult and time-consuming undertaking, as reporting is decentralised and there is no official database of all results. Furthermore, numerous decisions have to be made about how data are to be reported, especially in cases such as multi-candidate wards, where multiple candidates may stand for each party. In these cases, the data collector has to decide how to report this: one option is to take the top-placed candidate for each party; another is to add the total votes for all candidates standing for a particular party; while other methods might add some other combination of candidates, such as the first- and third-placed candidate from each party. As a result of these issues, any attempt to collate local election results for a single year alone requires a gargantuan effort, and as this thesis uses 46 years of data,

manually collating the data needed was not an option. Consequently, the analysis in this thesis is heavily reliant on the hard work of others.

Fortunately, there are a number of valuable sources of local election data available that have already done the hard work of collating huge amounts of data into accessible and well-organised databases, which hugely reduces the amount of work that was needed to get local election data in a format useful to the analysis in this thesis. The three most prominent sources of collated local election data available come from the Elections Centre (Rallings & Thrasher, 2022), the Local Elections Archive Project (Teale, 2022), and Open Council Data UK (Lawson, 2022). Of these, Open Council Data UK is the least useful for the purposes of this thesis, as it provides information only about council compositions and not about votes. As this thesis is primarily concerned with fragmentation in voting patterns, this is not a viable data source for the bulk of this analysis, and so it is used only sparingly for two graphs for each case study in the final chapter.

The other two data sources mentioned, however, are both used heavily in the analytical chapters, with the Elections Centre being used for the national, regional, and local authority-level analysis, and the Local Elections Archive Project being used for the ward-level analysis. The Elections Centre, directed by Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher (2022), provides a comprehensive database of UK local election data, with data available for local elections from 1973 to 2018 in a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for each year. The data are all at local authority level, and the database provides a number of variables, including number of votes, wards and seats won by each party, turnout, uncontested seats, percent of seats with combinations of Con/Lab/LD candidates contesting, number of female candidates and percent elected, and number of incumbent candidates and percent elected, among many others. For the ward-level data, Andrew Teale's (2022) Local Elections Archive Project was used as the main data source. This database provides simple, ward-level local election data spanning from 2002 to 2018, again with a separate Microsoft Excel spreadsheet provided for each year. This dataset includes far fewer variables than the Elections Centre data, with each

spreadsheet consisting simply of the ward name and code, local authority name and code, candidate name, candidate party, number of votes, and winner in a binary variable.

4.1.2 Demographic data

The demographic data used in the analysis of the demographic drivers of fragmentation all came from the 2011 census, with the exception of the variables measuring change over time, which used data from both the 2011 and 2001 censuses. As with any demographic data, using data from the census comes with its drawbacks when compared to other surveys. The chief issue with using census data is that because the census is only performed once every ten years, data tend to be more than a few years old at the point of research, and populations can change significantly in this time. In this thesis, analysis runs all the way up to 2018, meaning that the demographic data used is often seven years older than the electoral data. Despite this, the census does have the advantage of being far larger than any other survey, aiming as it does to capture 100 percent of the population rather than a sample, and also being able to capture hard-to-measure populations such as homeless people. Consequently, data from censuses are extremely granular, and because they reach right down to the smallest geographical levels, comparisons between very small population units remain possible without introducing large sampling errors. Other sources of demographic data simply do not have the time or resources to produce data at anything like the same level of granularity. Indeed, the second-largest demographic survey in the UK is the Annual Population Survey, and while it has the benefit of being conducted annually, it still has a sample size of only 320,000 people, which would lead to sampling errors too large to produce reliable statistics at anything below the local authority level (Noble, 2020). Of course, since this thesis requires robust ward-level data to produce much of its analysis, the census is the only real option for the demographic data.

Another advantage of using census data is the sheer number of variables included in the census questionnaire. One of the major drawbacks of secondary data analysis is the inability to tailor survey questions to capture the exact variables needed for a project's analysis. As we have seen from the literature review, there are a substantial number of cleavages identified in both the

traditional and contemporary literature on the topic, and being able to capture all of these variables accurately through one secondary data source is not necessarily a given. Of course, collecting primary data of this type is not feasible for a project of this nature, and so compromises must be made in selecting variables that are theoretically and analytically relevant to the topic, as well as available in public datasets. Fortunately, the census dataset contains variables that capture all the cleavages that were identified in the literature review, including age, education, occupation, religion, social class, ethnicity, and country of birth. Given the scope and range of the data in the census, it was the only real option for the demographic data to be used in this thesis.

4.1.3 Data cleaning, formatting, and troubleshooting

While the data sources used in this thesis are the result of a huge effort on the part of those involved in their compilation, the fact that they were made for different purposes and with different audiences in mind means that none were presented in a format usable for the analysis in this thesis, a problem common to most analyses relying on secondary data. As such, additional data formatting steps were needed to enable the original empirical analysis in this thesis. This section will detail the steps taken to re-format, clean, and combine the data from each of the three main data sources; the Elections Centre (Rallings & Thrasher, 2022), the Local Elections Archive Project (Teale, 2022), and the 2011 Census (ONS, n.d.).

We will begin by looking at the data from the Elections Centre, which shows local authority-level local election data in a separate Excel spreadsheet for each year from 1973 to 2018. Each spreadsheet has four tabs: 'Overall Results'; 'Authority Results'; 'Turnout, Candidates etc.'; and 'Authority Turnout etc.'. The relevant data for the analysis in this thesis was mostly found in the 'Authority Results' tab, which contains columns for type of council, the local authority name, party, total number of votes, vote share for each party as a percentage, as well as wards contested, wards won, seats contested, and seats won as both values and percentages. The data were re-formatted using Excel, both because this author is most familiar with this program and because the re-formatting would need to be done before export to SPSS in any case. After

downloading the spreadsheet for each year, preliminary data-cleaning steps included basic tasks such as deleting superfluous tabs and superfluous columns within the relevant 'Authority Results' tab, un-merging cells in the 'local authority name' column and then filling the consequent blank cells with the local authority name, adding a column to include the region of each local authority (which was populated using a VLOOKUP formula that referred to a table with two columns for local authority and region of that local authority that was copy-and-pasted into the spreadsheet), and other minor formatting tasks such as adding filters and freezing top rows to make general navigation of the data easier.

One of the main issues with the data format in the original spreadsheet was that each local authority's name was presented in a merged cell spanning multiple rows, with each party's election results for that local authority having a separate row, plus a row for the total, with the subsequent columns showing the electoral data mentioned in the previous paragraph. This layout is demonstrated by Table 1, below (taken from the 'Authority Results' tab of the 2018 spreadsheet). For the purposes of this thesis, the data needed to be converted such that the first column would contain the local authority's name and each party's vote share would be presented along the columns, with only one row for each local authority. In order to do so, the cells containing the local authority names were unmerged and the consequent empty cells filled with the local authority name repeated in each row, before a pivot table was used to convert the date such that each local authority only spanned a single row, with the columns containing the percentage vote share of each party in that local authority. The new formatting is demonstrated in Table 2, below (also taken from the 2018 spreadsheet).

Table 1: Example of data format of Elections Centre spreadsheets

		Votes	% Share	Wards contested	%	Wards won	%	Seats contested	%	Seats won	%
Barking & Dagenham	Con	9,195	23.4	17	100.0	0	0.0	51	100.0	0	0.0
	Lab	28,974	73.8	17	100.0	17	100.0	51	100.0	51	100.0
	Green	317	0.8	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0
	Ind	372	0.9	1	5.9	0	0.0	1	2.0	0	0.0
	Other	404	1.0	2	11.8	0	0.0	2	3.9	0	0.0
	Total	39,262	100.0			17	100.0			51	100.0

Table 2: Example of reformatted data from Elections Centre spreadsheets

		Party vote share						
Local authority	Region	Con	Green	Ind	Lab	LD	Other	UKIP
Amber Valley	East Midlands	47%	6%	0%	42%	5%	0%	0%
Daventry	East Midlands	53%	2%	1%	30%	12%	0%	1%
Derby	East Midlands	40%	1%	1%	31%	15%	3%	9%
Lincoln	East Midlands	37%	6%	1%	48%	8%	0%	1%

Following this initial data cleaning and re-formatting, the next stage was to calculate the effective number of parties for each local authority. ENOP was calculated using a formula that divides 1 by the sum of the square root of every party's vote share in each local authority[4]. This was done by adding new columns that calculated the square root of each party's vote share in each column, followed by a final column that divided one by the sum of the figures in these columns. All of the steps above were repeated for the spreadsheets containing data from the years relevant to this thesis. While there were some slight differences in the formatting and data presented in the ward-level data taken from the Local Elections Archive Project (Teale, 2022), the data formatting steps were largely identical to those used for the data from the Elections Centre, and so will not be detailed again to avoid unnecessary repetition.

One further step was the collation of the most recent election data to take into account the four-year local election cycle. Due to the fact that not all local authorities have local elections in any given year, and that the Elections Centre data is available for all local elections up to 2018, it was decided that the regression analysis would be based on effective number of parties data collated from the entire 2015 to 2018 election cycle. For some local authorities, such as those in London, all councillors are elected at once every four years, but for many more, a smaller proportion of councillors is elected at more frequent intervals of one, two, or three years. Where this was the case, the votes for each party in a local authority in every election that occurred in that location over the four-year period were simply added together and

[4] A full discussion of exactly how ENOP is calculated, as well as its advantages and drawbacks, can be found in Chapter 4.2.1.3.

divided by the total votes over that period to reach a vote share percentage for each party for the whole four-year cycle. Because of the way this aggregation has been calculated, it is possible, although unlikely, that in some scenarios, a particular party may have received the most votes in a local authority or ward over the aggregated four-year period and yet not have won the most votes in any one single election year. While this is worth noting, it is not an issue for the analysis, as the aim is to identify areas in which voting patterns, and not necessarily council seats, are fragmenting, and this does not prevent that.

Compared to the steps taken to reformat the election data, the census data was relatively straightforward to reformat, with the main challenge being that the process was still time-consuming as the steps needed to be repeated for each variable, and the consequent data collated into one single spreadsheet for merging with the election data. The first step taken to access the census data was to download the spreadsheet containing the index of tables and figures from the ONS website (ONS, n.d.), and then to identify and download the most relevant datasets for the demographic analysis. Each separate dataset involved slightly different steps to reformat the data, but broadly speaking, the process involved removing superfluous columns, changing groupings to ones relevant to the regression models (such as adding together the percentage of people with no qualifications and level 1 qualifications for the 'Education level' variable, or calculating the old age dependency ratio), and then collating the relevant variables into a single spreadsheet to be merged with the elections data. This process was repeated for local-authority and ward-level data.

Following the reformatting and cleaning of both the election and demographic data, the next challenge was to merge the two datasets to create the data used in SPSS to generate the regression models. The process for the local authority- and ward-level data was slightly different, largely due to changing ward boundaries between the 2011 census and the 2015-2018 election cycle, data from which forms the backbone of the analysis. In order to merge the local authority-level election data with the corresponding demographic data, an Excel sheet was created that combined the relevant variables from each separate data download in the form

that they would be used in the final regression models. This was done using the VLOOKUP function, which presented no issues, as of course the local authority names or ID codes did not change between data sheets. This, however, was not the case when merging the demographic and elections data, as although local authorities stayed unchanged, name formatting was sometimes subtly different (e.g. 'Southend on Sea' as opposed to 'Southend-on-Sea'; 'Bristol, City of' as opposed to 'Bristol'). Correcting this involved manually checking for errors and correcting names to be exactly the same across spreadsheets to ensure that the VLOOKUP formula could work as intended. Once all of these problems were ironed out, the sheet was then exported to SPSS to begin the modelling.

Matching up the ward names between the election and census data presented a more significant challenge. Many ward boundaries, names, and ONS identification codes changed in the period between the 2011 census and 2018 local elections, and additionally, many wards have generic names that occur across multiple wards in multiple local authorities (for example, there is a 'Riverside' ward in the local authorities of Aylesbury Vale, Gravesham, Halton, Liverpool, North Tyneside, Northampton, and Worcestershire), making the use of a simple VLOOKUP for ward name unviable. To overcome this issue, a slightly more complicated VLOOKUP solution was used. Firstly, an extra column was inserted that collated the ward name and local authority name separated by a comma (e.g. 'Riverside, Liverpool'). Then, a formula was written that would look first for the ward's ID code, and if this retrieved no match, would then look for the collated ward name and local authority name. Using this method, the demographic data from the 2011 census was able to be matched to 9,887 of the 13,216 wards in the 2015-2018 election data, representing 74.8 percent of the total data points. While having almost ten thousand cases is more than enough for a robust regression analysis, especially with the small number of independent variables, the fact that over 25 percent of cases from the sample are missing in the final analysis raises questions over whether the results of the regression are reliably generalisable. As such, the decision was made to proceed to run the models with the data that did match, and to run another regression model using only 2011 election data, where 99 percent of cases were matched, to check for consistency across both

models. More detail can be found in subsection 6.2.4.2, but it is enough for now to say that this check gave almost identical results to the 2015-2018 models.

Another issue that arose around the treatment of the 'Other' category when calculating the ENOP measurement for the local authority-level data. In order for the calculation to arrive at the true value for the effective number of parties, we must know the exact vote share for every single party that fielded a candidate in the area for which the figure is being calculated. However, the local authority-level data gave a figure only for Labour, Conservatives, Liberal Democrats, Greens, UKIP and Independents, with any other parties being categorised together as 'Other'. Therefore, without checking each local authority for every year in the analysis and manually adding the vote share for each party in the 'Other' category, it was impossible to arrive at a true figure for ENOP. However, it was decided that for the purposes of this thesis, this would not pose a significant issue.

One of the main reasons for this is that upon closer examination, there were very few local authorities in which there was a large 'Other' category, and taking a small sample of local authorities in which the 'Other' category accounted for more than 15 percent of votes, it was revealed there were a tiny number of local authorities in which this 'Other' category was not simply a single *de facto* independent candidate standing for a hyper-local independent party and receiving a large chunk of the local vote, as opposed to a profusion of smaller parties all receiving small but not insignificant vote shares. In addition, taking some example cases that ranged across the spectrum of 'Other' party vote shares and number of 'Other' parties revealed that the differences between ENOP calculated with a grouped 'Other' category and ENOP calculated with each individual party's vote share were minimal. As can be seen in Table 3, below, the difference between ENOP in this sample were incredibly small, and not particularly relevant for analysis; even in the most extreme case in the sample, Tower Hamlets, there was still a difference of only 0.27 when the ENOP category is calculated based on the vote share of each individual party rather than with a grouped 'Other parties' category. This should not substantially affect the overall results, nor change the view of Tower Hamlets as an area with

relatively high levels of fragmentation. As such, treating the 'Other' categories as one single party for the purposes of the ENOP calculation does not seem to be a major issue, and this is further ameliorated by the fact that this decision is consistently applied across all calculations, as well as the fact that this issue is only pertinent to the local authority-level data. In the ward-level data, which is used to generate the final regression models and so is the most important unit of analysis for this thesis, this was not an issue, as the data source for the ward-level electoral data did not aggregate small parties into a single 'Other' category, and so the ENOP calculations are accurate.

Table 3: Examples of difference in effective number of parties (ENOP) when calculated with 'Other' parties category grouped and ungrouped

Ward name	Year	Vote share %, 'Other' parties	No. of 'Other' parties	ENOP – 'Other' parties, grouped	ENOP – 'Other' parties, ungrouped	ENOP – Difference
Mansfield	2015	38.9	2	2.67	2.64	-0.03
Havering	2018	31.1	5	3.97	3.79	-0.18
Tower Hamlets	2018	29.7	4	3.40	3.67	0.27
Rochford	2018	21.2	2	3.28	3.43	0.15
Barnsley	2016	15.0	6	2.71	2.80	0.09
Stafford	2015	11.4	2	3.94	3.95	0.01
Barnsley	2015	10.9	5	2.90	2.97	0.07
Barnsley	2018	7.1	4	2.56	2.55	-0.01

4.2 Tools of analysis

This section will look at the methods to be employed on the data sources described above, beginning with the operationalisation of the concept of fragmentation, and moving on to consider the descriptive methods used in Chapter 4.2.4.2 and the regression models in Chapter 6.

4.2.1 Measurements of fragmentation

Perhaps the single most important methodological choice made in this thesis is how to operationalise the concept of fragmentation, which is of course the core concept around which the analysis is based. There have been multiple suggested methods by which to do so, which will be examined below, before the choice to use Laakso and Taagepara's (1979) effective number of parties measurement is discussed and justified.

4.2.1.1 Combined vote for Conservatives and Labour

The simplest and most obvious measure of fragmentation in UK elections is the percentage of voters casting their ballot for either Labour or the Conservatives, with the possible addition of the Liberal Democrats. As the two main parties in the UK's two (or two-and-a-half) party system, the sum of votes for these parties is a decent indication of fragmentation, as a lower vote share for them necessarily indicates a higher share for other, smaller parties. However, it remains a crude measurement for a number of reasons. Firstly, it presupposes the dominance of these two parties, and does not account for a situation in which another party gains a higher share of the vote that one or both of them. While it is true that this has never been the case in the period studied in this thesis, it is nevertheless an issue that must be raised.

Secondly, it provides no indication of the number or the size of the other parties gaining votes at any given election. An election in which, for example, the Conservatives gain 37 percent of the vote and Labour gains 33 percent yields a combined vote of 70 percent. However, this measurement gives no indication of whether one other party has gained 30 percent of the vote or five parties have each gained six percent of the vote. Finally, it also fails to account for the difference in vote between Labour and the Conservatives. It could hardly be said that an election in which the Conservatives gain, for example, 50 percent of the vote while Labour and the Liberal Democrats each gain around 20 percent of the vote is a two-party system, yet this measurement would not take the disparity between vote shares of the two parties into account. As such, it is clear that a more nuanced measurement of fragmentation is needed.

4.2.1.2 Indices of fractionalisation

One of the earliest attempts to measure fragmentation in a more systematic manner was Rae's (1967) *fractionalisation index*[5], which was derived from Herfindahl (1950) and Hirschman's (1945) *concentration index*[6]. The concentration index gives the probability that two randomly selected voters will vote for the same party, giving a value of one if there is only one party, and zero if the number of parties tends towards infinity. Rae's fractionalisation index works on a similar principle, but instead gives the probability that two randomly selected voters will vote for different parties, giving a value of zero if there is only one party, and a value of one if the number of parties tends to infinity. A similar index, known as the *hyperfractionalisation index*, or Kesselman-Wildgen index, was introduced by Kesselman (1966) and Wildgen (1971).

While these indices represent an initial attempt at measuring fragmentation, they suffer from various major weaknesses. Rae's index suffers from two main issues. The first is that the index is non-linear; if, for example, one doubles the number of parties of equal size, this does not correspond to a doubling of the value of the index, which creates problems for its use in analyses. Secondly, as the index is based on probabilities, it is difficult to interpret, giving a value that measures the likelihood of two voters selecting the same party, rather than a value that measures the actual or effective number of parties in a system (Diwakar, 2014, pp. 59–60). Meanwhile, the hyperfractionalisation index 'has been criticised for being excessively sensitive to the presence of small parties and therefore overstating party system fragmentation' (Zhang, 2011, p. 61). Consequently, it has passed into disuse in the literature.

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[5] The hyperfractionalisation index is defined by the formula:

$$F = 1 - HH$$

[6] The concentration index is defined by the formula:

$$HH = \sum_{1}^{x} s_i^2$$

4.2.1.3 Effective number of parties

As such, a different approach to the measurement of fragmentation is clearly needed. One of the most well-known attempts to do so was made by Laakso and Taagepera (1979), who introduced an index called *effective number of parties* (ENOP), which we will notate as N_{LT}. In the decades since its introduction, N_{LT} became the standard measurement of fragmentation, and 'in modern comparative politics a high degree of consensus has been reached' on its effectiveness (Lijphart, 1994, p. 68). Lijphart described it as 'the purest measure of the number of parties' (Lijphart, 1994, p. 70), stating that 'the problem of how to count parties of different sizes is solved by using the effective number measure' (Lijphart, 1999, p. 65).

N_{LT} gives an adjusted number of political parties in a system that takes into account both the number of parties and the relative success of each party in elections, as measured by their share of the total vote or by the number of seats they win. The figure given is a representation of the 'number of hypothetical *equal*-size parties that would have the same total *effect* on fractionalization of the system as have the actual parties of *unequal* size' (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979, p. 4). N_{LT} will only match the actual number of parties in a system when they all have equal electoral success; in practice, this rarely, if ever, occurs. N_{LT} is calculated by dividing 1 by the sum of the squares of the proportions of vote shares (or seats won) for all parties in an election. The equation for the formula is

$$N_{LT} = \frac{1}{\sum_{i=1}^{n} p_i^2}$$

where n is the number of parties with at least one vote or seat and p_i^2 is the square of each party's proportion of all votes or seats.

This method of calculating fragmentation has a number of major advantages. Firstly, unlike simply adding the vote shares of the largest parties, it takes into account all parties in an election and still provides a single figure that accounts for both the number of parties and their relative size in an intuitive and easy-to-interpret manner. Secondly, if all parties (n) have equal vote share, ENOP = n. For example, if four parties each received 25 percent of the vote, ENOP

would equal four. Secondly, if one party receives 100 percent of the vote, ENOP will always equal 1. Thirdly, adding in parties who receive no votes does not alter the ENOP value. Fourthly, small changes in the vote share of very minor party cause only a very small change in the ENOP figure. Finally, the vote share of every party in the system is treated equally and submitted to the same mathematical transformation, thus not biasing the figure for or against larger or smaller parties (Laakso & Taagepera, 1979, pp. 5–6).

Despite these advantages, however, ENOP does have some issues as a measurement. The first is not an issue with the measurement *per se*, but more of a caveat. ENOP measures the number of parties in a system that actually have a meaningful effect on the electoral outcome; it does not measure the *actual* number of parties in a system, and should not be used as a proxy for it. The same ENOP value can be generated by vastly different configurations of parties in different systems, regardless of the *actual* number of parties in that system (Taagepera & Shugart, 1989, p. 259). The level of fragmentation (as measured by ENOP) in any given party system may stay at a similar level despite an increase in the number of parties running in that system, or fragmentation could increase despite no additional parties entering the ballot. This is not an issue that should affect this thesis, however, as it is concerned primarily with fragmentation defined as the number of parties actually having a meaningful impact on electoral outcomes in the UK. The proliferation of smaller parties who receive insignificant numbers of votes does not have any real impact on the study question, and so this concern can be dismissed.

A second issue with ENOP is that it can behave oddly with changes in two key variables: the vote or seat share of the largest party; and the number of parties in the equation. In the former case, ENOP has a tendency to exaggerate the number of effective parties in situations in which the largest party has a very high proportion (>0.5) of the vote and minor parties have very small shares. For example, in an election in which one party wins 70 percent of the vote, and six other parties win 5 percent each, ENOP = 1.99. It would be very difficult to argue that this particular configuration is anything but a one party system, yet the ENOP figure with no

further information would lead you to believe this was a two party system (Molinar, 1991, p. 1984). In the latter case, a problem generic to all weighted indices occurs, in which any given ENOP score may be produced by a range of widely differing conditions in terms of the number of observable parties in competition and the vote or seat share of the largest party. As such, comparing ENOP scores across cases with vastly differing numbers of parties and different levels of largest party support is potentially misleading (Dunleavy & Boucek, 2003, p. 301).

4.2.1.4 Alternatives to effective number of parties

Given the problems with Laakso and Taagepara's (1979) measurement, it is useful to compare it to alternative measures of fragmentation before committing to its use. One such alternative was proposed by Molinar (1991), whose measure, called simply *number of parties* (*NP*), counts the winning party as one and weights the final figure by the contribution of the minority parties[7]. The measurement is a probability measure; 'it weighs the probability that two randomly chosen voters belong to the same minority party by the probability that two randomly chosen voters belong to the same party (winner or not)' (Molinar, 1991, p. 1385). Molinar argues that *NP* more accurately captures the number of effective parties in a systematically-generated set of theoretical election result cases, and that it 'behaves better in relation to the size of the largest party and to the gap between the two largest parties' (Molinar, 1991, p. 1390).

However, Molinar's alternative also has a number of quirks that make it very problematic. As noted above, ENOP often overestimates the number of effective parties in situations in which the main party receives a very high share of the vote. Molinar's index suffers from the inverse of this problem; that is, it often records highly fragmented party systems as having fewer effective parties if the main party has a higher share of the vote. Additionally, it 'systematically understates the numbers of parties in situations where one party has majority support',

[7] Molinar's (1991) *number of parties* index is defined by the formula:

$$N_{LT} = \frac{1}{2(s_1^2 - s_1) + 1}$$

especially when measuring legislative parties (Dunleavy & Boucek, 2003, p. 307). In their appraisal of methods of measuring fragmentation, Dunleavy and Boucek (2003) concluded that Molinar did not fully appreciate the complex behaviour of the index under certain condition, and argued that 'the index should be dropped forthwith from its residual place in the political science toolkit' (Dunleavy & Boucek, 2003, p. 313).

Dunleavy and Boucek (2003) themselves come up with an alternative index (N_{DB}) based on their critique of ENOP, in which they describe a problem they term the 'kink' effect. The kink effect can be described by the following (the notation N_{LT} refers to the ENOP figure; s_x refers to vote/seat share by party size rank e.g. s_1 represents the vote share of the largest party, s_2 the second largest etc.):

> 'Consider the lower limit values of N_{LT} as s_1 decreases from 0.51 (with s_2 = 0.49) to 0.49 (with s_2 = 0.49 and s_3 = 0.02). At s_1 = 0.51, the value of N_{LT} is 1.9992; at s_1 = 0.49, it is 2.0807. Thus, given that at s_1 = 0.50, the effective number of parties is exactly 2, the N_{LT} value falls by more than a hundred times as much when s_1 moves from 49 to 50 percent, as it does if s_1 moves from 50 to 51 percent' (Golosov, 2009, p. 178).

Dunleavy and Boucek's (2003) solution to this issue is to simply take the average of N_{LT} and $1/s_1$. This measurement[8] has the benefit of giving a more intuitively plausible measure of ENOP at low levels of fragmentation than N_{LT}, and while it does not completely eliminate the kink effect, it is much less pronounced. While N_{DB} does indeed solve many of the major problems of N_{LT}, Golosov (2009, p. 179) argues that their proposed solution is insufficient.

Golosov argues that in order to create a more accurate and intuitively appealing measurement of fragmentation, one must move away from the family of indices from which all the previously

[8] Dunleavy and Boucek's (2003) index is defined by the formula:

$$N_{DB} = \left(\frac{1}{\sum_1^x s_i^2} + \frac{1}{s_1}\right) \times \frac{1}{2}$$

discussed measurements are derived (Golosov, 2009, p. 180). His proposed index (N_G)[9] does that, and due to this, yields 'intuitively plausible values for constellations with $s_1 > 0.5$' (Golosov, 2009, p. 182). To take an examples, N_G would produce a value of 1.25 for a two-party system in which one party gains 80 percent of the vote and the other gains 20 percent. This is intuitive because the second party is one quarter (0.25) of the size of the largest party. N_{LT} would produce a value of 1.33 for this constellation. N_G also has the advantage of producing smaller scores for party constellations with fewer important parties, and also minimises undesirable side effects such as the kink effect described by Dunleavy and Boucek (2003).

4.2.1.5 Justification for chosen measure

Despite the relative advantages of the indices proposed by Dunleavy and Boucek (2003) and Golosov (2009) when compared to Laakso and Taagepara's (1979) index, this thesis opts for the latter measurement. Each method has its advantages and disadvantages, but unlike the other measures, N_{LT} has the advantage of being both the simplest to calculate and one of the simplest to interpret, as well as being the most commonly accepted and used measurement of fragmentation in the literature. This allows for greater cross-comparison between the work presented here and that of other papers. Additionally, there is a case to be made that because this thesis is more interested in general trends than individual cases, and because each of these measurements is highly correlated with one another, the results and discussion will not be substantively different if a different index were to be used.

4.2.2 Descriptive methods

The first substantive analytical chapter of this thesis (Chapter 5) will use largely descriptive methods to explore patterns of fragmentation in the UK, focusing on differences in ENOP across geographies, beginning at the national level and working down to ward-level. At the

[9] Golosov's (2009) index is defined by the formula

$$N_G = \sum_{1}^{x} \frac{1}{1 + (s_1^2/s_i) - s_i}$$

national level, the data will be mostly presented in the form of line graphs showing the changes in ENOP over time. These graphs will provide comparisons between ENOP in local and general elections, the combined vote share for Labour and the Conservatives in local and general elections, and the difference in ENOP in local elections as measured by votes and seats in order to illustrate the distorting effect of the first-past-the-post system on UK election results. Line graphs are the obvious choice for the national-level section, as it looks at the change in fragmentation over time, and line graphs are ideal for time-series data (Diamond & Jefferies, 2001, p. 33). While there was some intention to use structural break analysis to determine key moments at which fragmentation levels change significantly, it was eventually decided that this would be superfluous, as key moments are quite visually apparent, and this would have taken a lot of work for a relatively minor element of the thesis.

Moving down to the regional level, much of the analysis will look broadly similar to the national level. Line graphs will again be used to compare trends in fragmentation across regions, using both a collated line graph that includes all regions and individual line graphs of each region to allow for clarity of interpretation and comparison. Graphs showing the linear trend-lines for each region will also be included, although these are of limited analytical relevance, since they obscure the peaks and troughs of fragmentation levels that the raw data provides. As with the national level, structural break analysis will be used to determine if there are any important differences in patterns of fragmentation across regions, or if fragmentation has occurred at broadly the same pace regardless of geography.

At the local authority level, data presentation begins to get slightly more complex; individual or grouped line graphs showing trends across individual local authorities would have taken up far too much space and been much too cluttered, so this option was quickly disregarded in favour of more visual presentation methods, chief among which is the use of maps with gradated shading to compare fragmentation across local authorities and to visually check for trends in the geography of fragmentation across England. In order to generate the maps, a freely available online software package called Flourish (Flourish Studio, 2022) was used,

which has maps of the UK pre-populated with local authority boundaries. The base date for this was simply downloaded into an Excel spreadsheet, and the VLOOKUP function was used to match the local authorities in the map with the ENOP figures from the previous data cleaning and analysis. Where direct matches were unable to be found, data was simply matched manually, as much of the time this was simply due to slight differences in naming conventions; as an example, Southend on Sea needed to be matched to Southend-on-Sea. This result in a gradated map showing the levels of fragmentation across England, using the ENOP figure from the aggregated election data from the 2015-2018 local election cycle.

In addition to the maps, the chapter utilises tables showing various data points, including the most and least fragmented local authorities, as well as those lying around the median, along with the vote share for each party in these authorities and the number of authorities featuring different party configurations. Unfortunately, Flourish did not have a ward-level option available, so the ward-level analysis also relies heavily on the same tables described above, showing the most prevalent configurations of parties across all wards, and using this to draw up some basic categorisations of the different types of party constellations that are associated with higher or lower levels of fragmentation.

4.2.3 Regression analysis

The second analytical chapter of this thesis, which examines the factors that drive fragmentation in the UK local election system, will rely heavily on regression analysis to determine the key predictors of fragmentation. As all of the variables are based on aggregate level data, they are mostly continuous, percentage-based values, such as the proportion of people in a ward that are educated to degree level or higher. As such, multiple linear regression is the most suitable method for the bulk of the analytical work, with more limited use of binary or multiple logistic regression where appropriate. Regression analysis is being used for this study as it allows for the analysis of the relationship of many independent variables with the dependent variable (fragmentation) while also taking into account the interrelation among independent variables (Bernard, 2000, p. 620). This flexibility makes it 'ideal for the

investigation of more complex … research questions' (Pallant, 2007, p. 146), and given the complex and interlinking factors that influence the level of fragmentation in a political system, regression analysis is well-suited to the research question.

As with any statistical technique, regression has its strengths and weaknesses, as well as assumptions that must be met to ensure that it is an appropriate method. The variables that are selected for inclusion in a model, and the way in which they are entered into the model, can have a significant effect on the resultant coefficients. As such, it is vitally important that independent variables are selected on the basis of sound theoretical rationales or on previous studies that have confirmed their relevance to the dependent variable (Field, 2013, p. 321). All of the variables that will be included in the regression models in this thesis will meet these criteria, and a full discussion of the factors that have been theorised in the literature to have an impact on fragmentation has been provided in the *Theoretical Framework* chapter. Regarding the order in which variables are entered into the model, this study will likely use standard regression, in which all independent variables are entered into the equation simultaneously, with each independent variable measured in terms of its predictive power in relation to all the other variables. This method has the advantage of being both the simplest way to enter variables, and of allowing assessment of the overall fit of the model as well as the impact of each predictor on the dependent variable (Pallant, 2007, p. 147).

Another factor that must be considered when using regression analysis is that its suitability for any particular dataset is dependent on a number of assumptions, 'and is not all that forgiving if they are violated' (Pallant, 2007, p. 148). The first assumption is that of generalisability, which depends on having a large enough sample size. While there are no concrete rules for sample size in regression analysis, Field (2013, p. 313) suggests says that between 10 and 15 cases per predictor is optimum, Stevens (1996, p. 72) argues that 'about 15 subjects per predictor are needed for a reliable equation', and Tabachnik and Fidell (2007, p. 123) provide a formula for sample size requirements: $N > 50 + 8m$, where N is the number of cases and m is the number of independent variables. For the regression models based on ward-

level data, this will not be an issue; the ward-level data will include upwards of 10,000 cases and fewer than 10 independent variables. For the local authority-level analysis, for which there are only 326 cases, generalisability is more of a worry, but still should not present any significant issues. Even using the most conservative suggestions for sample size per case, this amount of cases should still allow the use of 30 or more predictors, far more than is likely to be used in any single model.

Linear regression is based on a number of assumptions, and checks to test these assumptions must be undertaken and passed if the method is to be used. The first is for multicollinearity, which exists when the independent variables are highly correlated, and can cause untrustworthy coefficient values, limitations on the value of R, and difficulties in assessing the impact of individual predictors. Multicollinearity can be checked for using a correlation matrix of the predictors, and any with a correlation of higher than 0.8 should be checked and rethought (Field, 2013, pp. 325–6). In addition, the data should be checked for outliers that might disproportionately affect the model, as well as for normality, linearity, homoscedasticity, and independence of residuals, which can all be checked using residuals scatterplots (Pallant, 2007, p. 149).

The second main assumption is the independence of errors, a violation of which produces overdispersion. This is a problem because it limits the size of standard errors, which can lead to large test statistics and thus overestimation of the significance of predictors in a model (because the test statistic is calculated by dividing the regression parameters by their standard errors). Smaller standard errors also produce smaller confidence intervals, leading to potential overconfidence in the ability of the relationship between the predictors in the sample and their outcome in the population. In short, overdispersion does not affect the model parameters themselves, but instead leads to bias about their significance and population value. The presence of overdispersion can be checked by taking the ratio of the chi-squared goodness of fit statistic to its degrees of freedom. Overdispersion is likely to be present if this ratio is greater than 2 (Field, 2013, p. 772). As many regression models are to be used in this thesis, presenting

the results of each one of these tests will take up far too much space, detract from the flow of the argument, and in general be irrelevant to the discussion. As such, these assumptions will all be checked for each model, but the results of these checks will only be discussed if any of the assumptions are violated. If there is no discussion, the reader may assume that none of the assumptions were violated.

Another factor to consider when using regression models is the entry method for the variables. One cannot simply select dozens of variables, throw them all into a model, and assume that the model will produce any reliable or valid results. It is important that predictors are entered into the models in a particular order. When predictors are all totally uncorrelated, the order in which they are entered makes no difference. However, this is rarely the case, and indeed, is definitely not the case for the variables used in this thesis. There are three main methods by which a researcher can enter variables; hierarchical, or blockwise, entry; forced entry; and stepwise methods, which can be further broken down into forward and backward stepwise methods. As with all statistical tests, each has its advantages and disadvantages.

The first potential method is stepwise, which is both one of the most popular and controversial methods of entering variables (Smith, 2018, p. 1). Stepwise regression involves a sequence of computer-automated steps performed by whichever statistics package the researcher is using, in which each candidate variable is evaluated one by one, typically using the *t* statistic for the coefficients of the variables. The forward-selection stepwise technique starts with just the constant of the dependent variable and no predictor variables, then adds them one by one based on which variable has the highest simple correlation with the dependent variable. If this predictor significantly improves the ability of the model to predict the dependent variable, then that variable is retained, and the computer programme searches for a second predictor with the highest semi-partial correlation with the outcome. In other words, it searches for the predictor that best explains the variation in the outcome variable that is left over after the first predictor is entered. For example, if the first predictor explains 30% of the variation in the dependent variable, then the programme will search for the variable that best explains the

remaining 70%. This will keep happening until no more statistically significant variables remain from the list of candidate variables (Field, 2013, pp. 212–213). The alternative to the forward selection method is backward selection, in which the computer begins by placing all predictors in the model, checks the significance of the contribution of all variables, and removes those that are not statistically significant. The programme will then reassess the model, and this procedure will continue until all variables are statistically significant.

While stepwise, on the surface, seems to be the most rigorous method as it is based solely on automated, mathematical calculations, many statisticians believe it should never be used, despite survey papers showing that around half of all published papers in journals in some fields use stepwise regression (Castle, Doornik, & Hendry, 2011; Whittingham, Stephens, Bradbury, & Freckleton, 2006). The stepwise method suffers from a number of flaws, chief among which is that the standard statistical tests assume a single test of a pre-specified model, and are not useful when a sequence of steps is used to choose the explanatory variables. The practical upshot of this is that standard errors of the coefficients are underestimated, confidence intervals become too narrow, the t statistic too high, and the p values too low, all of oversells the predictive power and thus creates a false confidence in the final model (Smith, 2018, p. 2). Additionally, some have argued that the method takes important methodological considerations out of the hands of the researcher and as such, should only be used when it is absolutely necessitated by the complete absence of any theoretical basis for variable selection (Field, 2013, pp. 212–213).

The main alternative to the stepwise method is the hierarchical, or blockwise, entry method. Like stepwise regression, hierarchical regression is a sequential process involving the entry of predictor variables into the model in steps. However, while stepwise regression is based solely on mathematical calculations performed by computer software, in hierarchical regression the order of variable entry into the analysis is determined by the researcher based on theory and past research (Lewis, 2007, pp. 9–10) on the assumption that 'the data analyst knows more than the computer' (Henderson & Velleman, 1981, p. 391). Known predictors from previous

research are entered first, and any new predictors added subsequently. This can be done all in one go, or by using either the stepwise or hierarchical methods (Field, 2013, p. 212). Hierarchical regression is the most appropriate tool to use when variance in a dependent variable is being explained by predictor variables that are correlated with each other, as the variables used in this thesis are. It allows for the analysis of the effects of predictor variables while controlling for the effects of other variables by calculating the change in the adjusted R^2 value at each step of the analysis (Lewis, 2007, p. 10).

Given the problems with stepwise regression and the advantages of hierarchical regression, this thesis will use the hierarchical entry model. There is a good amount of previous research upon which variable selection can be based, a lot of which identifies which variables could potentially be the most important predictors. When there is a sound theoretical basis for variable selection, there is very little reason to use settle for the compromises involved in stepwise regression. In addition, the predictor variables that will be used in the regression models are all correlated with one another to greater or lesser degrees, another criteria that meets the requirements for the use of hierarchical regression. Given the above considerations, hierarchical regression makes the most sense as the entry method for the regression analysis to be used in this thesis.

