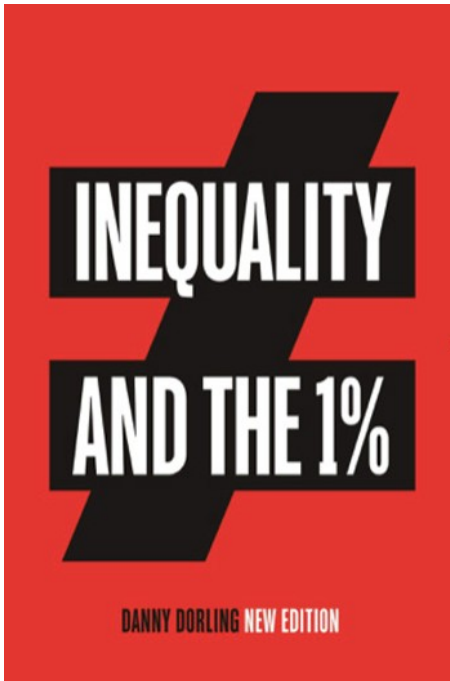# The Geography and Demography of Brexit

Danny Dorling *demolishes myths about the Brexit Referendum result of 2016 and the General Election result of 2019. The old, and predominantly the middle class of southern England, achieved victory in both.*

6 January 2020.

The June 2016 Brexit Referendum result was a shock – when it came. We might now say that it should not have been, but we must not forget that it was. It was especially a surprise to those who campaigned for Leave, many of whom clearly had not expected to win, and were not prepared for victory.

The winners in June 2016 were those members of the 1% who orchestrated the campaign to leave the EU. Further details are given in the preface of the 3rd edition of my book *Inequality and the 1%*, which can be read for free here: http://www.dannydorling.org/books/onepercent/Material.html

As a consequence, there has been political chaos from the date of the vote on 23 June 2016, right through to the day Britain did not leave on 29 March 2019 and beyond – to the General Election of 12 December 2019, and most probably there will be chaos throughout 2020.

With a colleague I wrote a book about Brexit during the first two years of that long period of political chaos (here). It was published on 15 January 2019, on the day of the first of a series of 'meaningful votes' which turned out not to be very meaningful at all. To those who read it we suggested that even if Britain fully leaves the EU, Brexit will be part of a diminishing of the UK.

One thing that was not highlighted strongly enough in that book was that that Leave vote was a majority middle-class vote. Some 59% of Leave voters were middle class – an estimate based on a large exit-poll sample. Lord Ashcroft sponsored the 2016 exit poll, and it was his publishing company (Biteback) that also kindly published our book, *Rule Britannia*.

