

Institution: University of Southampton		
Unit of Assessment: 19 Politics and International Studies		
Title of case study: 19-02 Shaping the national agenda on place and policy		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: January 2015 – July 2020		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Will Jennings Gerry Stoker	Professor of Political Science and Public Policy Professor of Governance	April 2012 – present January 2007 – present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2016 – July 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>The economic and political divide between cities and towns has become a major focus of British policy makers since the EU referendum vote in 2016. Research by Professors Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker has made a highly influential contribution to the understanding of Britain's political divides, shaping the national agenda on place and public policy. It has shaped political debate (with substantial, direct influence on the Labour and Conservative parties), underpinned the foundation of a new think tank, the Centre for Towns, which has been at the forefront of the emerging policy agenda on <i>towns</i>, and has directly informed the design and content of media coverage of British elections by Sky News.</p>		
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Between them, Professors Jennings and Stoker have been undertaking research on British politics and public policy for many decades. Both have published widely on democratic politics in Britain, while Stoker in particular has been prolific in his research on urban politics and local and regional governance. Their joint work over the past five years has considered the role of place in politics and policy, and specifically the geographical polarisation of public opinion and voting behaviour.</p> <p>Their thesis of bifurcated politics, or 'Two Englands', published in <i>The Political Quarterly</i> in 2016 [3.1] ahead of the referendum on the UK's membership of the EU argued that social and economic change – characterised by uneven patterns of growth and development between places – was fundamentally reshaping politics in England and Wales (with Scotland having undergone a distinct nationalism-based realignment in the recent past). The study identified the sharpening of difference in public attitudes and identities between areas of growth (typically core cities and university towns) and areas of relative decline (in particular coastal and former industrial towns). This widely-cited research was important in anticipating the political divides that came into stark contrast after the 2016 referendum and which seemingly have hardened since. Knowledge exchange relating to this research agenda was supported through two ESRC Impact Acceleration Award grants [G1], co-producing a practitioner workshop and report ('Place-based policymaking after Brexit') with the think tank New Local Government Network.</p> <p>In subsequent analyses of constituency-level patterns of voting in England at the 2017 general election [3.2], they revealed a 'tilting' of the electoral axis, with Labour performing better in major cities and university towns, and the Conservatives making gains in smaller towns and rural areas. Through analysis of longer-term trends in electoral support, they argued that the result was better understood as a symptom of a long-term divide emerging between citizens residing in areas of relative growth or decline. These findings were backed up through a report authored by Jennings and a team from the think tank New Economics Foundation [3.3], with demographic and economic trends underlying these growing divides further discussed in an essay in the journal <i>Renewal</i> [3.4]. A further ESRC Impact Acceleration Award grant [G2] supported a workshop that brought together international experts, from organisations such as the Brookings Institution and Joseph Rowntree Foundation.</p>		

Subsequent investigation of these trends of geographical polarisation [3.5] has shown that demographic and economic change (and decline) is linked both to the relative electoral gains or losses made by Labour and the Conservatives in recent decades, and to the prevalence of more 'open' or 'closed' attitudes (at constituency level). These research findings have made important advances in revealing the changing political geography of Britain, its interrelationship with social and economic conditions, and the challenges raised for public policy and the strategies adopted by political parties [3.6].

3. References to the research

3.1 Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. (2016). 'The Bifurcation of Politics: Two Englands.' *The Political Quarterly* 87(3): 372-382. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12228>

3.2 Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. (2017). 'Tilting towards the cosmopolitan axis? Political change in England and the 2017 general election.' *The Political Quarterly* 88(3): 359-369. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12403>

3.3 Will Jennings, Adrian Bua, Rachel Laurence and Will Brett. (2017). *Cities and Towns: the 2017 General Election and the Social Divisions of Place*. London: New Economics Foundation. <https://neweconomics.org/uploads/files/FINAL-CITIES-AND-TOWNS.pdf>

3.4 Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. (2017). 'The New Economy, Social Change, and Polarized Places: A Changed Terrain for British Politics?' *Renewal* 25(3/4): 28-43. <https://eprints.soton.ac.uk/447807>

3.5 Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker. (2019). 'The Divergent Dynamics of Cities and Towns: Geographical Polarisation After Brexit.' *The Political Quarterly* 90(S2): 155-166. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12612>

3.6 Gerry Stoker. (2019). 'Relating and Responding to the Politics of Resentment.' *The Political Quarterly* 90(S1): 138-151. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12576>

Grants

G1 ESRC Impact Acceleration Award: 'Knowledge Exchange on Place, Brexit and Policy', February to March 2017.