With multiple linear regression models, SPSS (or whichever statistics package is being used) generates a number of statistics that measure the 'fit' of the model as a whole, as well as the contribution of each individual predictor variable in the model. The statistics for measuring the overall fit of the model that will be discussed in the analysis are R^2, Adjusted R^2, the F statistic, and the p value. The R^2 statistic measures the proportion of the variance in the dependent variable that can be explained by the independent variables in the model. So, if a model's R^2 value is 0.5, we can say that 50% of the variance in the dependent variable is due to the independent variables in the model (Pallant, 2007, p. 158). The value of R^2 will always increase as more independent variables are included in the model, which leads to the temptation to overfit the model; that is, to include more variables than necessary to artificially

inflate the R^2 value. For that reason, the adjusted R^2 statistic will also be included. Adjusted R^2 attempts to correct for this overestimation by adjusting for the number of terms in the model, and can decrease when additional variables do not improve the model fit by a statistically significant amount (Frost, 2017).

The R^2 and adjusted R^2 statistics are both measures of the fit of the model, while both the F and p values are measures of the statistical significance of the model. For ease, we will rely on the p value, as it is easier to intuitively interpret. The p value is expressed as a proportion, and tells us the chance that the obtained results could happen as a result of random chance. If a statistical test has a p value of 0.1, there is a 10% chance that the results could be the result of random variations in the sample. When running a regression analysis, one must first pre-determine a significance level, beyond which one would have to fail to reject the null hypothesis that the model has a statistically significant effect on the predictor variable. For the sake of this thesis, we will use a significance level of 95%, meaning that any statistics with a p value of greater than 0.05 will be deemed statistically insignificant. This significance level will be used both in assessing the overall fit of the model, and in assessing the significance of the individual predictor variables.

When presenting the model results, some key statistics will be used to determine the effects of the predictor variables on the dependent variable (ENOP), namely the unstandardised beta coefficient, and the confidence intervals and p values for these unstandardised beta coefficients. The unstandardised beta coefficient measures the amount of change in the dependent variable after a one-unit change in the independent variable. So, for example, if we had a regression model with a dependent variable of average income in a local authority that included a variable measuring the percentage of residents with a degree, and the unstandardised beta coefficient for this variable was 500, we could say that a one-unit (i.e. a one percent) increase in the percentage of residents in a local authority who hold a degree will increase that local authority's average income by £500.

The *p* value and confidence intervals for the unstandardised beta coefficients are both measures of the confidence we can have in the accuracy of the reported beta coefficient. The *p* value measures the probability that the variance seen in the dependent variable as a result of changes in an independent variable happens by chance. If a variable has a *p* value of 0.123, there is a 12.3% chance that the results could be the result of random variations in the sample. We will set a confidence level of five percent in this thesis, meaning that any variable with a *p* value of greater than 0.05 will be deemed as not statistically significant. In other words, if we can't be more than 95% certain in the accuracy of a beta coefficient, it will not be considered when evaluating the model. Similarly, the confidence interval simply measures the range of values for the unstandardised beta coefficient within which we can be 95 percent certain that the true value of beta lies. In the income example given above, we might get a confidence interval of 475 at the lower bound and 525 at the higher bound. This would indicate that we can be 95 percent certain that the true value of beta lies between 475 and 525.

4.2.3.1 Model building and variable selection

As was discussed in the previous section, a key aspect of building a good regression model is the selection of variables that have a solid justification for inclusion based on theoretical literature as well as previous studies that have used them. The dependent variable in the models will of course be the effective number of parties (ENOP), which is used as the measurement for fragmentation. ENOP has been calculated down to ward-level for each year included in the study. The merits and drawbacks of this measurement are discussed in Chapter 4.2.1.

The selection of the independent (or predictor) variables is more complicated. Based on the literature around fragmentation and polarisation in the UK in recent years, a number of factors have been identified. The two that feature most prominently are age and education level. These two variables have been found in many studies to be the most important demographic predictors of attitudinal polarisation, and as such, it can be expected that the age structure and education levels present in a particular area will be relevant to its level of fragmentation.

Another important variable identified in the literature is income. One of the main contentions of the 'left-behind' thesis, or of that family of theories, is that polarisation has been caused by economic discrepancies between the 'winners and losers' of globalisation, and based on this, it could be expected that an area's income levels would play an important role in determining its likelihood to be prone to fragmentation. Income inequality may be even more important here; it is likely that areas that have more of a discrepancy between rich and poor may suffer more dissatisfaction with the prevailing political order and thus be more likely to fragment.

Another factor to consider would be an area's level of immigration, or change in immigrant population over a certain period. High levels of immigration will change an area's demographic composition, and if it is true that demographic factors impact fragmentation levels, this may have a significant impact. Additionally, high immigration levels may make fragmentation more likely merely by virtue of the introduction of a group of people who may not share the same ties to particular parties as existing residents. High immigration levels could also change residents' political priorities, and thus their party preferences and electoral choices, perhaps by pushing residents away from their traditional party affiliations to those who have a harder anti-immigration stance.

A key point to make here is that the demographic breakdowns of an area may not be indicative of fragmentation as much as how this has changed. While immigration is the easiest way for an area's demographic make-up to change, the UK has also experienced a rapid expansion in the rate of young people attending higher education institutions, which may have been more concentrated in some areas than others. Likewise, when considering the economic variables, areas that have not seen an increase in wealth or purchasing power, or have experienced widening wealth inequality, may be more susceptible to fragmentation, even if they are better off than other areas in absolute terms. For this reason, it is important to include models that take change over time into account, so variables that cover this facet of the fragmentation puzzle will also be included. To summarise, then, the regression models will include variables covering age, education level, social grade, ethnicity and occupation in industry, as well as how

these last two have changed over time. A fuller discussion of the selected variables, as well as the data sources used, can be found in Chapter 6.1.

4.2.4 Case studies

Chapter 7 of this thesis uses case studies of select local authorities to bolster our understanding of how fragmentation is occurring in English local elections. While using case studies in large-*N* studies such as this is uncommon, there are good theoretical and methodological reasons for employing a mixed methods approach such as this. A mixed methods approach allows 'researchers to seek a more panoramic view of their research landscape, viewing phenomena from different viewpoints and through diverse research lenses', as well as to answer research questions that neither quantitative or qualitative data could answer alone (Shorten & Smith, 2017, p. 74). As the quantitative analysis forms the bulk of the thesis, with the more qualitative case studies being used to complement the quantitative work, the approach used can be characterised as an explanatory sequential approach. In this research design, quantitative data is collected and analysed first, and may form the bulk of the research, before the qualitative data is introduced to help explain, or elaborate on, the quantitative results (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006, p. 5).

This approach is pertinent to this thesis because a core assumption in its theoretical framework and approach is that demographics affect fragmentation through party support; after all, electoral fragmentation is a second-order concept that is operationalised using data on party support, whether this be through vote share in elections or seats won in a legislative chamber. As such, looking at the demographic drivers of fragmentation through regression models alone, without considering how local contexts can affect the interplay between the two, is limiting, as the same demographics can and do lead to different levels of support in different areas. To take one example: as we will see in Chapter 5.3, cosmopolitan cities with diverse demographic profiles can be associated with very high levels of fragmentation in cases such as York, Bournemouth, Bath, and Bristol, or very low levels of fragmentation in cases such as London, Liverpool, and Manchester. It is highly likely that these huge contrasts in

fragmentation levels in demographically similar areas may be due to local context; it is likely the case that there are important historical and cultural factors in certain places that determine, define, or limit how demographic factors affect party support, or how much they matter compared to other places. For example, both Manchester and Liverpool have long histories as Labour strongholds, due to their traditional links to unions and industry, and their antipathy towards the Conservative party, which is often linked to the perception of the Conservatives as a party only concerned with the South of England (Kellner, 2013; Wilks-Heeg, 2019). As a result of these unique local contexts, the ways that we would expect the demographic profiles of these places to affect party support and therefore fragmentation levels may differ from other places with different local contexts.

4.2.4.1 Case selection

A key element of a case study approach is case selection. There are a diverse set of requirements for case selection depending on the data available, the aim of the case studies, and the resources available to the researcher. As the case studies in this thesis are intended primarily as a means by which to understand how specific cases might conform to or diverge from general trends – in this case, how local context affects fragmentation – it necessarily follows that the cases should be selected based on how well they are able to highlight when and how this occurs. The case selection was therefore done using a mix of criteria and considerations, taking into account levels of fragmentation, party configurations, and the pertinence of the demographic and electoral characteristics of an area to the trends identified throughout the literature review and quantitative analysis.

The first stage in the case study selection process was to classify each local authority[10] by its fragmentation levels and party configuration, as measured by total votes across the 2015-2018

[10] We are using local authorities rather than wards for this section for the simple reason that it is far easier to find good historical sources and contemporary news stories for larger areas, and thus build a more complete picture of a the story of fragmentation in a particular area. For example, examining Liverpool as a whole, as our first case study does, reveals a complex tapestry of factors underpinning their relationship with the Labour and Conservative parties as a city, which may not have been possible if a single ward in Liverpool were to be analysed instead.

election cycle. The ENOP figures were split into high, medium, and low fragmentation areas by splitting the data at the 33rd and 67th percentile, and then rounding up or down to the nearest 0.5 effective number of parties for the purposes of clarity and ease of classification, resulting in high fragmentation being classified as an ENOP of 3.50 or above, medium fragmentation as an ENOP of 3.00 to 3.50, and low fragmentation as an ENOP of below 2.50. Table 4, below, shows the results of this classification system, demonstrating the wide range of electoral outcomes present in English local elections, and highlighting that some configurations seem to be far more associated with electoral fragmentation than others; for example, we can see that areas with a Labour-Conservative-Lib Dem configuration are far less likely to have high levels of fragmentation than areas with a Conservative-UKIP-Labour configuration. Of course, this makes sense; in a traditionally two-and-a-half party system such as England, the emergence of challenger parties such as UKIP is bound to have a destabilising effect and lead to higher levels of fragmentation.

Given that the focus of this thesis is varying levels of fragmentation across places, it makes sense to select one local authority from each of the 'high fragmentation', 'medium fragmentation', and 'low fragmentation' categories. Case selection within these categories was done using a combination of theoretical rationalisation based on the literature review and results of the regression analyses, as well as on pragmatic issues such as the amount of information available on the local context in a given area, and whether or not that local context presented any particularly interested points of discussion. Of course, this approach eschews a more statistics-based selection approach in favour of one that puts more control into the hands of the researcher in determining case selection; one more statistics-led option, for example, would have been to rank all local authorities by ENOP and do case studies of the local authorities with the highest, lowest, and median ENOP figures. Indeed, this approach was considered, and was originally selected as the method for case selection. However, after preliminary research into these areas with the aim of building case studies on them, it was felt that given that the purpose of this chapter was to highlight how local context can affect fragmentation levels, other cases were better able to do so, and the next paragraphs will justify

why the selected cases were deemed to be both methodologically relevant and interesting enough to be included in the chapter.

Given the literature review and the results of the identification of the most prevalent party configurations, the selection for a highly fragmented area should be one in which UKIP has a part to play in the electoral story. After all, Brexit and the cultural and electoral divide around this event have featured prominently in our discussion of fragmentation, and it is only natural to explore this further in the case studies. With this in mind, Forest of Dean was selected for the case study of a highly fragmented area. Forest of Dean was the fifth most fragmented local authority over the 2015-2018 local election cycle, and had a Conservative-Labour-UKIP configuration. While there might seem to be more obvious choices for a highly fragmented area in which UKIP has featured prominently in local election outcomes, such as Boston in Lincolnshire, Forest of Dean does conform to the typical pattern that this phenomenon has followed, namely the rightward shift of voting preferences in largely working-class, former industrial towns, with support for Labour dropping and support for the Conservatives and later, UKIP, increasing. In addition, much of the literature has focused on ex-industrial towns in the North of England, and Forest of Dean's location in the South West provides a new perspective on this phenomenon.

For the medium fragmentation case, we have selected Ipswich, which has a Labour-Conservative-Lib Dem configuration. Of course, these three parties being the main electoral forces in an area of medium fragmentation is to expected, as these have been the three largest parties in England for the past century, and so we would expect areas with this configuration to have medium levels of fragmentation. Indeed, of all of the areas in the 'medium fragmentation' category, 43 percent have some combination of the Conservatives, Labour, and Liberal Democrats as the three main parties. In addition to the electoral configuration in Ipswich being highly prevalent within the 'medium fragmentation' category, the town is interesting on its own terms. Ipswich is a famous marginal seat in general elections, which highlights its status as an electoral battleground between Labour and the Conservatives, and

makes it an interesting study in how an area can be electorally unstable without a very high level of fragmentation. In addition, its local context of being a historic port town in a heavily agricultural county, whose economy is modernising and moving towards the financial and service sectors, gives it a lot of interesting contextual factors that may help to improve our understanding of the story of fragmentation in England in recent years.

Finally, for our low fragmentation case study, we have selected Liverpool, which has been the very definition of a one-party system for the past two decades due to a level of Labour dominance that has made it the subject of a great deal of academic literature on its electoral situation. Liverpool is an interesting case study for this reason, but it is also interesting because this was not always the case; both the Conservatives and Liberal parties have enjoyed periods of strong electoral performances in the city in the post-war period, and a unique set of factors have led to the Labour dominance we now see in its elections. In addition, in Liverpool perhaps more than any other English city, religion has played a pivotal role in its recent electoral history, and a deeper dive into the relationship between religion and fragmentation in the city may help to uncover some insights into the strength of the religious variable in the regression models. In addition, Liverpool makes a good case study simply because there is a wealth of academic and non-academic work alike that enables us to build a much fuller picture of the story of fragmentation in Liverpool than perhaps either of our other two case studies.

Table 4: Classification of local authorities in England by fragmentation levels and party configurations across 2015-2018 local election cycle

Party configuration	High fragmentation (ENOP >3.50)	Medium fragmentation (ENOP 3.00-3.50)	Low fragmentation (ENOP <3.00)
Con-Lab-LD	▪ Bedford ▪ Broxtowe ▪ Canterbury ▪ Cheshire West & Chester ▪ Gloucester ▪ High Peak ▪ Milton Keynes ▪ North Somerset ▪ Northampton ▪ Portsmouth ▪ Reigate & Banstead ▪ Rother ▪ Warwick ▪ Weymouth & Portland ▪ Worthing ▪ York	▪ Basingstoke & Deane ▪ Bromley ▪ Cumbria ▪ Derbyshire Dales ▪ Essex ▪ Kent ▪ Norfolk ▪ North Hertfordshire ▪ Pendle ▪ Rugby ▪ South Gloucestershire ▪ Suffolk ▪ Suffolk Coastal ▪ Warwickshire ▪ Welwyn Hatfield ▪ West Oxfordshire ▪ Worcestershire ▪ Wycombe	▪ Barnet ▪ Bexley ▪ Blaby ▪ Daventry ▪ Derbyshire ▪ Hertsmere ▪ Kensington & Chelsea ▪ Lancashire ▪ Leicestershire ▪ Lichfield ▪ North-West Leicestershire ▪ North Yorkshire ▪ Northamptonshire ▪ Ribble Valley ▪ South Northamptonshire ▪ South Ribble ▪ Westminster
Con-Lab-UKIP	▪ Cheshire East ▪ Derby ▪ East Riding of Yorkshire ▪ Forest Of Dean ▪ Medway ▪ North-East Lincolnshire ▪ Peterborough ▪ Scarborough ▪ Telford & Wrekin	▪ Adur ▪ Ashford ▪ Basildon ▪ Braintree ▪ Cannock Chase ▪ Carlisle ▪ Dartford ▪ Dover ▪ Dudley ▪ East Lindsey ▪ Erewash ▪ Great Yarmouth ▪ Kettering ▪ Newcastle-under-Lyme ▪ North Lincolnshire ▪ Plymouth ▪ Redditch ▪ Runnymede ▪ Rushmoor ▪ St Edmundsbury ▪ Swindon ▪ Walsall	▪ Amber Valley ▪ Bracknell Forest ▪ Breckland ▪ Broxbourne ▪ Charnwood ▪ Crawley ▪ East Northamptonshire ▪ East Staffordshire ▪ Gravesham ▪ Harlow ▪ Havant ▪ Kings Lynn & West Norfolk ▪ Lincolnshire ▪ North Warwickshire ▪ South Derbyshire ▪ Staffordshire ▪ Tamworth ▪ Wellingborough

Party configuration	High fragmentation (ENOP >3.50)	Medium fragmentation (ENOP 3.00-3.50)	Low fragmentation (ENOP <3.00)
Con-Lab-Green	▪ Darlington ▪ Lancaster ▪ Stroud ▪ Waveney	▪ Cherwell ▪ East Hertfordshire ▪ Rushcliffe ▪ Worcester	▪ Hillingdon ▪ Nuneaton & Bedworth ▪ Wyre
Con-Lab-Ind/Other	▪ Central Bedfordshire ▪ Nottinghamshire ▪ Southend-on-Sea ▪ Staffordshire Moorlands ▪ Wyre Forest	▪ Bromsgrove ▪ Craven ▪ Melton ▪ Newark & Sherwood ▪ Northumberland ▪ South Kesteven ▪ Stafford	▪ Hambleton ▪ Selby ▪ South Staffordshire
Con-LD-Lab	▪ Babergh ▪ Colchester ▪ Dacorum ▪ Devon ▪ Hinckley & Bosworth ▪ Lewes ▪ Maidstone ▪ North Norfolk ▪ Oxfordshire ▪ South Cambridgeshire ▪ South Oxfordshire ▪ St Albans	▪ Brentwood ▪ Broadland ▪ Cambridgeshire ▪ Chelmsford ▪ East Cambridgeshire ▪ East Sussex ▪ Gloucestershire ▪ Guildford ▪ Hertfordshire ▪ Huntingdonshire ▪ Mid Sussex ▪ Purbeck ▪ Sedgemoor ▪ Shropshire ▪ Somerset ▪ Surrey ▪ Three Rivers ▪ Tonbridge & Malling ▪ Tunbridge Wells ▪ Vale Of White Horse ▪ Waverley ▪ West Lindsey ▪ West Sussex ▪ Windsor & Maidenhead ▪ Woking ▪ Wokingham	▪ Buckinghamshire ▪ Chichester ▪ Dorset ▪ East Hampshire ▪ Fareham ▪ Gosport ▪ Hampshire ▪ Harborough ▪ Harrogate ▪ New Forest ▪ Sevenoaks ▪ South Norfolk ▪ South Somerset ▪ Stratford On Avon ▪ Surrey Heath ▪ Tewkesbury ▪ West Berkshire ▪ Wiltshire ▪ Winchester
Con-LD-Any other	▪ Aylesbury Vale ▪ Bath & North-East Somerset ▪ Cornwall ▪ Malvern Hills ▪ Mid Devon ▪ North Devon ▪ Poole ▪ Taunton Deane ▪ Teignbridge ▪ Torbay	▪ Eden ▪ Epping Forest ▪ Hart ▪ Horsham ▪ Mendip ▪ Mole Valley ▪ North Dorset ▪ Tandridge ▪ Test Valley ▪ Wealden ▪ West Dorset	▪ Chiltern ▪ Cotswold ▪ East Dorset ▪ Wychavon

Party configuration	High fragmentation (ENOP >3.50)	Medium fragmentation (ENOP 3.00-3.50)	Low fragmentation (ENOP <3.00)
Con-UKIP-Lab	▪ Bournemouth ▪ Spelthorne ▪ Swale ▪ Tendring ▪ Thanet	▪ Fenland	▪ Christchurch
Con-UKIP-Any other	▪ Arun ▪ Boston ▪ Folkestone & Hythe		▪ South Buckinghamshire
Con-Any other	▪ East Devon ▪ Fylde ▪ Havering ▪ Herefordshire ▪ Isle Of Wight ▪ Mid Suffolk ▪ Rochford ▪ Ryedale ▪ Torridge ▪ Uttlesford ▪ West Devon ▪ West Somerset	▪ Castle Point ▪ Elmbridge ▪ Forest Heath ▪ Maldon ▪ Richmondshire ▪ Rutland ▪ Solihull ▪ South Hams	▪ North Kesteven ▪ South Holland
Lab-Con-LD	▪ Bradford ▪ Kirklees ▪ Leeds	▪ Birmingham ▪ Calderdale ▪ Camden ▪ Exeter ▪ Ipswich ▪ Merton ▪ Sefton ▪ Stevenage ▪ Warrington ▪ Wirral	▪ Brent ▪ Ealing ▪ Hammersmith & Fulham ▪ Harrow ▪ Hastings ▪ Hounslow ▪ Luton ▪ Newham ▪ Preston ▪ Redbridge ▪ Trafford

Party configuration	High fragmentation (ENOP >3.50)	Medium fragmentation (ENOP 3.00-3.50)	Low fragmentation (ENOP <3.00)
Lab-Con-UKIP	▪ Bolton ▪ Southampton ▪ Stockton-on-Tees	▪ Bassetlaw ▪ Blackpool ▪ Bury ▪ Coventry ▪ Gedling ▪ Leicester ▪ Lincoln ▪ Nottingham ▪ Oldham ▪ Rochdale ▪ Sunderland ▪ Thurrock ▪ Wigan	▪ Barrow In Furness ▪ Blackburn with Darwen ▪ Chorley ▪ Corby ▪ Halton ▪ Hyndburn ▪ North-East Derbyshire ▪ North Tyneside ▪ Rossendale ▪ Salford ▪ Sandwell ▪ Slough ▪ South Tyneside ▪ St Helens ▪ Tameside ▪ Wakefield ▪ Wolverhampton
Lab-Con-Any other	▪ Allerdale ▪ Brighton & Hove ▪ Durham	▪ Reading ▪ Wandsworth	▪ Barking & Dagenham ▪ Barnsley ▪ Copeland ▪ Croydon ▪ Enfield ▪ Greenwich ▪ Waltham Forest ▪ West Lancashire
Lab-LD-Con	▪ Burnley ▪ Newcastle Upon Tyne ▪ Stockport	▪ Cambridge ▪ Chesterfield	▪ Gateshead
Lab-LD-Any other	▪ Sheffield	▪ Kingston Upon Hull ▪ Oxford	▪ Haringey ▪ Liverpool ▪ Southwark
Lab-Green-Any other	▪ Bristol ▪ Norwich		▪ Hackney ▪ Islington ▪ Lambeth ▪ Lewisham ▪ Manchester
Lab-UKIP-Any other	▪ Doncaster ▪ Hartlepool	▪ Rotherham	
Lab-Ind/Other-Any other		▪ Mansfield ▪ Tower Hamlets	▪ Bolsover ▪ Knowsley
LD-Con-Lab		▪ Sutton	▪ Cheltenham ▪ Kingston Upon Thames ▪ Oadby & Wigston ▪ South Lakeland
LD-Lab-Con	▪ Watford		

Party configuration	High fragmentation (ENOP >3.50)	Medium fragmentation (ENOP 3.00-3.50)	Low fragmentation (ENOP <3.00)
LD-Con-Any other		▪ Eastbourne ▪ Eastleigh ▪ Richmond Upon Thames	
Any other configuration	▪ Epsom & Ewell		

4.2.4.2 Case study format

As much as possible, the case studies will be presented in a standardised format that begins with a brief overview of the socio-economic history of the local authority, including why these factors make it an interesting case study, before moving on to look at the demographics of the area and compare these to the national average and discuss what we would expect to see electorally in that area based on the regression models from Chapter 6. We will then explore electoral outcomes in that local authority to see whether expectations are met, using a number of metrics including ENOP, vote shares and seats won in both local and general elections, and exploring reasons for why this may or may not conform to the conclusions drawn from the regression analysis. The sections will conclude with a recap of the data and a discussion of how the case study adds to our overall understanding of the story of fragmentation in England.

Chapter 5: Fragmentation in English local elections

The process of fragmentation in England is well-documented. The work of David Sanders (2017) in particular demonstrates that UK politics is becoming increasingly fragmented, with a declining combined vote share for Labour and the Conservatives, an increase in the number of local councils with no overall control, and (less relevant to this thesis) the clear existence of multi-party systems in the devolved assemblies (Sanders, 2017, p. 92). Many others have noted that the changing bifurcations and divisions in England's socio-political attitudes in recent years have altered the electoral landscape (Goodwin & Milazzo, 2015; Jennings & Stoker, 2017), and it is an almost unanimous consensus in the literature that the class cleavage, and with it the old two-party system, is gone, with an increasing number of parties able to impact elections (Evans & Tilley, 2012). However, a key element of this story is frequently missed. While it is almost indisputable that, at the national level, the UK's electoral system is fragmenting, what is often overlooked is that this is not a homogeneous process occurring at the same rate, or even at all, at the local level. This chapter of the thesis will demonstrate that fragmentation is not a universal occurrence across England's local authorities, and that while the overall trend is towards higher levels of fragmentation, many places are not fragmenting at all, or indeed, are consolidating their vote and moving towards being one-party systems.

The chapter will begin with a brief overview of fragmentation at the national level over the last 50 years. It will cover the fall in the combined Con-Lab vote, the rise in effective number of parties, and the distorting effect of the first-past-the-post voting system, which prevents fragmentation in vote shares from being translated into more parties taking seats in Parliament and on local councils. The next section of the chapter will look in more detail at variations in the level of fragmentation at the regional level, beginning to illustrate how even when broken down into areas as large as England's regions, there are distinct differences in the timing of and extent to which fragmentation has occurred. The next two sections look at

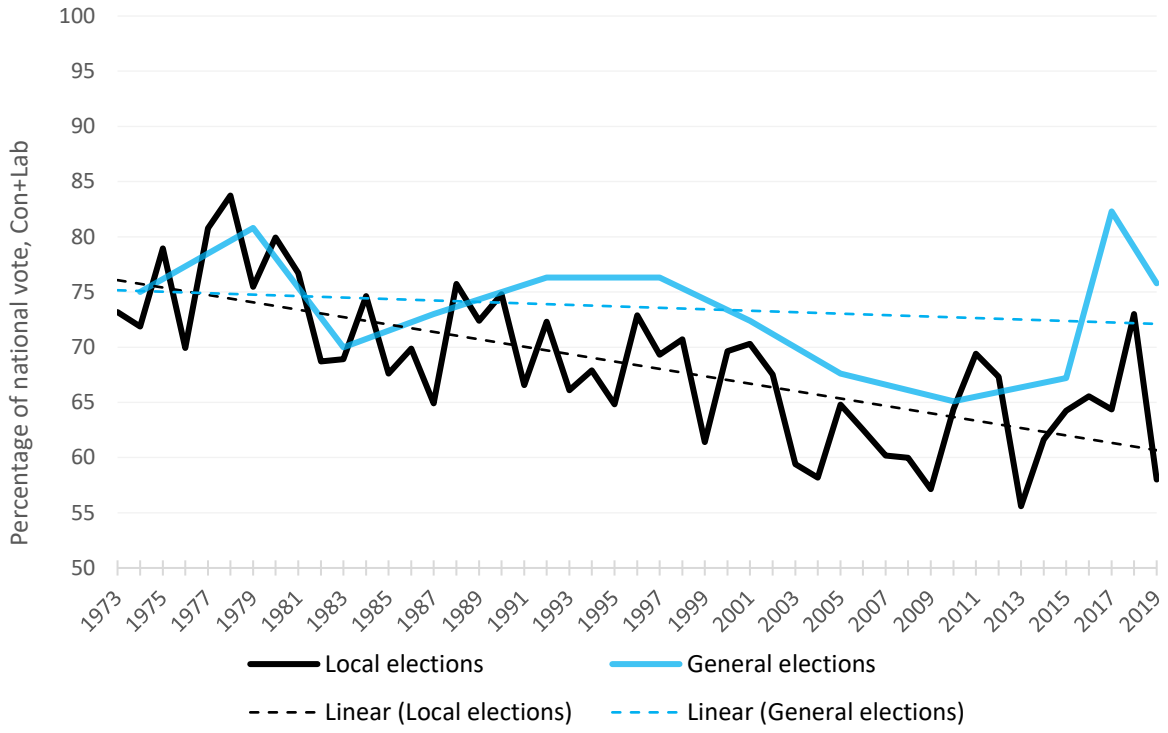
the process of fragmentation at the local authority and ward levels, at which point the vast differences in fragmentation levels across different areas truly becomes apparent. They also provide some speculative analysis as to the factors causing these differences, in preparation for the substantial analysis that will be provided by the models in the next chapter.

5.1 National level

At the national level, the fragmentation of UK politics has been well observed and much written about. However, as a context-setting exercise, this section will briefly go over the fragmentation of UK politics at the national level, before moving on to looking at the various different sub-systems that exist at the regional, local authority, and ward levels. As the literature review demonstrated, for much of the twentieth century, UK politics was essentially a two (or arguably two-and-a-half) party system driven by the cleavage between working-class Labour supporters and middle-class Conservatives, with various iterations of what is now the Liberal Democrat party picking up votes from those in the middle ground or those engaged in protest voting.

From around the 1970s onwards, the class cleavage began to decline in importance, and alongside this trend, politics also became more fragmented, with the vote share of the two main parties falling dramatically. As can be seen in Figure 8 (below), this drop in Con/Lab vote share can be observed in both general and local elections, albeit far more dramatically in local elections, which is an interesting observation in and of itself. While the trend in general elections has been for Con/Lab vote share to decline, the decline in the trend line is rather shallow (although there is a case to be made that this is largely attributable to the dramatic upsurge in Con/Lab votes in the 2017 and 2019 elections, spurred by the polarising nature of Brexit). By contrast, the downward trend in combined Lab/Con vote share in local elections is rather steeper, with the linear trend line starting from around 76 percent in 1973 and falling to just over 60 percent in 2019, a drop of around 16 percentage points. By contrast, the linear trend line for general elections falls less than three percentage points over the same period.

Figure 8: Combined Conservative and Labour party national vote share in general and local elections, 1973-2019



These simple measurements reveal two interesting points; firstly, that the combined vote for the Conservatives and Labour has been decreasing since the early 1970s in both general and local elections; and secondly, that this trend has been particularly pronounced in local elections. The first point is not surprising; as much of the literature review has shown, the traditional cleavages of British politics, particularly the class cleavage, have declined in importance over the course of the twentieth century, and so fewer voters are automatically voting for the two main parties due to the positions they would traditionally have occupied on the class scales. The second point is more interesting; the difference between this decline in general and local elections is rather marked, and appears to have started in the early 1990s and continued until the present day. These differences could be due to a number of reasons, or combinations of them. It may be the case that voters have different policy priorities or preferences when voting in local elections; that parties' policies and approaches to elections are different at the local and national level, and that this gap has been widening over the last tree decades; or that the local electoral system is more amenable to fragmentation and thus

success for smaller parties. Whatever the reason, it is an important reminder of the relevance of studying local elections; by considering only general election results, the extent of fragmentation in England would be greatly underestimated and crucial elements of the story of electoral fragmentation would be missed.

While the combined Conservative and Labour vote is a useful indicator of fragmentation, it is nevertheless a relatively crude calculation. It is therefore more instructive to look at the effective number of parties (ENOP), a measurement introduced by Laakso and Taagepera (1979) and discussed in depth in Chapter 4.2.1.3. The effective number of parties measure, as the name suggests, gives an approximation of the number of political parties in a given electoral system that have a meaningful impact on electoral outcomes. ENOP takes into account both the number of parties and the relative success of each party in elections, as measured by their share of the total vote or by the number of seats they win. Figure 9, below, plots the ENOP for votes (left-hand Y-axis) against the combined Conservative and Labour vote share (right-hand Y-axis) in each set of British local elections from 1973-2019. As can be seen from the linear trend-lines, the fall in the Con/Lab vote share at local elections has been mirrored by a rise in the effective number of parties, from around three in 1973 to four in 2019.

Another interesting point of comparison is the contrast between the effective number of parties by votes and by seats won. Figure 10, below, plots the ENOP for both votes and seats in all local elections from 1973 to 2019. As can be seen, while the trend line for ENOP as measured by votes has steadily increased over the past half-century, by 2019 the ENOP as measured by number of seats had risen to only fractionally above its level in 1973. Practically, this means that while people have been increasingly likely to vote for parties other than the Conservative or Labour parties, this has not been reflected in the number of seats that these smaller parties have been able to win. The most obvious reason for this is the first-past-the-post (FPTP) system used in Britain's local elections. FPTP over-represents larger parties while under-representing smaller ones and thus creating 'false majorities'. Additionally, FPTP disproportionately rewards parties with concentrated support in particular regions.

Figure 9: Effective number of parties (votes) (left-hand Y-axis) and combined vote share of Conservative and Labour parties (right-hand Y-axis) in British local elections, 1973-2019

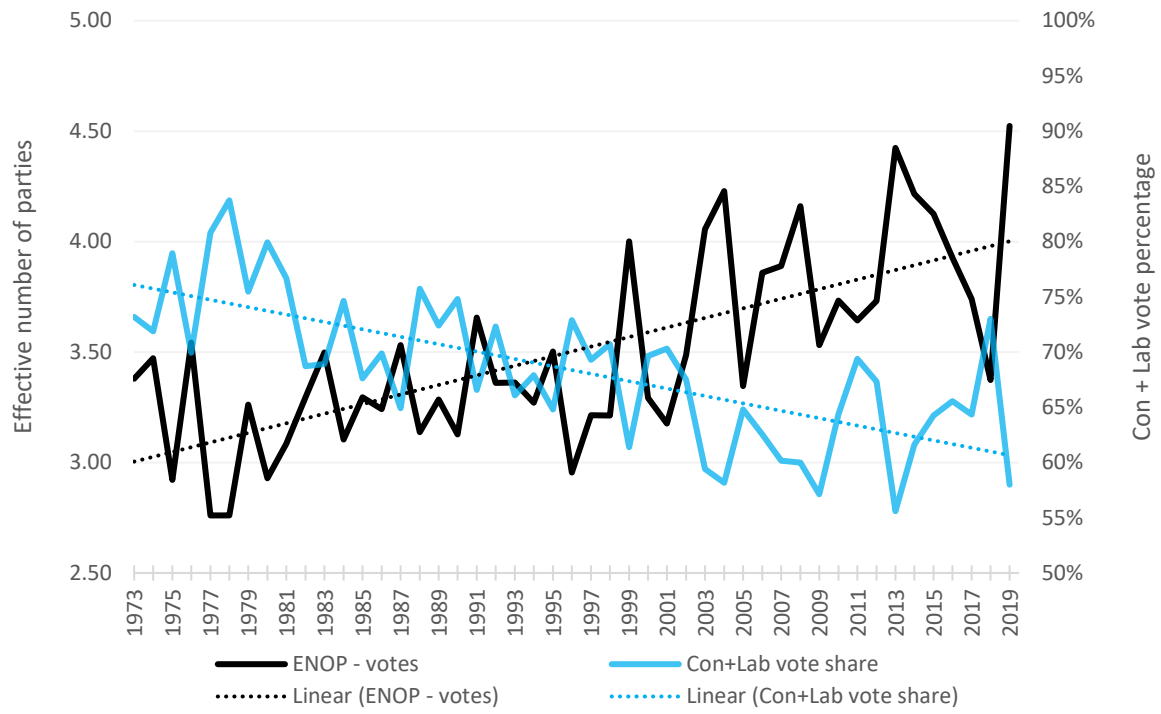


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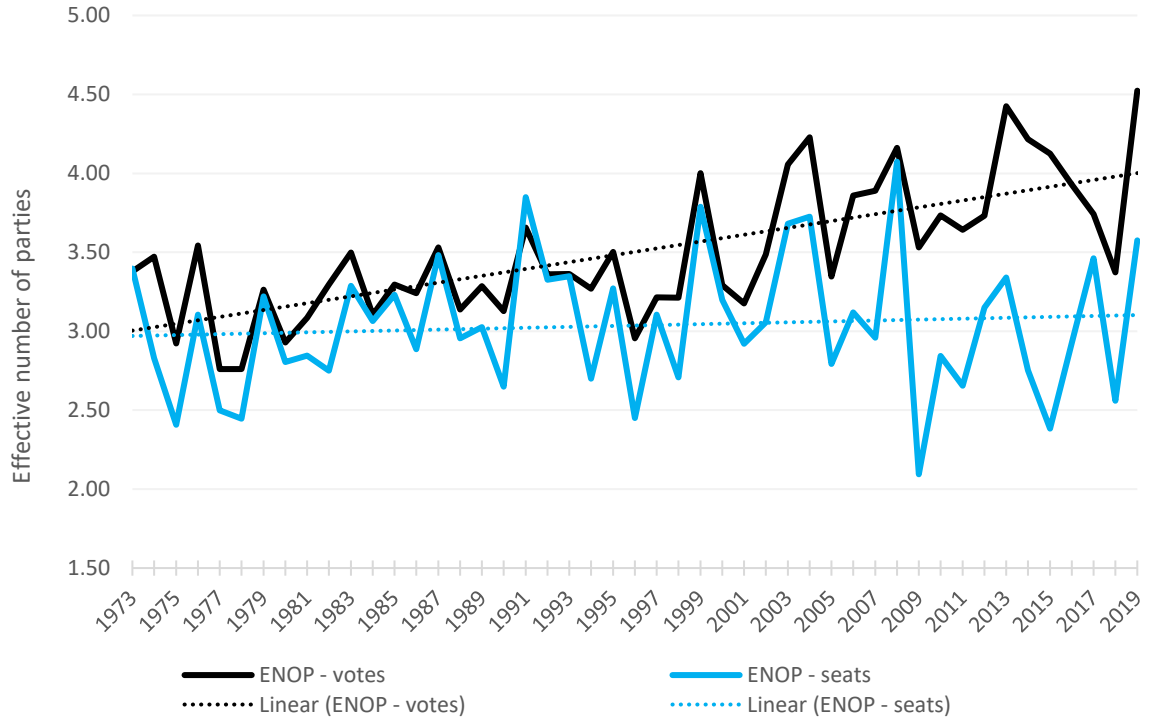
Figure 10: Effective number of parties, by votes and seats, in local elections, 1973-2019



Both of these issues were perfectly illustrated by the 2015 local elections. Across all authorities, the Conservatives benefitted from the over-representation effect, garnering 35.8 percent of the vote, but 59.3 percent of the available seats. Meanwhile, smaller parties were grossly under-represented, especially where their support was not concentrated in one particular region. UKIP's general election result in 2015, in which they won 12.6 percent of the vote and only one seat in Parliament, has been well publicised, and the party suffered a similar fate in that year's local elections, winning 12.8 percent of the vote and only 2.2 percent of the available seats. By contrast, looking at the 2015 local election results for metropolitan boroughs highlights the issue of over-representation of parties with concentrated support. The Labour party enjoys a high concentration of support in metropolitan areas, and consequently received 44.7 percent of votes in metropolitan borough councils. Due to the distorting effects of FPTP, this translated to 73.7 percent of seats. The Conservatives, by contrast, won 24 percent of the vote but only 18.8 percent of available seats.

