

‘Levelling up’: a political failure?

Rather than cementing their support in the Red Wall, a Conservative flagship policy now risks alienating voters across the country, writes **Lawrence McKay**.

It can be hard to believe that just a couple of years ago, commentators were talking sincerely of Conservative ‘hegemony’ in British politics. With a comfortable majority and a more pliant parliamentary party, Boris Johnson’s government was free to pursue what he called the ‘people’s priorities’ of Brexit and ‘levelling up’. This agenda would stake out a new centre-ground in British politics. Voters in towns in the North and Midlands, who had ‘lent’ their votes to the Conservatives, were to be turned into a new electoral bloc.

Levelling up was (and is) an ideologically incoherent agenda, but its political logic was far stronger. Its appeal was rooted in widespread discontent at long-term local decline, at the increasing visibility of regional inequalities and in the sentiment that successive governments had taken an uncaring approach to the places they called home. It understood that following an era of austerity, there is no more tangible signal of a government’s priorities than where and on what public money is spent.

Policies such as the Towns Fund, Future High Streets Fund and the Levelling Up Fund put this into practice. An old-fashioned process of Whitehall ‘picking winners’ has been restyled as a kind of political game-show: announcement days now come with a level of anticipation and political theatre akin to budget days. In politico-speak, the ‘optics’ of levelling up for the Conservatives are excellent. But in practice, these events have proved a lightning rod for discontent, both within and beyond the Conservative Party. There is a genuine puzzle on our hands: how did an agenda with such ostensibly broad appeal become yet another political headache for the government in Westminster?

In May 2022, I was involved in running a major piece of survey research into levelling up. We assembled an enormous, nationally-representative sample of 20,000 YouGov panelists and probed into many topics: their sense of pride in place, what problems they had locally, and many more. We wanted to understand how voters would really respond to tangible choices and trade-offs in levelling up.

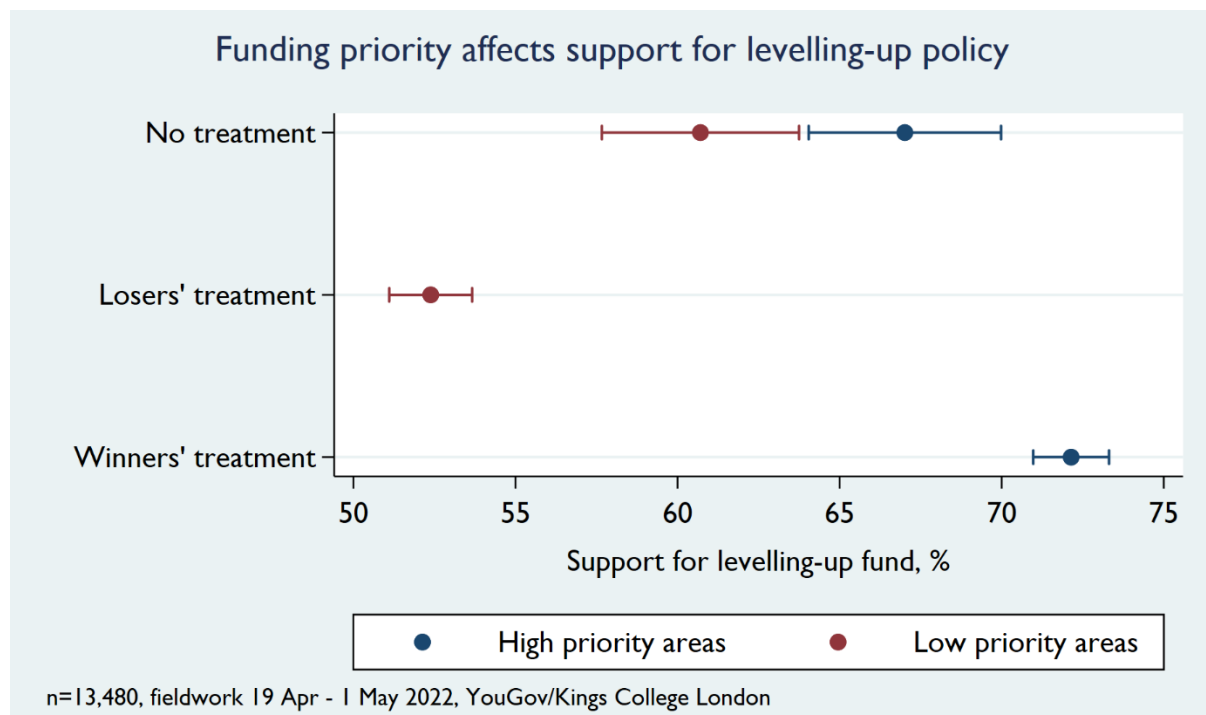
In the first experiment, we sought to test whether the process of levelling up matters: its transparency, degree of local involvement, and, in particular, how the decision to fund a project was made. This ‘conjoint’ experiment isolates how individual features of a proposal matter most, by randomly generating a series of proposals for a levelling up project in their area and making people choose between them.

We found that, systemically, people showed greater support for more transparent proposals and ones that involved the community. Furthermore, people tended to prefer a process out of the hands of ministers (either judged by experts or on a needs-based formula). As currently implemented, levelling up is a more top-down process which allows for ministerial discretion, and thus runs counter to these expressed preferences.

In the second experiment, we presented respondents with a news item regarding whether their area had been deemed ‘high priority’ or ‘low priority’ for levelling up (against a control group receiving no information). This recognised that not all areas would be winners of

levelling up. The treatments were chosen based on the real priority category assigned to different areas by the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities.

There was some upside to being 'high priority'; 'treated' respondents in the high priority category were more likely to support the Levelling Up Fund and to feel the government cared about their area. But on the flipside, we saw slightly larger effects for the low priority group: treated respondents showed a 'backlash' against the fund and were more likely to agree that 'the government cares less about my area than other parts of the country'. A competitive, zero-sum approach therefore, has real potential to alienate its many 'losers' (including, perhaps, parts of the relatively affluent 'Blue Wall' of southern Conservative seats).



This reveals the political failure of levelling up, which some have seen as contingent (rocked by COVID, Ukraine and executive dysfunction) but is in fact structural. The goodwill generated from one's area being 'picked' is mirrored by the ill-will of being rejected and, moreover, both groups dislike the idea that they can be simply 'picked' or 'rejected' in the first place.

Already, this approach is fraying. It has come under fire from powerful Conservatives such as West Midlands Mayor Andy Street, who has condemned the 'begging bowl culture' it creates. In November, journalist Isabel Hardman reported that, according to Conservative insiders, current Levelling Up Secretary Michael Gove is no great fan of the approach. The Labour opposition, meanwhile, pitches a new approach via its 'Take Back Control Bill', an ambitious proposal to devolve money and powers to councils. However, any incumbent of Number 10 will face the temptations of patronage and the pork-barrel. Whether Westminster can wean off its centralising habits is a key question for the years to come.

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