G2 ESRC Impact Acceleration Award: 'An International Workshop on Towns – knowledge exchange on the growing importance of place to polarisation in politics and public policy', February to March 2019.

4. Details of the impact

The research by Jennings and Stoker has generated three lines of impact. It has: (i) informed and shaped the discussion of geographical divides in British politics and society by parliamentarians, political parties and think tanks; (ii) informed and supported the creation of a new think tank, the Centre for Towns, which has been highly influential in informing and advancing the emerging policy agenda on towns; and (iii) provided expertise, data and analysis that has directly informed Sky News' coverage of British elections.

i. Informing and shaping understanding of geographical divides in British politics

This research has made an important contribution to understanding of political change in Britain, and the significance of geography, among parliamentarians – especially among Labour MPs who represent former industrial towns. Their original study [3.1] on the polarisation of British politics was highlighted in an essay in *The New Statesman* in November 2016 by Bridget Phillipson (MP for Houghton and Sunderland South), who wrote "One of the best assessments I have read recently on what is happening to our politics is an article on the bifurcation of our politics that Will Jennings and Gerry Stoker published in the *Political Quarterly* in March this year..." [5.1], and by Rachel Reeves (MP for Leeds West) in October 2018 in an article for *Labour List* [5.1]. Jennings gave oral evidence to the BEIS Select Committee chaired by Reeves in September 2018 about the significance of these trends for public policy.

Most notably, the research has strongly influenced the speeches and writing of Lisa Nandy (MP for Wigan, candidate for the Labour Party leadership in 2020, and Shadow Foreign Secretary).

Nandy first addressed the significance of 'Two Englands' in an article for The Huffington Post in February 2017 [5.1] and was expanded upon in a speech to the *Institute for Public Policy Research* in March 2017 [5.1]. Nandy has since drawn upon the theme in commentaries for *The Times*, *The New York Review of Books*, and a much-reported speech on power and political change also published as a commentary in *The Huffington Post* in September 2018 [5.1], as well as in an essay for *Political Quarterly* in 2019. Nandy says "*I came across it while I was working on a speech about the neglect of towns in the political debate. The clarity with which it set out the trends of the last forty years was the basis of the speech. It made a real splash among MPs from all political parties who found a way to interpret the trends ... that they had been trying to understand for some time. For the media and parts of Westminster it also provided an entirely new perspective on the outcome of the EU referendum.*" "*The importance of the Two Englands study is not that these trends are new, but that they have been happening for well over a decade and not been at all understood in public debate. That has now fundamentally changed*" [5.2].

The research has also significantly influenced policy debates within leading think tanks and the major parties. The *Policy Network* report 'Labour in English Towns' [5.1] published in May 2018 drew heavily on the analysis by Jennings and Stoker of differences in the electoral performance of Labour and the Conservatives in towns and cities [3.2, 3.3], and used the measure of relative decline promoted by the research [3.2, 3.5]. It has also been noted in reports by the *Institute for Public Policy Research* ('The State of the North 2017' and 'The State of the North 2018' [5.1]) and *Hope Not Hate* ('Hope, Fear and Loss' [5.1]). The idea of 'Two Englands' was described as "persuasive" by Conservative think tank *Onward* in its 2019 report 'The Politics of Belonging' [5.1]. Rosie Carter of *Hope Note Hate* observes: "*I think the "Two Englands" study is one that people talk about all the time, they just refer to the "Two Englands" and people know exactly what you're talking about*" [5.3].

ii. Informing and advancing the national policy agenda on towns via the Centre for Towns

The research has also been central to the creation of a new think tank, the Centre for Towns (CfT), which through a range of projects and collaborations has been highly influential in informing and advancing the emerging policy agenda on towns, promoting the importance of place-sensitive approaches to public policy. CfT was founded in October 2017 by Lisa Nandy MP, Ian Warren (a political data analyst) and Jennings. As noted, the work of Jennings and Stoker on 'Two Englands' and the growing divide in values and outlooks between particular places had previously been taken up by Nandy, and CfT built directly on the intellectual foundations of this research. Nandy says "*The Two Englands study was the catalyst for setting up the Centre for Towns*" [5.2]. Since the launch of CfT, Nandy notes "*we have actively challenged the thinking which has informed major political parties and much of local government for decades. It has led to a flurry of reports on towns from established think tanks, debates in Westminster, widespread media coverage of towns – almost all of which featured Centre for Towns because we have largely been the only source of information about our towns*" [5.2].