Leave: a southern middle-class vote

In the book, Sally Tomlinson and I did mention that most of Leave voters lived in the south of England (including London). This was surprising, as it was where only a minority of the UK electorate lived. But it was where the Tory and UKIP voters who most wanted to leave resided in greatest numbers. The south of England is where the elderly of the UK are concentrated, and where electoral turnout is almost always highest, and was highest in the Referendum.
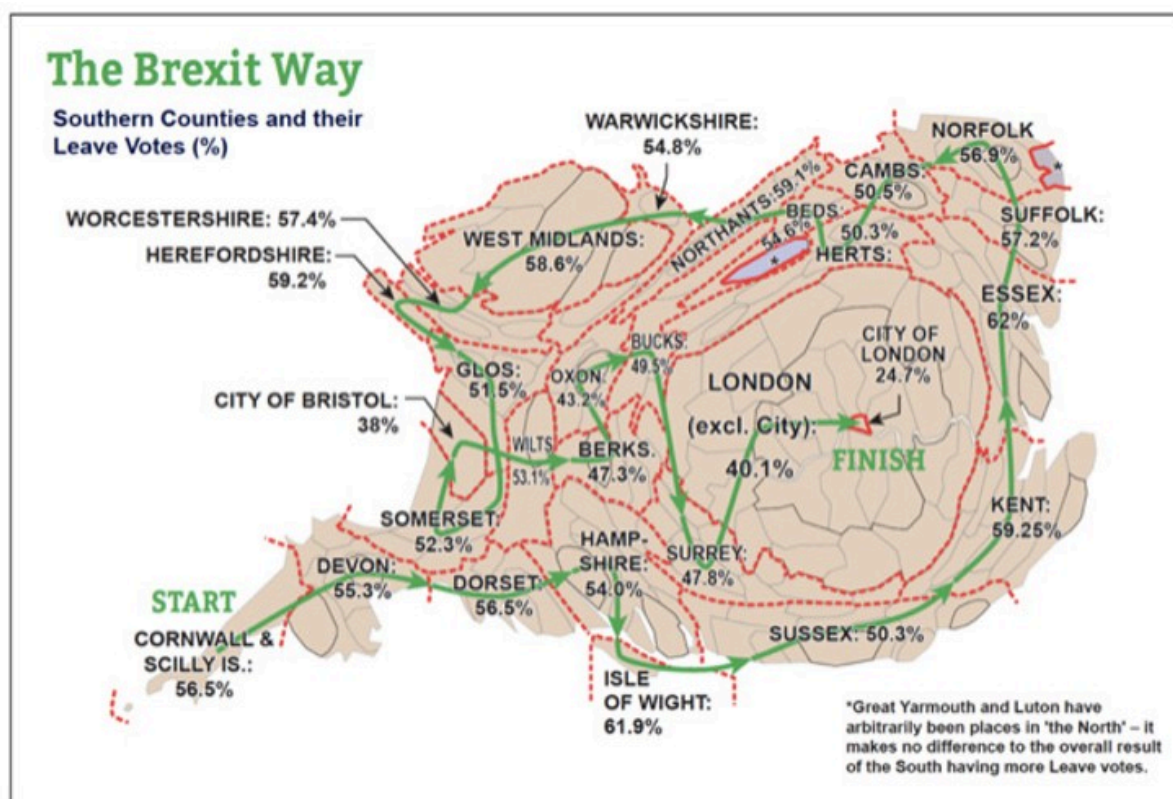
After the south-east region of England, where the referendum turnout was highest, the largest turnouts were, in descending order, the south-west of England, eastern England, and the East Midlands. Nowhere in the north of England was turnout (either in the 2016 referendum or the 2017 and 2019 referendums) as high as in the south, nor was it home to as many Leave voters.

Every county in the map below has a corresponding set of areas that are not in the south of England to which it can be compared, areas which always had fewer Leave voters despite always having a larger total electorate. These southern counties are the same ones that most solidly backed the Conservatives in the general election. The map shows the 'Brexit Way', a new national walk you can take to understand the Leave voters as it goes past the homes of the majority of them.

So many people in the south and east of England voted Leave that the walk would take you a very long time. It is better to cycle the route to pass along the site of what I hope in future will be recognised as the Brexit victory of southern England: a permanent reminder to people in the future of where the most and the strongest support for Leave came from; as well as the most solid support for the Conservatives, who now have a large majority in parliament.
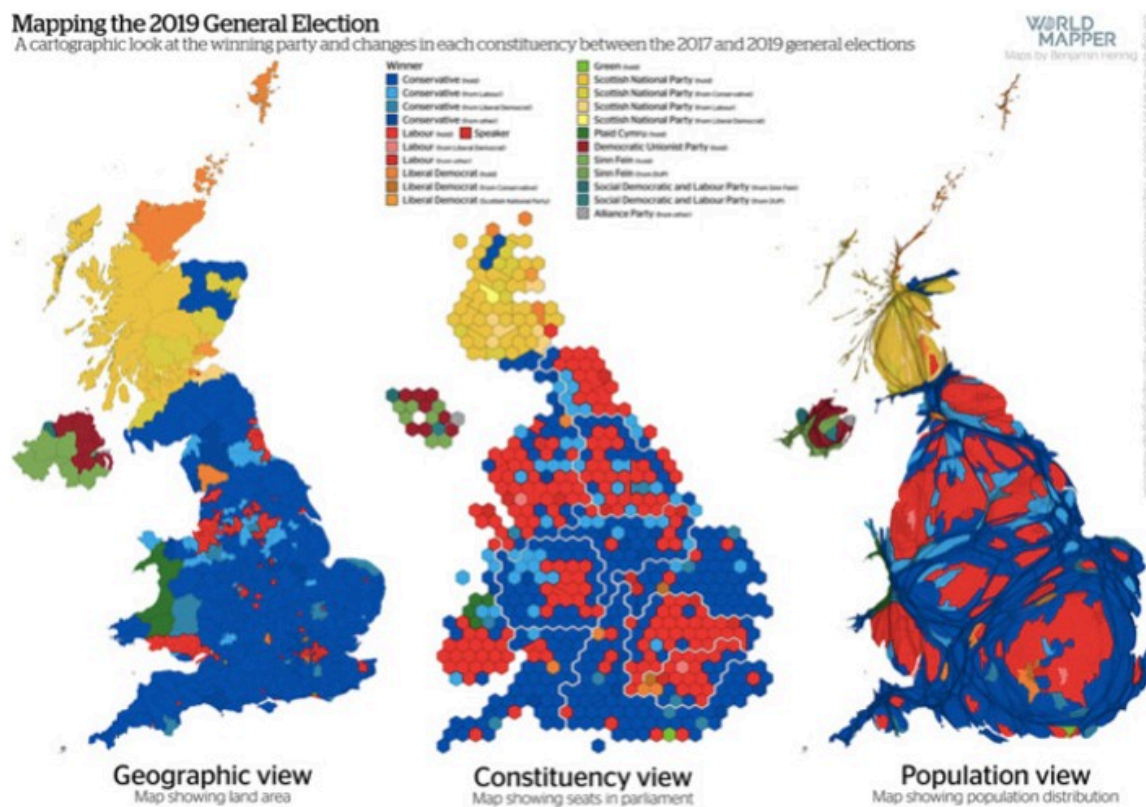
The Brexit Way: a proposed new national walk/cycle route past the homes of the majority of UK Leave voters (a minority of the electorate) so that we all know who they are.

