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Paper:

Daglish, C., Webber, D. & Cutts, D. (2017). Election issues, political party performance and geography. *Welsh Economic Review*, 25, 42-50.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10198>

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Election issues, political party performance and geography

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<https://doi.org/10.18573/j.2017.10198> Accepted: 20/11/17

Introduction

Voters make decisions on whether to vote and who to vote for in places. Places are crucial because they not only provide the context for interaction and social identification but they are the containers in which parties operate and seek representation by socialising and mobilising voters to support them. Longstanding theories of party choice stress how such places provide the space for group conditioning and environmental influences on individual behaviour. They also highlight how experiences shape an individual's identification with a political party which seeks to represent their interests. For a long time it was assumed that such partisan identifications remained intense and stable throughout the lifecycle following repeat exposure, mobilisation and participation in the political process. Aside

from being both enduring and reasonably resistant to changes in the political environment, these partisan attachments were shown to have indirect effects on electoral behaviour by influencing responses to party candidates and their policy platforms. Yet in the British context growing scepticism exists not only about the traditional strength of class as an explanatory variable of vote choice but the weakness of partisan ties.

Such scepticism has led to a renewed interest in the individual rationality decision making models, party-issue linkages and performance based evaluations to explain political choice.

A key element of the political game in Britain is the way in which parties compete with each other in places to obtain representation, in the hope of securing enough

seats in Westminster to form the government. Parties are rational in their approach to targeting resources in those places that are hotly contested and in developing highly strategic personal messages to key voters who they believe can swing the election in their favour. Often such targeted messages stress the party's policy platform on particular issues that they consider salient to the voter. Each party will place different levels of importance on different election issues and voters will assess the relative importance of those election issues when deciding who to vote for.

Perceptions of each party's performance on salient election issues will vary among different sections of the electorate, and hence each party will try to use credible information to stress past performance, competence and the viability of future initiatives

to bolster support from those voters who decide the election outcome. Such comparative judgements about party performance on the issues that matter shape, at least in part, the likelihood that a voter will support that party. Yet given the importance of place in the electoral arena, it is unclear whether differences in voting patterns reflect spatial variations in the perceived importance of election issues or spatial variations in the perceived performance of political parties on those election issues.

Here Lancaster's (1966) characteristics model is used, which assumes that people derive utility from the characteristics embedded in a service or product rather, than simply the service or product itself; for instance, it is not the presence of a road network that is important but the quality of the road network and the efficiency of using it to get to your destination. Lancaster's demand theory helps justify the existence of brands, and managers will seek to differentiate their brand from competitors by adjusting characteristics. Political parties can be viewed as competing to provide a range of similar

services but with each party providing a different performance and with varying importance given to each service.

This paper extends Lancaster's model to preferences for political parties in a general election, and tests the usefulness of the model using a unique individual-level dataset, collected across voters in three parliamentary constituencies, where each constituency had, at least in the recent past, elected representatives of different political parties.

Background

It is sensible to assume that every politician's primary objective is to gain power (Downs, 1957), but whether that is for self-gain, altruism or because they are ideologically driven is unclear. To achieve their goal, candidates and parties develop a policy platform, which, during an election, is put to voters through manifestos, speeches, public appearances and local and national campaign activity. Parties may tailor policies to garner support from those groups who have a longstanding identity with them. Yet voters often convey messages about their policy preferences to

parties and as such parties may seek to lure voters by moving their policy positions to reflect this in order to maximise their support. Political rivalry is illustrated through parties positioning themselves along an ideological political spectrum, but while this allows parties to communicate their aggregate position to prospective voters it is not particularly useful when parties are attempting to inform prospective voters about their positions on specific election issues.

According to Clarke et al. (2004), one of the consequences of weakening partisanship and the dwindling importance of the party-class linkage is that more voters are open to persuasion, exposed to short term influences and salient events operating in the electoral arena. The onset of de-alignment in Britain (Sarlvik and Crewe, 1983) has led to a renewed focus on rational decision making and individual utility maximising strategies to explain political choice. This neoclassical framework favoured by Downs (1957) is based on the premise that people are selfish, rational actors who conduct cost-benefit