To conclude, this snapshot of fragmentation at the national level has revealed a number of interesting points. Firstly, it is clear that UK politics has been undergoing a process of fragmentation over the last half-century, with vote share for the two main parties dropping and the effective number of parties increasing. Secondly, the rate at which fragmentation has occurred differs dramatically between local and general elections, with local politics seemingly fragmenting to a much greater extent, and at a much more rapid rate. Finally, there is a case to be made that the first-past-the-post electoral system is obscuring the true rate of fragmentation, as parties' vote shares do not translate into similar seat shares, giving the appearance of 'business as usual' if measured by the metric of seats won. What this analysis does not reveal, however, is the degree to which fragmentation is a homogenous process. The next sections will break down these results to the regional, local authority, and ward level, and seek to demonstrate that the process of fragmentation is not universal, or at least, not proceeding at a universal pace.

5.2 Regional level

While much of the literature has spoken about fragmentation at the national level, and thus presented it as a relatively homogenous process, it is important to explore the regional differences in levels of fragmentation. By doing so, areas that are particularly susceptible to fragmentation may be revealed, and when coupled with data about the demographic drivers of fragmentation, can help to show why fragmentation occurs and its positive and negative effects on the political system. In order to understand regional patterns of fragmentation, the effective number of parties was calculated for each of England's nine regions in every set of local elections since 1973. Figure 11 and Figure 12, both below, show the ENOP for each of England's nine regions in local elections from 1973 to 2018, with Figure 11 showing the actual ENOP figures and Figure 12 showing each region's linear trend line. While the graph is very cluttered, Figure 11 nevertheless reveals some interesting talking points. Looking at the general trends of the lines, one can see that the effective number of parties remained relatively stable up until around the turn of the century, at which point the lines begin to trend upwards. Additionally, there seems to be a spike in fragmentation between about 2013 and 2016, following by a relatively large drop in the 2018 elections.

It is important to note that Figure 11 presents a picture of systems highly susceptible to fluctuations in fragmentation levels year-by-year. While much of the fluctuation may be attributable to genuine differences in voter behaviour across elections, some of the fluctuation is a function of which councils, and what types of council, are being elected in a particular year. In some years, very few councils may be up for election in a particular region, which makes the ENOP figure more susceptible to extreme values. Therefore, in order to get an idea of the general increase or decrease in fragmentation, it is important to look at the trend-lines as a whole. As Figure 12 (below) shows, the linear trend-lines for all regions are increasing over the studied period (note that the Y-axis is more compact than in Figures 13-22, and so the trend-lines appear steeper here than they would on the same axis as the other graphs; this has been done to enable easier differentiation between lines). While there is some slight variation in the

gradient of the lines, most regions start with an ENOP of between 2.6 and 2.9 in 1973 and increase to between 3.3 and 4.0 by 2018. While this graph is useful in showing how fragmentation has increased over the time period, a lot of the granularity is lost by using trend-lines rather than the raw data, making the identification of key moments in the fragmentation story impossible.

Figure 11: Effective number of parties in English local elections by region, 1973-2018

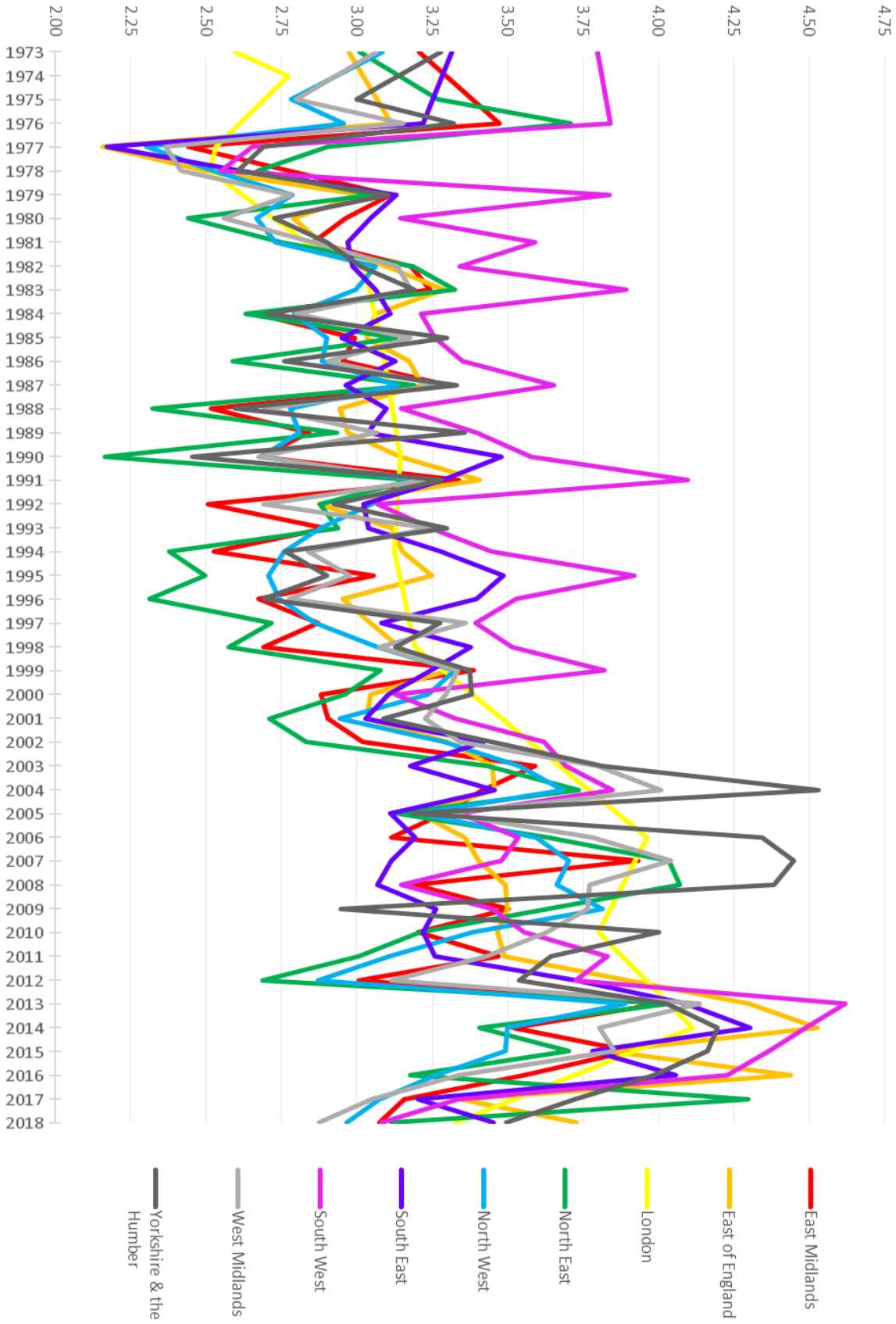
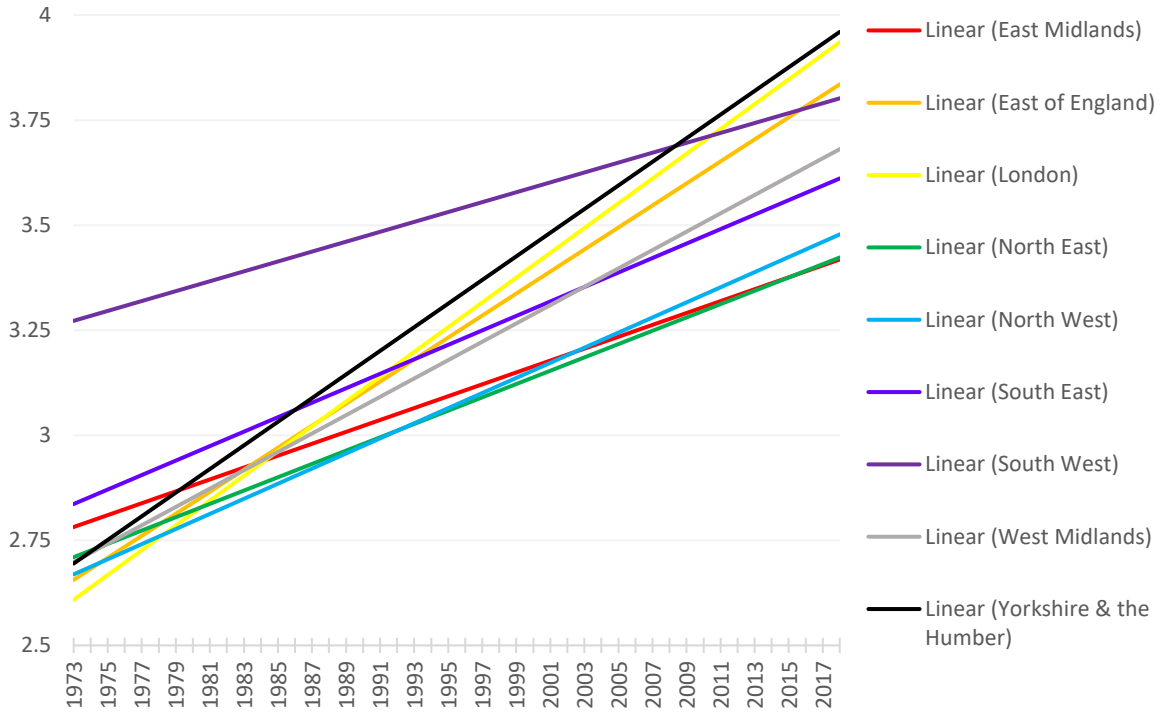


Figure 12: Linear trend-lines for effective number of parties in English local elections by region, 1973-2018



Therefore, we will now turn our attention to looking at the fragmentation patterns for each region separately, which allows both deeper analysis of each region's trends in fragmentation, as well as easier differentiation between each region than was possible given the clutter of Figure 11. Figures 13 to 22, below, add to the impression that the ENOP for most regions remained relatively stable for much of the final quarter of the 20th century. While fragmentation over this period did vary slightly between regions – the North East, for example, appeared to be falling slightly until the late 1990s – the trend for most regions was for very little overall variation between 1973 and the turn of the century. However, at this point, there was a marked increase in fragmentation, although there is a great deal of variation in the point at which the lines begin to trend upwards, as well as the degree to which fragmentation increases. For example, while most regions began to fragment somewhere between 1997 and 2003, the East of England, South West, and South East did not follow suit until at least 2008, fragmenting rapidly and peaking in 2013 or 2014 before the ENOP decreased.

Figure 13: ENOP in North West

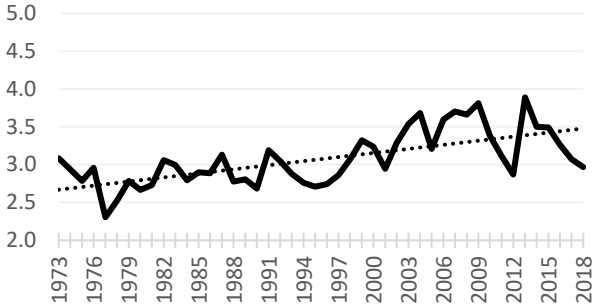


Figure 14: ENOP in North East

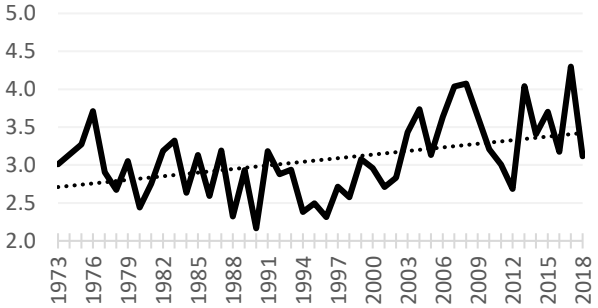


Figure 15: ENOP in West Midlands

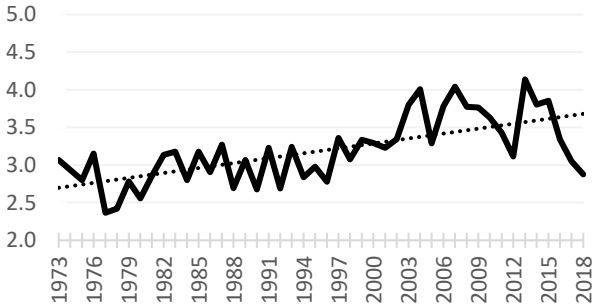


Figure 16: ENOP in Yorkshire & the Humber

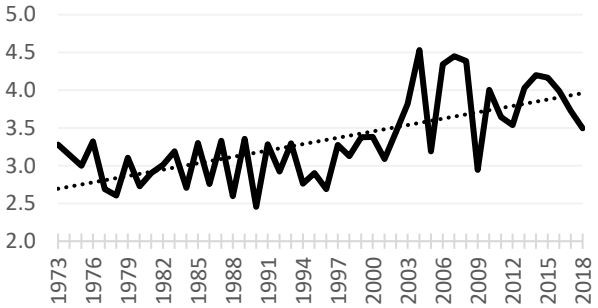


Figure 17: ENOP in East Midlands

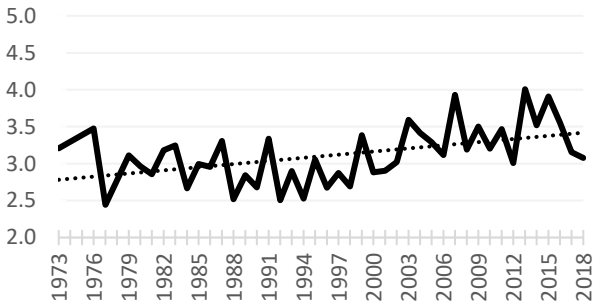


Figure 18: ENOP in East of England

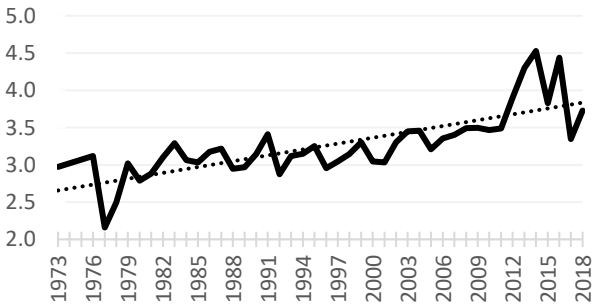


Figure 19: ENOP in South West

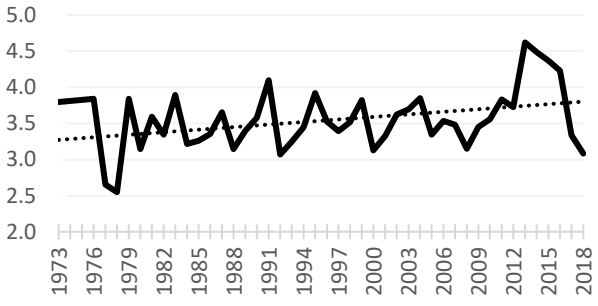


Figure 20: ENOP in South East

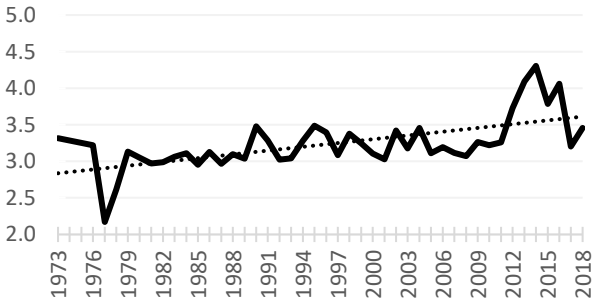


Figure 21: ENOP in London

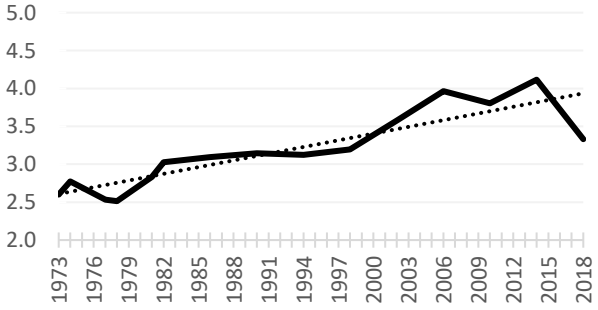
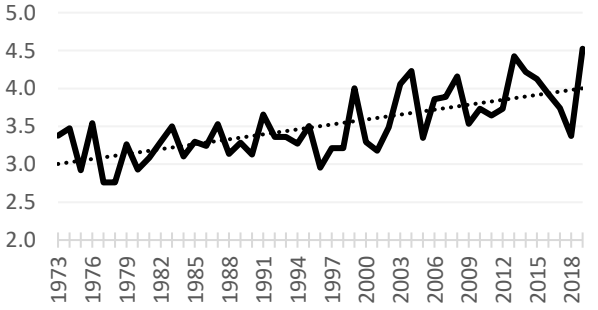


Figure 22: ENOP in England



Beginning in the North West (Figure 13, above) and North East (Figure 14, above), we can see that while the trend-lines for these regions are broadly similar, there are marked differences in their patterns of fragmentation. In the North West, there is much less volatility in levels of fragmentation between elections, with far less pronounced peaks and troughs than many of the other regions. Additionally, we can see that electoral preferences remained relatively stable for much of the period until around 1997, where we see a marked up-tick in the ENOP that continues for the rest of the period. In contrast, the North East seems to be a much more volatile region, with much greater variation year-by-year. Interestingly, we see a different pattern in the North West. While in the North East, fragmentation steadily rose throughout the period, in the North East ENOP seemed to be on a slight downward trend before more dramatically trending upwards from around 1997. In both places, this was followed by a marked drop from 2009 to 2012, followed by another increase, and a smaller drop up to the 2018 election.

The graph for Yorkshire and the Humber (Figure 16, above) reflects the trends of the two Northern regions, and is very similar to the North East in particular. In Yorkshire, the observed trend for fragmentation to increase over the period was particularly pronounced; the region had the second steepest increase in fragmentation, behind only London. The region saw a dramatic increase in fragmentation beginning in 1997 but accelerating between 2001 and 2003. The peaks and troughs of the graph then become far more pronounced than in previous years, suggesting much more volatility in ENOP between elections than for many other regions. However, like every region except the East of England and the South East, fragmentation has been falling since the early- to mid-2010s, which is perhaps unsurprising given the concentration of support for the Conservatives as a result of prominence of Brexit in national political discourse and that party's electoral position as the *de facto* leaders and implementers of Brexit. Moving on to look at the graphs for the East Midlands (Figure 17, above) and West Midlands (Figure 15, above), we get more confirmation of the pattern that has appeared in the discussion of the other regions. As with the above, we can see a relatively stable level of fragmentation through the first twenty years of the studied time period, with

ENOP hovering at around 3. This is followed by marked increases in fragmentation beginning in the late 1990s and then severe fluctuations, culminating in a recent drop in fragmentation to similar levels as those observed in the years immediately preceding the new millennium.

The graphs for the South East (Figure 20, above) and East of England (Figure 18, below) show that these regions have followed a very similar pattern of fragmentation across the studied period. While the rise in fragmentation in the East of England has been slightly steeper than for the South East, both regions are characterised by a relatively constant level of fragmentation, without drastic peaks and troughs, across the time period, followed by a sharp increase around 2013-14 and then a decline to today. This is an interesting contrast to other areas, which seem to rise more markedly towards the end of the 1990s. This could provide an early indication of the importance of a region's wealth to its propensity to stability; London, the South East, and the East of England, in that order, are the three regions whose inhabitants enjoy the highest levels of disposable income in England, according to 2016 data from the Office for National Statistics (BBC, 2018). Their relatively late rise in fragmentation compared to other regions could be related to this.

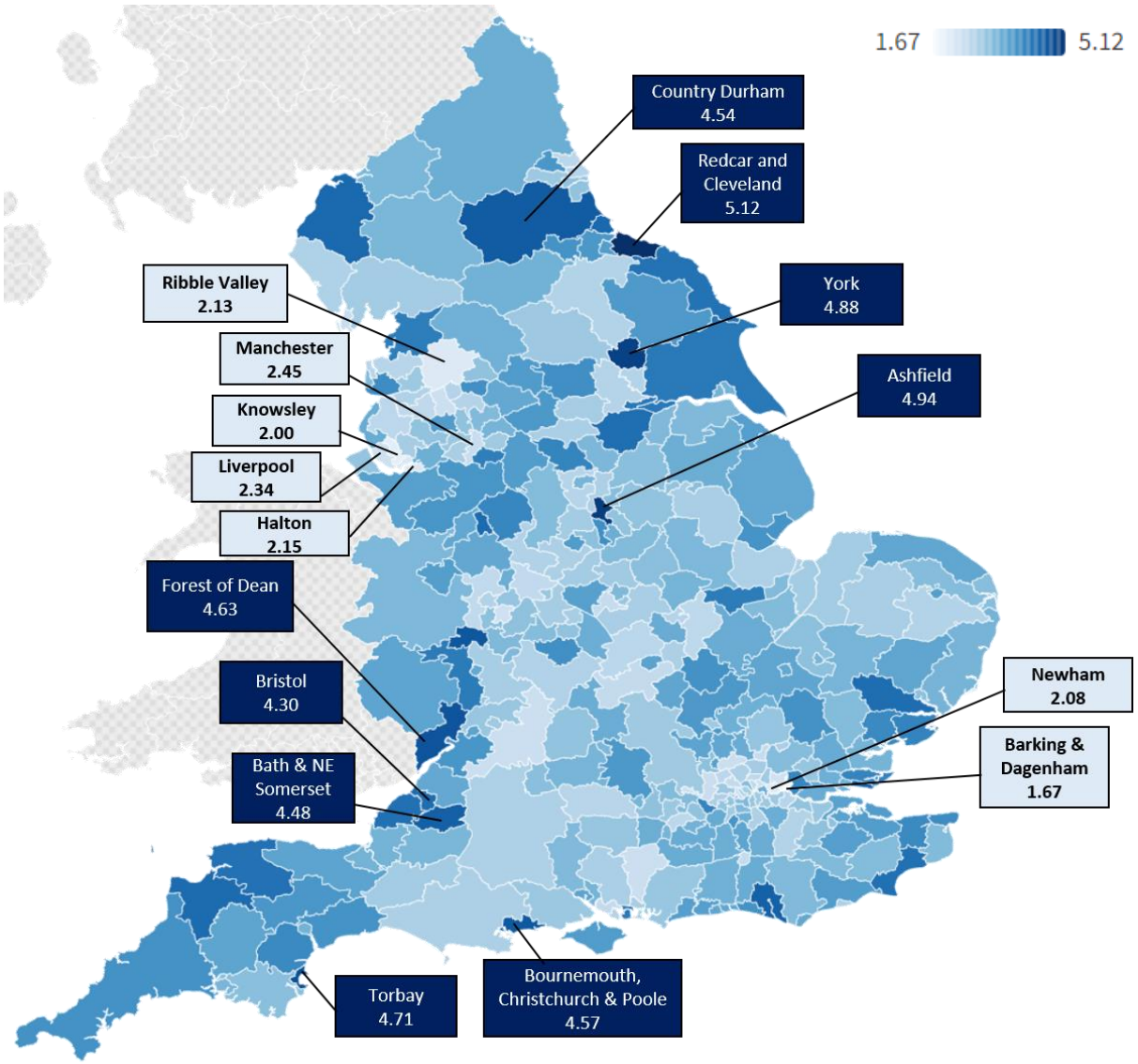
Finally, the graph for London (Figure 21, above), while fluctuating less than other regions due to the fact that London is the only region that elects all of its local councillors at once every four years, still has some points of interest. Firstly, London's linear trendline is the steepest of all the regions studied, showing the greatest overall increase in fragmentation, with ENOP at around 2.5 in 1973 and rising to almost 4.0 in 2018. This may be evidence of the heterogeneity hypothesis; as a large, multicultural city with a high degree of wealth inequality, that has undergone rapid demographic shifts over the studied period, it makes sense that London would be particularly susceptible to fragmentation. The second observation is that like the South East and South West, fragmentation in London remained stable for longer, with the large increase coming in the mid-2000s rather than the late 1990s. Again, as the overall wealthiest region in the UK, this may support the idea that high-income levels preclude electoral restlessness and lead to lower levels of fragmentation.

Overall, then, the regional analysis has already begun to reveal the lack of homogeneity in the process of electoral fragmentation in England's local elections. While all regions have seen the effective number of parties in their local elections increase over the last half-century, the rate and extent to which this has occurred has varied considerably, as does the point at which fragmentation begins to accelerate, ranging from as early as around 1997 in some areas to as late as 2011 in others. In broad strokes, we have seen an increase in fragmentation across the country, and a degree of variability in the process has been revealed. The next section, however, will reveal just how much the process varies across the country, as local authority-level data allows for a much deeper insight into the variable nature of fragmentation in England and reveals the existence of a number of party configurations across electoral areas.

5.3 Local authority level

While the above has provided a useful snapshot of the national and regional picture over time, it is by examining the local authority and ward levels that we can truly understand the intricacies of the story of fragmentation in England, and perhaps begin to find indications of the drivers behind this process. Presenting the results of this local authority-level analysis is tricky, and so multiple methods have been used in order to provide as comprehensive a snapshot as possible of the differing levels of fragmentation across England. In order to assess the current levels of fragmentation, the results of the last four local elections for which comprehensive data are available (2015 to 2018) were aggregated. This was done to account for the entire, four-year local election cycle, which taking a single year would not have done. The ENOP was calculated for each year individually, and also aggregated by adding together the number of votes for each party across the entire four-year cycle and performing the ENOP calculation on these figures to produce an average ENOP across the entire election cycle. The results of this process are presented in the map in Figure 23, below, with higher levels of fragmentation denoted by darker shading. Some key areas are highlighted in pop-out boxes (note that the areas in the boxes are not necessarily the most or least fragmented areas, although the top and bottom 5 are included).

Figure 23: Map of England showing ENOP in English local authorities, 2015-2018



Meanwhile, Table 5 and Table 6, both below, show the top, bottom, and middle (around the median) ten local authority ENOP figures for 2015 to 2018. While Table 6 shows the aggregated results – it is the data from which the map mas made - the results in Table 5 have not been aggregated across the four-year period. This means that an individual local authority may appear twice for results in different years, as is the case with Wyre Forest, where results in both the 2015 and 2016 local elections placed it in the top ten most fragmented local authorities in England. While most of this chapter deals with the aggregated results, as this accounts for the full, four-year election cycle, it is nevertheless instructive to look at the disaggregated results, as particularly high or low ENOP levels in certain LAs may be linked to

the year and the particular political moment. As a simple example, one might expect to see higher fragmentation in 2015 and 2016, with the former being the year of UKIP's strong general election performance and 2016 being the year of the UK's referendum on continued membership in the European Union. We might then expect to see fragmentation falling in 2017 and 2018 as the Conservatives became the party that the public trusted to best implement Brexit, with former UKIP voters shifting to the Conservatives and helping to consolidate the electoral landscape.

The map and tables provide some interesting insights into the story of fragmentation across England. Looking at the ten most fragmented local authorities, as presented in Table 5, below, it is important to note that the highest levels of fragmentation are not concentrated in any one region. The local authorities with the highest fragmentation levels can be found in every region from the North-East down to the South-West, with only the East Midlands and London not having local authorities with the very highest levels of fragmentation. There are nevertheless some important observations to pick out and explore. The first notable pattern is that while there are a few exceptions, fragmentation generally seems to be higher in coastal regions, most notably along the south coast and in the North-East. Along the south coast, Torbay and the combined local authority of Bournemouth, Christchurch, and Poole both appear in the top ten most fragmented local authorities, while Portsmouth and the local authority of Folkestone and Hythe also have high levels of fragmentation, with ENOP figures of 4.14 and 4.26 respectively. Southend-on-Sea and Rochford, adjacent local authorities located on the north bank of the Thames estuary in the East of England, also appear in the top ten most fragmented local authorities in the non-aggregated results, while the Forest of Dean and City of Bristol, both of which are on, or very close to, the Severn Estuary, also show high levels of fragmentation. In the North-East, Redcar and Cleveland, the most fragmented local authority in the dataset, along with County Durham, are also either partly or predominantly coastal.

Table 5: ENOP rankings by local authority in the 2015-2018 local elections, non-aggregated

	Local authority	Region	Year	ENOP	ENOP rank
Top 10	Redcar & Cleveland	North East	2015	5.12	1
	York	Yorkshire and The Humber	2015	4.88	2
	Forest of Dean	South West	2015	4.87	3
	Southend-on-Sea	East of England	2016	4.83	4
	Wyre Forest	West Midlands	2016	4.76	5
	Rochford	East of England	2016	4.75	6
	Allerdale	North West	2015	4.74	7
	Lewes	South East	2015	4.74	8
	Wyre Forest	West Midlands	2015	4.73	9
	Torbay	South West	2015	4.71	10
Middle 10 (around median)	Kingston Upon Hull	Yorkshire and The Humber	2016	3.11	391
	Swindon	South West	2016	3.11	392
	North Hertfordshire	East of England	2017	3.11	393
	West Somerset	South West	2017	3.11	394
	Basildon	East of England	2015	3.11	395
	Redditch	West Midlands	2017	3.11	396
	Bromsgrove	West Midlands	2015	3.10	397
	Craven	Yorkshire and The Humber	2018	3.10	398
	Chelmsford	East of England	2017	3.10	399
	Oxford	South East	2018	3.10	400
Bottom 10	South Northamptonshire	East Midlands	2017	2.07	780
	Sandwell	West Midlands	2016	2.02	781
	Halton	North West	2016	2.02	782
	Harrogate	Yorkshire and The Humber	2016	1.98	783
	South Staffordshire	West Midlands	2017	1.97	784
	Sandwell	West Midlands	2018	1.95	785
	Slough	South East	2018	1.91	786
	Knowsley	North West	2015	1.73	787
	Barking & Dagenham	London	2018	1.67	788
	Christchurch	South West	2017	1.66	789

Table 6: ENOP rankings and election results in English local elections, 2015-2018, aggregated

Local authority	Region	ENOP	Con %	Lab %	LD %	Green %	UKIP %	Ind %	Other %
Most fragmented									
Redcar & Cleveland	NE	5.12	16	**29**	16	4	11	21	4
Ashfield	EM	4.94	15	**33**	13	1	12	7	19
York	Y&H	4.88	**27**	23	22	15	5	7	2
Torbay	SW	4.71	**31**	13	22	10	20	4	0
Forest Of Dean	SW	4.63	**34**	22	5	13	15	11	0
Wyre Forest	WM	4.61	**35**	21	5	6	13	4	16
Bournemouth	SW	4.57	**37**	15	11	13	18	4	2
Durham	NE	4.54	20	**36**	12	3	3	16	11
Poole	SW	4.52	**35**	8	22	9	17	10	0
Bath & North East Somerset	SW	4.48	**34**	15	23	17	4	8	0
Median fragmentation									
Oxford	SE	3.24	13	**47**	22	15	0	2	1
St Edmundsbury	EoE	3.24	**49**	20	6	5	11	9	0
Redditch	WM	3.22	**40**	35	4	5	16	0	0
Purbeck	SW	3.22	**46**	9	28	7	5	5	0
Bromsgrove	WM	3.22	**48**	25	5	4	3	9	6
Leicester	EM	3.22	17	**50**	8	10	11	3	1
Wandsworth	LDN	3.22	38	**39**	8	9	0	4	2
North Lincolnshire	Y&H	3.22	**42**	32	0	10	15	1	0
Test Valley	SE	3.21	**47**	8	26	4	12	3	0
Tunbridge Wells	SE	3.21	**49**	17	17	2	10	2	3
Least fragmented									
Hackney	LDN	2.36	11	**61**	9	18	0	0	1
Sandwell	WM	2.36	21	**60**	1	4	14	0	0
Slough	SE	2.35	32	**56**	2	0	9	0	0
Liverpool	NW	2.34	6	**63**	12	10	4	0	5
Redbridge	LDN	2.32	34	**55**	5	3	0	1	1
Halton	NW	2.15	16	**65**	7	0	9	2	1
Ribble Valley	NW	2.13	**63**	24	12	0	0	0	0
Newham	LDN	2.08	15	**67**	6	5	0	1	5
Knowsley	NW	2.00	6	**69**	5	5	4	4	7
Barking & Dagenham	LDN	1.67	23	**74**	0	1	0	1	1
KEY:			**1st**	2nd	3rd				

The presence of high levels of fragmentation in many coastal areas is not surprising – coastal regions have undergone significant shifts in their demographic profiles over the past few decades, with many such places suffering falling income due to the decline of industry and tourism. This may result in political dissatisfaction, expressed by voters through their moving away from the main political parties and towards smaller ones, perhaps as a protest vote. Indeed, this tallies with literature reviewed earlier, such as Jennings and Stoker (2016), who observe that voters in 'backwater' towns (which in this article, tended to be coastal towns due

to the inductive process used to identify 'backwaters', which began with the coastal town of Clacton and then took the fifty most demographically similar places) tend to be more socially conservative, and fear change, immigration, and globalisation (Jennings & Stoker, 2017, p. 10). Perhaps even more tellingly, UKIP won many of its key early victories in such coastal areas; the party's first elected MP was in Clacton (BBC News, 2014), while the first council it took control of was Thanet, a coastal area in Kent that was also the parliamentary constituency for which then-party leader Nigel Farage stood as an electoral candidate (Feeney, 2015).

A second observation is that higher fragmentation can also be seen in a number of cities, such as York, Bournemouth, Bath, and Bristol. This may be evidence to support the hypothesis that higher heterogeneity in a place's demographics makes fragmentation more likely; all of these cities have universities and, to greater or lesser extents, a cosmopolitan population encompassing a broad spectrum of demographic and economic situations. However, this is in stark contrast to cities such as London, Liverpool, and Manchester, which have similar demographic profiles but very low levels of fragmentation – four of the ten least fragmented local authorities between 2015 and 2018 could be found in London, while Liverpool had the sixth lowest ENOP figure and Manchester the sixteenth. These huge contrasts in fragmentation levels in demographically similar areas may be due to local context; after all, the mechanism by which demographics affect fragmentation is via demographic differences in party support, and there may be important historical and cultural factors in certain places that determine how demographic factors affect party support. For example, both Manchester and Liverpool have long histories as Labour strongholds, due to their traditional links to unions and industry, and their antipathy towards the Conservative party, which is often linked to the perception of the Conservatives as a party only concerned with the South of England (Kellner, 2013; Wilks-Heeg, 2019). The case studies in Chapter 7, and in particular the case study on Liverpool, provide a more in-depth exploration of how local context can alter how demographic factors affect party support and by extension, fragmentation. A third observation is that, generally speaking, inland areas seem to have lower levels of fragmentation, especially

in the Midlands and in the South. These areas are largely Conservative strongholds in what has been referred to as the 'Blue Wall', explaining the lower ENOP figures (Jeffrey, 2021).

5.3.1 Party configurations

While the ENOP figure provides a good estimation of the number of effective parties in each of the areas discussed above, another useful approach is to consider the actual constellations of parties present across the election results. This is an important element in developing a comprehensive understanding of how fragmentation is occurring in England, because as discussed in Chapter 2.3.2, party support is the intermediary factor between demographics and fragmentation, and so a clear view of how different party constellations are more or less strongly associated with fragmentation is crucial to building this understanding. Additionally, the work done in this section feeds into the analysis found in Chapter 7, which uses case studies to illustrate how some areas may conform to, or challenge, the findings of the regression models of the demographic drivers of fragmentation. It may well be the case that there are different party constellations that are more or less prone to fragmentation, as well as different demographic clues to the likelihood of an area fragmenting due to the party constellation; by identifying the most prominent and significant configurations, a deeper insight into the nature of fragmentation in English local elections may be reached. The analysis of party configurations will be done in two ways; firstly, the aggregated vote shares of each party in each local authority across the 2015 to 2018 election cycle will be summarised and ranked, in order to ascertain the most common configurations across the entirety of the election cycle (displayed in Table 7, below). Following on from this, the election results from those areas in which we see the most extreme levels of fragmentation, both high and low, will be examined in greater detail in order to understand the configuration of the party systems we find at the extreme ends of the fragmentation spectrum. This will be analysed with reference to the initial table of the most common party configurations in order to ascertain if any party configurations are more or less common in the most and least fragmented areas than across the country as a whole.

Table 7, below, shows the most common party configurations in the 2015-2018 local election cycle in England. The first three columns denote the first-, second-, and third-placed parties, while the second three show the number of local authorities conforming to each configuration. To take the example of Labour, the table shows that in 100 local authorities, Labour received the highest vote share. Reading down, we can see that of these 100 local authorities in which Labour received the highest vote share, the Conservative Party received the second-highest vote share in 70 local authorities. Then, of these 70 local authorities in which Labour and then the Conservatives had the highest vote share, the Liberal Democrats received the third-highest vote share in 24 of these 70 local authorities, UKIP in 33, any other party in the remaining 13, and so on. As can be seen from Table 7, below, the election cycle between 2015-2018 featured a wide range of differing party configurations, with a number of distinct patterns emerging. As the Conservatives dominated this election cycle, it is unsurprising to see that they received the highest aggregated vote share over this period in 241 of the 351 (69%) local authorities in England. Within these 241 Conservative local authorities, the most common configuration was one in which Labour and the Liberal Democrats split the left-of-centre vote, allowing the Conservatives to take the highest vote share. A Con-Lab-LD configuration was seen in 51 local authorities, while a Con-LD-Lab configuration was present in a further 57 local authorities. A similar configuration saw the Conservatives as the largest party and the left-wing vote split largely between Labour and the Green Party, which occurred in a further eleven local authorities. This type of configuration, in which the left-wing vote was split, allowing a Conservative win, was seen in just under half of all Conservative-majority local authorities in England. Therefore, we can characterise the first, and most prevalent, configuration as a *Conservative predominant, divided left* area.

Table 7: Party configurations based on aggregated local election results at local authority level, 2015-2018

1st place party	2nd place party	3rd place party	No. of LAs
Con	**-**	**-**	**241 (69%)**
Con	Lab	-	126 (36%)
Con	Lab	LD	51 (15%)
Con	Lab	UKIP	50 (14%)
Con	Lab	Green	11 (3%)
Con	Lab	Ind/Other	15 (4%)
Con	**LD**	**-**	**82 (23%)**
Con	LD	Lab	57 (16%)
Con	LD	Any other	25 (7%)
Con	**UKIP**	**-**	**11 (3%)**
Con	UKIP	Lab	7 (2%)
Con	UKIP	Any other	4 (1%)
Con	**Any other**	**-**	**22 (6%)**
Lab	**-**	**-**	**100 (28%)**
Lab	**Con**	**-**	**70 (20%)**
Lab	Con	LD	24 (7%)
Lab	Con	UKIP	33 (9%)
Lab	Con	Any other	13 (4%)
Lab	**LD**	**-**	**12 (3%)**
Lab	LD	Con	6 (2%)
Lab	LD	Any other	6 (2%)
Lab	**Green**	**-**	**7** (2%)
Lab	**UKIP**	**-**	**3 (1%)**
Lab	**Ind**	**-**	**3 (1%)**
Lab	**Other**	**-**	**5 (1%)**
LD	**-**	**-**	**9 (3%)**
LD	**Con**	**-**	**8 (2%)**
LD	Con	Lab	5 **(1%)**
LD	Con	Any other	3 **(1%)**
LD	**Lab**	**-**	**1 (0%)**
Other			**1 (0%)**
TOTAL			**351 (100%)**

Another highly prevalent configuration represents a much more recent phenomenon in which the Conservatives received the highest vote share, but in which Labour's chances were harmed not by the splitting of left-wing votes, but instead by the rise of UKIP and their popularity among Labour's traditional voting base. A full fifty local authorities had the Con-Lab-UKIP configuration, with seven more having a Con-UKIP-Lab result. Thus, we can characterise our second configuration as *Conservative predominant, UKIP/Labour split* areas. The reverse of

this scenario, where Labour received the highest share of the vote and a strong UKIP performance harmed the Conservative vote share by splitting the right-of-centre vote, was also a particularly prevalent configuration. There were 33 local authorities with a Lab-Con-UKIP configuration, representing a third of all Labour-majority areas and just under half of all areas in which Labour received the highest vote share and the Conservatives received the second highest. Our third configuration can therefore be seen as *Labour predominant, divided right*. A final configuration, but a much less common one, is characterised by the Liberal Democrats receiving the highest aggregated vote share over the four-year election cycle, with the Conservative party in second place. Of the nine local authorities in which the Liberal Democrats received the highest share of the votes, only one did not see the Conservatives take second place. This suggests a somewhat centrist, tending towards centre-right, ideological predominance amongst voters in these areas. As such, we characterise these areas as being *Lib Dem, centre-right*.