Proportion of the referendum vote for Leave is shown. For each country and area shown there is a separate set of areas outside the south of England that in all cases were responsible for fewer Leave votes but had more voters on the electoral roll.

For every one of the 28 counties and cities labelled in the map above it is possible to find another set of areas of the UK that had a larger electorate but a lower total Leave vote. From Stoke to Hull, from Middlesbrough to Sheffield, without exception there is an equivalent area of the south of England in which more people voted leave, despite fewer people there having a vote – just as far more people in the south voted Conservative on 12 December 2019.

Labour lost seats in the north in 2019 because the Labour vote fell as compared to 2017 – not because large numbers defected directly from Labour loyalty to Tory voting.
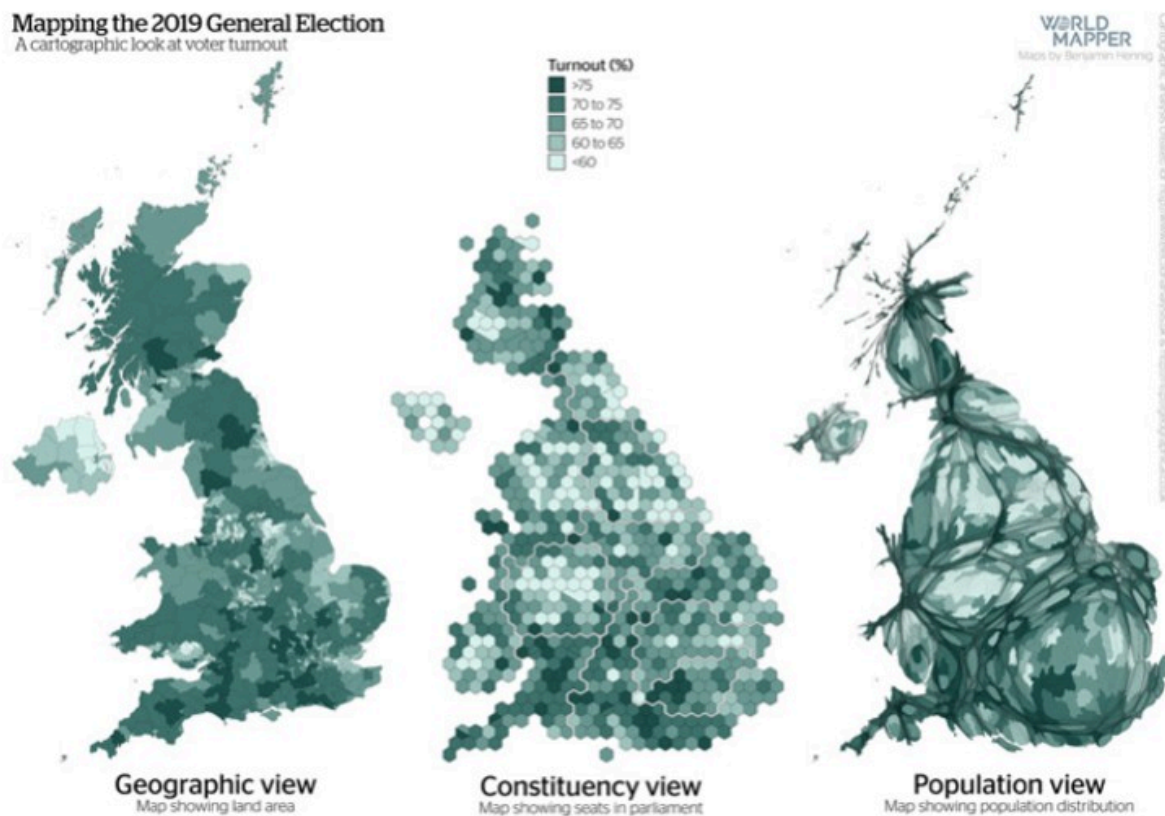