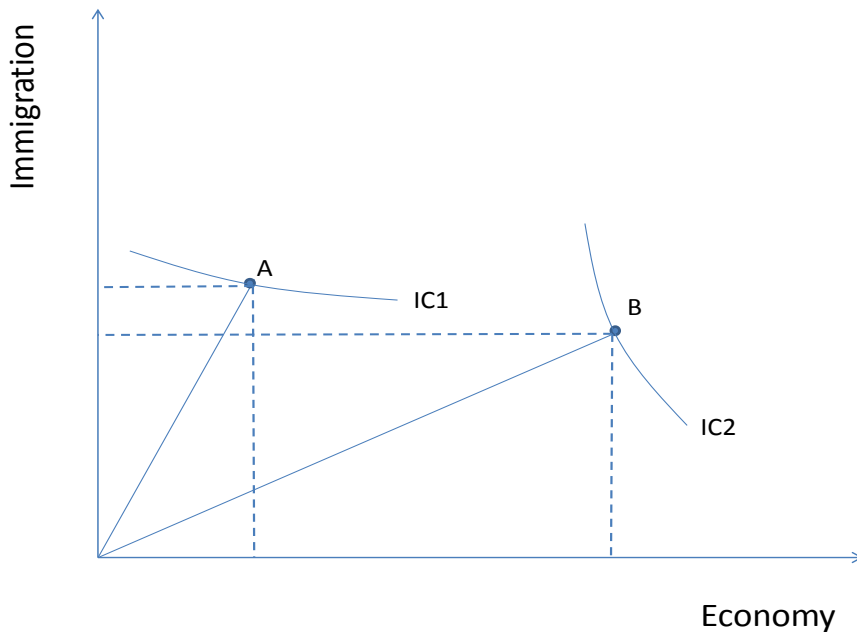
calculations based upon indicators like unemployment, price stability or economic performance indicators such as the government deficit. For Downs (1957), the left-right ideological continuum motivates party competition with voters rationally seeking parties they perceive to be closest to their own preference (to maximise utility) resulting in parties ultimately adopting policy positions that lures as many voters to them as a possible. Yet Stokes (1992) and others stress that certain issues or ‘valence issues’, where public opinion on achieving such desirable policy outcomes is uniformly shared and heavily skewed, matter

more. Individual voter and party differences along policy dimensions are not as important as how voters perceive a party’s ability to solve existing national problems or issues. Within this valence framework what matters are comparative evaluations of parties’ managerial capabilities, their competence and performance in solving these salient issues and achieving positive outcomes. As such, voters will seek to maximise their utility by selecting the party they believe will best deliver positive results on those issues that concern them most. More broadly, Lancaster’s neoclassical model is adopted and applied here because of

its flexibility to deal with different option choices (i.e. which political party to vote for) and combinations of characteristics (e.g. election issues), and allows the identification of how these issues combine to determine party support.

The standard Lancaster (1966) model calibrates the axes to correspond with the characteristics embedded in goods and services, such as boot capacity and horse-power embedded in different cars (Gwin and Gwin, 2003). Here this is applied to political voting where the axes correspond to different election issues, such as immigration and the economy, see Figure

Figure 1: Basic Lancaster model



1. The more an individual feels a particular election issue is important then the further along the axis the voter's response will be. When two election issues are represented on a two-dimensional figure then it can be illustrated using a single ray. When one election issue is considered more important relative to another then the ray will be closer to the axis that represents that election issue. Figure 1 presents a situation when two election issues are considered together, immigration and the economy, and two political parties, A and B. Party A is perceived by a voter to perform better than party B on the issue of immigration but worse on the issue of the economy. Whether a political party receives the person's vote will depend on how well the voter perceives the party performs on different election issues but also the willingness of the voter to trade off one election issue for another. The trade-off between election issues is portrayed in this model by the slope of an indifference curve (IC). The rational consumer then selects the party that maximises their satisfaction, with party A getting the vote if they are willing to trade off the

economy for immigration, and therefore they perceive immigration to be more important (IC1), or party B receiving the person's vote if they are willing to trade off more immigration for less of the economy (IC2).

Data and calibration

This study used a cross-sectional questionnaire using a stratified sample from the South West of England region. Through a combination of Likert scales and open answer questions, the questionnaire focused on how important the public feels elections issues are, and how they view political parties perform on these election issues. For brevity, this paper only considers the public's perceptions of the Conservative, Labour and Liberal Democrat parties. The policy issues selected for analysis were the economy, education, immigration, anti-terrorism and the National Health Service (NHS).