While the above provides a good starting point in identifying the most common party configurations over this election cycle, a more nuanced look at the actual vote shares over this time period, rather than the rankings alone, may be able to identify more configurations, including sub-categorisations of those identified above. Table 8, below, shows the 20 most fragmented local authorities based on aggregated results from the 2015-2018 election cycle, and includes the actual vote share for each party, aggregated across the four years. It also highlights the first, second, and third-placed parties in each local authority in gold, silver, and bronze respectively. Looking at Table 8, below, we can see that despite the high levels of fragmentation, all of the twenty local authorities shown were won[11] by either the Conservative Party or Labour party. Of these, twelve were won by the Conservatives and the remaining eight by Labour, although eight of the ten most fragmented local authorities were won by the Conservative party. The dominance of these two parties is unsurprising; they are the two

[11] Note that the word 'won' in this context is not strictly accurate; the figures shown in the table show the aggregated votes over the four-year election cycle, and so more accurate terminology would be 'Party X received the largest total share of the votes over these four election years'; 'won' is used for brevity.

largest parties in the country by a considerable margin, and in this time period won almost two-thirds of the national vote in local elections (Con - 37%; Lab – 29%). As such, it is not surprising that these two parties were successful even in the most fragmented areas. What is more interesting is looking at the second- and third-placed parties, which helps to reveal the multitude of types of party configurations present in these highly fragmented areas. While Labour or the Conservatives won all of these twenty local authorities, they were the recipient of the second-highest vote share in only six. There was a great deal of variety in the second-placed party, with the Liberal Democrats coming second in five local authorities, UKIP and Labour in four, Independents, Conservatives, and Other parties in two each, and the Green Party in one.

Perhaps the most interesting story here is the performance of UKIP. While it is no secret that they performed well in this time period, particularly in the 2015 election, these results reinforce the perception of UKIP as a disruptive force in UK politics and highlight the importance that they have had in driving fragmentation in recent years. While they did not receive the highest vote share in any of the most fragmented areas presented in Table 8, below, they placed second in four of the twenty local authorities, and third in a further five, receiving at least ten percent of the vote in fourteen of the twenty most fragmented local authorities. UKIP performed very well in both the 2015 and 2016 local elections – securing 12.8 percent and 10.9 percent of the national vote share respectively – when the debate around the UK's continued membership of the European Union was at its peak, and it is not surprising to see the link between strong UKIP performance and fragmentation. Their performance, and the effect it has had on fragmentation in these local elections, also serves to imply that fragmentation may be linked with voter dissatisfaction. As was implicitly and explicitly suggested in the sections of the literature review dealing with the idea of the 'left-behind', there is a large body of work linking UKIP and support for Brexit with political dissatisfaction, and as such, their strong presence in the most fragmented areas would seem to support the link between fragmentation and dissatisfaction among the electorate. Of course, this thesis does not directly measure dissatisfaction, so the observations made here must be treated as

evidence of no more than an indirect or potential association, rather than as concrete evidence linking fragmentation in English local elections to voter dissatisfaction.

Table 8: Vote shares and ENOP of twenty most fragmented local authorities, aggregated across all local elections 2015-2018

			Collated vote share, %, 2015-2018						
Local authority	**Region**	**ENOP**	**Con**	**Lab**	**LD**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Ind**	**Other**
Redcar & Cleveland	NE	**5.12**	16	29	16	4	11	21	4
Ashfield	EM	**4.94**	15	33	13	1	12	7	19
York	Y&H	**4.88**	27	23	22	15	5	7	2
Torbay	SW	**4.71**	31	13	22	10	20	4	0
Forest Of Dean	SW	**4.63**	34	22	5	13	15	11	0
Wyre Forest	WM	**4.61**	35	21	5	6	13	4	16
Bournemouth	SW	**4.57**	37	15	11	13	18	4	2
Durham	NE	**4.54**	20	36	12	3	3	16	11
Poole	SW	**4.52**	35	8	22	9	17	10	0
Bath & N.E. Somerset	SW	**4.48**	34	15	23	17	4	8	0
Lewes	SE	**4.46**	35	11	25	11	10	8	0
Southend on Sea	EoE	**4.41**	36	21	11	5	9	17	0
Allerdale	NW	**4.37**	28	33	4	10	11	13	0
Hartlepool	NE	**4.37**	18	33	0	4	22	18	5
Stoke on Trent	WM	**4.33**	21	32	1	2	16	3	23
Torridge	SW	**4.33**	39	10	10	12	14	15	0
Babergh	EoE	**4.30**	39	15	16	11	5	14	0
Bristol	SW	**4.30**	21	33	15	23	6	1	2
Doncaster	Y&H	**4.29**	21	36	2	6	21	7	7
Folkestone & Hythe	SE	**4.26**	40	12	11	14	17	5	1
KEY:			1st	2nd	3rd				

Another interesting observation concerns the performance of independent candidates in the most fragmented areas. One might reasonably expect to see strong independent performance in more fragmented areas, but independent candidates did not receive the highest vote share in any of the twenty most fragmented local authorities, came second in only two, and third in a further four. Additionally, independent candidates received more than twenty percent of the vote in only one local authority, and over fifteen percent in only four more. However, it is reasonable to add in 'Other' parties to this analysis, as frequently these parties are essentially independent candidates running under the banner of so-called 'hyper-local' parties that only

exists in a single local authority, and sometimes campaign largely for a single issue (Pidd, 2021). For example, the 23 percent for 'Others' in Stoke-on-Trent represented the City Independents, a loose coalition of independent candidates, while the 16 percent of votes for 'Others' in Wyre Forest was almost entirely for the Independent Kidderminster Hospital and Health Concern, a party founded in 2000 that grew out of a campaign to restore the casualty unit at Kidderminster Hospital. By doing so, the impact of independent candidates starts to look more impactful; treating 'Others' as Independents now gives independents second place in four of the twenty most fragmented local authorities, and third place in a further five. This categorisation also means that independent candidates received more than a fifth of the vote in two local authorities and more than fifteen percent in nine authorities.

Another point to make is that the performance of independent candidates is somewhat obscured in the local authority-level data compared to the ward-level data. Because a local authority's council is formed of many councillors from its constituent wards, looking at the vote shares at local authority level does not necessarily show the impact of independents. For example, independents could receive a low vote share but still win in many wards because of concentrated support, or receive a high vote share but end up with relatively few councillors because of dispersed support. When we consider the number of council seats occupied by independent councillors, we can see that they had a greater impact than these figures perhaps suggest. Table 9, below, shows the number of council seats won by independent candidates or candidates from hyperlocal parties between 2015 and 2018. Over this time period, these candidates won 5.3% of seats across England, making them the fourth largest bloc of councillors after the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties. Additionally, in the years between the time period covered in this thesis and the present day, such candidates appear to be getting more important in local politics, or at least becoming more prevalent; between the previous two local elections in 2019 and 2021, the number of minor party candidates rose by 772, from 1,015 to 1,787 (Pidd, 2021).

Table 9: Number and percentage of elected councillors in English local elections, ward-level, 2015-2018

	2015		2016		2017		2018		2015-2018	
	# of Cllrs.	% of Cllrs.	# of Cllrs.	% of Cllrs.	# of Cllrs.	% of Cllrs.	# of Cllrs.	% of Cllrs.	# of Cllrs.	% of Cllrs.
Conservative	5,521	59%	842	30%	1,439	61%	1,332	30%	9,134	48%
Labour	2,278	24%	1,326	48%	418	18%	2,353	53%	6,375	34%
Lib Dem	658	7%	378	14%	312	13%	542	12%	1,890	10%
Independent & hyperlocal	**574**	**6%**	**116**	**4%**	**179**	**7%**	**142**	**3%**	**1,011**	**5%**
Other	295	3%	107	4%	21	1%	43	1%	466	2%
Total	**9,326**	**100%**	**2,769**	**100%**	**2,369**	**99%**	**4,412**	**100%**	**18,876**	**100%**

One point to consider in this discussion is the ideological affiliation of these independent candidates. While it is beyond the scope of this thesis to check the political leanings of every independent candidate over the election period covered, others have observed that many independent candidates or hyperlocal parties are former UKIP or Brexit party councillors who grew disillusioned with these parties and struck out on their own. A prime example of this is the Rotherham Democratic Party (RDP), which was founded in February 2021 and already has twelve councillors, all of whom have previously been elected to the council under the banner of either UKIP or the Brexit Party. Andrew Teale, who maintains the Local Elections Archive Project used for much of the ward-level data used in this thesis, said in an interview with the Guardian that many hyperlocal parties are founded in so-called 'satellite towns' that feel overshadowed by their district centres. Exacerbating this issue is the fact that in many cases, these satellite towns are actually big enough to be their own municipality, and up until the 1970s often were. The emergence of hyper-local parties reflects a trend for people to turn against the large parties in such areas, due to a feeling of being ignored and not catered for by the priorities of the main parties, and instead concentrate on electing councillors more concerned with local issues that are more important in their day-to-day lives. Such councillors are often better able to reflect people's views about their local area without the restrictions that

are often placed by councillors representing the larger parties due to the use of the whip system (Pidd, 2021).

This reinforces the conception of fragmentation as being a symptom of political disillusionment among the electorate, as well as more loosely converging with the left behind thesis by anecdotally tying together dissatisfaction with mainstream political representation and a move towards more right-leaning, anti-immigration or less socially progressive parties. However, not all of these hyperlocal parties fall into this category; many are actually more left-leaning, such as the Chase Community Independents Group in Cannock Chase, Staffordshire, which is made up of former Labour, Lib Dem and Green Party candidates. While this is all interesting, the lack of a systematic classification of the ideological leanings of independent candidates means that unfortunately, deeper exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, but would be worth further research.

Moving now to consider the least fragmented local authorities, it is unsurprising to see in Table 10, below, that the Conservative and Labour parties received the highest aggregated vote share in every local authority from 2015 to 2018, with the largest party typically receiving between half and three-quarters of the results. Furthermore, only six of these twenty local authorities had a party other than the Conservatives or Labour in second place, with the Liberal Democrats second in three authorities, the Green Party in two, and any Other party in one. What is particularly interesting is that Labour was the largest party in the vast majority of the least fragmented local authorities, taking thirteen to the Conservatives' seven. The most likely reason for this is the well-documented observation that Labour enjoy heavily concentrated support in key strongholds such as university towns and cities, while the Conservative Party enjoy broader support across the country (Furlong, 2019). This time period saw Labour's vote being split from both their traditional left-wing competitors, such as the Liberal Democrat and Green parties, as well as from the UKIP surge that saw many of Labour's traditional voters eschew their left-wing economic leanings in favour of more right-authoritarian social values. Over the same time period, the Conservatives did not suffer as much of a split in their vote, as

many on the right of the political spectrum would either be natural Conservatives or vote tactically for the Conservatives despite their real preference perhaps being for UKIP instead. Therefore, it makes sense that where Labour did win, it would be predominantly in those areas that are so heavily and traditionally Labour that neither the left- or right-wing challengers could make real inroads into their voter base.

Table 10: Vote shares and ENOP of twenty least fragmented local authorities, aggregated across all local elections 2015-2018

			Collated vote share, %, 2015-2018						
Local authority	**Region**	**ENOP**	**Con**	**Lab**	**LD**	**Green**	**UKIP**	**Ind**	**Other**
Broxbourne	EoE	**2.48**	57	24	3	1	15	0	0
Blaby	EM	**2.48**	56	26	11	1	5	0	0
Hammersmith & Fulham	LDN	**2.47**	35	52	12	1	0	0	0
Barrow in Furness	NW	**2.46**	39	49	1	0	10	0	0
Manchester	NW	**2.45**	9	61	11	11	5	1	1
Hillingdon	LDN	**2.44**	52	37	2	7	0	1	1
Hertsmere	EoE	**2.43**	58	25	8	1	5	3	0
Cotswold	SW	**2.43**	53	3	36	4	4	1	0
East Hampshire	SE	**2.41**	60	8	20	4	5	2	0
Blackburn with Darwen	NW	**2.39**	33	55	4	1	6	1	1
Hackney	LDN	**2.36**	11	61	9	18	0	0	1
Sandwell	WM	**2.36**	21	60	1	4	14	0	0
Slough	SE	**2.35**	32	56	2	0	9	0	0
Liverpool	NW	**2.34**	6	63	12	10	4	0	5
Redbridge	LDN	**2.32**	34	55	5	3	0	1	1
Halton	NW	**2.15**	16	65	7	0	9	2	1
Ribble Valley	NW	**2.13**	63	24	12	0	0	0	0
Newham	LDN	**2.08**	15	67	6	5	0	1	5
Knowsley	NW	**2.00**	6	69	5	5	4	4	7
Barking & Dagenham	LDN	**1.67**	23	74	0	1	0	1	1
KEY:			1st	2nd	3rd				

Another small observation on the least fragmented authorities regards the performance of the Liberal Democrat parties in these areas. Behind the Conservative and Labour parties, the Liberal Democrats were easily the third most successful party in these areas, receiving the second-highest vote share in three authorities, representing half of the authorities in which there was not a Con/Lab or Lab/Con one-two. In the Cotswold authority, the Liberal Democrats received a full 36 percent of the vote, which would have been a high enough vote

share to be the largest party in all but five of the twenty most fragmented authorities. The Liberal Democrats also received the third-highest share of the votes in a further seven of the twenty least fragmented local authorities. The relatively strong performance of the Liberal Democrats in the least fragmented areas suggests that these places most strongly conform to the traditional conception of England as having a two and a half party system, with Labour and the Conservatives vying for the top position and the Liberal Democrats taking the centrist vote among those who do not lean heavily to either side of the political spectrum.

In terms of the classification of party configurations, the least fragmented authorities highlight the need for sub-categorisation of the configuration types identified earlier, which were: *Conservative predominant, divided left*; *Conservative predominant, UKIP/Labour split*; *Labour predominant, divided right; Lib Dem, centre-right*. Starting with the *Conservative predominant, divided left* category, it is clear to see that an area such as York, in which between 2015 and 2018 the Conservatives received 27 percent of the vote, Labour 23 percent, and the Liberal Democrats 22 percent, is vastly different to an authority such as Ribble Valley, where the vote shares for these three parties were 63, 24, and 12 percent respectively. As such, it would be prudent to divide this category into: *Conservative minority win, competitive divided left;* and *Conservative majority win, weak divided left*. Similarly, a distinction is needed between those authorities in which the Conservatives receive the highest vote share by a relatively small margin, potentially because UKIP has split the Labour vote, such as in Forest of Dean (Con – 34%; Lab – 22%; UKIP 15%), and those in which the Conservatives receive such a large majority of votes that UKIP's effect on Labour's chances was inconsequential to the overall outcome, despite them having similar vote shares, as in Broxbourne (Con – 57%; Lab – 24%; UKIP – 15%). Therefore, we shall split the *Conservative predominant, UKIP/Labour split* category into simply: *Conservative majority win, UKIP/Labour split;* and *Conservative minority win, UKIP/Labour split*. The *Labour predominant, divided right* category will be split in the same manner as the *Conservative predominant, divided left* category; the three sub-categories will be *Labour majority win, weak divided right* and *Labour minority win, competitive divided right*. Finally, the *Lib Dem, centre right category*

will not be sub-categorised as this category contains so few local authorities already that further division will only serve to overcomplicate analysis and be of limited analytical worth.

5.4 Ward level

We now move to the smallest geographical area studied in this thesis; the electoral ward. This level provides the most accurate summary of fragmentation in the UK, and has various advantages over the other levels, chief among which is the fact that the dataset used for the ward-level results actually included all small parties, rather than grouping together smaller parties in the 'Other' category, as with the LA-level data. As the ENOP calculation ideally requires the number of parties in each electoral area to be known, this enables an entirely accurate ENOP figure to be found. As with the LA-level data above, the results for 2015-2018 were combined to give a complete national picture of the most recent set of English local elections for which data are available. Again, as with the LA-level data, presenting the data is a challenge, and so various tables and graphs will be presented to try to give the most rounded picture of how fragmentation occurs at the ward level.

As with the LA sub-chapter, one of the key elements of understanding how fragmentation is occurring at the ward level is to identify the different types of party system operating in England's electoral wards. Table 11, below, shows the number and percentages of different party constellations at ward level occurring in the 2015-2018 election cycle. As with Table 7, above, from the local authority level sub-chapter, in Table 11, below, the first three columns denote the first-, second-, and third-placed parties, while the second three show the number of wards with each party configuration. For example, the table shows that the Conservative Party won in 6,494 wards, representing 49% of all wards. Of these, Labour came second in 3,090, meaning that 23% of *all* wards (not 23% of the 49% of wards where the Conservatives won) had the Con-Lab configuration. Of those, the Liberal Democrats came third in 982, meaning that 7% of wards had the Con-Lab-LD configuration, and so on.

Table 12, below, compares the party configurations found in local authority-level local election results to those found in ward-level local election results. When reading the table, it is

important to remember that only the coloured rows will total to 100%. This analysis reveals a number of interesting points about the most prevalent configurations in England's local elections. First and foremost is that these results seem to reinforce the evidence of Figure 10 in Chapter 5.1, above, that the first-past-the-post system distorts electoral results in favour of the larger parties and thus obscures fragmentation in English local elections. As can be seen in Table 12, below, the LA-level results showed a Conservative win in 69% of all local authorities in the four-year local election cycle between 2015 and 2018, while at the ward level, this figure drops to just 49%, a fall of 20% percentage points. The Conservatives gained the most votes in less than half of all wards, yet were the largest party in more than two-thirds of local authorities. Every other party lost out to this electoral equation, with Labour winning the most votes in 33% of wards and only 28% of LAs, the Liberal Democrats winning 10% of wards and only 3% of LAs, and Independent candidates winning 3% of wards and no LAs. While this thesis is not concerned with the electoral system *per se*, this finding does serve to reinforce the relevance of analysing ward-level results, which provide the best descriptor of fragmentation in voting patterns undistorted by the vagaries of the first-past-the-post system.

Electoral systems aside, the ward-level results serve to reinforce the configurations identified in the LA-level analysis. Once again, around half of the Conservative predominant wards have Labour in second place (47% at ward level; 52% at LA level), and the proportion of wards in which UKIP and the Liberal Democrats are the third places is also very similar at both ward- and LA-level. In fact, this trend continues for most of the configurations identified, and there is little point in discussing each individual similarity. However, despite the overall similarity, there are nevertheless some important divergences. One striking difference is that while the Lab-UKIP configuration made up only 1% of all local authorities, this configuration was present in 6% of all wards. Once again, this is a result of the distorting effects of the first-past-the-post system, which has potentially downplayed the significance of party configurations in which UKIP is challenging Labour from the right. Similarly, while the Liberal Democrats were the largest party in only 3% of LAs, they received the highest vote share in a full 10% of wards.

Table 11: Party configurations from aggregated local election results at ward level, 2015-2018

1st place party	2nd place party	3rd place party	No. & % of Wards
Con	**-**	**-**	**6,494 (49%)**
Con	Lab	-	3,090 (23%)
Con	Lab	LD	982 (7%)
Con	Lab	UKIP	1,092 (8%)
Con	Lab	Green	472 (4%)
Con	Lab	Ind/Other	201 (2%)
Con	**LD**	**-**	**1,641 (12%)**
Con	LD	Lab	996 (8%)
Con	LD	Any other	645 (5%)
Con	**UKIP**	**-**	**704 (5%)**
Con	UKIP	Lab	433 (3%)
Con	UKIP	Any other	271 (2%)
Con	**Green**	**-**	**321 (2%)**
Con	**Ind. or Other**	**-**	**583 (4%)**
Lab	**-**	**-**	**4,419 (33%)**
Lab	**Con**	**-**	**2,674 (20%)**
Lab	Con	LD	642 (5%)
Lab	Con	UKIP	917 (7%)
Lab	Con	Any other	1,115 (8%)
Lab	**LD**	**-**	**386 (3%)**
Lab	LD	Con	254 (2%)
Lab	LD	Any other	132 (1%)
Lab	**Green**	**-**	**255 (2%)**
Lab	**UKIP**	**-**	**804 (6%)**
Lab	**Ind**	**-**	**147 (1%)**
Lab	**Other**	**-**	**139 (1%)**
LD	**-**	**-**	**1,341 (10%)**
LD	**Con**	**-**	**969 (7%)**
LD	Con	Lab	646 (5%)
LD	Con	Any other	323 (2%)
LD	**Lab**	**-**	**318 (2%)**
LD	**Any other**	**-**	**54 (1%)**
Green	**-**	**-**	**134 (1%)**
UKIP	**-**	**-**	**123 (1%)**
Ind	**-**	**-**	**433 (3%)**
Other	**-**	**-**	**280 (2%)**
TOTAL	**-**	**-**	**13,224 (100%)**

Table 12: Comparison of aggregated local authority-level results and ward-level results in English local elections, 2015-2018

1st place party	2nd place party	3rd place party	% of Wards	% of LAs
Con	**-**	**-**	**49%**	**69%**
Con	**Lab**	**-**	**23%**	**36%**
Con	Lab	LD	7%	15%
Con	Lab	UKIP	8%	14%
Con	Lab	Green	4%	3%
Con	Lab	Ind/Other	2%	4%
Con	**LD**	**-**	**12%**	**23%**
Con	LD	Lab	8%	16%
Con	LD	Any other	5%	7%
Con	**UKIP**	**-**	**5%**	**3%**
Con	UKIP	Lab	3%	2%
Con	UKIP	Any other	2%	1%
Con	**Any other**	**-**	**6%**	**6%**
Lab	**-**	**-**	**33%**	**28%**
Lab	**Con**	**-**	**20%**	**20%**
Lab	Con	LD	5%	7%
Lab	Con	UKIP	7%	9%
Lab	Con	Any other	8%	4%
Lab	**LD**	**-**	**3%**	**3%**
Lab	LD	Con	2%	2%
Lab	LD	Any other	1%	2%
Lab	**UKIP**	**-**	**6%**	**1%**
Lab	**Any other**	**-**	**4%**	**4%**
LD	**-**	**-**	**10%**	**3%**
LD	**Con**	**-**	**7%**	**2%**
LD	Con	Lab	5%	1%
LD	Con	Any other	2%	1%
LD	**Lab**	**-**	**2%**	**0%**
Green	**-**	**-**	**1%**	**0%**
UKIP	**-**	**-**	**1%**	**0%**
Ind	**-**	**-**	**3%**	**0%**
Other	**-**	**-**	**2%**	**0%**
TOTAL	**-**	**-**	**(100%)**	**(100%)**

To summarise, from both the local authority- and ward-level analysis of party configurations, we have seen that many configurations of varying strengths, and with different theorised relationships to fragmentation, exist in English local elections. In brief, these are as follows:

- Conservative win, divided left
    - Conservative majority win, weak divided left
    - Conservative minority win, competitive divided left
- Conservative win, UKIP/Labour split
    - Conservative majority win, inconsequential Lab/UKIP split
    - Conservative minority win, consequential Lab/UKIP split
- Labour win, divided right
    - Labour majority win, weak divided right
    - Labour minority win, competitive divided right
- Lib Dem win, centre-right opposition

These classifications reveal a number of interesting insights into how fragmentation is occurring in England over the studied time period. Firstly, this data makes it clear that the UKIP challenge to both the Conservatives on the right and Labour on the left is a key driver of fragmentation; over the course of the 2015-2018 local election cycle, local authorities in which there was some variation on the combination of the Conservatives, Labour, and UKIP as the three largest parties by vote share made up more than a quarter of all local authorities and wards in England. An interesting point to make here is that UKIP more frequently split the Labour vote than the Conservative vote; local authorities in which the configuration was Lab-Con-UKIP or Lab-UKIP-Con made up just over a third of all local authorities and wards that were won by Labour, compared to less than a quarter of the local authorities and just over a quarter of the wards in which the Conservatives won being either Con-Lab-UKIP or Con-UKIP-Lab. It could be argued that this lends strong support to the 'left-behind' thesis (Ford & Goodwin, 2014b; Goodwin & Heath, 2016), bolstering the expectation that when we reach the

analysis of the demographic drivers of fragmentation, we might expect to see the demographic variables linked with this group being strongly associated with fragmentation.

Secondly, however, it is also true that in this election cycle, Labour were harmed by both the Liberal Democrat and Green parties, who attract support from those on the centre-left and far-left of the political spectrum respectively. Local authorities with a Con-Lab-LD or Con-LD-Lab configuration made up 45 percent of the local authorities in which the Conservatives garnered the most votes over this period, with the addition of the Con-Lab-Green configuration bringing this figure to just under half. The effect was less pronounced at ward level, with a little under a third of all Conservative-won wards conforming to this configuration. This provides some evidence to suggest that while Labour faced a substantial challenge from UKIP, their main rivals were still the two parties splitting the left-wing vote from both a more centre-left and far-left position, and that this may be a more important driver of fragmentation. This tallies with the work of Sanders (2017), who pinpointed Labour's competition with other liberal parties for what he called the 'Liberal Internationalist, Pro-EU Left' vote as a key factor in their failure to provide meaningful electoral competition to the Conservatives in recent years (Sanders, 2017, p. 116). The splitting of the Labour vote from the left, however, is not a new phenomenon; English elections have always been considered as having a two-and-a-half party system, with the Liberal Democrats often attracting floating voters, and so it could be argued that in this election, this occurred more at the expense of Labour than the Conservatives. Consequently, the emergence of the right-wing challenge from UKIP to Labour's core working-class voter base is still likely to the biggest driver of fragmentation. The regression analyses in the next chapter will provide further evidence for, or challenge, this argument.

The third and final observation from the classification of party configurations is that there are still a substantial number of local authorities that reinforce the view of English local elections as a two-and-a-half party system, with more than a quarter of local authorities having configurations in which the top three parties are some combination of the Conservatives,

Labour, and the Liberal Democrats. We would expect areas like this to be associated not with the lowest levels of fragmentation, but instead with a middling effective number of parties figure. The lowest levels of fragmentation will of course occur in areas in which one party, usually either Labour or the Conservatives, is entirely dominant, usually at the detriment of the other. However, in local authorities in which most of the votes are split between the three main parties, and challenger parties find it more difficult to have an impact, an effective number of parties close to the median is to be expected. We will now turn to an examination of the main demographic drivers of fragmentation in English local elections. The analysis from this chapter will then be synthesised with the results from that analysis, in order to further pick out the intricacies of the story of fragmentation in English local elections, and they will also combine to inform the case study selection for the final empirical chapter.

Chapter 6: The drivers of fragmentation

As we have seen so far, the story of fragmentation in English local elections is not a simple one. While fragmentation seems to be higher in coastal areas and in some cities, there is no clear pattern to determine which areas are most prone to fragmentation, or if there is a geographic element that helps to determine fragmentation levels. Furthermore, we have seen that fragmentation has not been driven solely by one configuration of parties; while it seems that the rise of UKIP, and in particular their challenge to Labour as the party of the working class, was one of the key drivers of fragmentation across the 2015 to 2018 election cycle, it could also be argued that the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party splitting the left-wing vote with Labour was almost as significant in driving fragmentation across England. With that in mind, this chapter will dig deeper into the demographic drivers of fragmentation, seeking to establish if there are any key constellations of demographic characteristics that are associated with higher or lower levels of fragmentation. Based on the literature, and indeed the finding that UKIP voting was a key driver of fragmentation over this election cycle, we might expect areas with a higher concentration of people belonging to the 'left-behind' to be more fragmented, although attention must also be paid to areas with more people with the characteristics of the 'squeezed middle'. The chapter will begin by looking at how variables were selected for the regression models, before moving through a series of descriptive statistics and regression models at both the local authority and ward level, and concluding with a discussion that summarises the findings and links them back to the literature review.

6.1 Variable selection

With any regression model, it is vitally important that any independent variables that go into the model are selected on the basis of sound theoretical rationales or on previous studies that have confirmed their relevance to the dependent variable (Field, 2013, p. 321). While it is possible to create models with a large number of variables, this is inadvisable, as having too many variables for the number of cases can seriously harm the generalisability of a model.

Furthermore, they must be independent of one another to prevent problems of multicollinearity. Therefore, the variables selected should be few in number (between 5 and 10 would be ideal), unrelated to one another to prevent multicollinearity, and based on sound theory. In order to do this, we will need to refer back to the factors identified in the literature review and theoretical framework to reach a usable list of predictors. This section will recap the theoretical bases for variable inclusion, the data available in the census, and the final variables that will be included in the regression models based on these criteria.

6.1.1 Social class, occupation, and educational attainment

A core element of the story of fragmentation in England is the role of social class. While social class has seemingly declined in importance over the past 50 years as a predictor of electoral outcomes (Evans & Tilley, 2012), it is nevertheless a key element of the story of elections in England. Therefore, it would still be instructive to consider social class in our models. While the classification of social class is a contentious issue, the census does provide a breakdown of approximate social grade by applying an algorithm first developed by members of the MRS Census & Geodemographics Group that takes into account occupation, employment status, qualifications, tenure, and whether respondents work full-time, part-time, or not at all (UK Geographics, 2014). The measurement identifies six separate social grades: A, B, C1, C2, D, and E. The descriptions for each social grade are given in Table 13, below, as well as the proportion of the English population falling into each category. For the purposes of the regression models, these grades will be divided into three groups, with one group consisting of grades A and B, the next being C1 and C2, and the final one being D and E. The latter two groupings will be used in the models, as both those in the lowest social grades and those belonging to what has been termed 'the squeezed middle' have been linked to dissatisfaction and disaffection with the political system, which could in turn lead to higher fragmentation as they turn away from the main parties. By proxy, we will be able to determine the relationship between those in social grades A and B and the dependent variable by simply taking the inverse

of the 'Social grade – DE' variable. Given the literature, the hypothesis for the relationship between the 'Social grade – DE' variable and ENOP is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward of social grades D or E and the effective number of parties

For the 'Social grade – C1C2' variable, the hypothesis is:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward of social grades C1 or C2 and the effective number of parties

Table 13: Approximated social grade descriptions from 2011 census

Social Grade	Description	% UK population, 2011 census
AB	Higher & intermediate managerial, administrative, professional occupations	22%
C1	Supervisory, clerical & junior managerial, administrative, professional occupations	31%
C2	Skilled manual occupations	21%
DE	Semi-skilled & unskilled manual occupations, Unemployed and lowest grade occupations	26%

Source: (UK Geographics, 2014)

Similarly to social grade, occupation may also be linked to fragmentation. It has been theorised that the decline of manufacturing and industry has led to economic stagnation or decline in many towns and cities that once relied heavily on this sector, which in turn has led to political disaffection and the emergence of new cleavage structures and greater fragmentation as voters look to challenger parties to express their frustrations (see Jennings & Stoker, 2016 for example). As such, the percentage of people in a local authority or ward working in manufacturing or industry should be included as a predictor in the regression analysis. However, this does not quite capture the theoretical justification for its inclusion, as it is the decline of industry, rather than the number of people in an area working in industry, that is

theorised to be linked with fragmentation. As such, we might expect those areas that still have a higher proportion of people employed by industry to be less fragmented. Additionally, it may also be useful to include a variable that measures the change over time in the percentage of people in a particular area working in industry, to capture the relationship between places in industrial decline and fragmentation. This will be measured by a variable that captures the percentage change in people working in industry and manufacturing between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. The census data breaks occupations down into 19 categories, ranging from A to U (and 'Other'). For the purposes of this thesis, industry has been defined as those occupations in categories A-F, which are summarised in Table 14, below. The hypothesis for the relationship between the 'Industrial workforce' variable and ENOP is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a negative relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward of social grades D or E and the effective number of parties

For the '% change, industrial workforce, 2001-2011' variable, the hypothesis is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a negative relationship between the change in the proportion of people in a local authority/ward working in an industrial occupation between 2001 and 2011, and the effective number of parties

Table 14: Industry descriptions from 2011 census (Table KS605EW), categories A-F

Category	Description	% UK population, 2011
A	Agriculture, forestry and fishing	0.9%
B	Mining and quarrying	0.2%
C	Manufacturing	8.9%
D	Electricity, gas, steam and air-con supply	0.6%
E	Water supply, sewerage, waste management, and remediation activities	0.7%
F	Construction	7.7%
A-F	**Industry (all above categories combined)**	**18.9%**

Source: (ONS, 2022)

Another similar variable is education level. Much of the literature on Brexit voting, the left-behind, and social cleavages in the UK in general in the past five or six years has identified education level as a key predictor of voting patterns and social attitudes. One study, for example, found that educational attainment alone can correctly classify 90% of local authorities by voting outcome in the 2016 Brexit referendum, depending on the prediction model and classification method used (Calvert Jump & Michell, 2020). As such, it would be reasonable to assume that if education level plays such a large role in determining the outcome of first-order variables such as voting choices or social attitudes, it would likely also be a predictor of second-order variables such as ENOP. Perhaps the most interesting education indicators to potentially be included in the models would be 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' and 'Qualifications – Level 2 or Level 3' (see Table 15, below, for a full breakdown of the educational categories provided in the census data).

The rationale for the former would again come from the hypothesis that people with lower levels of qualification are more likely to fit with the archetype of the 'left-behind', and thus feel disillusioned from mainstream politics and thus more likely to vote for fringe parties, thus driving fragmentation. Inversely, a high proportion of degree-educated people in an area might affect fragmentation in one of two ways. Firstly, it could lead to greater fragmentation, as university cities and towns could see students staying after graduation, bringing a diverse set of voting priorities potentially focused more on non-material issues such as the environment (Inglehart & Norris, 2016). This would then push voters towards left-leaning parties such as Labour and Green Party, countering the preferences of older and more Conservative-leaning residents, as is the cases in places such as York and Bath (see Table 6, above). More degree-educated people could also lead to lower levels of fragmentation if the above occurs in an area that was already Labour-leaning. As such, it would be an interesting variable to include in the models.

However, for the purposes of the regression models, we will use two variables. The first will measure the proportion of people in a local authority with no qualifications or Level 1

qualifications, and another will measure the proportion of those with Level 2 or 3 qualifications. In this way, we will capture both those with the lowest levels of educations, as well as again considering the 'squeezed middle'. By proxy, this will also consider those with Level 4 or higher qualifications, as the relationship of the 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' variable with the dependent variable will simply be the inverse of the relationship between the 'Qualifications – Level 4 or above' category and the dependent variable. Given the above, the hypothesis for the relationship between the 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' variable and ENOP is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward with no qualifications or Level 1 qualifications, and the effective number of parties

For the 'Qualifications – Level 2 or Level 3' variable, the hypothesis is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward with Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications, and the effective number of parties

Table 15: Qualifications descriptions from 2011 census (Table KS501EW)

Category	Description	% UK population, 2011 census
No qualifications	No qualifications	22.4%
Level 1	1-4 GCSEs (any grades); or equivalent	13.4%
Level 2	5+ GCSEs (Grades A*-C), 2-3 AS Levels; or equivalent	15.5%
Apprenticeships	Apprenticeships	3.7%
Level 3	2+ A Levels, 4+ AS Levels; or equivalent	12.4%
Level 4	Degree (e.g. BA, BSc) or higher	27.2%
Other qualifications	Other vocational/work-related Qualifications, Foreign Qualifications	5.4%

Source: (ONS, 2022)

6.1.2 Age

Another factor that was identified in the literature as being an important predictor of voting patterns, if not fragmentation directly, was age. Age, alongside education, was a key predictor of voting to Leave the EU, as well as of party affiliation. However, it is unlikely that mean age as a continuous variable would be a good predictor of fragmentation. As discussed in Chapter 2.3.2.1, demographic heterogeneity is likely to be a better predictor of fragmentation than any single demographic variable alone. Therefore, to capture heterogeneity, we will use the old age dependency ratio (OADR) as the age predictor for the models in this thesis. OADR is a measure of the proportion of retired people against the working age population, calculated by dividing the number of people in an area of working age (16-64) by the number of people aged 65 or over. The higher the OADR, the more people aged 65 or over there are in an area compared to those of working age, and the more homogenous that area's age profile is, and the less we would expect to see fragmentation occurring in that area. There is some discussion in the literature over the efficacy of OADR as a measure given the changing nature of the workforce and the rising number of people remaining economically active past retirement age (ONS, 2019), but such discussions go beyond the scope and purpose of this thesis, for which OADR provides a helpful proxy for age homogeneity. Given this, the hypothesis for the relationship between the old age dependency ratio and ENOP is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a negative relationship between the old age dependency ratio in a local authority/ward and the effective number of parties

6.1.3 Religion

As discussed in the literature review, religion has always been a key cleavage in Western politics, and until the rise of the class cleavage, was the dominant division in many electoral systems. While religion, like class, is widely regarded to have declined almost to the point of irrelevance as an important cleavage dimension in Western societies, and in Britain in particular, there is still some evidence that religion retains at least some influence on the way

that people vote. Indeed, enough contemporary studies have found a religious dimension to voting behaviour that one author declared that 'specifications of British voting behaviour are incomplete if they do not contain religious variables' (Kotler-Berkowitz, 2001, p. 552). As such, it is worth including religious variables in the demographic analysis. The 2011 Census asked respondents their religious affiliation, broken down into Christian, Muslim, Sikh, Hindu, Jewish, Buddhist, other, no religion, and religion not stated. Unfortunately given the split between Anglicans and Catholics in the literature, the census question does not differentiate between the two, giving only one all-encompassing 'Christian' option. Additionally, given the very small proportion of Britons who identify with any religion other than Christianity (59 percent) or Islam (5 percent), the models will include only one variable measuring the overall proportion of people in an area identifying with any religion. While this no doubt loses some granularity, it nevertheless will enable the identification of whether religion plays a significant role in electoral fragmentation, and highlight areas in which this effect is particularly prevalent to facilitate deeper probing.