The activities of CfT have significantly enhanced understanding of the issues affecting towns and resulted in increased political attention to towns in public policy, as well as promoting the use of data in this area. It has done so through its own reports and through a number of collaborations with external stakeholders [5.4]. These include reports produced jointly with *Hope Not Hate* (on attitudes towards social change), *Ernst and Young* (on trends in Foreign Direct Investment in towns and cities) [5.5], the *Royal Institute of British Architects* (on ageing and housing), the *BBC* (on identity and place), and the *Yorkshire Post* (relating to challenges posed to the region by demographic trends). As such, via Jennings' contribution to the CfT, this body of research has significantly advanced understanding of geographical inequalities in a range of policy domains for a number of audiences – including stakeholders within those domains and also for policymakers, media and the public. Analysis by Centre for Towns has been mentioned *nine times* in debates in UK Parliament (including at PMQs) and in motions in UK Parliament and the Welsh Assembly [5.1]. Sarah Longlands of think tank IPPR North has said "*People like Centre for Towns have really helped to propel towns further up the list of priorities*" [5.3]. Will Tanner, former Deputy Head of the Number 10 Policy Unit and Founder of the think tank *Onward* says "*I think the Centre for Towns is clearly one of the leading voices [in the towns*

debate]. The work that Will, Ian and Lisa have done over the last few years has been exemplary in terms of making people think about towns as a unit of economic and social analysis” [5.3].

There is clear evidence that research by CfT influenced the UK government’s £3.6 billion Towns Fund. Jennings was consulted by the Cities and Local Growth Unit of the Ministry for Communities, Housing and Local Government (MCHLG) in August 2019 on the future shape of the fund (phone call with Team Leader – Regeneration Investment, 27 August 2019). The Towns Fund prospectus [5.6] published in November 2019 cited the CfT/EY report on trends of FDI in towns and cities [5.5] on page 5 in its discussion of the economic challenges faced by towns, in addition to making reference to housing, transport and digital connectivity (links to CfT reports relating to these areas were shared with MCHLG via email on 27th August 2019, indicating a clear link between analysis by CfT and the policy issues addressed by the Towns Fund). Following that consultation, MCHLG indicated *“We’re incredibly grateful for your advice and evidence which helped to inform the Towns Fund prospectus” [5.7].*

Significantly, the typology of places developed by Jennings and Warren for the Centre for Towns has since been adapted in an official geographical classification of parliamentary constituencies according to the size of settlement by the House of Commons Library. The Library notes that for their scheme of constituencies *“settlements are classified according to an adjusted version of the taxonomy recently developed by the Centre for Towns”*. [5.8] The Office for National Statistics has also since introduced its own prototype classification similarly based on the size of urban settlements, reflecting the influence of the CfT typology [5.9]. As such, this research has motivated and informed the classification of official statistics relating to towns and cities. Yvette Cooper (MP for Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford and also Chair of the Home Affairs Select Committee) has argued: *“That’s why the Centre for Towns ... is so important. The truth is it is hard to get good evidence to compare towns, because no one properly collects it. Policy makers look at regions or local authority districts or households but rarely at the actual geography that defines people’s lives.”* [5.1] Will Tanner has noted: *“There are huge benefits of constructing datasets that allow for that type of analysis to be done in a way that can influence policy. Clearly the Centre for Towns is one of the leading contributors to that debate.”* [5.3] Nandy herself traces the significance of the research from shifting political debate to having a substantive impact on public policy:

“Perhaps the most significant thing for me about Two Englands is that it’s hard to think of a single study that has not just shaken up political thinking, but had an impact on people themselves. We launched Centre for Towns with a study by Will Jennings that showed people in towns were significantly more likely to feel politicians didn’t care about them or their area. In my frequent interactions with people across the country, I get a real sense that has now changed. That is quite an extraordinary achievement.” [5.2]

More generally, the activities of CfT have directly shifted the national agenda on towns, leading to high levels of media coverage (a systematic search of Nexis using related terms identifies 177 news articles between January 2016 and July 2020) [5.1].