Questions were framed as retrospective evaluations in order to account for differences between voters; each respondent was asked "How well do you think the Conservative government handles the economy?", then proceeded to ask the question again but

substituted "the economy" with each of the other policy issues, and then this process was repeated but with the Conservative party replaced with the Labour party and then the Liberal Democrats.

Data were collected using a face-to-face questionnaire, during February 2016. A drawback to this method is that it is geographically restrictive. In an attempt to tackle this issue, the questionnaire surveys were conducted outside supermarkets, as they provide a concentration of people from all around an area that would help to diversify the sample. Data on 50 respondents were collected from each of three different parliamentary constituencies, where each constituency was represented by different political parties up until the 2015 general election, to reduce any partisanship effect. Bristol West was selected as the Labour constituency, Filton and Bradley Stoke was selected as the Conservative Constituency, and Thornbury and Yate was selected as the Liberal Democrat Constituency; note that Thornbury and

Table 1: Sample characteristics compared to the regional average

	Group	Count	Sample (%)	Regional average (%)
Gender	Male	88	58.67	50.00
	Female	62	41.33	50.00
Age	18-24	30	20.00	13.70
	25-44	71	47.33	29.80
	45-64	36	24.00	32.60
	65+	13	8.67	23.70
Race	White	142	94.68	95.40
	Black	3	2.00	0.90
	Asian	2	1.33	2.00
	Mixed race	3	2.00	1.40

Source: Authors' survey

Yate changed from a Liberal Democrat to a Conservative constituency in the 2015 general election, and responses needed to be drawn from this constituency as there were no Liberal Democrat constituencies in the South West at the time the research took place.

Table 1 shows a brief descriptive summary of the gathered information. There is a dominance of people with a white ethnicity, which reflects the make-up of the parliamentary constituencies sampled, a slight dominance of males in the sample (59%) and a broad spread across the age range.

In lieu of an objective performance measure, this study used the central tendencies from the questionnaire responses from each constituency to infer how well the parties

are perceived to perform on each policy. Unlike Lancaster's original application where possession of more money can mean the purchasing of a greater quantity of particular attributes, the UK voter only has one vote; a final point along that ray therefore corresponds to what the voter perceives they will receive in terms of the two election issues

in exchange for 'spending' their vote on a particular party. The angles of the rays indicate how the respondents rate the importance of one election issue relative to another election issue, and the length of the ray indicates how well a particular party performs relative to another ray which corresponds to a different political party.

Table 2: Average policy performance by political party

Party	Policy theme	Mean	St. Dev.
Conservative	Economy	3.07	1.32
	Education	2.50	1.23
	Immigration	2.44	1.12
	NHS	2.39	1.27
	Anti-terrorism	3.38	1.57
Labour	Economy	2.47	1.22
	Education	3.29	1.36
	Immigration	2.50	1.25
	NHS	3.35	1.32
	Anti-terrorism	2.75	1.39
Liberal Democrats	Economy	2.21	1.50
	Education	2.61	1.63
	Immigration	2.19	1.41
	NHS	2.61	1.54
	Anti-terrorism	2.32	1.58