In terms of the relationship between religion and the effective number of parties, the literature would suggest that due to the relatively fixed voting preferences of Christians and Muslims, the two largest religious groups in England, in areas with a higher concentration of religious people, fragmentation would be lower, as they are likely to vote *en masse* for one of the two major parties. Even in areas with a high number of both Muslims and Christians, fragmentation is likely to be low despite the divide; if the vast majority of Muslims vote for Labour and Christians for the Conservatives, ENOP is unlikely to be far above two, which is a relatively low figure, especially considering that England is commonly seen as having a two and a half party system. Given this, the hypothesis for the relationship between religion and ENOP is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a negative relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward belonging to any religion and the effective number of parties

6.1.4 Ethnicity and immigration

The final set of variables to be considered are the country of birth and ethnicity of residents in each ward or local authority. Again, immigration and ethnicity have become key variables in contemporary analyses of electoral cleavages in England, and have long been identified in the literature on fragmentation as potential determinants of electoral fragmentation levels (Neto & Cox, 1997, p. 152). The role of immigration in the Brexit debate, and its position as a key issue in many elections in recent years makes it a natural inclusion as a variable in this thesis, with the assumption that in areas with higher number of immigrants, fragmentation is likely to be higher due to the decreased ethnic homogeneity. Conversely, in areas with a relatively homogenous, White British or Irish population, we would expect fragmentation to be lower. However, as with the industrial occupation variable, it has been hypothesised that change in immigration levels over time is more important in determining electoral patterns than the absolute number of immigrants living in an electoral area. Goodwin and Heath, for example, find that 'even though areas with relatively high levels of EU migration tended to be more pro-Remain; those places which had experienced a sudden influx of EU migrants over the last ten years tended to be more pro-Leave' (Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 329). Given the theorised importance of change in immigration levels over time, a variable capturing this should be included, with the expectation that it would have a positive relationship with fragmentation.

Several variables have been considered to measure immigration for the models in this thesis. The first potential measure is the ethnicity of the residents in a ward or local authority. A simple measure would therefore be the proportion identifying as White British in an electoral area. For the purposes of these models, White British and White Irish have been grouped together, as the close cultural, economic, and ethnic ties between Britain and Ireland have meant that Irish immigration has not featured to any significant extent in discussions of contemporary political cleavages. Indeed, Irish citizens have a right of residence in the UK that is not dependent on their status as EU members, and are treated as if they have permanent immigration permission to remain in the UK, including the right to vote, work, claim benefits

and use the NHS (Schymyck, 2020). Therefore, there is not a great deal of analytical sense in separating the two, and as such, the first variable to be included is the proportion of people who are ethnically White British or Irish in an electoral area. Given the discussion in the previous paragraph regarding the importance of change in immigration levels over time, a variable measuring the change in the proportion of those identifying as ethnically White British or Irish between the 2011 census and the 2001 census will be the second variable to be included. An alternative to using ethnicity would be country of birth, which would directly measure immigration. As there is a high degree of collinearity between the two measures (r = 0.973), only one of these two variables should be included, which was decided to be ethnicity.

The hypothesis for the 'Ethnicity – White British or Irish' variable is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the proportion of people in a local authority/ward who are ethnically White British or Irish and the effective number of parties

Similarly, for the variable measuring the change in the proportion of ethnically White British or Irish people between 2001 and 2011, the hypothesis is as follows:

> **H_1:** There is a positive relationship between the change in the proportion of people in a local authority/ward who are ethnically White British or Irish between 2001 and 2011, and the effective number of parties

6.1.5 Summary

So far, we have considered approximated social grade, change in industrial occupation levels between 2001 and 2011, qualifications, age, and country of birth as potential predictor variables. Table 16, below, summarises these themes and the variables that will be used to measure them (with the variables that will be included in the regression models highlighted in bold), as well as the expected relationships between the independent and dependent variables. All variables have been taken directly from questions in the 2011 census, and the 2001 census

when change over time is being considered. All variables are expressed as a percentage of residents in a local authority or ward, except for old age dependency ratio, which is, rather unsurprisingly, a ratio. The next section will move on to producing linear regression analysis of the relationship between fragmentation and these variables at the local authority level.

Table 16: Variables to be included in regression models

Potential drivers	**Census question (Table code)**	**Groupings available in census data**	**Final variable groupings**	**Expected direction of relationship with ENOP**
Social class	Approximated social grade (QS611EW)	AB, C1, C2, DE	- AB - **C1C2** - **DE**	- Negative - Positive - Positive
Occupation	Industry (KS606EW)	19 occupation categories from A-U, plus 'Other' category	- **Industrial workforce** - % change, industrial workforce, 2001-11	- Negative - Positive
Education	Qualifications (KS501EW)	No qualifications; Level 1; Level 2; Apprenticeships; Level 3; Level 4 or higher; Other	- **None or Level 1** - **Level 2 or Level 3** - Level 4 or higher	- Positive - Positive - Negative
Age	Age structure (KS102EW)	0-4; 5-7; 8-9; 10-14; 15; 16-17; 18-19; 20-24;25-29; 30-44; 45-59; 60-64; 65-74; 75-84; 85-89; 90 and over	- **Old age dependency ratio (OADR)**	- Negative
Ethnicity	Ethnic group (KS201EW)	Main divisions are: White; Mixed/multiple ethnic groups; Asian/Asian British; Black/African/Caribbean/Black British; Other ethnic group	- **White British & Irish** - % change in White British & Irish pop., 2001-11	- Negative - Positive
Religion	Religion	Has religion; Christian; Buddhist; Hindu; Jewish; Muslim; Sikh; Other; No religion; Religion not stated	- **Has religion**	- Negative

Source: (ONS, 2022)

6.2 Regression analysis

Now that the potential variables for inclusion have been detailed and discussed, this chapter will now turn to the process of building regression models to uncover the demographic predictors of fragmentation in England. We will begin with some simple correlation statistics to check the relationships, and significance of those relationships, between fragmentation as measured by ENOP and the predictor variables detailed above. Chapter subsection 6.2.1 will focus entirely on local authority-level data; the ward-level data will be analysed separately in subsection 6.2.3.

6.2.1 Preliminary local authority-level correlation analysis

We will start the local authority-level analysis by looking at the Pearson correlation coefficients (r) between ENOP and an expanded set of predictor variables, presented in Table 17, below. It is important to note that throughout the discussion below, it must be remembered that while bivariate correlations may tell us about the direct association between two variables, they do not tell us anything about any other intervening factors that may also play a role in this relationship. As such, any analysis on how demographic variables affect fragmentation based on bivariate correlations alone is largely speculative, and should take a back seat to the discussion of the regression models, which will be able to provide a clearer indication of the impact of, and interrelation between, the demographic variables on fragmentation.

The results of the correlation analysis present several points for discussion. The first is that many of the selected variables are not statistically significantly correlated with ENOP. Only one of the potential social grade predictors is significantly correlated with ENOP, and none of the industrial occupation variables. Conversely, all of the age, ethnicity, and country of birth variables have statistical significance, as well as all but one of the religion variables. Among the qualification categories, all variables except 'No qualifications', 'Level 1', and the grouped 'None or Level 1' are statistically significant. One interesting observation is that among the qualification variables, the grouped 'Level 2 & 3' variable has the highest correlation with

fragmentation of (r = 0.270, p = 0.000), while in the social grade category, only the 'C2' and combined 'C1C2' categories are statistically significant, having weak positive correlations of r = 0.162 (p = 0.004) and r = 0.139 (p = 0.012) respectively. This is an interesting initial finding in itself, suggesting that while the extreme ends of the social grade and qualifications spectrum do not affect fragmentation, areas with higher numbers of people with who would likely be categorised as lower middle class could be more prone to fragmentation. This observation is reminiscent of the findings of Antonucci et al (2017), who argue that the Leave vote in the Brexit referendum was driven mainly by the 'squeezed middle' – the intermediate classes who have experienced financial decline in recent years and consequently feel 'worthless' and like they are missing out on the benefits of globalisation (Antonucci et al., 2017, p. 212).

Another interesting outcome is the strength and significance of the correlations between the religious variables and fragmentation. The variable 'Any religion' had the single strongest negative correlation with fragmentation of any of the variables included (r = -0.345, p = 0.000), while 'No religion' had the strongest positive correlation (r = 0.354, p = 0.000). The Muslim population also had a statistically significant, negative correlation with fragmentation (r = -0.231, p = 0.000), while perhaps surprisingly, the Christian population was the only religious variable with no statistically significant correlation with fragmentation (r = 0.058, p = 0.299), despite the evidence that Christian voting patterns have shifted considerably over the last 40 years. The association of any religion with stability and irreligion with fragmentation may simply be due to the homogeneity thesis – it may be that in areas with a higher number of religious people, all of whom are likely to share a set of socially conservative political attitudes, electoral stability is more likely.

Table 17: Correlations between effective number of parties (ENOP) and predictor variables for local authority-level regression models

Category	Variable	*r*	Sig.	*N*
Age	18-44	-0.153**	0.006	324
	45-64	0.143**	0.010	324
	65+	0.247**	0.000	324
	OADR	0.226**	0.000	324
Qualifications	No qualifications	0.081	0.145	324
	Level 1	0.058	0.296	324
	Level 2	0.157**	0.005	324
	Level 3	0.236**	0.000	324
	Level 4 or higher	-0.115*	0.039	324
	Level 2 & Level 3	0.270**	0.000	324
	None or Level 1	-0.074	0.183	324
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	0.289**	0.000	324
	% change, White Brit. or Irish, 2001-11	-0.247**	0.000	324
Religion	Any religion	-0.345**	0.000	324
	Christian	0.058	0.299	324
	Muslim	-0.231**	0.000	324
	No religion	0.354**	0.000	324
Country of birth	UK	0.264**	0.000	324
	UK & Ireland	0.263**	0.000	324
Social grade	AB	-0.090	0.108	324
	C1	-0.058	0.296	324
	C2	0.162**	0.004	324
	C1C2	0.139*	0.012	324
	DE	0.028	0.622	324
Industry occupation	Occupation in industry	0.105	0.060	324
	% change, Occ. in industry, 2001-11	-0.074	0.183	324

** Significant at 5% level ** Significant at 1% level*

One explanation for the lack of a statistically significant relationship between Christianity and fragmentation could be the way that Christianity is measured in the census questionnaire, which may lead to a drastic over-representation of the number of practising Christians in the UK, as well as the level of their commitment to the religion. The question in the census asks 'What is your religion?', which could be argued to be a leading question that leads to British people defaulting to ticking 'Christian' because of weak cultural ties rather than actual belief. Other surveys use different wording and find drastically different results. For example, the

2018 British Social Attitudes survey asked 'Do you regard yourself as belonging to any particular religion?', to which 52 percent of respondents replied 'non-religious' (Curtice, Clery, Perry, Phillips, & Rahim, 2019, p. 20). By contrast, the 2011 Census saw only 25 percent ticking 'no religion'. Similarly, a 2021 survey by YouGov on behalf of Humanists UK asked the same question as the census, and then asked respondents who said they were Christian why they had responded in that way. Just 34% of the English and Welsh adults who ticked 'Christian' said they did so because they 'believe in the teachings of Christianity', with cultural reasons far more likely to be the motivating factor. For example, 59 percent said that they identified as Christian because they were baptised, 49 percent because they were brought up to think of themselves as a Christian, 44 percent because one of their parents is/was a Christian, and 42 percent because they went to a Christian or Sunday school as a child (Humanists UK, 2021). Given the dubious statistical validity of the census results on religion, it is perhaps unsurprising that Christianity had no association with fragmentation in the correlation analysis, as the measure is not truly measuring what it is supposed to and thus the real effect of Christianity on fragmentation is not able to be ascertained using this data source. Despite this, a variable measuring the proportion of religious people as a whole will be retained for the final model, as this was statistically significant, is important for completeness, and has important theoretical justifications for its inclusion, as discussed in Chapter 6.1.3.

Another observation from the preliminary correlation analysis is the significance of both age and ethnicity/country of birth. All age groups had statistically significant (at the 1% level) correlations with ENOP, with the 18-44 category having a weak negative relationship (r = -0.153, p = 0.006), the 45-64 category having a similarly weak positive relationship (r = 0.143, p = 0.010), and the 65+ group having the strongest positive relationship (r = 0.247, p = 0.000). The old age dependency ratio was positively correlated with ENOP (r = 0.226, p = 0.000) to a similar, though slightly weaker, degree than the 65+ category. This is an interesting finding, as one might reasonably expect older voters to be more stable in their voting preferences and thus be associated with lower fragmentation levels. However, as has been previously noted, age has become one of the key social cleavages in attitudes and voting preferences in recent

years, with older age groups having a strong influence on the Brexit vote, the rise of UKIP, and the current dominance of the Conservative party. It could be the case that having a higher proportion of older voters in an area is driving fragmentation through these voters changing long-held preferences, perhaps moving from the Conservative or Labour parties to challenger parties such as UKIP, or even changing between the two main parties and destabilising previous safe seats.

The variables within the ethnicity category represent perhaps the most interesting results of this preliminary exercise. Both the 'White British and Irish' and '% change in the White British & Irish population, 2001-2011' variables have statistically significant (at the 1% level) correlations with ENOP, although these relationships pull in different directions. While the White British and Irish population has the strongest positive correlation ($r = 0.289$, $p = 0.000$) with ENOP of any variable included in Table 17, above, the change in the White British and Irish population between 2001 and 2011 has the strongest negative correlation ($r = -0.247$, $p = 0.000$) outside of the religious variables. On the surface, this is very surprising. The literature would suggest that homogeneity of a population leads to less fragmentation. Therefore, we would expect to see areas with a higher White British and Irish population having lower ENOP figures, but the reverse is true. Similarly, with immigration being a key dividing line in social and electoral cleavages in England in recent years, one would expect to see areas that have undergone rapid changes in their immigrant populations in the decade between 2001 and 2011 to be far more prone to fragmentation. The logic here would be that voters concerned about immigration might turn away from the main parties to single issue parties such as UKIP in an attempt to remedy their concerns, or at the very least to express frustration.

One possible explanation for the positive correlation between the White British and Irish population and fragmentation may simply be that this group is driving fragmentation. As much of the literature review demonstrated, the last few decades in English politics have seen a major de-alignment in electoral cleavages, with the old class divide breaking down entirely and new divides along education and age, as well as attitudinal variables, taking its place. The

literature revolves around the impact the dissatisfaction of the white working class has had on electoral politics, and shows how this has led to disaffection, changing voting patterns, and shifting priorities. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that although the homogeneity hypothesis would suggest that higher numbers of ethnically White British and Irish people in an area would lead to lower fragmentation levels, this is not the case if the homogenous group is undergoing a major shift in its political and social attitudes and behaviours. This also works for the other side of the equation; if it is the case that immigrants who are not ethnically White British or Irish tend to vote for a single party, then it would make sense that those places that have experienced the most immigration in the last decade would also have experienced the least fragmentation.

Checking the correlations between the two ethnicity variables and voting patterns seems to provide some support to this hypothesis. Table 18, below, correlates the two ethnicity variables with vote shares in local elections collated across the 2015-2018 election cycle. The table shows that there are moderate, positive, statistically significant correlations between the White British or Irish population and voting for the Conservative Party, UKIP, and Independents, as well as a moderately strong negative correlation with voting for Labour and a weak negative correlation with voting for the Green Party. This is in line with what would be expected. Looking at the figures for the change in the White British or Irish population, we can see that there is a moderately strong negative correlation between this change and voting for the Labour party. The direction of this correlation is somewhat difficult to intuit – it may have been better to take the increase in the non-White British or Irish population – but in other words, as the White British and Irish population decreases, Labour voting increases, while votes for the Conservatives, UKIP, and Independent candidates decreases. While this in itself does not show that an increase in immigration in a local authority reduces the chances of fragmentation, it does provide anecdotal evidence to support the hypothesis that immigrants tend to vote Labour and that when enough do so, fragmentation can decrease even as ethnic structure changes. The results of the regression analyses will provide more concrete indicators of the relationship between ethnicity and fragmentation.

Table 18: Correlations between ethnicity variables and vote shares in 2015-2018 local elections, collated

	White British or Irish population			% change, White British or Irish pop., 2001-2011		
Party	***r***	**Sig.**	***N***	***r***	**Sig.**	***N***
Conservative	.393**	.000	324	.352**	.000	324
Labour	-.506**	.000	324	-.487**	.000	324
Lib Dem	.011	.000	324	.045	.420	324
Green	-.166**	.850	324	-.097	.080	324
UKIP	.342**	.003	324	.210**	.000	324
Independent	.327**	.000	324	.339**	.000	324
Other	-.010	.857	324	.040	.469	324

** Significant at 5% level ** Significant at 1% level*

6.2.2 Local authority-level regression analysis

The results of the preliminary correlation analysis have highlighted some interesting, and perhaps unexpected, patterns in the relationship between fragmentation and demographics in English local elections at the local authority level. Age, ethnicity, and country of birth all have statistically significant correlations with fragmentation, while the educational and occupation-based variables reveal that there may be an association between the lower middle-class population and higher fragmentation levels. This somewhat tallies with the literature on fragmentation, which tends to identify ethnic, religious, economic, and linguistic factors as the most important predictors of fragmentation (Neto & Cox, 1997, p. 152). Additionally, the literature on emerging cleavages in the UK specifically identifies education level and age as two of the most important predictors of voting behaviour and social attitudes. Based on the results of the correlation analysis and the literature review, we can now begin to build the regression models using a hierarchical entry procedure. As outlined in the methodology section, the hierarchical entry method is a sequential process involving the entry of predictor variables into the model in steps, with the order in which variables are entered into the model

being determined by the researcher, based on theory and past research (Lewis, 2007, pp. 9–10). Known predictors from previous research are entered first, and any new predictors added subsequently.

It is important to note that we cannot simply enter all variables from the correlation table into a regression model. This is because many of the variables, especially those in the same category, are very highly correlated with one another, especially if they measure two opposing ends of a spectrum. For example, in the 'Religion' category, 'Religion – Christian' is very strongly negatively correlated with 'Religion – Muslim'. This is because Christianity is the largest religion in the UK, with Islam being the second-largest, so where the number of Christians in a local authority decreases, it is likely because there are more Muslims. There are very few cases in which the decrease in the Christian population is due to the size of another religion, or people with no religion. Therefore, including both as separate variables would make little sense, as the variables would essentially be measuring the inverse of one another, and be very highly correlated. Because of this, it makes sense to group variables together and include only one or two of those groups that hold more analytical relevance. For example, for social grade, we have grouped the four grades in the census data – AB, C1, C2, DE – into 'C1C2 and 'DE', and excluded the AB variable. Where groupings like this have occurred, it is because there are strong reasons to believe that doing so makes the model less cluttered, less susceptible to issues of multicollinearity, and more theoretically sound. In this case, for example, excluding the 'Social grade – AB' variable avoids the inevitable collinearity with the 'Social grade – DE' variable, as the grouping of the two middle categories together means that these two groups would simply have an inverse relationship with the dependent variable. The excluded category then effectively becomes the base category that effects are measured against, and so its exclusion does not preclude us from drawing conclusions about the relationship between this variable and the effective number of parties.

From the classical literature on fragmentation, we would expect ethnic, religious and economic variables to have the greatest impact on fragmentation, but given the context of

English politics in particular in recent years, it would seem that currently, the main demographic cleavages in English politics are education level and age. As such, the first block in our hierarchical regression model will include variables to capture these demographics. For age, we will use the Old Age Dependency Ratio (OADR), a measure of the proportion of retired people against the working age population. This measure has the advantage of capturing both the age ratio of an area's population, as well as the homogeneity of its age structure. For qualification level, two variables will be used. The first will be 'Qualifications – None or Level 1', which groups the percentage of people in an area with either no qualifications or Level 1 qualifications (1-4 GCSEs of any grade, or equivalent). The other variable will be 'Qualifications – Level 2 to 3', which as the name suggests, will group the percentage of people in an area with Level 2 qualifications (GCSEs A*-C, apprenticeships, or equivalent) and Level 3 qualifications (A Level and AS Level, or equivalent).

The decision to exclude a variable measuring the proportion of people with Level 4 or higher qualifications has been made to cut down on the number of predictor variables, as well as because of the high degree of collinearity between this group and those with no qualifications or Level 1 qualifications (r = -0.964).[12] Essentially, the 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' variable will capture the inverse of a variable measuring those with Level 4 or higher qualifications, and so there is little point in including both. The way that the variables have been split is also due to theoretical considerations. Literature on the current cleavages in English politics suggest that there are distinct differences in the electoral behaviours of those with GSCEs at grades D-E, or lower or no qualifications, those with A Levels, and those with degrees. It therefore makes sense to group the lowest two levels together, as there appears to

[12] Because of the way that the education variables have been grouped, the correlation coefficients of these two variables with education categories grouped in this way would normally be a perfect inverse of one another. However, the census includes another category for those with foreign qualifications, without specifying the level of those qualifications. This category has been excluded from the analysis, meaning that the relationship between the highest and lowest education level variables and the dependent variable will be very close to the inverse of one another, but not exactly so.

be little evidence that there are significant differences that would necessitate them being separated, and the same is true of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications.

The next block to be entered into the model will control for those predictors that are highly discussed in the more classical work on fragmentation; religion, ethnicity, and social class/occupation. As discussed in the variable selection sub-section of this chapter, the religious variable is a somewhat controversial inclusion in any of these models, as the way that the census measures religious affiliation is highly likely to overestimate the amount and strength of Christian belief in England. As such, the model will include only one religious variable measuring the total number of people in an area saying that they belong to any religion, but it must be noted that any relationships between religion and fragmentation should be analysed with caution. To cover the ethnic aspect of fragmentation, we will include one variable that measures the proportion of an area's population that is 'White British or Irish'. For social class, we will include two variables – 'Social class – DE' and 'Social class – C1C2'. This will allow us to analyse all social class categories (again, because a 'Social class – AB' category would simply be the inverse of the 'Social class – DE' variable), while at the same time explicitly incorporating the theoretically relevant social class categories based on the 'left-behind' and 'squeezed middle' literature. Finally, for occupation, we will include a measure of the number of people working in industry, which is again the theoretically relevant occupation category based on the literature review.

The final block to be entered will include variables measuring change over time in a population. Both rapid immigration and the decline of manufacturing and industry have been theorised or shown to have had profound effects on electoral behaviour in Britain in recent years, so we will include variables to measure this. For immigration, we will include a variable measuring the change in the proportion of ethnically White British or Irish residents in an area between the 2001 and 2011 censuses. Similarly, for occupation, we will include a variable measuring the change in the proportion of an area's population working in the manufacturing or industrial sectors between the 2001 and 2011 censuses.

Before looking at the output of the regression models, we will briefly examine the descriptive statistics for the variables included in the model. Table 19, below, shows the *N*, variable type, minimum value, maximum value, mean, and standard deviation for every variable in the regression models. Including these figures is useful not just for completion, but also for the interpretation of the regression coefficients. In particular, it is very important to note that unlike the rest of the independent variables, which all measure the percentage of a local authority's population with that particular demographic characteristic, the old age dependency ratio (OADR) is expressed as a ratio. Therefore, while a one-unit difference in any of the percentage-based variables equates to a difference of one percent, for the OADR, a one-unit increase equates to an increase from an OADR of zero to an OADR of one. This is the reason that the unstandardised coefficient seems so large. So, looking at the output for Block 2 in Table 20, below, we can see that while it is accurate to say that a one-unit increase in OADR corresponds to an increase of 1.597 in the effective number of parties, the range of values for the OADR is only 0.08 to 0.57 (as shown in Table 19, below,). As such, the maximum that the OADR can add to the constant (ENOP) in Block 2 of the model is 0.91 (that is, in the local authority with the maximum OADR of 0.57, ENOP would be 0.91 higher than in a local authority with an OADR of 0.00). Keeping this in mind will help with a more intuitive reading of the output from the regression models.

Table 19: Descriptive statistics for local authority-level regression model variables

Category	Variable	Variable type	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Fragmentation	ENOP	Continuous	324	1.67	5.12	3.27	0.55
Age	OADR	Ratio	326	0.08	0.57	0.29	0.08
Qualifications	None or Level 1	Percentage	326	11.0%	49.9%	35.7%	6.5%
	Level 2 or Level 3	Percentage	326	13.8%	34.5%	27.9%	2.7%
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	Percentage	326	17.6%	98.0%	85.2%	15.9%
	% change, White Brit or Irish, 2001-11	Percentage	326	-32.1%	0.8%	-5.7%	5.1%
Social Grade	DE	Percentage	326	6.0%	41.6%	24.2%	6.9%
	C1C2	Percentage	326	33.0%	64.3%	52.3%	3.8%
Industry	Industrial workforce	Percentage	326	3.6%	38.7%	19.8%	5.4%
	% change, industrial workforce, 2001-11	Percentage	326	-12.9%	0.5%	-5.1%	1.7%
Religion	Has religion	Percentage	326	48.8%	84.2%	67.6%	5.6%

The output of all blocks of the regression models is presented in Table 20, below, which shows the unstandardised beta coefficients, whether the variables are significant at both the five and one percent levels, and the standard error of the beta coefficients (in brackets below the beta coefficients), as well as the overall model statistics at the bottom of the table. We will now discuss each separate block of the models and how each additional set of variables affects the significance of the individual variables and the overall model fit. Beginning with Block 1, which includes the two variables most frequently discussed in the contemporary literature on electoral fragmentation in England, age and education level, we see that overall, the model has an R^2 value of 0.091 and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.083, meaning that the model explains just 8.3% of the variance in fragmentation in English local elections between 2015 and 2018. The model is statistically significant at both the 5% and 1% levels, with a p value of 0.000. Looking at the contribution of the individual predictor variables, only the 'Age – OADR' and 'Qualifications - Level 2 or Level 3' variables have a statistically significant relationship with ENOP, with both having a positive association with fragmentation. For the age variable, a one-

unit increase in the old age dependency ratio of a local authority corresponds to an increase of 1.009 in the effective number of parties, controlling for the other variables in the model. This was somewhat to be expected following the results of the correlation analysis. As was previously discussed, areas in which the old age dependency ratio is higher might experience more fragmentation as age is a key social cleavage in English politics, with older people more likely to hold more authoritarian views, and more likely to have voted for Leave, UKIP, and the Conservatives. As such, it may be the case that older people are more likely to have found that their views are not being represented by the parties they traditionally voted for, or to feel that changes in society left them needing to register their dissatisfaction at the ballot box, thus increasing the number of electorally relevant parties and driving increasing fragmentation levels.

The two qualification variables are slightly more surprising; only the 'Qualifications – Level 2 or 3' variable had a statistically significant, positive relationship with the effective number of parties. For every one-unit increase in the proportion of people in a local authority with level 2 or 3 qualifications, we would expect to see a corresponding increase of 0.051 in the effective number of parties in that local authority. This is a slightly surprising result; the literature on contemporary cleavages in England suggests that education level, along with age, is the most important predictor of electoral behaviour, with a stark divide between those with degrees and those with lower levels of education. However, the results of this model show that neither of these groups are particularly relevant to fragmentation, and that although they may be polarised, this does not translate into electoral instability. This is likely because of homogeneity; if a local authority has a high proportion of people with degrees, and people with degrees are more likely to vote for Labour, for example, then it makes sense that such an area would be less prone to fragmentation. Instead, we can see from the model that it appears to be those with middling education levels who are driving fragmentation, lending tentative support to the idea that the 'squeezed middle' is the most electorally relevant voting bloc in English local elections at the present time (Antonucci et al., 2017, p. 212).

Table 20: Unstandardised beta coefficients and standard errors of multiple linear regression models of local authority-level fragmentation in 2015-2018 local elections in England

Category	Variable	Block 1	Block 2	Block 3
-	Constant	1.741**	4.016**	3.850**
		(0.326)	(0.705)	(0.817)
Age	OADR	1.009*	1.597**	1.652**
		(0.400)	(0.577)	(0.586)
Qualifications	None or Level 1	-0.003	-0.014	-0.016
		(0.005)	(0.013)	(0.014)
	Level 2 or Level 3	0.049**	0.031	0.028
		(0.013)	(0.022)	(0.024)
Ethnicity	White British or Irish		0.003	0.003
			(0.005)	(0.007)
Social Grade	DE		0.023*	0.024*
			(0.011)	(0.011)
	C1C2		-0.001	0.002
			(0.015)	(0.017)
Industry	Industrial workforce		-0.009	-0.012
			(0.009)	(0.010)
Religion	Has religion		-0.031**	-0.031**
			(0.006)	(0.006)
Ethnicity	% change, White British or Irish, 2001-11			-0.001
				(0.014)
Industry	% change, industrial workforce, 2001-11			-0.014
				(0.021)
Model evaluation	**R^2**	**0.091****	**0.208****	**0.210****
	Adjusted R^2	**0.083****	**0.188****	**0.184****
KEY: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05				

The second block of variables to be entered include those variables that the traditional literature on fragmentation identify as the key social cleavages that drive electoral fragmentation. The variables entered in this block are: 'Ethnicity – White British and Irish'; 'Social Grade – DE'; 'Social grade – C1C2'; 'Industrial workforce'; and 'Religion – Any'. Adding these variables significantly increases the fit of the model, with the R^2 value rising from 0.091 to 0.208 and the adjusted R^2 value rising from 0.083 to 0.188, suggesting that this model accounts for more than double the amount of variation in the dependent variable as the model specified in Block 1. Adding extra variables also changes the significance of some of the

variables entered in Block 1, with the significant variables now being 'Age – OADR', 'Social grade – DE', and 'Religion – Any', the former two having a positive relationship with fragmentation and the latter having a negative relationship. Interestingly, by controlling for social grade, education now becomes insignificant to the model, with a one-unit increase in the proportion of people in a local authority belonging to the 'Social grade – DE' categories corresponding to a 0.023 increase in the effective number of parties in that local authority. This is perhaps unsurprising, as the approximated social grade data from the census is a conglomeration of a number of variables, including education, income, occupation, and other factors that are likely to be related to education. Therefore, as a catch-all variable, social grade perhaps explains more than just education level. From a theoretical perspective, this is also an interesting finding, as it provides evidence to support the idea that it is the so-called 'left behind' groups driving fragmentation. If people are disillusioned with the political establishment, as was the case with this group, they are more likely to switch their vote to a new party, and thus increase fragmentation. We have already seen that the working-class vote has largely switched from Labour to either UKIP or the Conservatives, and that this was a particularly prevalent trend in the electoral cycle (2015 to 2018) used for this model, so it is no surprise to see fragmentation being driven by this demographic.

The significance of religion in the model is perhaps surprising, although its negative relationship with fragmentation is not. The model shows that for every one-unit increase in the proportion of religious people in a local authority, we can expect to see a drop of 0.031 in the effective number of parties in that local authority. This relationship is easily explicable; as we have seen, Christians in England largely vote for the Conservative party (Fox & Kolpinskaya, 2021; Kolpinskaya & Fox, 2021), while Muslims, the second largest religious group in England, are far more likely to vote for Labour (Clements & Spencer, 2014, pp. 10–11). Therefore, in areas with a higher concentration of religious people of any denomination, it is to be expected that fragmentation is lower as they are likely to vote *en masse* for one of the two major parties. Even in areas with a high number of both Muslims and Christians, fragmentation is likely to be low despite the divide; if the vast majority of Muslims vote for

Labour and Christians for the Conservatives, ENOP is unlikely to be far above two, which is a relatively low figure, especially considering that England is commonly seen as having a two and a half party system.

Finally, we will examine the results from the third block of variables, which includes variables measuring change in two key demographics – ethnic composition, and industrial employment. The two variables entered at this stage are 'Ethnicity – percentage change in the White British and Irish population between 2001 and 2011', and 'Industry – percentage change in the industrial workforce between 2001 and 2011'. While the overall model stays statistically significant, with a *p* value of 0.000, these two variables add little to the model, increasing the R^2 value by just 0.002, from 0.208 to 0.210, and reducing the adjusted R^2 value from 0.188 to 0.184, suggesting that the two new variables actually make the model a worse fit than the previous block. Additionally, neither of the variables are statistically significant contributors in themselves, and are also very highly correlated with their corresponding variables measuring absolute population rather than change ('Industrial workforce' and 'Ethnicity – White British and Irish'). As a result of these issues, it would be prudent to remove these two variables from the model, and take the model generated in Block 2 as our best model to predict fragmentation levels in English local authorities.

To recap, in Block 2, 'Age – OADR', 'Social grade – DE', and 'Religion – Any' were the three statistically significant predictors of fragmentation, a finding that largely supports contemporary literature that sees those belonging to the social group that has been called 'the left-behind' as the drivers of electoral fragmentation, especially in relation to the age and social grade categories, with those areas with a higher number of people fitting the 'left behind' archetype being more likely to fragment, as voters express their dissatisfaction with mainstream, establishment politics and alter their voting behaviour to reflect this. This effect could be even more prevalent in local elections – as section 3.2.4 demonstrates, there is some evidence to suggest that people are more likely to vote according to their actual preferences, rather than voting tactically, in second-order elections such as local or European Parliament

elections. As such, this is an important finding in bolstering the evidence about the state of English politics at this important political moment. The significance of the religious variables, as well as its negative relationship with fragmentation, is perhaps more surprising, although it is likely to be the case that the strong support for the Conservative party among Christians and Labour among Muslims means that where there are higher numbers of religious people in a local authority, most votes will go to the two main parties and fragmentation will therefore be lower. The next section will examine the key demographic drivers of fragmentation at the ward level. While we can expect the results to be largely the same, the much larger dataset, lack of aggregation, and some methodological issues mean that the importance of variables may change and become more or less important in the story of fragmentation in the UK than was revealed in the local authority-level analysis.

6.2.3 Preliminary ward-level correlation analysis

As with the ward-level analysis, this section will begin with a brief look at the correlations between the dependent variable, effective number of parties, and the predictor variables. Table 21, below, shows the results of this correlation analysis, as well as a comparison with the correlations from the local authority-level analysis. As can be seen, every variable except 'Qualifications – Level 4 or higher' and 'Social grade – DE' had a statistically significant correlation with ENOP. There were also some important differences in which variables had statistically significant correlations with the effective number of parties variable at ward level compared to local authority level. At the local authority level, neither the 'Social grade – C2DE' or 'Industry – Industry categories A-F' were significantly correlated with ENOP, while the 'Qualifications – Level 4 or higher' did have a significant correlation at the five percent level. The fact that more of the variables had statistically significant correlations at ward-level than local authority-level is perhaps unsurprising, as the ward-level analysis has far more cases, and so the relationships between the variables can be measured with greater accuracy and with less margin for error.

Table 21: Comparison of correlations between effective number of parties (ENOP) and predictor variables at local authority level and ward level

Category	Variable	*r* *Ward level*	*r* LA
Age	OADR	-0.057**	0.226**
Qualifications	None or Level 1	-0.024*	0.081
	Level 2 & Level 3	0.140**	0.270**
	Level 4 or higher	-0.020	-0.115*
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	0.096**	0.289**
Social grade	DE	0.010	0.028
	C1C2	0.059**	0.139*
	AB	-0.039**	-0.090
Industry	Occupation in industry	-0.072**	0.105
Religion	Any religion	-0.349**	-0.345**

** Significant at 5% level ** Significant at 1% level*

Table 21, above, also allows us to see how the correlation values and directions differ between the ward- and local-authority level analysis. While most of the variables have correlations of similar strength and direction, there are some large and surprising differences. The first of these is with the old age dependency ratio variable, which in the local authority-level correlations had a moderate positive association with fragmentation, but in the ward-level analysis, this reversed to a very weak negative association. Similarly, the 'Occupation in industry' variable showed a weak negative association with fragmentation at the ward level, but a similarly strong association in the opposite direction in the local authority-level analysis, although it must be noted that this variable was not significant at the local authority level. No other variables changed direction, but the strength of the correlations tends to be much weaker at the ward level. This could again be due to the greater number of cases in the ward-level dataset giving a more accurate picture of the association between the predictor variables and ENOP, with the local authority-level data overestimating the strength of the relationships due to the aggregation that occurs when grouping the data together to such a high level. The 'Religion – Any religion' variable had an almost identical, moderate negative correlation with

fragmentation in both sets of analysis. These relationships will be explored further in the ward-level regression analysis.

6.2.4 Ward-level regression analysis

Having briefly considered the correlations between ENOP and the predictor variables, we will now turn to the regression analysis, using the same variables entered in the same way as for the local authority-level models, the justifications for which can be found in Chapter 6.1. As with the local authority-level analysis, the first block of variables to be entered will be those measuring age and qualifications: 'Age – Old age dependency ratio', 'Qualifications – None or Level 1', and 'Qualifications – Level 2 or Level 3'. The second block will include variables measuring ethnicity, social grade, occupation in industry, and religion: 'Ethnicity – White British or Irish', 'Social grade – DE', 'Social grade – C1C2', 'Industrial workforce', and 'Religion – Any'. One difference between the ward-level analysis and the local authority-level analysis will be the absence of the third block including variables measuring change over time in some key indicators. These variables have been excluded for two reasons – firstly, a very high number of ward boundaries, names, and identification codes were changed between the 2001 and 2011 censuses, making it very difficult to match data between the two. Secondly, given the extremely high collinearity between these variables and the other industry and ethnicity variables, and the insignificance of these variables in the local authority-level analysis, it was felt that the omission of these variables would not pose significant issues for the models, and would not be worth the time and effort it would take to match the old ward boundaries with the new. As with the local-authority analysis, Table 22, below, gives descriptive statistics for the variables included in the regression models, and the boundary for the OADR should again be given particularly attention when interpreting the output of the models.

Table 22: Descriptive statistics for ward-level regression model variables

Category	Variable	Variable type	N	Min	Max	Mean	SD
Fragmentation	ENOP	Continuous	13216	1.00	5.58	2.55	0.65
Age	OADR	Ratio	9877	0.01	1.72	0.29	0.12
Qualifications	None or Level 1	Percentage	9877	1.5%	67.1%	36.4%	9.7%
	Level 2 or Level 3	Percentage	9877	13.7%	68.8%	31.8%	4.5%
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	Percentage	9877	4.1%	99.6%	86.1%	16.8%
Social Grade	DE	Percentage	9877	0.5%	65.0%	23.6%	10.8%
	C1C2	Percentage	9877	26.1%	75.5%	52.6%	5.7%
Industry	Industrial workforce	Percentage	9877	1.8%	45.5%	20.0%	5.8%
Religion	Has religion	Percentage	9877	34.5%	94.0%	68.2%	7.3%

As with the local-authority level analysis, the results of both blocks of the regression models will be presented in a single table (Table 23, below) showing the unstandardised beta coefficients, standard error, and statistical significance of each variable, as well as the overall fit of the model. We will begin by considering the first block of variables, measuring the impact of age and education level, which have been widely theorised in the literature to be the main drivers of electoral fragmentation in Britain in recent years. At this stage of the variable entry, the model explains very little of the variation in fragmentation, with an R^2 value of just 0.024, and an identical adjusted R^2 value, indicating that the model explains just 2.4% percent of the variance in fragmentation levels in ward-level local elections in England between 2015 and 2018. The model is statistically significant at both the five percent and one percent levels, with a p value of 0.000. Additionally, all of the variables in the model are statistically significant at the five percent level, which is a change from the local authority-level models, in which the variable 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' was not significant. The OADR variable had a negative association with ENOP, with a one-unit increase in the old age dependency ratio of a local authority corresponding to a decrease of 0.344 in the effective number of parties,

controlling for the other variables in the model. Both of the qualification level variables had positive associations with ENOP.