The light blue seats are mostly suburban northern seats that the Conservatives gained in 2019 (map courtesy of Benjamin Hennig).

This little geographical exercise can be carried out in such a way that every single area of the UK and Gibraltar (where people could also vote in the 2016 Referendum) is included, and no area is included twice. Three and a half years after that fateful day, 23 June 2016, we still have so much to learn about what happened.

Power gambles

In 2016, David Cameron took a gamble and lost. In May 2017, Theresa May took a gamble and saw her majority reduced at the general election that year. In December 2019, Boris Johnson took a gamble and was lucky. No doubt similar political manipulation occurred as was revealed after the 2016 Referendum and that will likely be revealed over the course of 2020 and 2021.
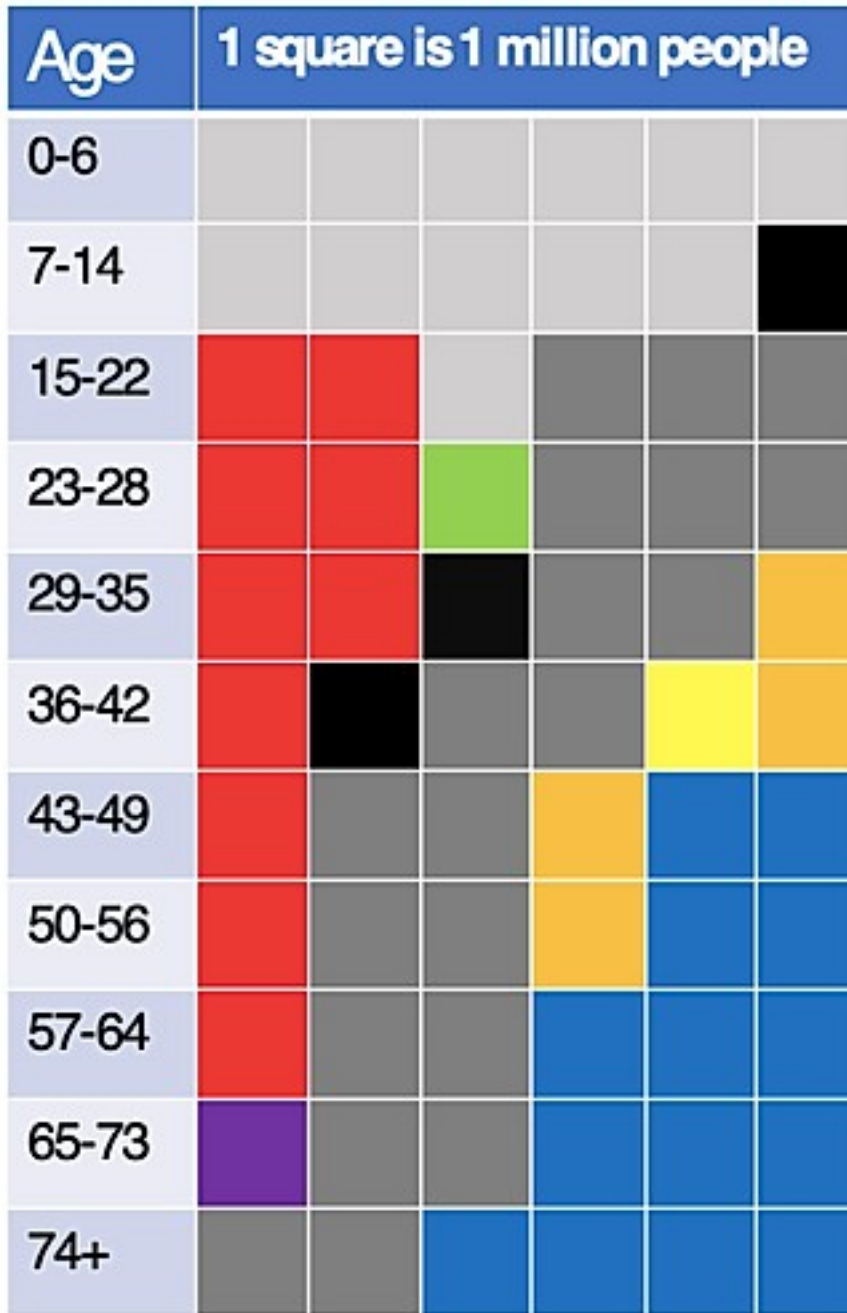