Source: Authors' survey

Results

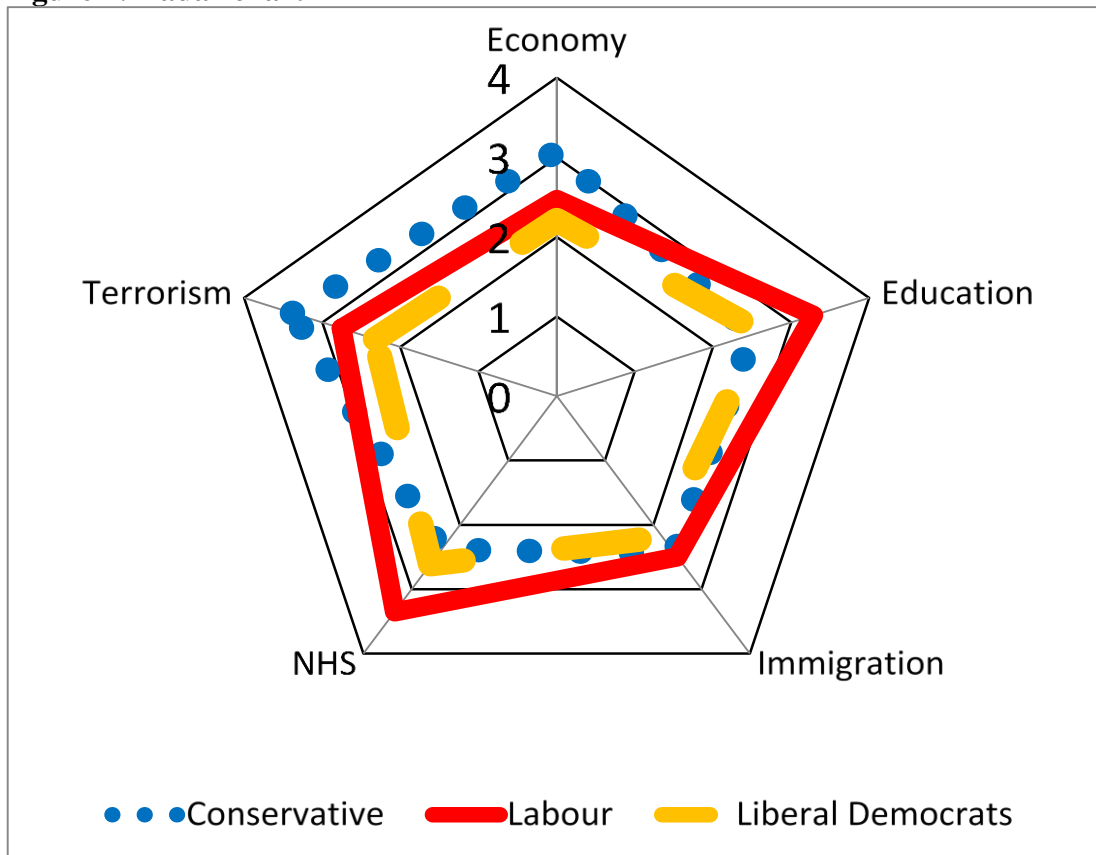
After combining all of the three constituency's results, Table 2 shows that the Conservative party received the highest scores for performance on the economy with a mean of 3.07 and on anti-terrorism with a mean of 3.38. Labour received the highest mean scores for education (3.29) immigration (2.50) and the NHS (3.35). The Liberal Democrats scored the lowest mean scores for their performance on the economy, immigration and anti-terrorism, and had the highest deviations from the mean across all policy areas, suggesting

that opinions of this party were highly varied. The Liberal Democrats may have lost vote share in the 2015 general election because voters' had relatively poor perceptions of their likely performance on contemporarily important election issues.

Figure 2 presents a radar chart that illustrates the perceived relative performance of each political party on each election issue. It can be seen that if education, immigration and the NHS were considered by the electorate to be the most important election issues

then the Labour party would have got into power. Also of note is that the respondents on average saw the Liberal Democrats outperforming the Conservatives on education and the NHS. If either the Labour or Liberal Democrat parties are going to gain power then they need to shift the political debate away from the economy and terrorism, and onto education and the NHS. The continuation of the political debate on issues of the economy and terrorism will continue to result in the Conservatives gaining votes. Similarly, it is in the

Figure 2: Radar chart



Source: Authors' survey

interests of the Conservatives to continue to ensure that the political debate surrounds terrorism and the economy, probably including debates surrounding Brexit, because that will ensure that they will continue to attract votes.

This data is used to calibrate Lancaster-type models as shown in Figures 3-8. As can be seen in Figures 6-8, although the perception of the performances of different political parties on education and the NHS varies spatially, as highlighted by the different lengths of the rays, perceptions on the relative performance of political parties on these two election issues does not seem to vary spatially, as highlighted by the consistency of the angle of the rays to the axes. If education and the NHS were the main election issues then the Conservative party would not have been elected in any of these three constituencies; they are consistently perceived to be outperformed by at least one other political party in each of these three constituencies.