Table 23: Unstandardised beta coefficients and standard errors (in brackets) of multiple linear regression models of ward-level fragmentation in 2015-2018 local elections in England

	Variable	Block 1	Block 2
	Constant	2.030**	3.787**
		(0.056)	(0.113)
Age	OADR	-0.344**	0.187**
		(0.057)	(0.070)
Qualifications	None or Level 1	-0.002*	0.005**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
	Level 2 or Level 3	0.021**	0.018**
		(0.001)	(0.002)
Ethnicity	White British or Irish		0.000
			0.001
Social Grade	DE		0.003**
			(0.001)
	C1C2		0.004**
			(0.001)
Industry	Industrial workforce		-0.012**
			(0.002)
Religion	Has religion		-0.030**
			(0.001)
Model evaluation	**R^2**	**0.024****	**0.138****
	Adjusted R^2	**0.024****	**0.137****

KEY: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

Adding the second block of variables into the model yields some interesting results. The overall fit of the model improves greatly, with an R^2 value of 0.138 and an adjusted R^2 value of 0.137, indicating that the model explains 13.8 percent of the variance in fragmentation levels in ward-level local election voting in England between 2015 and 2018. In addition, the marginal difference between the R^2 value and the adjusted R^2 value indicates that the model has not been overfitted; in other words, that all of the variables included in the model are relevant, and their inclusion is justified. The model is statistically significant at both the five percent and one percent levels, with a *p* value of 0.000. In terms of the contribution of the individual

variables, all variables but 'Ethnicity – White British or Irish' were significant at the one percent level. Of the significant variables, 'Age – OADR', 'Qualifications – None or Level 1', 'Qualifications – Level 2 and 3', 'Social grade – DE', and 'Social grade – C1C2' all have a positive relationship with fragmentation, meaning that as these demographics increase, so does fragmentation. On the other hand, the variables 'Industrial workforce' and 'Religion – Any' both have negative relationships with the effective number of parties in a ward. Additionally, because 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' and 'Social grade – DE' have positive associations with fragmentation, we can infer that those with Level 4 or higher qualifications and with a social grade of A or B would have a negative relationship with fragmentation.

Looking at the differences between Block 1 and 2, some interesting changes occur in the Block 1 variables once the Block 2 variables have been controlled for. The first, and most obvious, is that once the Block 2 variables are controlled for, the relationship between age and fragmentation reverses, with age now having a statistically significant, positive relationship with ENOP compared to the negative relationship seen before these variables were controlled for. The difference is also rather large; in Block 1, a one unit increase in the old age dependency ratio corresponded to a fall in fragmentation of 0.344, whereas in Block 2, a one unit increase corresponded to a rise in fragmentation of 0.187. The direction of the relationship between fragmentation and the 'Qualifications – None or Level 1' variable also reversed, but much less dramatically, with an unstandardised beta value of -0.002 in Block 1, and 0.005 in Block 2. Of course, adding new blocks of variables will always change the relationships between the dependent and independent variables, so this is not surprising, but worth noting.

6.2.4.1 Comparison of ward-level and local authority-level results

We will also consider the differences between the model results for the ward-level and local-authority-level data. The unstandardised *B* values for Block 2 of both of these models are presented in Table 24, below. The first thing to note is that many more of the variables are statistically significant at the ward level than at the local authority level; both qualification

variables and the occupation in industry variable are significant at ward-level, but not at local-authority level, while the old age dependency ratio variable and the social grade variables were significant at the one percent level in the ward-level model, but only at the five percent level for 'Social grade – DE' and not at all significant for 'Social grade – C1C2' in the local authority-level model. The greater number of significant variables in the ward-level model, however, is unsurprising – the ward-level analysis includes far more cases, allowing for narrower confidence intervals and thus more certainty of the significance of the reported effects.

Of the variables that are significant, there are some substantial differences in the impact that the variables have on fragmentation. At the local authority level, a one-unit increase in the old age dependency ratio corresponds to an increase of 1.597 in the effective number of parties, compared to an increase of just 0.187 in the ward-level model. This may be because aggregating the data up to the local authority-level makes the OADR a stronger predictor of fragmentation than at the ward-level, but it is more likely that the discrepancy is simply due to the greater accuracy of the ward-level model, given its far higher number of cases. Age shows by far the largest variation between the two levels of data, with all other variables having a very similar impact on ENOP at both ward- and LA-level, with no changes in the direction of the relationships of any of the variables with fragmentation in the statistically significant variables. It is therefore safe to say that the drivers of fragmentation are reasonably consistent at both levels of data, and that where differences in the statistical significance of the variables exist, it is likely due to the far smaller number of cases available at local authority level. In addition, the fact that there are no variables with statistically significant effects in different directions between ward and local authority level provides more evidence of the consistency of the models.

Table 24: Comparison between ward-level and local authority-level linear regression models of demographic drivers of fragmentation, 2015-2018

	Variable	LA level	Ward level
	Constant	4.016** (0.705)	3.787** (0.113)
Age	OADR	1.597** (0.577)	0.187** (0.070)
Qualifications	None or Level 1	-0.014 (0.013)	0.005** (0.001)
	Level 2 or Level 3	0.031 (0.022)	0.018** (0.002)
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	0.003 (0.005)	0.000 0.001
Social Grade	DE	0.023* (0.011)	0.003** (0.001)
	C1C2	-0.001 (0.015)	0.004** (0.001)
Industry	Industrial workforce	-0.009 (0.009)	-0.012** (0.002)
Religion	Has religion	-0.031** (0.006)	-0.030** (0.001)
Model evaluation	**R^2** **Adjusted R^2**	**0.024**** **0.024**	**0.138**** **0.137**
KEY: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05			

6.2.4.2 Robustness check using 2011 English local election data

The ward-level data here requires a robustness check due to a minor methodological issue. All of the demographic variables come from data collected in the 2011 census, whereas the local election data comes from 2015 to 2018. While this in itself is not a major issue, it does create one problem; as mentioned in the methodology chapter, between 2011 and 2018, many ward boundaries, names, and ID codes were changed, making it very difficult to match the electoral and demographic data together. In total, the demographic data was able to be matched to 9,887 of the 13,216 wards in the election data, representing 74.8 percent of the total data points. While having almost ten thousand cases is more than enough for a robust regression analysis with only seven variables, the fact that over 25 percent of cases from the sample are

missing in the final analysis raises questions over whether the results of the regression are reliably generalisable. Therefore, we will run the same regression analysis using data only from the 2011 local elections and compare with the results of the regression models using the data from the 2015 to 2018 local elections. As this election is from the same year as the census data was collected, there should be very few, if any, missing cases, and this is indeed the case; of the 6,097 wards in the election data, 6,089 (99.9%) were able to be matched to the census data. If there are any major differences, this may be a cause for concern, but if the results are broadly similar, then we can assume that the missing cases in the 2015-2018 analysis are not a major issue.

The results of the regression analysis using the 2011 data are presented in Table 25, below. As can be seen, all variables in Block 1 were significant at the five percent level, with the old age dependency ratio having a negative relationship with fragmentation and both qualification variables having a positive relationship with fragmentation. In Block 2, all variables except age are significant at the five percent level, with 'Qualifications – None or Level 1', 'Qualifications – Level 2 or 3', 'Social grade – DE', and 'Social grade – C1C2' all having positive associations with fragmentation, while 'Ethnicity – White British or Irish', 'Industrial workforce', and 'Religion – Any' all have negative associations. However, as the purpose of conducting this regression analysis using the 2011 election data was to ensure that the missing cases from the 2015-2018 data did not cause undue issues with the models, it is more useful to compare the results between the two sets of elections.

Table 26, below, shows the unstandardised beta variables and statistical significance of the individual predictor variables for both models. As can be seen, there is little variation overall between the two models; both have almost identical R^2 and adjusted R^2 values, with the 2011 model having an adjusted R^2 value of 0.135 and the 2015-2018 model having an adjusted R^2 value of 0.138. The only real difference between the models is that in the model for 2011, old age dependency ratio is the only variable that is not statistically significant, while in the model for 2015-2018, it is ethnicity that is insignificant. This is not a surprising result, as both

variables share moderately strong correlations with each other (r = 0.443 for 2011, r = 0.510 for 2015-2018), which is a strong enough relationship to expect that these variables may be interchangeable to a substantial extent, while not being so highly correlated that they violate the assumptions of multicollinearity.

Table 25: Multiple linear regression models of the demographic drivers of ward-level fragmentation in 2011 local elections in England

	Variable	Block 1	Block 2
	Constant	2.208**	4.045**
		(0.091)	(0.152)
Age	OADR	-0.797**	-0.001
		(0.064)	(0.075)
Qualifications	None or Level 1	0.002*	0.007**
		(0.001)	(0.001)
	Level 2 or Level 3	0.008**	0.015**
		(0.002)	(0.002)
Ethnicity	White British or Irish		-0.006**
			(0.001)
Social Grade	DE		0.003**
			(0.001)
	C1C2		0.003*
			(0.001)
Industry	Industrial workforce		-0.016**
			(0.002)
Religion	Has religion		-0.027**
			(0.001)
Model evaluation	**R^2**	**0.032****	**0.137****
	Adjusted R^2	**0.031****	**0.135****

KEY: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05

The assumption that the two variables measure the same demographic to a consequential extent also has a solid grounding in theory; the 2011 census data shows that people living in Britain who are ethnically white have a median age of 41, compared to 29 for the Asian population, 30 for the black population, and 18 for those of mixed ethnicity (Ethnicity Facts and Figures Service, 2020). This is largely because the vast majority of the ethnically White British and Irish population are likely to have been born in the UK, and so span the whole

range of age brackets, whereas a much higher proportion of those from other ethnicities are likely to be immigrants, who tend to be younger, and of working age, therefore bringing the old age dependency ratio down. As such, it is perhaps unsurprising that these variables have switched significance, as it could be argued that they largely measure the same demographic. Of course, it is also possible that between 2011 and 2018, age has become a more significant predictor of fragmentation than ethnicity by dint of changing cleavage structures, and this tallies with much of the literature that has identified age, alongside education level, as the best predictor of voting behaviour in England, particularly in relation to Brexit (see Goodwin & Heath, 2016, p. 328, for example). The change may also be accounted for by a combination of these two explanations.

Due to the substantial similarities and potentially explicable differences between the two models, it is safe to assume that the model for the 2015-2018 local elections is not unduly affected by the missing cases, and that while this is a methodological annoyance, it should not adversely affect the findings to the point that they become unreliable. Future research may wish to use geographical information system software to match a greater proportion of the electoral data to the census data, but doing so is beyond the scope of this thesis. Additionally, it is also worth noting that the considerable changes that have occurred in the nature of party competition between 2011 and 2015-18 makes this a rather conservative test of the reliability of the data, a test that has revealed no major issues and thus further solidifies the robustness of the results. While modelling the 2011 election results was primarily intended as a means of checking the robustness of the 2015-2018 model's sample, as an added bonus it also provides tentative evidence that the demographic drivers of fragmentation over the seven-year period between 2011 and 2018 have remained largely unchanged, with the possible exception that age has become more important than ethnicity in predicting fragmentation. While this thesis is more concerned with the drivers of fragmentation at the most recent set of elections for which data at the ward level is available in an accessible and manageable format, it is nevertheless interesting to consider.

Table 26: Comparison between unstandardised beta variables for multiple linear regression models of demographics and ward-level fragmentation in 2011 and 2015-2018 local elections in England

	Variable	2011	2015-2018
	Constant	4.045** (0.152)	3.787** (0.113)
Age	OADR	-0.001 (0.075)	0.187** (0.070)
Qualifications	None or Level 1	0.007** (0.001)	0.005** (0.001)
	Level 2 or Level 3	0.015** (0.002)	0.018** (0.002)
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	-0.006** (0.001)	0.000 0.001
Social Grade	DE	0.003** (0.001)	0.003** (0.001)
	C1C2	0.003* (0.001)	0.004** (0.001)
Industry	Industrial workforce	-0.016** (0.002)	-0.012** (0.002)
Religion	Has religion	-0.027** (0.001)	-0.030** (0.001)
Model evaluation	**R^2** **Adjusted R^2**	**0.137**** **0.135**	**0.138**** **0.137**
KEY: ** p<0.01, * p<0.05			

6.3 Discussion and conclusion

The regression analyses of the demographic drivers of fragmentation in English local elections between 2015 and 2018 have revealed that a diverse set of demographic factors affect electoral fragmentation at local elections in English wards, and that the relationship between these factors is not straightforward. The ward-level analysis revealed that the old age dependency ratio, qualification levels, industrial occupation, religion, and social grade of a ward's voters all have a statistically significant impact on the level of fragmentation in a ward, while ethnicity does not. Of these variables, the old age dependency ratio, proportion of residents with no qualifications or Level 1 qualifications, Level 2 or Level 3 qualifications, proportion of

residents with a social grade of DE, or a social grade of C1C2 all have a statistically significant, positive association with fragmentation, while the proportion of residents working in industry, and proportion of residents saying that they belong to any religion are all associated with a decrease in fragmentation.

While many of these outcomes match the hypotheses regarding the direction of the relationships between the predictor variables and the effective number of parties, there are also some surprising results. A summary of the predicted direction of the relationships between the predictor variables and fragmentation, as well as the outcomes of the ward-level regression model, can be found in Table 27, below. As we recall, it was hypothesised that the old age dependency ratio would have a negative relationship with the effective number of parties in that ward's local elections, as a higher concentration of older people would increase a ward's homogeneity and thus decrease the likelihood of a proliferation of small parties. However, the results of the regression model revealed the opposite; the older a ward's population, the more likely it was to have higher levels of fragmentation. While this is not the predicted direction of the relationship, it is perhaps unsurprising; after all, older age is one of the key characteristics of the so-called 'left-behind' population that has been theorised to be driving fragmentation in recent elections, with people in this group expressing their frustration with the perceived stagnation of mainstream politics and changing cultural norms in England through voting for challenger parties such as UKIP and thus increasing electoral fragmentation.

Indeed, this was also seen with the variables measuring qualifications and social grade. For these two groups, the hypotheses stated that we would expect to see positive associations between those with both low and middle levels of education, and those belonging to low and middle social grades, with fragmentation. For those with lower levels of education, and belonging to the lowest social grades, the theoretical perspective would be that again, these demographic characteristics are indicative of belonging to the 'left-behind', and thus would be likely to be driving fragmentation. For those in the middle social grades, and with Level 2 or

Level 3 qualifications, we also expected to see a positive association with fragmentation, as these people would belong to the so-called 'squeezed middle', who have also been frustrated by a perceived drop in living standards relatively to their slightly wealthier peers, and have thus also expressed frustration with the main parties at the ballot box. This was found to be the case, with all of these variables being positively associated with fragmentation in our ward-level model. The 'left-behind' category also includes those who are ethnically White British, and although this variable also had a positive association with the effective number of parties in our analyses, this relationship was not statistically significant, which could mean either that ethnicity is not a good predictor of electoral fragmentation, or that any relationship between the two is eliminated when controlling for other variables.

Table 27: Comparison of hypothesised relationships between independent variables and effective number of parties against results of ward-level regression model

Category	Variable	Hypothesised relationship with ENOP	Direction of relationship in ward-level regression model
Age	OADR	Negative	Positive
Qualifications	None or Level 1	Positive	Positive
	Level 2 & Level 3	Positive	Positive
	Level 4 or higher	Negative	Negative
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	Negative	Positive*
	% change, White British or Irish, 2001-11	Positive	N/A
Social grade	DE	Positive	Positive
	C1C2	Positive	Positive
	AB	Negative	Negative
Industry	Occupation in industry	Negative	Negative
	% change, occupation in industry, 2001-11	Positive	N/A
Religion	Any religion	Negative	Negative

**not significant at the 5% level*

The variable measuring the proportion of people in a ward working in an industrial occupation also conformed to our predictions. It was theorised that although a decline in the manufacturing industry has led to feelings of political dissatisfaction in many former industrial towns and cities, and thus we might expect to see areas in which more people are employed in this sector to have a positive relationship with fragmentation, it may also be the case that those areas in which there are still higher numbers of people working in this industry have faced less decline and thus will not be as politically dissatisfied and prone to fragmentation. Indeed, this proved to be the case, with the industrial occupation variable having a negative association with fragmentation. While we cannot say for certain why this is the case, this may be the best explanation.

As with the industrial occupation variable, our prediction that the 'Religion – Any' variable would have a negative association with fragmentation was borne out by the results of the ward level regression analysis, which seems to confirm the literature that suggests that religion is still an important predictor of voting behaviour. Even if religion might be declining in importance in terms of the absolute number of people identifying with a religion, for those people who do, it seems that their religiosity strongly influences their voting behaviour. According to the literature, Christians of all denominations now tend to largely vote Conservative, while for Muslims, England's second-largest religious group, Labour are the party of choice. The presence of higher numbers of religious people in a ward seems to stabilise the electoral system as people vote with their religious preference. This is true even of wards in which there are high numbers of both Christians and Muslims, as each group tends to vote for one of the two main parties, thus bringing the effective number of parties down by concentrating votes and conforming to the traditional idea of England as having a two or two-and-a-half party system.

To conclude, the regression models have shown that there are strong reasons to believe that there are indeed key demographic drivers determining fragmentation levels in English local elections. In addition, the models seem to provide tentative evidence for the impact of both

the ‘left-behind’ and ‘squeezed middle’ on driving fragmentation, bolstering the view that political dissatisfaction among these groups is indeed contributing to increasing fragmentation levels in English local politics through people in those groups moving away from their traditional party support and instead casting their ballot for challenger parties. It also provides some interesting avenues for future research. Aside from further research into the exact mechanisms by which political disaffection translates into fragmentation, and the presence of factors unique to certain places or contexts that might cause deviations from the results of the models, perhaps the most interesting avenue for further research would be around the impact of religion on electoral fragmentation. For an ostensibly secular country such as England, in which religion seems to play a relatively minor role in political life, it is surprising that this variable has the strongest relationship with fragmentation of any variable in our models. The next chapter, in which we examine some key case studies areas in more depth, may help to shed some light on this issue, particularly in the case study of Liverpool.

Chapter 7: Case studies

The last two chapters of this thesis have revealed that the story of fragmentation in English local elections is complex and varied, with some areas having a multitude of parties that have a significant impact on electoral outcomes, and others where there is very little effective electoral competition whatsoever. The analysis thus far has revealed some limited insights into the geography of fragmentation, with many of the most fragmented local authorities located in coastal areas and many inland areas being characterised by a more stable electoral situation. There is also some limited evidence to suggest that university-centric, metropolitan, and multicultural cities such as Bristol and York are more prone to fragmentation, but this observation is tempered by the dominance of the Labour Party in places such as Manchester and Liverpool, whose unique histories make them an exception to this rule. Furthermore, despite the recent electoral dominance of the Conservative party, there are a wide range of party configurations present across England's electoral wards, and the analysis of these configurations in more depth may help to unpack how the picture of fragmentation in England is somewhat dependent on local contexts, and moves in different directions depending on an area's history, demographic constitution, and other factors.

The regression models generated in the previous chapter show that there are significant demographic drivers of fragmentation, and these models provide strong clues as to which factors make an area more or less prone to electoral fragmentation. However, as we have seen, there are important exceptions to these rules, and we cannot discount local context when trying to build as complete a picture of the story of fragmentation in English local elections without taking that into consideration. With that in mind, this chapter seeks to demonstrate how local context can either confirm or override the demographic associations with fragmentation that we have identified, in order both to gain a greater understanding of how fragmentation works, as well as to further demonstrate the complexity of the situation. The case studies will use a mixture of electoral and demographic data, historical research, and local knowledge to build a picture of how fragmentation can be affected by a diverse range of unique

local contexts. As the case selection process and justifications for the case study approach have already been explored in detail in Chapter 4.2.4.1, we will dive straight into the case studies, beginning with our high fragmentation case, the Forest of Dean.

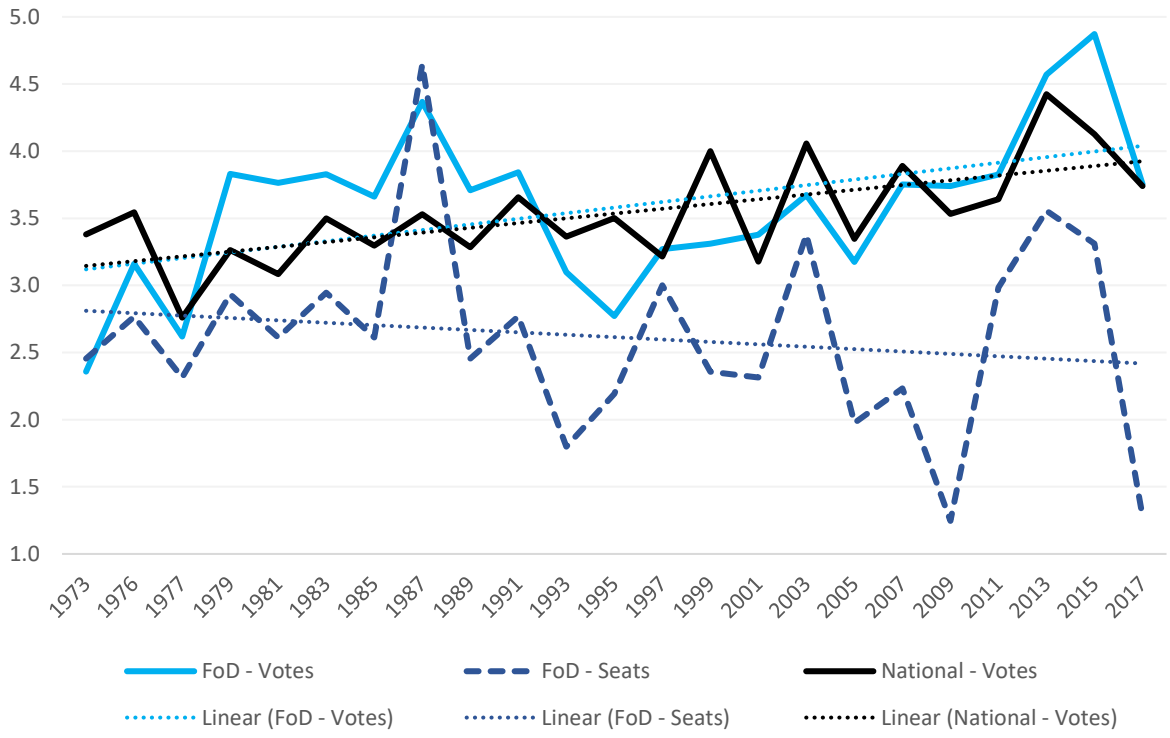
7.1 Case study 1 (high fragmentation) – Forest of Dean

For the case study of a very highly fragmented area, we will look at Forest of Dean, a local authority located in the west of the county of Gloucestershire, surrounded by the River Wye and the Welsh border to the West, the River Severn to the South, and the city of Gloucester to the East. The area is famous for being one of the last surviving areas of ancient woodland in England, and to this day remains the second-largest crown forest in England, behind only the New Forest. The main sources of work in the area were traditionally in forestry and mining, with half of the male population employed in mining in 1945, but starting in the 1980s, jobs in this sector began to disappear due to economic recession and the larger national trend of employment moving away from heavy industry and into the service, technological, and financial sectors (Invest in Gloucestershire, 2021). Over this period, several local factories in the area closed or significantly downsized, and while the area still has many small employers in this industry, its employment profile now leans far more towards tourism and to a lesser extent, technology, with several such companies establishing themselves in the area in recent years (Forest of Dean District Council, 2022). Additionally, many residents increasingly work in nearby towns and cities such as Gloucester, Hereford, and Ross-on-Wye (Baggs & Jurica, 1996).

This area is interesting to this thesis for a number of reasons, the first being its consistently high effective number of parties over the period in question. As well as being the fifth most fragmented local authority in the aggregated 2015-2018 local election results, the effective number of parties in the local authority has been higher than 3.50 (the cut off point for being considered a highly fragmented area) since 2007, and fragmentation has always been either higher than, or only slightly lower than, fragmentation at the national level over the past half century (see Figure 24, below). While the trends shown in Figure 24, below, may make it seem

that Forest of Dean is very similar to the national average in terms of fragmentation levels, it must be remembered that the national figure considers every single party that has stood in any local election in any given year. This means that the effective number of parties is naturally going to be far higher at the national level simply because including all of the different parties that operate in different local authorities, including the profusion of hyperlocal and independent offshoot parties, is going to increase the amount of fragmentation at the national level compared to a single local authority, which is likely to have a maximum of around 6-10 parties fielding candidates in any given year.

Figure 24: Effective number of parties (by votes and seats) in local elections for Forest of Dean (FoD) Council, compared to national ENOP (votes), 1973-2018



The second reason that Forest of Dean is an interesting case study of a highly-fragmented local authority is that the high number of effective parties by vote share is reflected in the allocation of seats on Forest of Dean council. As has been mentioned previously, first-past-the-post voting systems greatly distort the impact of the largest party, frequently awarding the largest party by vote share a disproportionately large number of seats in the legislative chamber. While Forest of Dean is no exception to this trend, the fragmentation of vote share in local

elections in the area has also translated to a highly fragmented council. As can be seen in Figure 25, below, it is rare for any one party to win more than half of the seats up for election at any single local election, and this frequently translates to a council under no overall control (see Figure 26, below). This has been the case for more than half of the last half-century, and despite a long period of Labour control between 1991 and 2001 and a briefer period of Conservative control between 2007 and 2010, the council has been under no overall control in 28 of the last 46 years, and has had no overall controlling party in the last seven years of the period covered in this thesis.

Figure 25: Seats won on Forest of Dean Council, by party, at local elections, 1973-2018

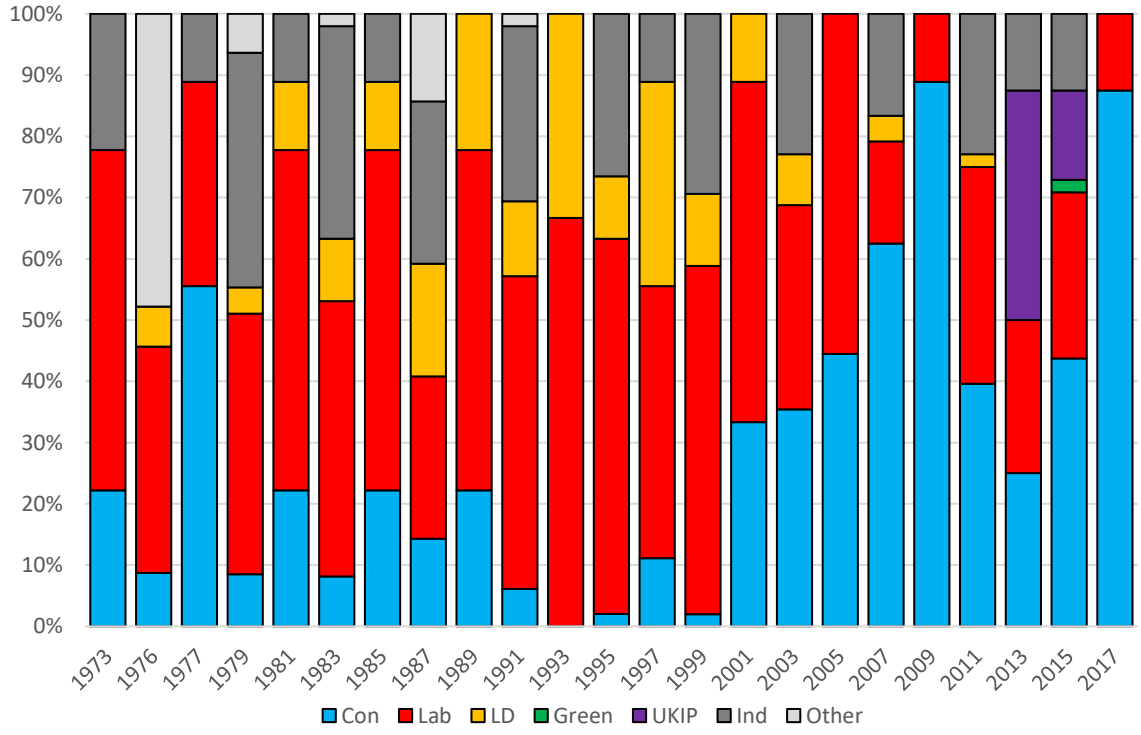


Figure 26: Control of Forest of Dean council, 1973-2018

1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
Ind	Ind	Ind	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC
1983	**1984**	**1985**	**1986**	**1987**	**1988**	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1992**
NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	Lab	Lab
1993	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
2003	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	Con	Con	Con	Con	NOC	NOC
2013	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**				
NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC				

The third reason that this is an interesting area to examine is that it shows a stark difference in the effective number of parties between general and local elections, thus emphasising the justifications for studying second-order elections, as well as providing further evidence for the existence of multiple party systems even within the same geographical area. As can be seen in Figure 28, below, while the effective number of parties in local elections has been on a steady upward trajectory over the past 20 years[13] , fragmentation has been decreasing in general elections, with Figure 28, below, showing the extent of Conservative party dominance in recent years; in the 2019 general election, the Conservatives received more than double the vote share of Labour, their closest competitors in the constituency. While over the same period, the Conservatives have consistently received the highest vote share in local elections, their margin of victory has been far smaller, with their highest figure being 43 percent in 2017 (see Figure 29, below). Additionally, since 1997 Labour and Independent candidates in local elections have regularly received over 20 percent of the vote, while in general elections, the only party outside of the Conservatives to have done so since 1997 is the Liberal Democrats in 2010.

The fourth and final reason that this is an interesting area to examine more closely is because in many ways, it conforms to one of the key electoral stories in England over the past decade, namely the rightward shift of voting preferences in largely working-class, former industrial

[13] This time frame has been used because between 1950 and 1997, Forest of Dean did not exist as a parliamentary constituency, and so comparison of local and general elections pre-1997 is not possible.

towns, with support for Labour dropping and support for the Conservatives and later, UKIP, increasing. As can be seen in Figure 29, below, Labour consistently received a larger share of the vote that the Conservatives in Forest of Dean's local elections in every year from 1973 to 2001, with the sole exception of 1977. However, from 2001, the local authority's electorate shifted decidedly to the right, with the Conservatives overtaking Labour as the most popular party. This continued until 2013, when UKIP saw unprecedented success in the area. Looking at Figure 29, below, it is clear the UKIP's success came at the expense of the Conservative party. From having no candidates in Forest of Dean in the 2009 local elections and polling at just 2 percent in the 2011 elections, UKIP's popularity in the area skyrocketed to 28 percent in 2013, making them the largest party by vote share. By contrast, the Conservative Party polled at 42 percent in 2009, dropping to 35 percent in 2011 and just 24 percent in 2013. Subsequently, the Conservative party's rapid recovery in Forest of Dean clearly came at the expense of UKIP; while the latter declined 17 percentage points from their high in 2013 down to just 11 percent by 2017, the Conservatives saw a similar increase of 19 percentage points in their vote share across the same period. The discussion of UKIP and Brexit support in the literature review identified the 'left-behind' as the key driver of these phenomena, and it will be interesting to see if it is this demographic that has been driving fragmentation in Forest of Dean in recent years.

Figure 27: Effective number of parties by vote share in general and local elections in Forest of Dean, 1997-2018

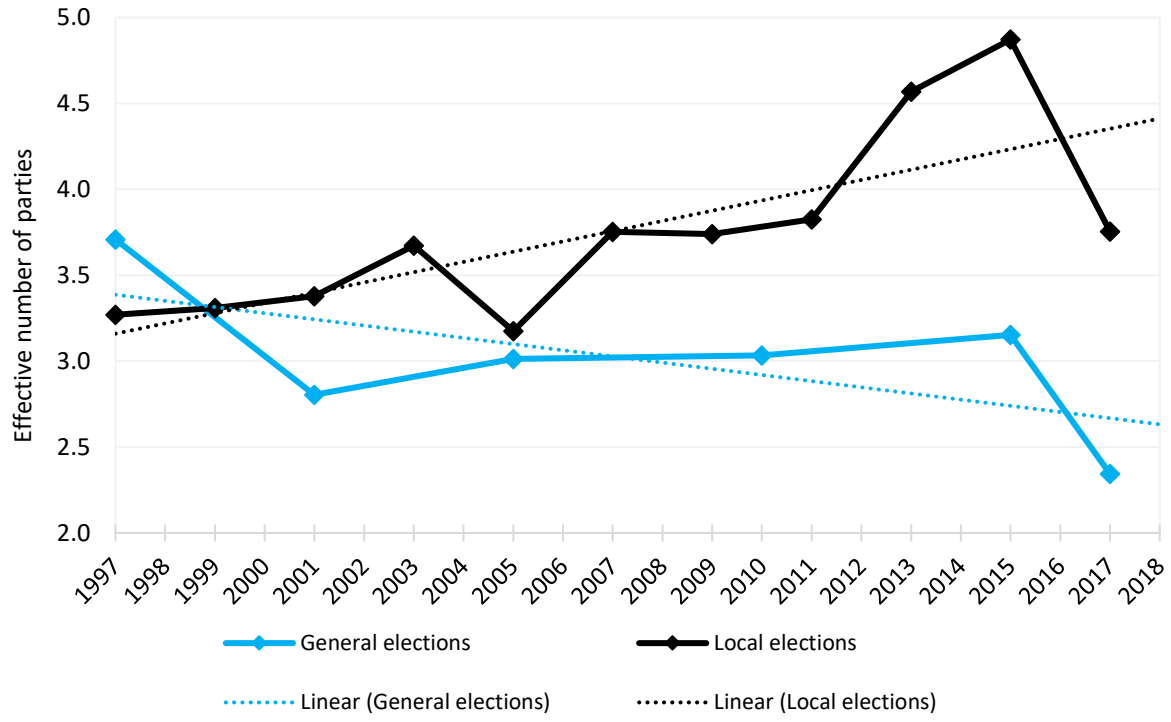


Figure 28: Vote share by party in general elections in Forest of Dean constituency, 1997-2019

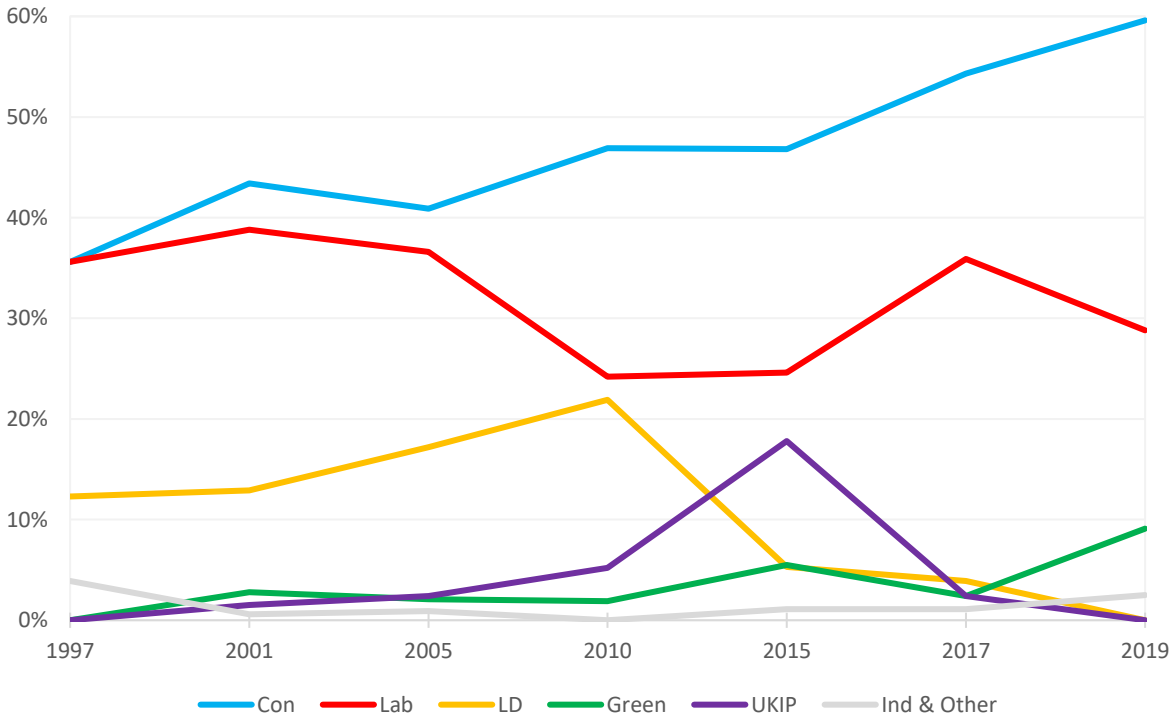
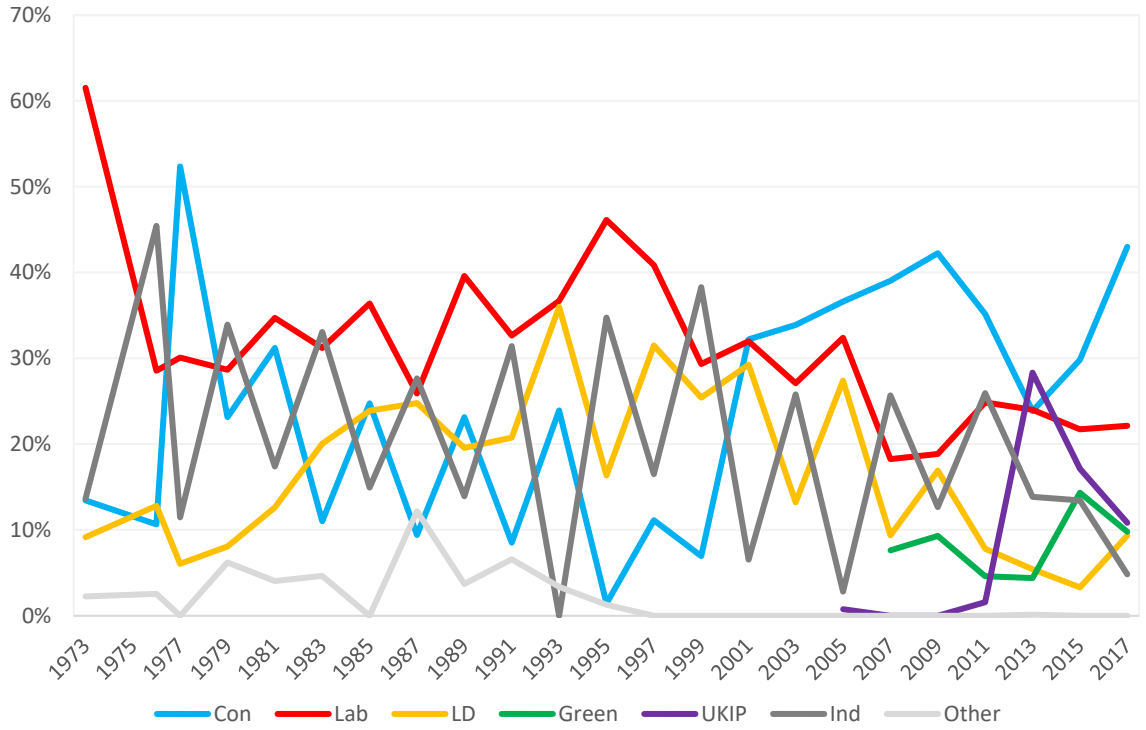


Figure 29: Vote share by party in local elections for Forest of Dean Council, 1973-2018



7.1.1 Demographics of Forest of Dean

As we have seen, Forest of Dean has consistently been a very fragmented local authority, tending to be either on par with, or more fragmented than, the national average. We will now examine the demographic characteristics of the area in order to ascertain if any particular demographic is driving this fragmentation. Recalling the results of the regression modelling on the demographic drivers of fragmentation, we remember that the proportion of residents with Level 4 or higher qualifications, working in industry, and belonging to a religion are all associated with lower levels of fragmentation, while the old-age dependency ratio, number of residents with Level 2 or 3 qualifications, and number of residents with a social grade of C2, D, or E are all associated with increased fragmentation. Table 28, below, shows the demographics of Forest of Dean against the national average for England, with the difference between Forest of Dean and England displayed in the rightmost column. Looking at these differences, we can see that the population of Forest of Dean is, on average, older, less well-

educated, of a lower social grade, much less ethnically diverse, more likely to be employed in industry, and less religious than the population of England as a whole.