The light grey seats are those with the lowest political turnout in 2019 - mainly in cities (but not London) and the north (map courtesy of Benjamin Hennig).

It is important that we remember the determination of that small group within the richest 1% of British society in their attempts to ensure that the UK should leave the EU, but also that it is a story that is still unfolding. It is important that we see the results of the December 2019 election as a continuation of those attempts.

One way in which the Conservatives won in 2019 was in helping to persuade many people not to vote Labour, people who had voted Labour in 2017. Often, they said they could not vote for a party led by Jeremy Corbyn, having done just that only two years earlier.

Many were cleverly manipulated. Most people in Britain, when given a choice, chose not to vote, and more can be easily persuaded not to vote if the party they might have voted for is painted in a particular way on the BBC, in the newspapers, and in targeted individual Facebook adverts.

The diagram below gives a crude description of who voted for which political party at the most recent 2019 General Election, by age group.

Age	1 square is 1 million people					
0-6	light grey	light grey	light grey	light grey	light grey	light grey
7-14	light grey	light grey	light grey	light grey	light grey	black
15-22	red	red	light grey	dark grey	dark grey	dark grey
23-28	red	red	green	dark grey	dark grey	dark grey
29-35	red	red	black	dark grey	dark grey	gold
36-42	red	black	dark grey	dark grey	yellow	gold
43-49	red	dark grey	dark grey	gold	blue	blue
50-56	red	dark grey	dark grey	gold	blue	blue
57-64	red	dark grey	dark grey	blue	blue	blue
65-73	purple	dark grey	dark grey	blue	blue	blue
74+	dark grey	dark grey	blue	blue	blue	blue

Voting in the December 2019 General Election roughly assigned to age group (note for political parties that are very small this is very crude). Light grey: children. Dark grey: not voting. Black: EU not UK citizen. Blue: Conservative. Red: Labour. Gold: Liberal. Yellow: SNP. Green: Green or Plaid Cymru. Purple: Northern Ireland. (References here and here.)

The UK in December 2019 was home to 66 million people. Demographically, they can be divided into eleven almost equal-sized groups of six million

people each. The first group are children aged 0-6; and the last group are all those aged 74 and above. Within each equal-sized age group, a (very crude) approximation can be made of how people voted based on polls released at the time of the election and the exit poll.

The Conservatives were more strongly backed by the old than they have ever been before. This is how they won.

Of the 66 million people living in the UK (where ● represents 30 MPs), and rounded to the nearest million:

20 million did not vote or were eligible but not registered to vote

14 million voted Conservative (gaining 365 seats of 650) ●●●●● ●●●●● ●●

12 million were children (and UK citizens)

10 million voted Labour (203 seats) ●●●●● ●●

4 million voted Liberal (11 seats)

3 million were not UK citizens

1 million voted in Northern Ireland (18 seats) ●

1 million voted Scottish National Party (48 seats) ●●

1 million voted Green, Plaid, or other (5 seats)

The UK's undemocratic first-past-the-post voting system allows 14 million people to elect a large majority of MPs despite being such a small minority of the population.

For now, it is just worth remembering, as the *Sun* newspaper might put it (if its owner chose to): 'It was the South of England **wot** done it.' The South, the old, and predominantly the middle class of southern England won the Brexit Referendum of June 2016 and the General Election of December 2019.

However, those in the 1% who have worked so hard to secure Brexit will continue to try to present themselves as champions of the working class and the north. The Brexit saga is far from over…

Danny Dorling is the author of Inequality and the 1%*,* Rule Britannia: Brexit and the end of empire*, and many other books.*