Figures 3-5 highlight that the Conservative party was perceived to perform

better on the economy and immigration election issues relative to Labour and the Liberal Democrats. On these two election issues, the perceived performance of the parties do vary spatially, as indicated by the different lengths of the rays, but the perceived relative performance of political parties on these issues also varies spatially, as illustrated by different angles of the rays to the axes. In the Conservative constituency, the Conservatives (who held this seat in the 2015 election) were perceived to outperform the Labour and Liberal Democrats on immigration and the economy, but in the Labour and Liberal Democrats constituencies the Conservatives were perceived to perform better than the Labour and Liberal Democrats on the economy but not necessarily on immigration. If voters' preferences in the Labour constituency are such that they would trade off a lot of the economy for a small amount immigration then the corresponding community indifference curve would be relatively flat and hence the Labour party would have got into power in that constituency (as was the case in the

2015 general election), and the same would have occurred in the Liberal Democrat constituency. However, if voters' preferences in the Labour or Liberal Democrat constituencies are such that they would trade off the economy for a large amount immigration then the corresponding community indifference curve would be relatively steep, and hence the Conservatives party would get into power in those constituencies (as was the case in the previously held Liberal Democrat constituency). If this type of analysis was applied in Wales then it is possible that the UKIP vote share disintegrated in Wales in the 2017 election because of the changing emphasis and dialogue of immigration issues in the media relative to other election issues.