Table 28: Demographic characteristics of Forest of Dean (FoD) compared to England

Category	Variable	England	Forest of Dean	Difference – FoD v. England
Age	OADR	0.26	0.35	+8.7
Qualifications	None or Level 1	35.8%	38.8%	+3.0
	Level 2 or Level 3	31.2%	28.8%	-2.4
	Level 4 or higher	27.4%	24.0%	-3.4
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	80.8%	97.1%	+16.3
	% change, White Brit/Irish, 2001-11	-7.5%	-1.1%	-6.4
Social grade	DE	25.5%	24.8%	-0.7%
	C1C2	51.6%	54.9%	+3.4%
	AB	23.0%	20.3%	-2.7%
Industry	Occupation in industry	18.8%	27.3%	+8.5
	% change, occ. in industry, 2001-11	-5.2%	-7.9%	+2.7
Religion	Any religion	68.1%	66.9%	-1.2
	Christian	59.4%	65.8%	+6.4
	Muslim	5.0%	0.1%	-4.9
	No religion	24.7%	25.2%	+0.5

Looking at the demographics of Forest of Dean, we can see that our model does indeed hold true for this area. The old-age dependency ratio, proportion of residents with Level 2 or 3 qualifications, and proportion of residents with a social grade of C2, D, or E are all associated with an increase in the effective number of parties, and Forest of Dean meets two of these three criteria, having both a much older population than England as a whole, and a population likely to be of a lower social grade than nationally. While Forest of Dean does have slightly fewer voters with Level 2 or 3 qualifications, it does have a higher-than-average number of voters with no qualifications or Level 1 qualifications, suggesting that it is more the 'left-behind' than the 'squeezed middle' driving fragmentation in the area. In addition, religion is the largest single predictor of fragmentation, with areas with a high number of religious residents likely to be less fragmented, and Forest of Dean has a slightly lower-than-average proportion of residents identifying as religious. The only major departure from what would be expected from

a very heavily fragmented local authority is that Forest of Dean has more people working in industry than the national average, although the area has experienced a greater fall in the proportion of its residents employed in this sector than the country as a whole.

7.1.2 Conclusion: Forest of Dean – a microcosm of the national picture

Forest of Dean, then, is both a very highly fragmented local authority, and one that largely conforms to the demographic model of fragmentation generated in the previous chapter, with its older, less well-educated, working-class, and less religious population seemingly the catalyst for the profusion of parties that have a meaningful impact on local elections in the area. While the Conservatives enjoy a large majority in vote share in general elections in the local authority, the situation in local elections is very different. The Conservatives are still the largest party, but never receive more than half of the vote, have been shown to be susceptible to losing support to challenger parties such as UKIP, and frequently receive very similar vote shares to Labour and independent candidates, although their share has been steadily increasing since 2013. The key fragmentation story here is the decline of Labour in a working-class, ex-mining town and the rise of the Conservatives and UKIP. With the exception of a few years in the late 1970s, Labour were consistently the largest party by vote share in Forest of Dean. This situation prevailed until the turn of the century, when despite having held the council for more than a decade throughout the 1990s, Labour were overtaken by the Conservatives and the council returned to no overall control, where it has stayed since, barring a brief four-year stint of Conservative control from 2007 to 2010.

Demographically, this situation in Forest of Dean is consistent with much of the literature on the 'left-behind', with the area's older and less well-educated population driving the move away from Labour and into more right-leaning parties such as the Conservatives and UKIP. This is interesting for two reasons; firstly, it shows the importance of this demographic group in driving fragmentation in English local elections in recent years. It is highly unlikely to be a coincidence that the demographic drivers of UKIP and Brexit voting, according to many studies in the literature review, are very similar to the demographic drivers of fragmentation

found in our regression analysis. The case of Forest of Dean provides a perfect illustration of the mechanics behind this phenomenon, in which the old class cleavage that saw the town's working-class, industry-employed electorate consistently voting for Labour has broken down and been replaced by a new cleavage, characterised by age and lower education levels driving support for more ideologically right-leaning parties. This local authority is a microcosm of a larger national story playing out in many similar towns, and provides a perfect illustration of both how and why fragmentation is occurring in English local elections, as well as the importance of studying local election results in revealing aspects of fragmentation that would be hidden by considering only general elections.

7.2 Case study 2 (medium fragmentation) – Ipswich

For our case study of an area around the median level of fragmentation, we will look at Ipswich. Ipswich is a large port town in East Anglia, and is both the county town and the administrative centre of the county of Suffolk. It is notable for being one of the oldest towns in England, having been continuously occupied since the Saxon period, and for being an important economic centre for much of England's history, particularly due to the port's importance in facilitating trade; indeed, to this day the port exports more agricultural products than any other in the UK, reflecting the importance of agriculture in the areas immediately surrounding the town (Gummer, 2017). Today, Ipswich's economy is much more focused on tourism, retail, and finance. Retail and leisure developments on the dock-front, the opening of the University of Suffolk in 2016, the presence of a number of large insurance company's headquarters or key offices in the town, and good road and rail connections with other cities, especially London, Cambridge, and Norwich, have become the area's key economic drivers in recent years, and have helped Ipswich to become a retail and tourism destination.

Politically, Ipswich is governed by a two-tier system, with Ipswich Borough Council at the district council level, and Suffolk County Council at the county council level. The town is covered by two Parliamentary constituencies: the Ipswich constituency, covering about 75% of the town, and the Central Suffolk and North Ipswich constituency, covering the remaining

quarter. In local elections, Ipswich has always been a battleground between the Conservatives and Labour, with the Liberal Democrats mostly being the main challenger party, with the exception of the 2013 and 2014 local elections, in which they were overtaken by UKIP as the third-largest party by vote share (see Figure 30, below). This situation is reflective of the stereotypical analysis of England as having a two-and-a-half party system, with the Conservative and Labour parties battling for the highest vote share and the Liberal Democrats running in third, and has resulted in the effective number of parties hovering around 3.0 for much of the last two decades, as can be seen in Figure 31, below. Over the most recent four-year election cycle covered in this thesis (2015-2018), Ipswich's effective number of parties was 3.10, just below the median for English local authorities of 3.26. Ipswich's general elections follow a very similar pattern. It is one of the most marginal constituencies in the country (Geater, 2015), with the gap in vote share between Labour and the Conservatives rarely lower than 10 percent, and the combined vote share for the two parties never dropping below 70 percent, and in recent years, they have rarely polled lower than a combined 90 percent (see Figure 32, below). As can be seen in Figure 33, below, the trend in effective number of parties in general elections has also tracked very closely with local elections, although has stayed slightly lower throughout the studied period, probably reflecting the slightly different electoral priorities and considerations for voters in second-order elections.

This close battle for the highest vote share between Labour and the Conservatives in Ipswich's local elections has not translated into a similarly pitched contest for control of the council, with Labour consistently winning a far higher proportion of seats than the Conservatives, as shown in Figure 34, below. Consequently, Labour has been in control of the council for all but five years in the last four decades, with a Conservative-Lib Dem coalition controlling the council between 2005 and 2010 (see Figure 35, below). A large part of the reason for this, once again, is the distorting effect of the first-past-the-post voting system, which rewards concentrated support in key areas over more universal but diffuse support. In Ipswich, the Conservatives enjoy a similar level of support to Labour when looking purely at vote share across all wards, but their support is concentrated in the larger and more populated wards in

the north of the town, whereas Labour has a higher level of support in a greater number of smaller wards in the south of the town. This means that although the overall vote share of the Conservatives in Ipswich is close to Labour's, Labour's more concentrated support in an area of the town with a greater number of smaller wards enables them to consistently win more wards and seats and thus retain control of the council. This was perfectly illustrated in the 2015 local elections, in which the Conservatives actually received a marginally higher share of the votes, but still won only 44 percent of seats compared to Labour's 56 percent.

Figure 30: Vote share by party in local elections for Ipswich Town Council, 1973-2018

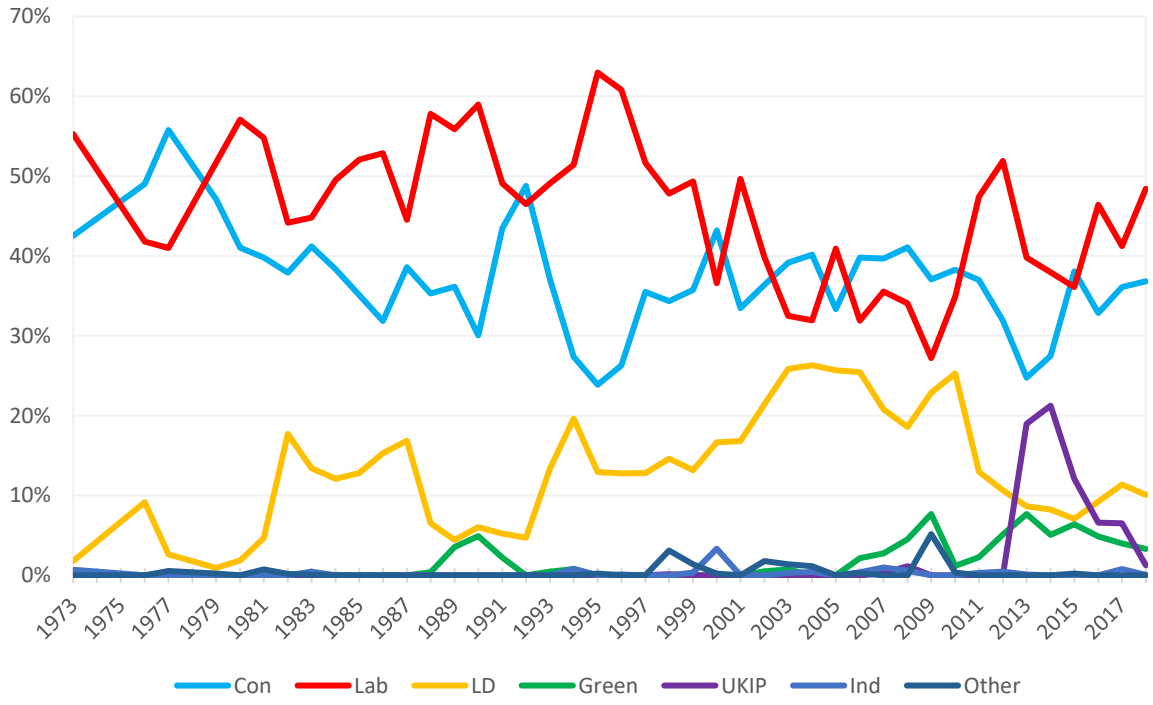


Figure 31: Effective number of parties (by votes and seats) in local elections for Ipswich Town Council, compared to ENOP in England (by votes), 1973-2018

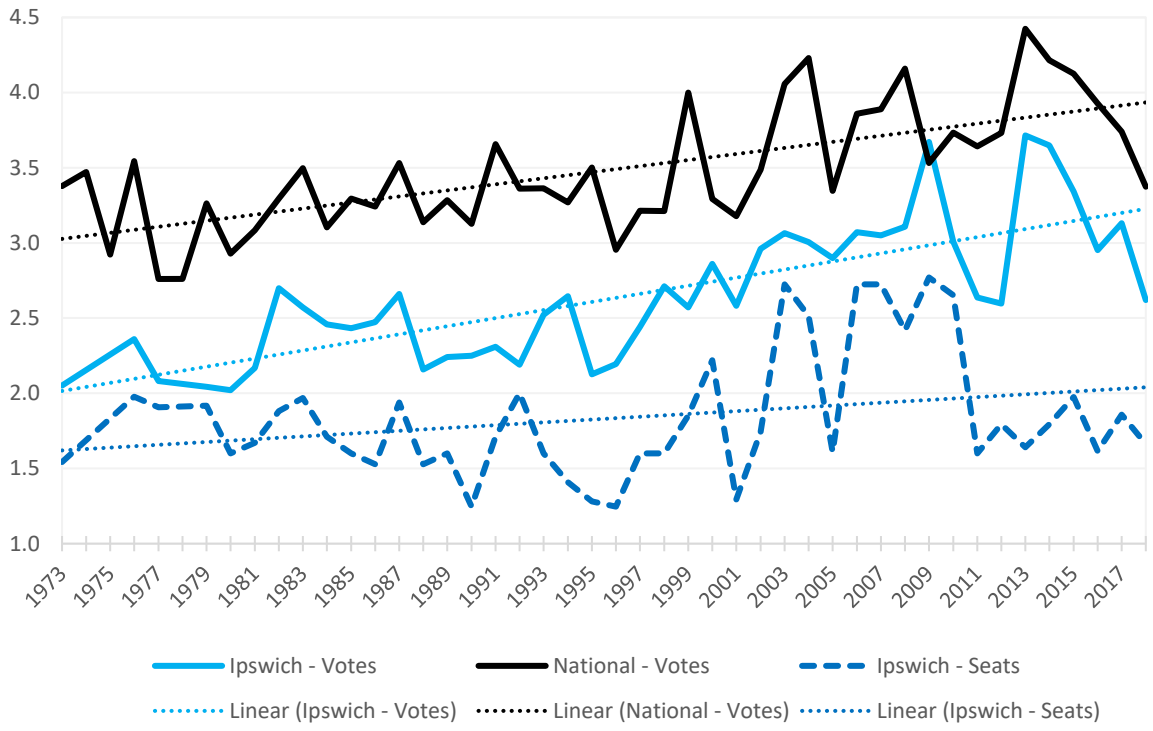


Figure 32: Vote share by party in general elections in Ipswich constituency, 1973-2018

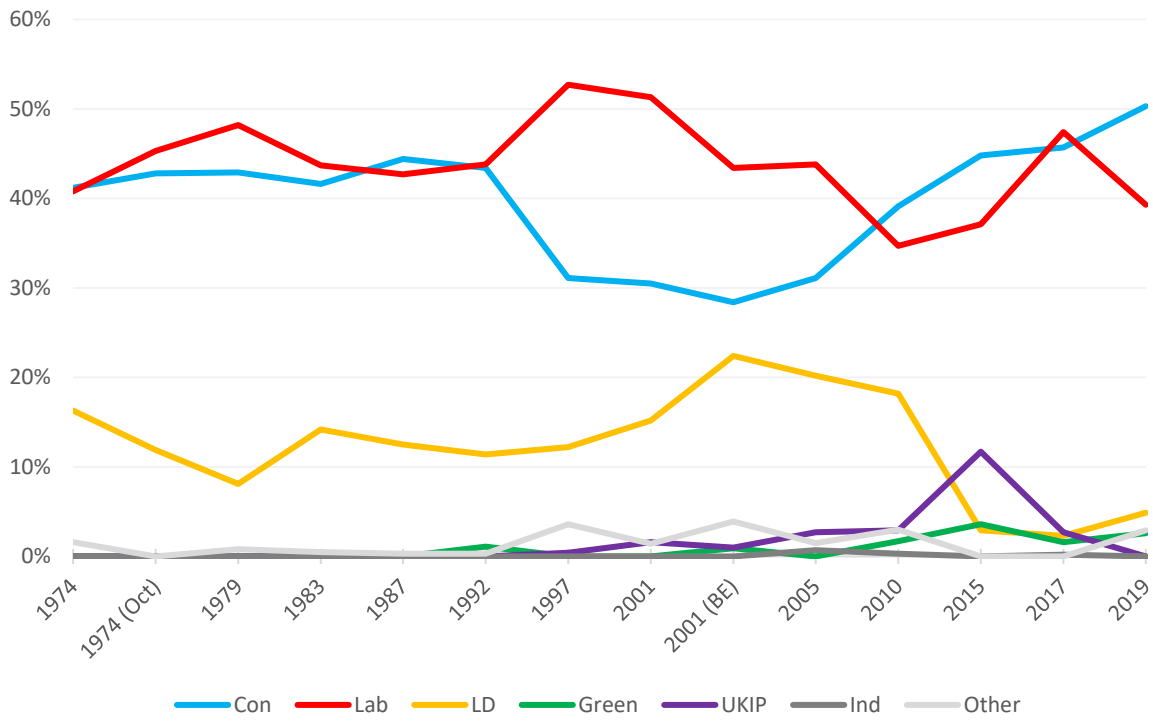


Figure 33: Effective number of parties by vote share in general elections for Ipswich constituency and in local elections for Ipswich Town council, 1973-2018

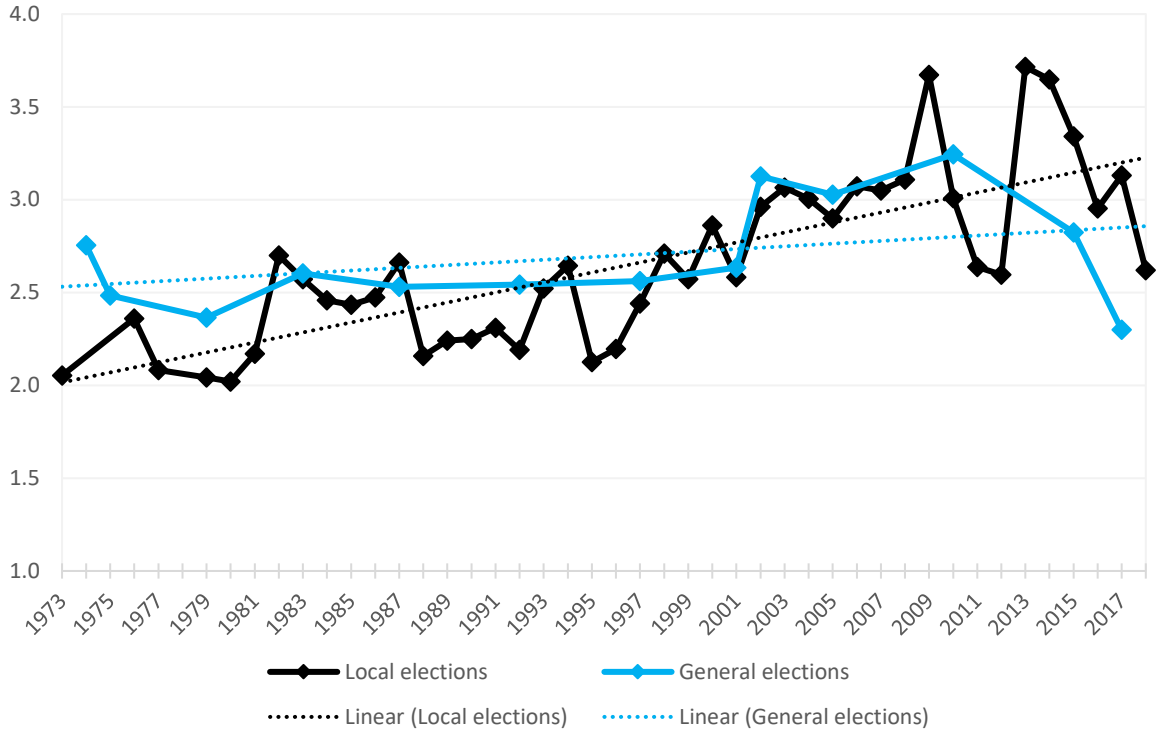


Figure 34: Seats won on Ipswich Town Council, by party, at local elections, 1973-2018

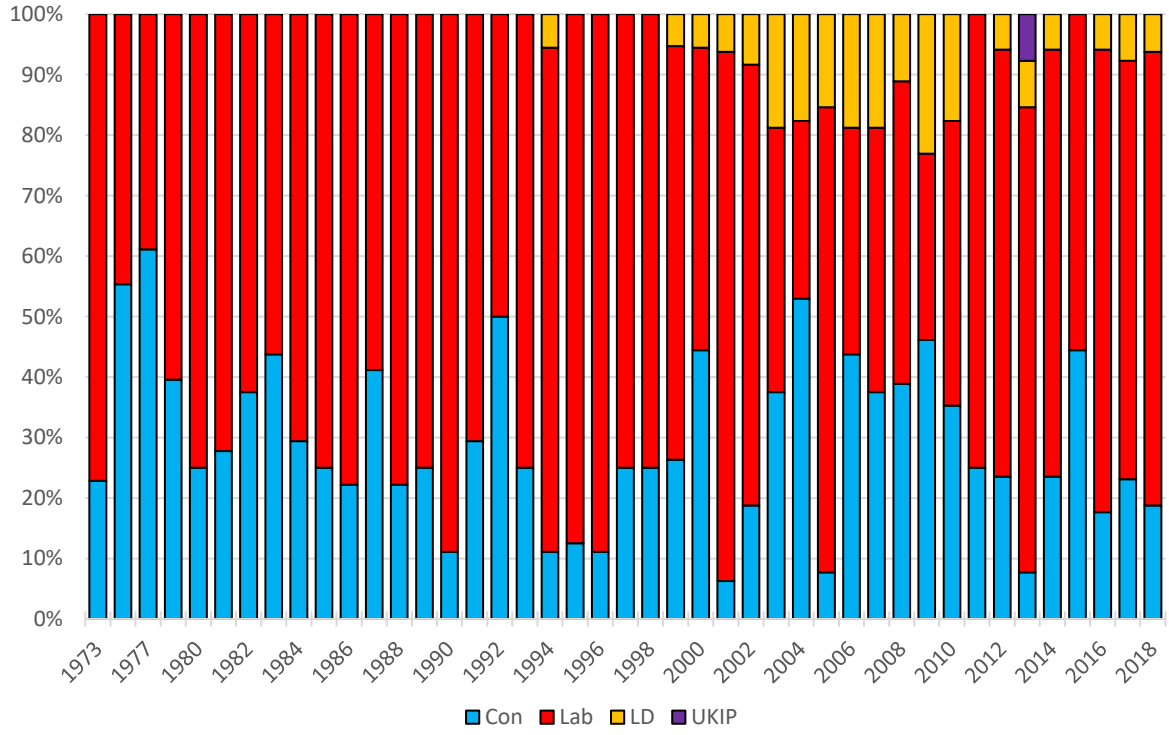


Figure 35: Control of Ipswich Town council, 1973-2018

1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
Lab	Lab	Lab	Con	Con	Con	Con	Lab	Lab	Lab
1983	**1984**	**1985**	**1986**	**1987**	**1988**	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1992**
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
1993	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab
2003	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
Lab	Lab	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	Lab	Lab
2013	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**				
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab				

Ipswich's political system is interesting to this thesis for a number of reasons. The first is that its elections are a microcosm of the two-and-a-half party system that is often held up in the literature as being the norm in England, with Labour and the Conservatives fighting for the largest vote share and the Liberal Democrats in third place. By examining a local authority that is not only empirically close to the median level of fragmentation, but that also exhibits characteristics similar to the national picture, we can perhaps gain some insight into how fragmentation normally occurs, as opposed to the extreme situations found in the other two case studies. Secondly, Ipswich's voters also voted heavily for UKIP in the local elections in 2013, 2014, and 2015, allowing the party to overtake the Liberal Democrats as the main challenger party to Labour and the Conservatives. Again, this is a microcosm of the national picture, capturing the zeitgeist and again, providing an interesting insight into the impact that changing cleavages and the rise of UKIP had on fragmentation levels. Finally, Ipswich is an interesting case as its profile is one that is different to many of the other cases presented both in this thesis, and in the literature more broadly. This is because Ipswich could have easily fallen into the category of a 'left-behind' town, given its traditional reliance on agriculture and manufacturing, but has actually been revitalised and reinvigorated by a major shift in its economic and employment profile towards retail, tourism, and finance. We will now turn to the demographics of the town, and examine how its demographic characteristics have affected fragmentation in the local electoral system, and whether this conforms to or challenges our model.

7.2.1 Demographics of Ipswich

Given that Ipswich's local elections tend to result in a level of fragmentation consistent with the stereotypical analysis of England as being a two-and-a-half party system, we might expect Ipswich's demographics to be roughly on par with England as a whole, or at least, for Ipswich's population to possess demographic characteristics that balance out in terms of their impact on fragmentation. Recalling the results of the regression modelling on the demographic drivers of fragmentation, we remember that the proportion of residents with Level 4 or higher qualifications, working in industry, and belonging to a religion are all associated with lower levels of fragmentation, while the old-age dependency ratio, number of residents with Level 2 or 3 qualifications, and number of residents with a social grade of C2, D, or E are all associated with increased fragmentation. Table 29, below, shows the demographics of Ipswich against the national average for England, with the difference between Ipswich and England displayed in the rightmost column. Looking at these differences, we can see that the population of Ipswich is, on average, slightly younger, less well-educated, of a lower social grade, less ethnically diverse, slightly less likely to be employed in industry, and much less religious than the population of England as a whole.

Looking at the demographics of Ipswich, we can see that the town has a complex relationship with the model of the demographic drivers of fragmentation. Its population is much less religious than England as a whole, and as religion was the strongest single predictor in our model, with a negative association with fragmentation, we would expect Ipswich's irreligiosity to be associated with it being much more fragmented that England as a whole. It also has a lower proportion of people employed in industry, as well as a higher proportion of residents belonging to the D and E social grades and with no or Level 1 qualifications, all of which are also associated with higher levels of fragmentation. However, the population of Ipswich also has a lower old age dependency ratio and has a lower proportion of residents with Level 2 and 3 qualifications and of the social grades C1 and C2 than England as a whole, and because an elderly population and a higher proportion of residents with Level 2 and 3 qualifications and

of the social grades C1 and C2 are both associated with higher fragmentation, this may help to balance the impact of religion and the social grade variables on the town's fragmentation levels.

Table 29: Demographic characteristics of Ipswich compared to England

Category	Variable	England	Ipswich	Difference – Ipswich v. England
Age	OADR	0.26	0.24	-2.7
Qualifications	None or Level 1	35.8%	41.7%	+5.9
	Level 2 or Level 3	31.2%	27.7%	-3.5
	Level 4 or higher	27.4%	20.6%	-6.8
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	80.8%	83.5%	+2.7
	% change, White Brit/Irish, 2001-11	-7.5%	-7.9%	+0.4
Social grade	DE	25.5%	31.6%	+6.1
	C1C2	51.6%	51.2%	-0.3
	AB	23.0%	17.2%	-5.8
Industry	Occupation in industry	18.8%	18.0%	-0.8
	% change, occ. in industry, 2001-11	-5.2%	-4.6%	-0.6
Religion	Any religion	68.1%	57.8%	-10.3
	Christian	59.4%	53.1%	-6.3
	Muslim	5.0%	2.7%	-2.3
	No religion	24.7%	35.0%	+10.3

Broadly speaking, these findings make sense in relation to the model we constructed to uncover the demographic drivers of fragmentation. As we recall from Figure 33 (above), the level of fragmentation in Ipswich's local elections in recent years has fluctuated a great deal, with some years such as 2009 and 2013 resulting in a relatively high effective number of parties, but this has been tempered by other years where fragmentation has been much lower, bringing it closer to the median, albeit always slightly above it. In the four-year election cycle between 2015 and 2018 studied in this thesis, these fluctuations have placed Ipswich very close to the median number of effective parties in England. As such, we would expect Ipswich to have a set of demographic characteristics that create the conditions for a relatively high level of electoral fragmentation, tempered by some other characteristics that bring it closer to the median. Indeed, this is what we have found, with Ipswich's irreligiosity, lower levels of

education, and lower social grade all pushing it towards higher fragmentation levels, while its lower old age dependency ratio and lower number of people with middling levels of education bringing the effective number of parties down slightly.

7.2.2 Conclusion: Ipswich

Ipswich proved to be an interesting case study. Its status as one of the most marginal constituencies in general elections and its party configuration, which is currently Labour-Conservative-Lib Dem, but over the past few decades, has just as frequently been Conservative-Labour-Lib Dem, characterises it as an archetypal two-and-a-half party English local authority. Over the last few decades, the effective number of parties in Ipswich's local elections has stayed consistently within the 'medium fragmentation' category. Our regression models reveal Ipswich to be a slightly enigmatic case, providing evidence to both support and disagree with the conclusions drawn in Chapter 6. Ipswich's population is less likely to be religious than the national average, and is also less well educated and of a lower social grade than at the national level, all of which pushed the area towards higher fragmentation levels. However, this is balanced out by its lower old age dependency ratio and lower number of people with middling levels of education and of the C1 and C2 social grades, which helped to bring down the effective number of parties and place it in the medium fragmentation category. Ipswich turned out to be an excellent case study in demonstrating that the models we have generated in this thesis must be taken as a whole, with various demographic variables interacting with one another, and some characteristics balancing out others in terms of their effects on fragmentation.

7.3 Case study 3 (low fragmentation) – Liverpool

In the search for an archetype of a low fragmentation area, the North-West provides a number of interesting cases. Both Liverpool and Manchester are typical examples of Labour strongholds, with these regions seen as bywords for anti-Tory sentiment and Labour routinely winning more than two-thirds of the vote at local elections, and upwards of 80 percent of the

available seats. The perception of Liverpool as an electoral write-off for the Conservatives is so entrenched that following the 2012 mayoral elections, BBC Radio 5 Live reported that the Conservative candidate for Liverpool was defeated by a rival dressed as a polar bear (Jeffery, 2017a, p. 387). While this unfortunately turned out to be untrue[14], the fact that this was seen as eminently plausible goes a long way to illustrate the extent of contemporary Labour dominance in the city.

Either of these two cities would have made for interesting vignettes of extremely low fragmentation areas, but it was decided that Liverpool is the better case for closer inspection; firstly, as Table 6 and Figure 23 (both above, in chapter 5.3) show, Liverpool was one of the ten least fragmented local authorities in the aggregated 2015-2018 local election cycle, with an ENOP of 2.34 compared to Manchester's 2.45. Its neighbour on Merseyside, Knowsley, was actually even less fragmented than Liverpool over this time period, with an ENOP of just 2.00, making it the second-least fragmented local authority in England and reinforcing the extent of Labour dominance in the Merseyside area. Pragmatically, there also seems to be more literature on local elections in Liverpool than Manchester, and in addition, in many ways its story is more interesting. As we shall see, Liverpool City Council has undergone many shifts in its party-political system. While it may be almost inconceivable now, the Conservative Party was actually the dominant political force in Liverpool for more than two hundred years, from the mid eighteenth century all the way to the immediate post-WWII period. By 1945, Labour had gained enough of a foothold as an electoral force that between then and 1970, the vast majority of votes and seats in local elections were won either by them or the Conservative Party, with the Liberals finishing a distant third and all other seats tending to be won by the now-disbanded Protestant Party. By 1970, the Conservative vote share had dropped below 20 percent for the first time in the city's history, with no party able to command control of the

[14] The Liberal Democrat and Green candidates for Pentland Hills ward, part of the City of Edinburgh Council, did however receive fewer votes in the 2012 local elections than independent candidate Mike Ferrigan, who dressed himself as a penguin named Professor Pongoo and pledged that if he was elected, he would wear the outfit to every council meeting he attended (Morse, 2012).

council and Labour or the Liberal Party (with limited Conservative support) running largely ineffective minority administrations. After 1984, Conservative vote share dropped below 10 percent, removing any influence they had on the council, a situation that prevails until the present day.

The extent of Labour's current electoral dominance in Liverpool is illustrated by Figure 36, Figure 37, and Figure 38, all below, which show the vote shares in local elections, seats won on Liverpool City Council, and control of Liverpool City Council respectively in local elections in the city between 1973 and 2018. As these figures show, despite a long period of Liverpool being a battleground between Labour and the Liberals, and later Liberal Democrats, Labour are now so dominant that they have received the majority of votes in every local election since 2010, have controlled the council since 2010, and have won more than 80 percent of seats in every local election since 2011. A Conservative candidate has not been elected to the council since 1994, and the party has not polled in double digits since the election before that. Furthermore, despite the recent decline in Labour seats, from 94 percent in 2015 to 81 percent in 2018, this was not because of a fall in Labour's vote share, with the decrease in seats won being almost entirely attributable to a large fall in UKIP voters, who have seemingly been picked up by the Liberal Democrats in key battleground wards.

The dominance of Labour and the electoral insignificance of the Conservative party in Liverpool means that the city have consistently had a much lower number of effective parties than the national average since the early 1980s, with only one exception in 1992. As can be seen in Figure 39, below, Liverpool actually had a very similar level of fragmentation to the national average through much of the 1970s, with a tight race between Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats meaning that the local authority had three parties consistently having a significant impact on local elections. However, since 1981, Liverpool has bucked the national trend, with the fall of the Conservatives, and later, the Liberal Democrats turning Liverpool into a city with only 2.24 effective parties when looking at vote share. As has been discussed previously, the first-past-the-post electoral system used in English local

elections gives a disproportionate number of seats to larger parties, and Liverpool is no exception; when the vote share is translated into seats on the city council, Liverpool becomes essentially a one-party city, with an ENOP of 1.50 in 2018, the highest it has been since 2010. In 2015, Labour were so dominant that the effective number of parties by seats was just 1.14.

Figure 36: Vote share by party at local elections for Liverpool City Council, 1973-2018

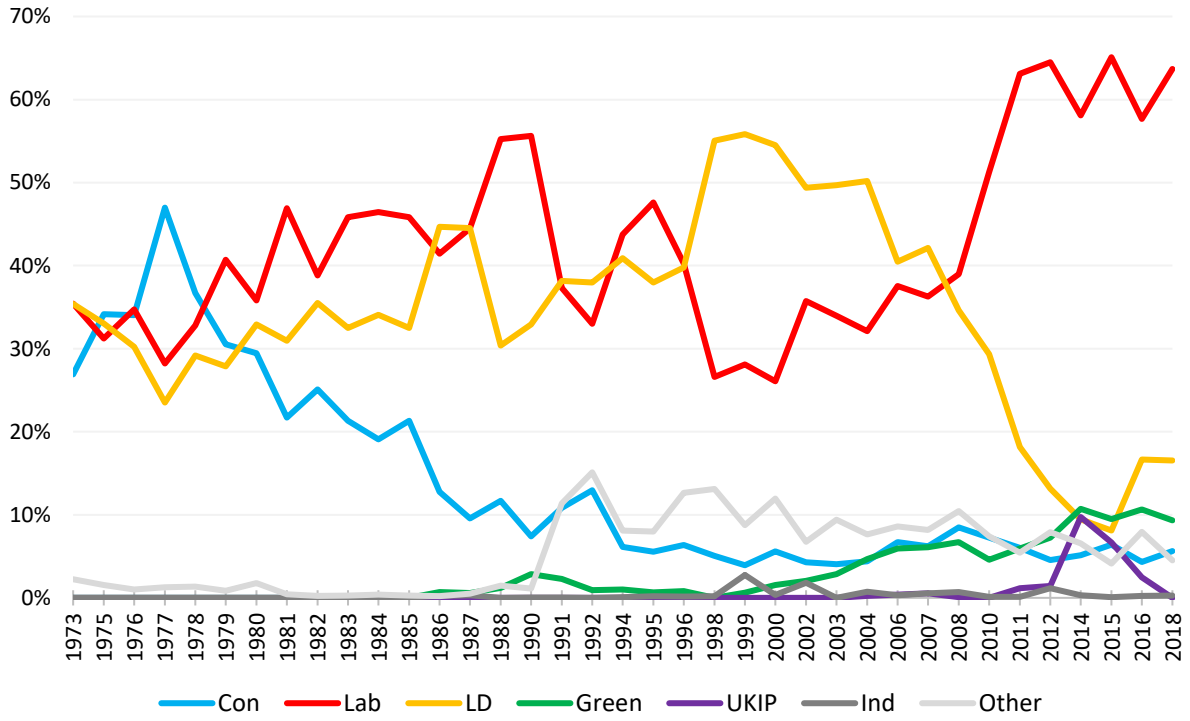


Figure 37: Seats won on Liverpool City Council, by party, at local elections, 1973-2018

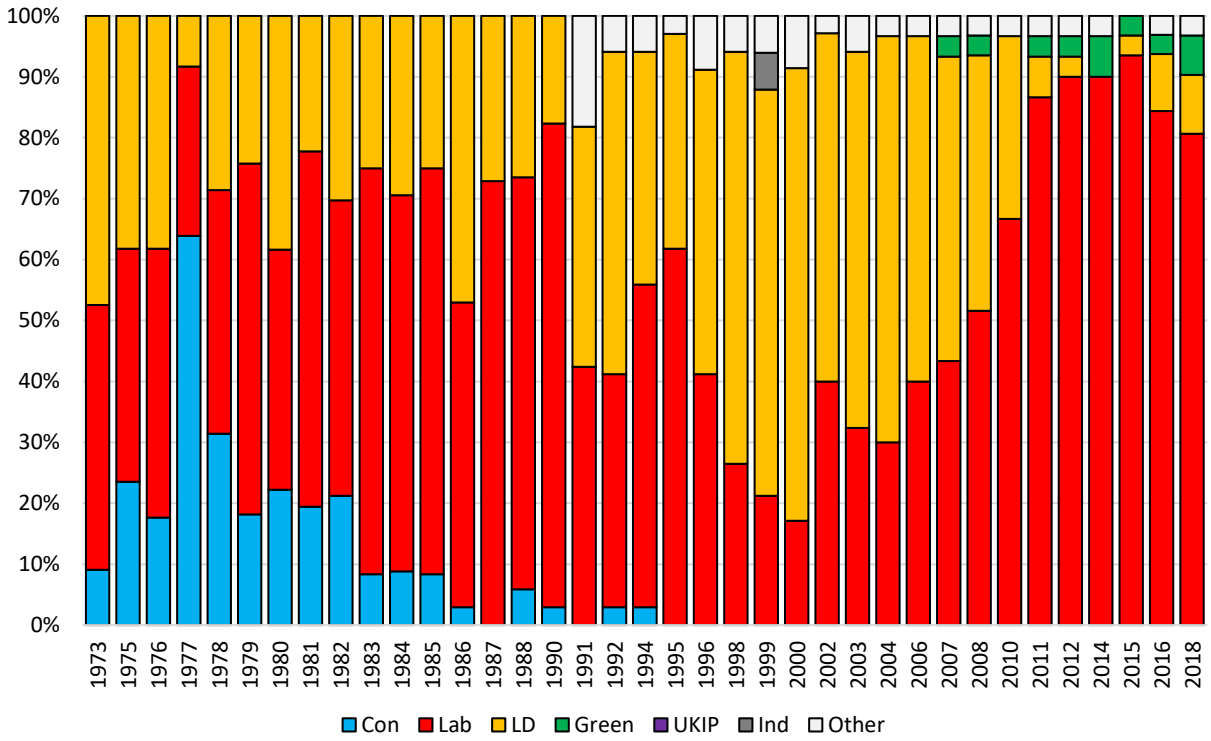
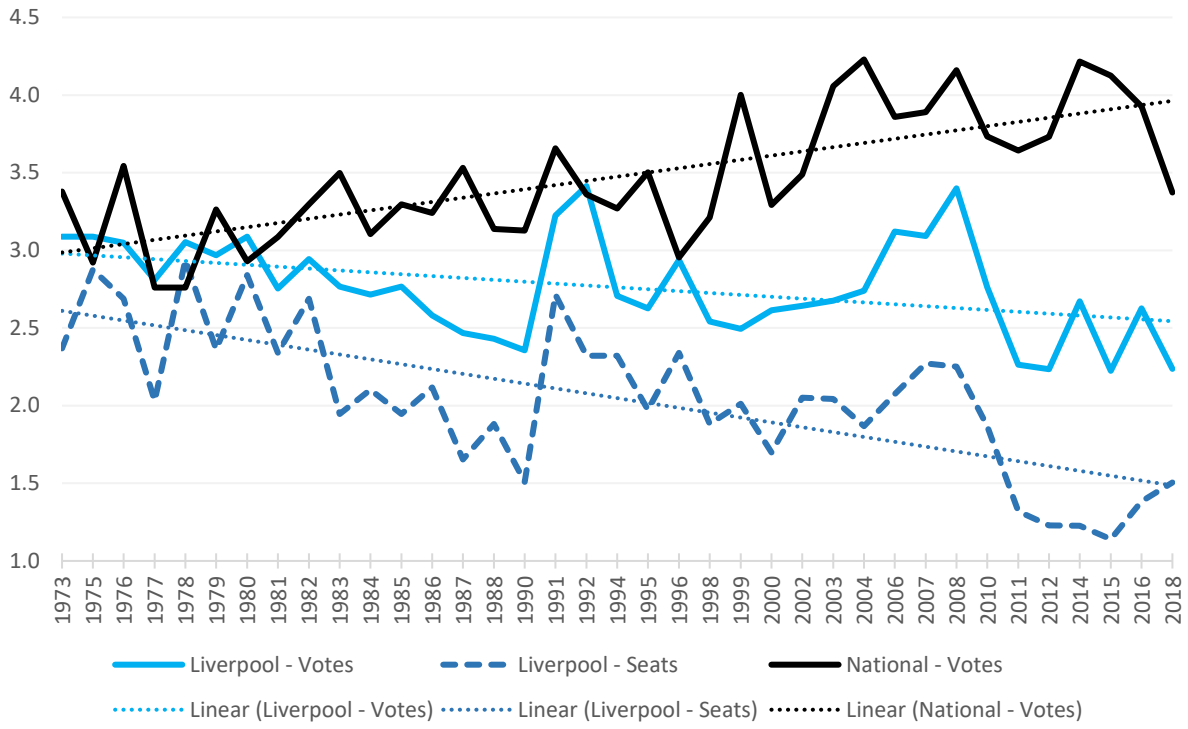


Figure 38: Control of Liverpool City Council, 1973-2018

1973	1974	1975	1976	1977	1978	1979	1980	1981	1982
Lab	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC	NOC
1983	**1984**	**1985**	**1986**	**1987**	**1988**	**1989**	**1990**	**1991**	**1992**
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lib	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	NOC
1993	**1994**	**1995**	**1996**	**1997**	**1998**	**1999**	**2000**	**2001**	**2002**
NOC	NOC	NOC	Lab	Lab	LD	LD	LD	LD	LD
2003	**2004**	**2005**	**2006**	**2007**	**2008**	**2009**	**2010**	**2011**	**2012**
LD	LD	LD	LD	LD	LD	LD	Lab	Lab	Lab
2013	**2014**	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**				
Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab	Lab				

Figure 39: Effective number of parties (by votes and seats) in local elections for Liverpool City Council, compared to national ENOP (votes), 1973-2018



7.3.1 Demographics of Liverpool

All of this begs the question of just why Liverpool is presently such a one-party city. Recalling the results of the regression modelling on the demographic drivers of fragmentation, we remember that the proportion of residents working in industry and belonging to a religion are associated with lower levels of fragmentation, while the old-age dependency ratio, number of residents with None or Level 1 qualifications, Level 2 or 3 qualifications, and number of residents belonging to the social grade groupings of DE or C1C2 are all associated with increased fragmentation. Table 30, below, shows the demographics of Liverpool against the national average for England, with the difference between Liverpool and England displayed in the rightmost column. Looking at these differences, we can see that the population of Liverpool, on average, is younger, less well-educated, of a lower social grade, less ethnically diverse, less likely to be employed in industry, and more religious (and specifically, more Christian), than the population of England as a whole.