iii. Shaping coverage of British elections by Sky News

Research by Jennings and Stoker, in collaboration with the Centre for Towns, has shaped Sky News’ coverage of British politics, most notably the 2019 general election. Sky News took up the theme of towns as the key battleground for the next general election – with analysis for Sky online in October 2018 by Jennings of the top marginal constituencies in England, Wales and Scotland highlighting the concentration of most marginals in town-focused constituencies [5.1]. Through contributing to internal briefing papers for Sky News, Jennings’ analysis directly influenced its ‘Path to Power’ concept used to tell the story of the campaign and informed the selection of constituencies for live broadcast visits [5.10]. Nick Phipps, Editor of election night programmes for Sky News says *“Jennings’ understanding of change in British electoral politics ensured that Sky News was able to provide our audience with the definitive account of the general election among all national broadcasters – allowing us to anticipate key stories of the election and explain why they mattered to our viewers. It meant that Sky News was months ahead of everyone else in highlighting the critical importance of towns to the election”* [5.11]. In his role with Sky News, Jennings also advised on the selection of appropriate economic, social

and political indicators for the profiling of constituencies, and on how these data might be visualised. The profiles were used on screen during coverage of the campaign and in online articles about specific constituencies. In addition to providing Sky News with the relevant data for all 650 UK parliamentary constituencies, working with Michael Thrasher (Sky's Senior Election Analyst) Jennings constructed a national index of constituency deprivation (based on the Index of Multiple Deprivation, but extended to incorporate Scotland and Northern Ireland which are not included in the IMD). This index was also used in the constituency profiles and in election night coverage of the results.

On Sky News' election night programme in December 2019, Jennings was responsible for analysis of voting patterns at constituency level and in particular their correspondence to demographics – writing reports on the Slack internal messaging system and providing briefings and analysis to Deputy Political Editor Sam Coates and Economics Editor Ed Conway – who were responsible for analysing the results in the election coverage. As part of that analysis, Sky News made use of the Centre for Towns typology, reporting the national swing differentiated by urban settlement size, whereby the Conservatives did better in smaller towns and made smaller gains in major cities.

Director of Newsgathering and Operations for Sky News, Jonathan Levy, says [5.11] *"Jennings' expertise in British electoral politics and data analysis has enabled us to reach new levels in our use of data visualisation in coverage of UK elections"*. Ed Conway said: *"The data analysis provided by Jennings on election night was crucial in enabling us to reliably and engagingly tell the story of the election to viewers – via both broadcast and online. Sky News was widely recognised to have provided the most compelling in-depth coverage of the election and Jennings' data analysis and visualisation was vital to that."* [5.11]

Research by Jennings and Stoker has therefore significantly and directly informed and supported election coverage by one of the UK's major national broadcasters – from the level of providing a broad conceptual framework to assisting with technical design of data visualisation and analysis.

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

5.1 Media coverage of towns.

5.2 Supporting statement from Lisa Nandy MP, July 2020.

5.3 Interviews with think tanks relating to towns, June 2020. Contact details of interviewer supplied.

5.4 Centre for Towns website. <https://www.centrefortowns.org/reports>

5.5 EY (in collaboration with Centre for Towns). (2018). *Bridging the gap: EY's UK Attractiveness Survey, UK cities and towns*. November 2018.

<https://www.ey.com/Publication/vwLUAssets/2018-UK-Attractiveness-Survey/%24FILE/EY-UK-Attractiveness-Survey-2018.pdf>

5.6 Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government. (2019). *Towns Fund prospectus*. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/towns-fund-prospectus>

5.7 Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government, email correspondence from the Team Leader – Regeneration Investment, Cities and Local Growth Unit, Ministry of Housing, Communities, and Local Government (21 August 2019, 6 September 2019, 1 November 2019).

5.8 House of Commons Library. (2018). *City & Town Classification of Constituencies & Local Authorities*. 21 June 2018.

<https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-8322>

5.9 Office for National Statistics. (2019) *Understanding towns in England and Wales: an introduction*

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/populationandmigration/populationestimates/articles/understandingtownsinenglandandwales/anintroduction#toc>

5.10 Sky News. (2019). 'Path To Power.' Sky News online. <https://news.sky.com/topic/path-to-power-8370>

5.11 Supporting statement from Sky News, July 2020.