Figure 3: Conservative Constituency

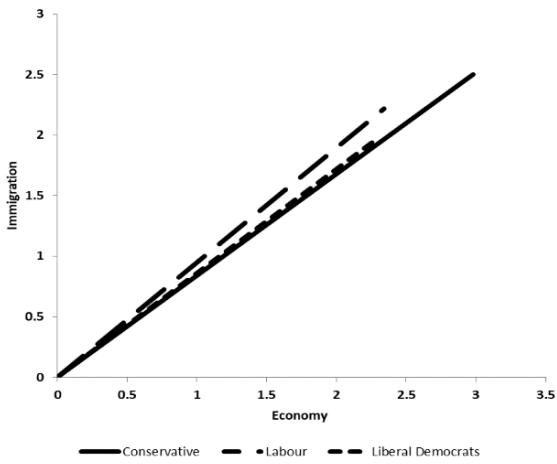


Figure 6: Conservative Constituency

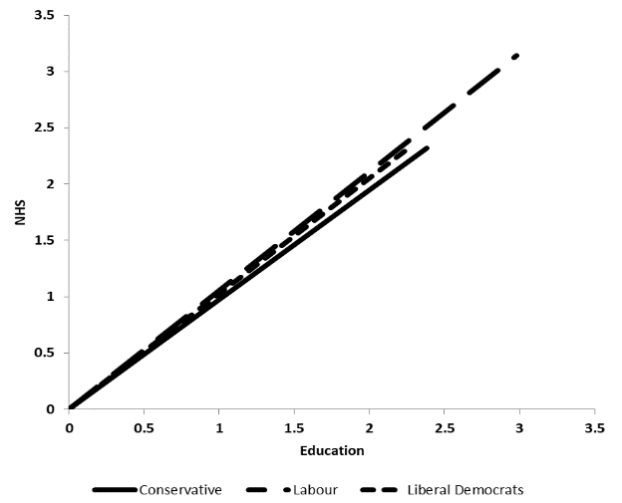


Figure 4: Labour Constituency

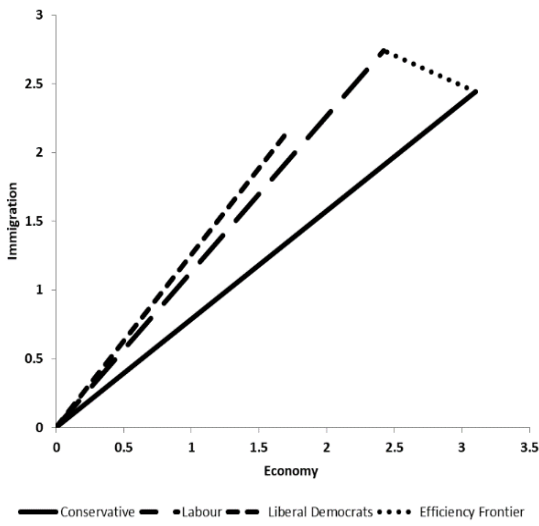


Figure 7: Labour Constituency

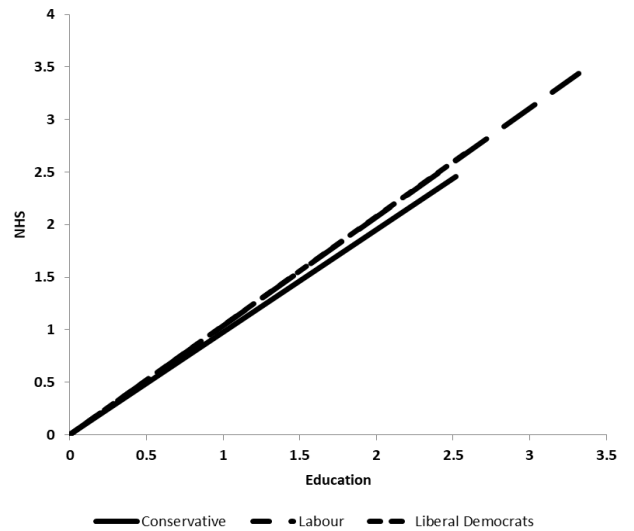


Figure 5: Lib Dem Constituency

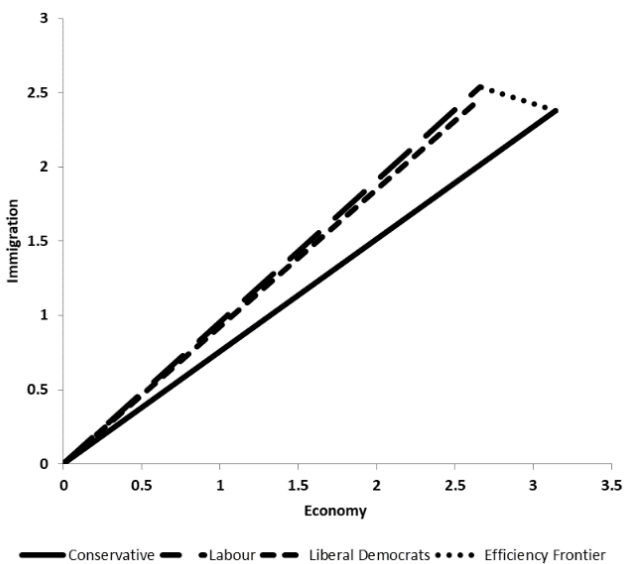
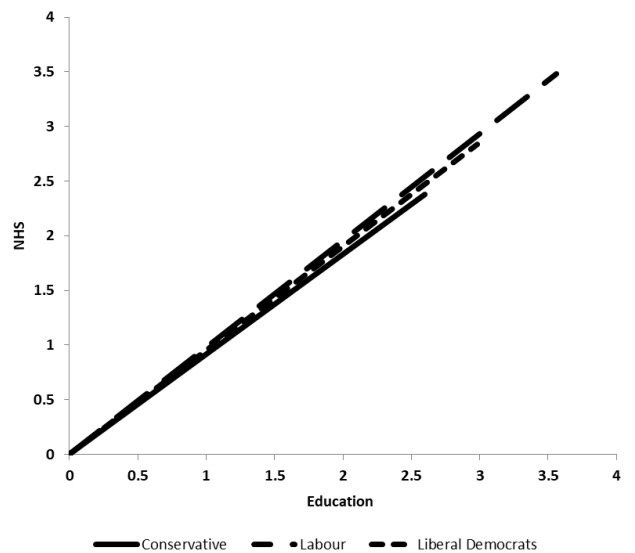


Figure 8: Lib Dem Constituency



The results highlight that it is not only the perceived importance of election issues that varies across space but also the perceived performance of political parties on those election issues. This is of interest to analysts and political parties because it appears that the information provided to the electorate is either interpreted in slightly different ways across constituencies or that the effectiveness of that information in getting to the electorate varies across space.

What is behind these spatial differences? There may be a process that spatially sorts voters with certain preferences for election issues across constituencies. Perhaps people who have done well in the labour market,

and who have located to a constituency with high house prices, value the economy more importantly than the NHS, and are therefore less willing to trade off the economy for an improvement in the NHS. Perhaps people who have suffered more with ill health, and therefore may have also done less well in the labour market, co-locate in another area and collectively place greater emphasis on the NHS and would trade off improvements in the economy for greater improvements in the NHS.

Because there are spatial patterns related to labour market success it is likely to be the case that voting patterns relate to these issues. Another possible explanation is that there are local community peer

group effects where locals source information from offline and online media forms, campaigning and discussions or interpretations of policy information in particular ways. A further possibility is that experiences accumulate over time and change or strengthen perceptions of the importance of election issues and that these may be associated with residential location preferences. Currently, however, it is not known which of these or other factors dominate, whether, how and why their importance changes over time, how they interact with other contributing factors and how they in turn influence voting patterns. This will be the subject of future research.

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