Table 30: Demographic characteristics of Liverpool compared to England

Category	Variable	England	Liverpool	Difference – Liverpool v. England
Age	OADR	0.26	0.21	-0.05
Qualifications	None or Level 1	35.8%	41.2%	+5.4
	Level 2 or Level 3	31.2%	29.4%	-1.8
	Level 4 or higher	27.4%	22.4%	-5.0
Ethnicity	White British or Irish	80.8%	86.3%	+5.5
	% change, White Brit/Irish, 2001-11	-7.5%	-6.8%	-0.7
Social grade	DE	25.5%	35.2%	+9.7
	C1C2	51.6%	48.8%	-2.8
	AB	23.0%	16.0%	-7.0
Industry	Occupation in industry	18.8%	13.8%	-5.0
	% change, occ. in industry, 2001-11	-5.2%	-3.7%	-1.5
Religion	Any religion	68.1%	76.0%	+7.9
	Christian	59.4%	71.0%	+11.6
	Muslim	5.0%	3.3%	-1.7
	No religion	24.7%	17.7%	-7.0

These statistics raise more questions than they answer. Liverpool is one of the least fragmented local authorities in England, and so from the regression modelling of the previous chapter, we would expect its population to be older, more highly-educated, of a higher social grade, less religious, and more likely to be employed in industry than the population of England as a whole. However, Liverpool bucks the national trend on all but one of these indicators, with only its status as a far more Christian city than most places in England (71 percent of Liverpool's residents identify as Christian compared to 59 percent in England as a whole), as well as its slightly lower level of people belonging to the 'squeezed middle' being in concordance with its extremely low fragmentation levels. The regression models showed that religion was the largest single determinant of fragmentation in English local elections, and if this is the case, perhaps Liverpool's far more religious population is a large part of the reason for their especially stable and unfragmented local election party system. As we shall see, there is some support in the literature for this hypothesis, although it is also clear that in Liverpool,

there are other factors at play that prevent the fragmentation that we would expect to see based on its other demographic characteristics.

7.3.2 A history of party politics in Liverpool

The most simple and obvious answer for this is that Liverpool is a city with a deeply fractious, and likely irrevocably damaged, relationship with both the Conservative Party and its major champion in mainstream media, *The Sun* newspaper. As a result, Liverpool is an electoral desert for the party, and the complete absence of the most popular party in the country (by vote share at general elections) as a credible option for Liverpool's electorate goes a long way to explaining why it has become a *de facto* one-party city. Conventional wisdom on Liverpool's severe distrust and dislike of the Conservative Party traces it back to Margaret Thatcher's policies in the late 1970s and 1980s. Thatcher's Conservative Party presided over a period in which the nation's industrial sector was facing a steep and unprecedented decline, and in which unemployment was rampant, and her government's policy was to not prop up failing industries, to cut public services in an effort to end the reliance on 'cradle to the grave' social welfare, and to diminish the strength of the trade unions that would vehemently oppose these policies. Consequently, Liverpudlians blamed the Conservative government for decline in the city, and the Conservative party's political opponents in the city capitalised on this, painting the Conservative government as 'heartlessly presiding over the region's decline and rising unemployment, and cutting its public services without compunction' (Burnell, 2013).

While it is inarguable that Liverpool's relationship with Thatcher's government plays a major role in the effective exile of the Conservative party from Liverpool, Jeffery (2017a) argues that the decline of the party's fortunes on Merseyside can be traced back even further, and was initially heavily influenced by the declining importance of the religious cleavage in determining voting behaviour before the politics of the Heath government that preceded Thatcher's prime ministership further dented the party's electoral chances. This is a very interesting argument given the observation above that a far greater proportion of Liverpool's population identifies as religious, and as Christian in particular, compared to the national

average, and is worth exploring in detail. The next section will delve into the history of Liverpool's party politics, with the aim of developing an understanding of why the Conservative party has fallen so far out of favour in Liverpool and consequently, why it remains one of the least fragmented local authorities in the country.

As was touched upon above, until the middle of the twentieth century, Liverpool was a bastion of Conservative support in the North-West despite being a heavily working-class city, and there is a strong case to be made that the main reason for this is religion. Perhaps uniquely among the great cities of England, Liverpool's development has been shaped and conditioned by religion, and the politics of religion. According to Baxter (1969), the Great Famine in Ireland led to a mass exodus of Irish Catholics to British cities, with Liverpool the major recipient – by 1851, around a quarter of Liverpool's population was born in Ireland (Bounds, 2020). As the majority of those who settled in Liverpool were either too poor or too unskilled to make a life elsewhere, the city became split on national-religious lines, with the consequence that over the next century, religion in Liverpool 'dominated its political life and distorted it in a way that was unknown even in Glasgow – only Belfast can offer a comparison' (Baxter, 1969, p. 1; cited in Jeffery, 2017a, p. 391).

Although there is considerable debate as to the extent to which the Conservative Party in Liverpool stoked anti-Catholic sentiment – Waller (1981), for example, argues that the Conservatives could not possible have prevailed in Liverpool without doing so, while Davies (1996) argues that while sectarianism was a relevant factor, its importance has been overblown – it is inarguable that the Conservative Party could rely on strong, working-class, Protestant support in the city. This support was bolstered by the issue of Irish Home Rule, with those against the idea leaning heavily towards the Conservatives, and those in favour tending to vote for the Irish Nationalist Party. So strong was this divide that Liverpool contained the only constituency outside of Ireland ever to elect an Irish Nationalist to parliament, with T.P. O'Connor serving as Member of Parliament for Liverpool Scotland from 1885 until his death in 1929 (Brady, 1983). The strength of this divide meant that the potential for the Labour party

to reach the Protestant working-class voter, or indeed the poor Catholic working-class, who tended to vote for the Irish National Party, was severely limited until much later in history. Similarly, the Liberal party were stuck in an electoral middle-ground in which their support for Irish Home Rule alienated Protestant voters, while Catholics felt better represented by explicitly Catholic parties (Jeffery, 2017a, p. 392).

As a consequence, the Conservative party 'continued to thrive in the interlocking associational network – party, popular and sectarian – which facilitated ready interaction between the classes', meaning that party political support was split almost entirely across religious lines, rather than between classes. The immediate post-WWI years are seen as the period in which the religious cleavage finally broke down to be replaced by the class cleavage as the main determinant of voting behaviour in the UK, and in a working-class city like Liverpool, this should have led to a massive surge in support for Labour. However, this did not happen in Liverpool in the same way as the rest of the country; even as late as 1969, the Conservative party polled 53.4 percent in the general election compared to Labour's 45.2 percent. The slower decline can be attributed at least in part to the strength of working-class Protestant socialisation into Conservative Party support. While one might expect a working-class Liverpudlian child in the inter-war period to support Labour, many such children would have been born into Protestant families for whom Irish Home Rule was a salient issue within living memory, and thus would be strongly socialised into Conservative support from a young age, when political socialisation is most effective (Butler & Stokes, 1974, p. 51). This situation was compounded by the long-standing success of the Conservative Party, which helped to portray them as the 'natural' party of local government in Liverpool as compared to the relatively new and unestablished Labour Party (Jeffery, 2017a, p. 394).

Of course, this situation could not, and did not, last forever, and as fewer children were socialised into their parents' support for the Conservative Party, the national class cleavage began to have more of an effect in determining voting in Liverpool. This had a doubly negative effect on Conservative support; the rise of the class cleavage as the dominant determinant of

voting behaviour made Liverpool's large working-class population more likely to vote Labour in the first place, and for those who might once have been socialised into the Conservative Party, the Labour Party became their natural new home. So, while the strength of religious feeling in Liverpool meant that the religious cleavage held sway for far longer than in most other places, especially because of Liverpool's high working-class population, it does not explain why the Conservatives saw a surge in popularity in the 1960s, or a corresponding fall in the 1970s. Instead, we must turn to the influence of national politics on local government in Liverpool to explain these events (Jeffery, 2017a, pp. 394–5).

The 1960s and 1970s were an incredibly turbulent period in British national politics, and local elections to a large extent reflected local dissatisfaction with national developments. Using articles from local newspapers, including the *Liverpool Echo* and *Daily Post*, Jeffery (2017a) demonstrates that the view among Liverpool's councillors was that the performance of the Labour government at the time led to frustration with the party in Liverpool, with voters expressing this dissatisfaction in local elections. Importantly, Labour voters tended to simply abstain, rather than switch allegiance to the Liberal Party, thus consolidating Conservative dominance in this period (Jeffery, 2017a, p. 396). When Heath was elected in 1970, this trend reversed, with the performance of his Conservative government now attracting the ire of Liverpool's voters at local elections. While the local vote for the Conservatives did not immediately drop, the Labour vote rose substantially, with those who abstained from voting for Labour in previous years returning to the ballot box to vote for their party. Then, crucially, the 1972 Local Government Act reduced the number of wards in Liverpool from 40 to 33, with the whole council up for election in 1973.

Very surprisingly, the Liberal Party were the ones to capitalise on this shake-up, with their impressive strategy of focusing on pavement politics enabling them to win 47 percent of the vote, compared to Labour on 43 percent and the Conservatives on just 9 percent. This sudden defeat of the Conservatives enabled the Liberal Party to shift the electoral narrative in the city, positioning themselves as the main alternative to Labour and the best chance of preventing a

socialist council. So, as we have seen, the Conservative's electoral malaise in Liverpool can be traced to both the declining significance of the religious cleavage in the city, followed by voter dissatisfaction with the Heath administration and the change of electoral boundaries that enabled the Liberal Party to supplant the Conservatives as the main opposition to Labour. However, it is not the case that this was 'the final nail in the coffin of the Liverpool Conservatives' as Jeffery (2017a, p. 398) claims. As Figure 36, above, shows, the Conservative Party recovered quickly from their slump in 1973, and won by far the most votes in the 1977 local elections, on 47 percent compared to 28 percent and 24 percent for Labour and the Liberals respectively. They again won the most votes in 1978, albeit by a smaller margin, and though they were overtaken by Labour in 1979, they still outperformed the Liberals. It was not until 1980, a year into Thatcher's prime ministership, that they became the third-largest party by vote share, a position from which they never recovered, with votes steadily declining until they reached the point in the mid-1990s where a 10 percent share would be nothing short of an electoral miracle for the party, a situation that prevails until this day.

Of course, Liverpool's relationship with Thatcher and her Conservative government is well-documented, but the exact reasons for the deep distrust of the Conservatives on Merseyside can also be attributed to what Jeffery (2017b) terms the 'Scouse identity'. He argues that by the 1980s, Liverpool was suffering both economically and socially, with high unemployment and rampant crime and drug use. While the extent to which this can be blamed on Thatcher's policies or the changing economy and natural decline of heavy industry is still very much up for debate, the Militant-led Labour council successfully framed Liverpool's decline as the sole fault of the Conservative government. As a result of this, Jeffery argues, the key tenets of the 'Scouse identity' became the rejection of the key tenets of Thatcherism, including competition, free market economics, and the private sector, and emphasised the traits of 'solidarity' and 'justice', which were portrayed as anathema to Thatcher. This in turn led to the norm that true Scousers don't vote Conservative, and this norm was reinforced through the same socialisation mechanism that had reinforced Conservative support for most of the century. However, unlike previously, this socialisation faced fewer restraints, with both Labour and the Liberal

Democrats finding it easy to thrive from this anti-Tory Scouse identity, and as the Conservatives were already electorally irrelevant, there was little to no political resistance to this state of affairs (Jeffery, 2017b).

The final factor in this complete Conservative exile from the city was the April 1989 Hillsborough disaster, in which 96 Liverpool supporters attending an FA Cup semi-final match at the Hillsborough stadium in Sheffield were killed in a crush caused by overcrowding and poor crowd control. The chain of events that followed, in which politicians, the police, and the media, most notably *The Sun* newspaper, pushed a false narrative that blamed the behaviour of Liverpool fans, rather than failings of crowd control, are too detailed and controversial to fully explore in this thesis. However, the upshot of this was that 'the Conservatives, and in particular Margaret Thatcher, came to be held responsible locally for sanctioning the fabrication of police witness statements and for feeding falsehoods to sections of the Conservative-supporting press' (Wilks-Heeg, 2019, pp. 11–12). Even today, *The Sun*, which ran headlines such as those shown in Figure 40, below, is boycotted so effectively in the region that it is practically impossible to buy a copy of the newspaper on Merseyside. This situation has ramifications to this day, with one study finding that the boycott of the Eurosceptic *Sun*, and the consequent popularity of the pro-EU *Daily Mirror* on Merseyside, being the key reason behind Liverpool's strong Remain vote in the 2016 Brexit referendum. They find substantial evidence that Merseyside residents became considerably less Eurosceptic in the years immediately following the boycott, and that this decline in Euroscepticism was strongest among cohorts that came of age during the boycott, and among the working-class, who were the key demographic of the newspaper (Foos & Bischof, 2022, p. 35).

To recap, then, we have seen how Liverpool's local politics were staunchly Conservative for many years, with the party's dominance lasting throughout the nineteenth century and halfway through the twentieth. Much of this dominance was due to the strength of the Protestant vote in the city, with almost all of this vote going to the Conservative party. Moreover, the significance of the religious cleavage declined far more slowly than in other

places, but decline it eventually did which, combined with the redrawing of electoral boundaries in 1972, the effective campaigning of the Liberals, and later, the abhorrence of Thatcherism in the city, meant that the Conservative party was effectively nullified as an electoral force by the late 1980s. All of this, however, fails to explain why Liverpool is now so staunchly Labour, and so resistant to fragmentation. As late as 2007, the Liberal Democrats both polled and won more seats than the Labour party, but since then, their fortunes have declined so steadily that the council has effectively become a one-party administration.

Figure 40: Front page of The Sun newspaper, 19th April 1989

Source: (Wikipedia, 2022)

Academic analyses of why this occurred are thinner on the ground than those explaining the downfall of the Conservatives. As with the decline of the Conservative Party being attributed to Thatcher, there is an obvious answer to the decline of the Liberal Democrats, and that is their decision to enter into a coalition government with the Conservative Party after the 2010 general election, with voters expressing their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs at the local elections. However, as with the decline of the Conservatives, this was more of a final nail

in the coffin than the initial cause, as the Liberal Democrat vote in Liverpool was already rapidly declining by the time that this occurred. While academic analyses of the reasons for this are scarce, one source from the Liberal Democrat party themselves gives some important reasons for their decline.

In his report on the history of the Liberal and Liberal Democrat parties in Liverpool, Councillor Richard Kemp CBE pins the beginning of the party's downfall in the city on a 2006 dispute between the Chief Executive of Liverpool City Council and the leader of the Liverpool Liberal Democrats, Councillor (now Lord) Mike Storey, which led to both parties stepping down from their positions and damaged the credibility of the Liberal Democrats. In addition, Kemp blames the bid for Liverpool to become the 2008 European City of Culture for drawing focus away from governing and campaigning, and the party failing to keep their eyes on the bigger picture. Finally, he says that councillors who were elected 'on the crest of the wave' of the party's success in the city then struggled to run an effective re-election campaign when things became more difficult, asserting that they 'didn't know what to do and didn't want to do it anyway', 'believing their own propaganda' and causing the electorate to lose faith and end their association with the party (Kemp, 2018, p. 17). These issues were only exacerbated in 2010, when the Liberal Democrats joined with the Conservatives in a coalition government at Westminster, and the Liberal Democrats became damned by association with the party for which Liverpudlians had developed a visceral hatred. By 2014, the Liberal Democrats lost every seat in the city, and had dropped behind the Greens to become only the third-biggest party in the city (Kemp, 2018, p. 18). While they have now shown some signs of recovery, the party is still nowhere near the electoral force it once was in Liverpool, languishing a distant second behind Labour, who received 64 percent of the vote in 2018 compared to the Liberal Democrats' meagre 17 percent.

7.3.3 Conclusion: Liverpool – a case study in bucking the national trend

As we have seen, Liverpool's relationship with party politics, and its levels of fragmentation, have continually run counter to national trends over the past century, with the effective

number of parties in the city continually declining while fragmentation increased at the national level. This trend in Liverpool ran counter not only to the national picture, but to the regression models of the demographic drivers of fragmentation presented in this thesis. According to these models, Liverpool's young, less well-educated, working-class, ethnically homogenous, and religious population should make the city far more prone to fragmentation, with the exception being that religiosity has a strong negative association with the effective number of parties. Clearly, Liverpool presents a unique case, and indeed, looking at the history of the city reveals a number of factors that have combined to make the city one of the least fragmented places in the country.

Firstly, the strong Irish presence and the importance of religion to Liverpool's history meant that for much of the twentieth century, the city was a strongly Conservative place. While its association with the Conservative party has been dramatically ended, its religiosity has not declined at the same rate, with Liverpool still a far more religious place than most of the country. However, this no longer seems enough to explain the lack of fragmentation, as one would expect religion, especially Christianity, to be associated with Conservative voting. Instead, in Liverpool, it is the city's history that is far more important than its demographics in determining its voting patterns, and thus fragmentation levels. The turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s, in which the importance of heavy industry declined, unemployment rose, and Liverpool suffered heavily with the policies of Thatcherism, as well as the Hillsborough disaster, all combined to make the city an electoral wasteland for the Conservative party. The Liberal Democrats' decision to form a national government in coalition with the Conservatives then made them anathema to the city's electorate, which allowed Labour a free march to electoral dominance in the city, a position they had no problem assuming given the city's strong links with trade unions and working-class radicalism. Liverpool, then, is an ideal case study of exactly how demographic factor can be trumped by unique historical and social circumstances in a place, and provides an important reminder that any statistical modelling will have exceptions that make paying attention to local contexts and situations critically important.

7.4 Conclusion

At the start of this chapter of the thesis, we set out to bolster the largely quantitative analysis found in the first two empirical chapters with a more qualitative, in-depth look of the local contexts and situations of three case studies pertinent to our overall fragmentation story. These cases both served to confirm and challenge some of the findings from previous chapters. We looked first at the highly fragmented local authority Forest of Dean, an ex-mining town near the Welsh border in Gloucestershire that has moved from being a bastion of working-class Labour support to one that perfectly fits the story of these places shifting rightwards in their electoral preferences and moving their allegiance to the Conservatives and UKIP. This case study largely served to bolster the evidence for the group known in the literature as the 'left-behind' being the catalyst for fragmentation in many areas in England, and helped to show how this has happened in the context of a town a little outside of the archetypal Northern ex-industrial town in which this phenomenon has seemingly been most prevalent.

We then considered the case of Ipswich, a large port town located in the agricultural county of Suffolk whose economy has now moved towards retail services and finance. Ipswich was an interesting case study for a number of reasons, namely its status as one of the most marginal constituencies in general elections and its party configuration, which is currently Labour-Conservative-Lib Dem, but over the past few decades, has just as frequently been Conservative-Labour-Lib Dem, putting it squarely in the realm of a classic, two-and-a-half party English local authority. The effective number of parties has consistently hovered around the high end of the medium fragmentation category, and in terms of our regression models, Ipswich represents somewhat of an enigmatic case, with a mixture of conforming and challenging the findings of the model. We saw that Ipswich's population was far less likely to be religious than the national average, and also had a higher proportion of people with lower levels of education and lower social grades than the national average, all of which pushed the area towards higher fragmentation levels. However, this is balanced out by its lower old age dependency ratio and lower number of people with middling levels of education and of the C1

and C2 social grades, which helped to bring down the effective number of parties and place it in the medium fragmentation category. Ipswich turned out to be an excellent case study in demonstrating that the models we have generated in this thesis must be taken as a whole, with the recognition that no single demographic variable can account for fragmentation levels, and there is a complex interaction between them that helps to determine the effective number of parties operating in an area.

Finally, we looked at Liverpool, a staunchly one-party city in which it is almost unimaginable that any party other than Labour could be the main electoral force. Liverpool was an interesting case study because for many reasons, not least because it highlighted how unique local contexts could greatly alter the impact of our demographic variables on fragmentation, and result in a city with a long history of fierce electoral competition becoming an essentially one-party system. The regression model was almost entirely inapplicable to Liverpool, with only its higher number of religious people, and to a slightly lesser extent, lower number of people belonging to the 'squeezed middle', being in concordance with the extremely low levels of fragmentation seen in the city. An examination of Liverpool's history, however, revealed that religion perhaps more than any other variable has had an extreme impact on the political situation in the city, which partially explained the lower levels of fragmentation given the continued importance of religion as a determinant of voting behaviour. However, the most important lesson to be learned from the case study of Liverpool is that local context can easily override the demographic model we constructed, with the policies of Thatcher, the Hillsborough disaster, and the city's consequent boycott of the staunchly Conservative *Sun* newspaper combining to ensure that Liverpool will remain a bastion of Labour support for the foreseeable future.

The overall message of this chapter of the thesis, then, is that our demographic model both has wide applicability, but also that we cannot underestimate the importance of local contexts, which can easily override any inclinations a place might have towards higher or lower levels of fragmentation based on our model. Both Forest of Dean and Ipswich largely conformed to our

model, with the former highlighting the impact of the left-behind group in driving fragmentation, while Ipswich's middling levels of fragmentation make sense given its varied demographic make-up. Liverpool showed the significance of local contexts and events, and its rich history demonstrates that fragmentation, or the lack thereof, can be an extremely context-dependent phenomenon, and reinforces the importance of caution when attempting to generalise our findings.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

The dealignment of English political parties with their traditional voting base, and the consequences of this for English party politics, and the political system more widely, has been the subject of much debate since the Brexit referendum, which brought the new cleavages in English politics to the forefront of the minds of political analysts. Since that time, a wealth of literature has been generated concerning how the electorate is divided, what the causes and consequences of these divisions are, and what this means for party politics. Much of this literature has been binary in nature, focusing on polarisation and in doing so, obscuring the sheer variety of local political systems existing in England and the ways in which they are changing. This thesis has sought to remedy this by instead focusing on the heterogeneity of political fragmentation across places; while it is almost indisputable that, at the national level, the UK's electoral system is fragmenting, what is often overlooked is that this is not a heterogeneous process occurring at the same rate, or even at all, at the local level. This thesis has sought to redress this imbalance by examining the differences in the rate and extent of fragmentation down to ward level in English local elections, and in doing so has demonstrated that the new patterns of party support that emerged in the wake of the breakdown of the class cleavage have led to increased fragmentation at the national level, but highlights that there are substantial differences in the rate and extent to which fragmentation is occurring in different places. This thesis has shown that not only are there substantial differences in the level of fragmentation found across England, but also that the reasons for this are a complex mix of party politics, demographic variables, and local contextual factors, all of which combine to emphasise that far more attention needs to be paid to the nuanced nature of new electoral and political cleavages in England if they are to be fully understood.

Additionally, Chapter 6 sought to understand if there are any demographic factors that make fragmentation more or less likely, and if these conform to the pre-existing narratives in the literature that see the 'left-behind' as the main demographic group behind fragmentation. For the most part, the demographic analysis showed this to be the case; the regression models

showed that lower levels of qualification and lower social grades were both associated with higher fragmentation, which largely seems to confirm the idea that it is the 'left-behind' driving fragmentation. However, as with everything in this thesis, it is not as simple as that. The models also showed that higher proportions of those belonging to the middling levels of qualification and social grades were also associated with higher fragmentation, which also lends some credence to the argument that it is the 'squeezed middle' driving fragmentation. The results of this thesis lend tentative support to the idea that both groups have had a part to play in increasing fragmentation in recent years. The models also revealed that religion played a strong role in hindering fragmentation, a surprising result given that religion is rarely seen as a major variable in political behaviour in contemporary England. This result begs the question of whether religion still has a strong effect on political behaviour, or whether it is merely acting as a proxy variable for other, more relevant factors.

Finally, in keeping with the theme of there being a litany of local election systems with different relationships to fragmentation, the case studies in Chapter 7 revealed that local context is immensely important in determining how and why fragmentation occurs, and emphasises that any generalisations made from the regression models should come with the caveat that an area's unique political and social history can override any demographic indicators as to its proclivity to fragment. The first case study, which looked at Forest of Dean, showed how a strongly Labour-supporting, ex-mining town shifted rightward, with the rise of UKIP driving fragmentation there. In many ways, this case study was representative of the archetypal 'left-behind' story, with working-class Labour support declining, fragmenting, and moving to the right, with UKIP and, following the Brexit vote, the Conservatives, benefitting from this decline. The second case study, looking at Ipswich, showed how medium levels of fragmentation occur in a place that conforms to the typical two-and-a-half party view of English politics, with levels of fragmentation staying around the median due to fierce competition between the two largest parties rather than any strong presence of smaller parties.

Finally, we looked at Liverpool, which of all the case studies perhaps best served to emphasise the importance of local context. Despite the vast majority of Liverpool's demographics pointing towards a much higher level of fragmentation than is actually the case, the city is consistently one of the least fragmented local authorities in the entire country. In fact, Liverpool is essentially a one-party city, with it being almost unthinkable for any party other than Labour to win an election there, despite the city actually having a long history of fierce electoral competition. Much of this is due to Liverpool's unique history, with an historically strong Irish Catholic immigrant presence meaning that it is a much more religious place than many other metropolitan cities in England, and as religion was strongly negatively associated with fragmentation, this goes some way to explaining the low fragmentation in the city. However, this is not the full story; Liverpool's uniquely contentious relationship with the Conservative party, fuelled by Thatcher's policy of 'managed decline' and the Hillsborough disaster, has made the party anathema on Merseyside, and allows Labour to dominate at elections. This uniquely local set of circumstances highlights the importance of using any generalisations made from the data in this thesis with the caveat that local history can override even strong demographic indicators pointing towards higher levels of fragmentation.

Overall, then, this thesis demonstrated that the fragmentation of English local elections is, in itself, a fragmented phenomenon, occurring at different rates and to varying extents across a multitude of local contexts. This thesis has shown that fragmentation is not limited to one type of place; for example, the cities of Bristol, Bath, and York had some of the highest levels of fragmentation of any local authority in the data, whereas Liverpool, Manchester, and London all had some of the lowest. We also saw how there are a vast number of party configurations that exist across English local elections, with some being more associated with fragmentation than others, and that again, these configurations defy neat categorisation into binary divisions such as town and city. To further illustrate the point that fragmentation is a much more complex and nuanced phenomenon than much of the literature gives it credit for, the regression models of the demographic drivers of fragmentation revealed that no one single group is responsible for higher effective numbers of parties, with both the 'squeezed middle'

and 'left-behind' demographics being associated with higher fragmentation. This reveals the need for politicians and academics to pay particular attention to these groups, not only to address political dissatisfaction arising from inequalities, but more cynically, as areas upon which to focus electoral campaigning in order to take advantage of the presence of these groups indicating that an area may be more likely to fragment and be more amenable to strong electoral competition. Finally, the case studies demonstrated that we must be cautious associating any group with fragmentation, as local contexts can easily override national trends, such is the case with Liverpool, which we would expect to be a rather highly fragmented area based on its demographics, but is instead one of the least fragmented local authorities in the country.

8.1 Limitations of the research

Of course, and as with any research, the analysis presented in this thesis has not been without its challenges, and the conclusions drawn have their limitations. Some of these limitations come from issues with the demographic data used in the thesis, and in particular, the use of census data. Compared to the electoral data, the census data was up to seven years out of date, and even aside from the issues of how rapidly demographic change can occur even within short spaces of time, this chronological disparity also affected the linking of the demographic and electoral data. This was because changing electoral boundaries made matching demographic data to electoral data, and making comparisons over time, difficult to achieve. Aside from this, questions over how to treat the 'Other' category in electoral data when calculating effective number of parties, and difficulties in finding the best ways to display the data in order to best illustrate the heterogenous nature of fragmentation across the country, also presented challenges. A full discussion of the data issues can be found in Chapter 4.

Aside from the data issues, one of the major limitations of the research is paradoxically also proof of its usefulness given the current literature. A large part of the justification for this thesis was to demonstrate that the binary nature of current discussions about the electoral divisions currently at play in English politics was obscuring the complexity of the issue, looking

for simple explanations rather than acknowledging the myriad ways in which different party configurations and party contexts are affecting fragmentation across the country. However, in showing this to be the case, this thesis has also shown that as useful as quantitative models are in informing us about general patterns, there are always exceptions that can be of huge regional or local importance, as was revealed by the case study of Liverpool in Chapter 7.3.3.

Another limitation with this thesis is the ability to make generalisations over time and place using the conclusions it generates. As has already been discussed, this thesis uses data from the 2011 census and focuses heavily on the 2015-2018 local election cycle. While this is not a problem in itself, this election cycle represents an important moment in the history of English elections, with the Brexit debate dominating political discourse and the strength of UKIP in 2015 and 2016, in particular, perhaps overriding the 'normal' course of fragmentation. As such, great caution should be taken in asserting that the demographic indicators associated with the 'left-behind' or the 'squeezed middle' are indicators of fragmentation in and of themselves; it may simply be the case that they are the best indicators of support for those challenger parties that best took advantage of the political and electoral turmoil caused by Brexit. As will be discussed in the next section, it would be very interesting to compare future research on the demographic drivers of fragmentation to the results generated in this thesis. Similarly, it may be difficult to extend the results of this analysis to different places, even within the United Kingdom. Fragmentation in Scotland or Wales may occur in very different ways than in England, or be driven by different demographics, and care must be taken not to generalise the results beyond the specific context examined in this thesis.

8.2 Areas for further research

While this thesis has provided a much wider and deeper understanding of the nature of fragmentation in English local elections, it has also revealed many areas for further research, which encompass historical changes in fragmentation, more detailed looks at contemporary fragmentation patterns, and how patterns of fragmentation might change in future. Beginning with the historical view, one possible area for further research would be to investigate how

fragmentation patterns have changed over time, as well as if the demographic drivers of fragmentation have altered. For the former, it would be interesting to see if the most fragmented places now were also the most fragmented places twenty, thirty, or forty years ago. Much of the literature has described political dissatisfaction in certain types of places, normally post-industrial or seaside towns, being the driving force behind new political cleavages. Given that these areas were once the cornerstone of the British economy, it would be unlikely for this sense of dissatisfaction and proclivity towards fragmentation to be a historical constant. Therefore, analysing the most fragmented areas historically might reveal crucial new indicators as to the causes of fragmentation. Similarly, as was previously mentioned, time series analysis was considered for the regional-level analysis in Chapter 5.2, and it would be interesting for future analysis to use this method to determine mathematically exactly when there was a statistically significant upturn in the level of fragmentation seen in English local elections, and examine whether this was associated with any particular set of historical events or changing party-political priorities.

Regarding the latter, researching how the demographic drivers of fragmentation have changed over time would also add considerably to the findings of this thesis, as well as of the literature around electoral cleavages more generally. This thesis briefly touched on this issue, looking at the demographic drivers of fragmentation in the 2011 local elections compared to the 2015-2018 local election cycle, but this was largely done as a robustness check to see if changing ward boundaries between the time of the census and the 2015-2018 election cycle had affected the results of the analysis. It would be interesting to extend this further, to see if the demographic drivers of fragmentation were substantially different decades ago compared to today, or whether the importance of those belonging to the 'left-behind' and 'squeezed middle' in driving fragmentation represents a unique cultural moment that is not consistent through England's electoral history.

While the more historical research may be interesting, perhaps the greatest scope for further research would be in investigating the contemporary nature of fragmentation from different

angles than those taken in this thesis. One particular avenue for inquiry would potentially be to look at the issue from a more behavioural perspective, perhaps using individual-level data to drill down into exactly what makes an individual more or less likely to waver in their voting behaviour or to forego longstanding cultural allegiances with particular parties and forge new political loyalties. This type of inquiry might take a qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews with floating voters from key areas, such as the most fragmented places identified in this thesis. Alternatively, it could continue with quantitative analysis, taking a multi-level modelling approach to ascertain the relative importance of individual factors versus local context in determining how voters in highly fragmented areas cast their ballots.

Another approach might look at different factors in determining the key drivers of fragmentation in an area. This thesis has focused heavily on the demographic drivers, but future research might instead look at more party-political factors in order to complement the results of this study. For example, a future paper could examine how the demographic attributes of candidates, the allocation of party resources to particular areas, or the ways in which parties seek to appeal to voters outside of their typical supporter demographic, affect the likelihood of fragmentation. In particular, the allocation of party resources might be a fertile area for study that dovetails nicely with the work presented here; it would be very interesting to see if areas with a high number of people with the attributes found to be positively associated with fragmentation are more likely to fragment if challenger parties allocate more resources to fighting elections in that area, or if the impact of the demographic variables stays reasonably constant regardless of the electoral efforts of political parties. This would help to understand exactly how much fragmentation is driven by demographic factors, and how this can be affected by external influences.

Future studies might also expand the scope of the research by extending the analysis to include Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. As was previously mentioned, it was decided to exclude these countries from the research, as the unique political situations present in these places means that each could have a thesis of its own dedicated to its electoral cleavages, and

including them in this analysis would have only muddied the waters. However, the electoral situations in these places is no less important than in England, and would provide a much better understanding both of the phenomenon of fragmentation more generally, and also help us to understand if the demographics of fragmentation in England are a cultural phenomenon unique to the English context, or are symptomatic of wider trends across the United Kingdom, and even further afield. In a similar vein, further research might also spend more time comparing fragmentation in general elections to local elections. One of the major justifications for using local election data in this thesis, besides the gap in research and increased granularity of the data, was that there is substantial evidence to suggest that people behave differently in second-order elections compared to first-order elections. If this is the case, looking at either one in isolation will obscure the true story of fragmentation, and may hide important differences that are very relevant to the story of exactly how and why fragmentation occurs in certain places.

Finally, it would be very interesting to ascertain whether a repeat of the analyses in this thesis in ten- or twenty-years' time would reveal the same demographic groups being associated with fragmentation, or whether new cleavage structures will emerge in which a new demographic group provides strong support for a new challenger party, and thus becomes more strongly associated with fragmentation. Writing this conclusion in July 2022, four years after the most recent data used in this thesis, it is apparent that the political situation has evolved rapidly, with the UK's exit from the European Union being finalised in January 2020, Labour's move back to Blairite centrism under Starmer, and the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic all potentially changing fragmentation patterns as new voting priorities emerge, and the parties offer different platforms under new leaders. What is clear, however, is that fragmentation is an incredibly important topic in the study of politics, encompassing issues of dissatisfaction and disillusion, demographic change, party priorities, and how the political system can best serve its voters. If this thesis has revealed anything, it is that the fragmentation is a far more multi-faceted and complex phenomenon than much previous research has perhaps acknowledged, and that if our political system is to react to the needs of the electorate and

target dissatisfaction with the system, fragmentation must continue to be studied and understood by academics and politicians alike.

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