


Internal migration and political polarisation: is the 'Big Sort' happening in the UK?



By Vincenzo Bove,
Georgios Efthyvoulou
and Harry Pickard



The ‘Big Sort’ was coined by Bill Bishop in 2004 to describe the self-grouping of Americans into like-minded communities. Economists and political scientists have argued that this phenomenon has polarised America and held back US politics. Is a similar self-separation happening in the UK?

From the general election to the Brexit referendum, we know there is a strong regional dynamic to British voting preferences. But how much of this dynamic is driven by self-selection? In other words, when we move within the UK, do we tend to move to communities that share our political values and ideals?

To find out, we analyse ONS data on the movement of people between pairs of local authority districts. The dataset is the most comprehensive ever used to investigate political preferences and migration – it covers all possible origin and destination districts in England and Wales between 2002 and 2015.

We measure the political similarity between all possible origin and destination district-pairings over time. First, we identify whether a district-pairing’s local councils are controlled by the same party. Second, to measure ideological difference between a district-pairing, we calculate the average difference in party shares between the two dominant parties. ►

We control for fixed effects that drive emigration away from an individual district, and immigration towards an individual district. We also control for factors that influence migration flows between pairings of districts, such as differences in average wages and unemployment, geographic proximity, and ethnic mix.

Our results show strong evidence that migration between two districts increases when the districts are politically similar. Migration flows between two Labour or two Conservative districts are 5% higher than those between other pairs of districts. Meanwhile, a one-standard-deviation increase in political difference (around 19 percentage points) leads to a decrease in migration flows of about 4%.

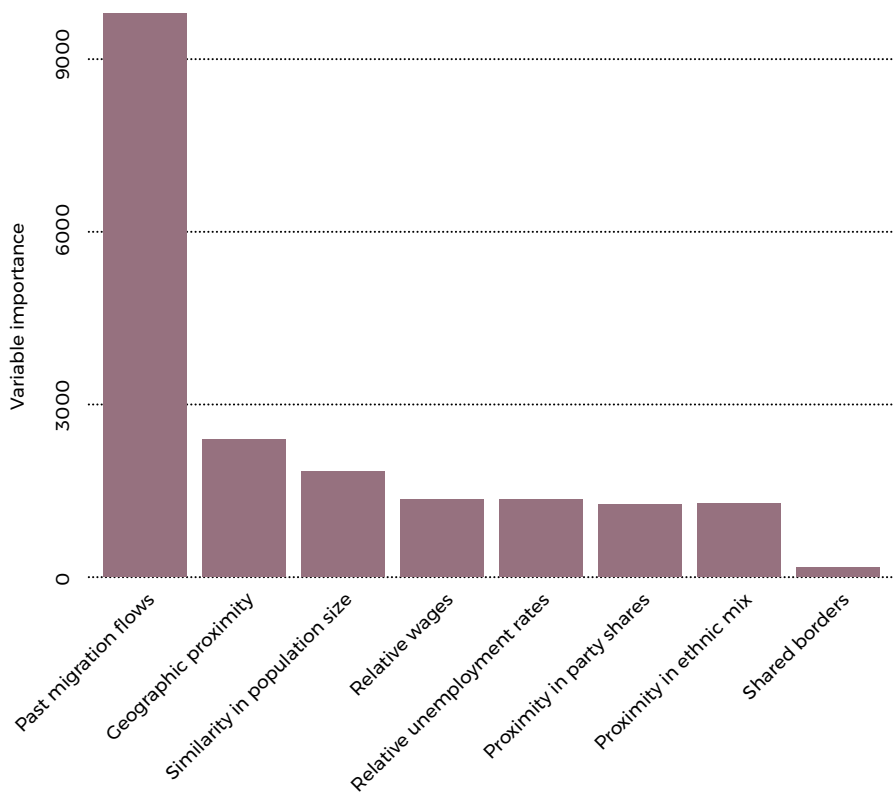
Figure 1 shows that the most important variables in predicting migration flows between two districts are migration flows the year before and geographic distance. This is to be expected. Yet political similarity ranks sixth overall and exerts about the same influence as relative wages and proximity in ethnic mix.

To understand more about why we tend to move to districts sharing our political views, we look at individual-level data for the same period, 2002–2015, from the British Household Panel Study (BHPS) and its successor, Understanding Society (UKHLS).

We investigate whether individuals' perceptions and attitudes towards the location where they live are affected by the extent of their political alignment with the district. In particular, we compare a measure of respondents' political alignment to their neighbourhood with their answers to questions on whether they would like to move and how satisfied they are with their neighbourhood.

We find that politically-aligned individuals are about 2.5 percentage points less likely to report a preference to move. They are 2–4% more likely to provide positive responses to questions about whether they plan

Figure 1: Key determinants of migration flows across districts



to reside in the area for a long time, feel a sense of belonging in their neighbourhood, and feel that they are similar to their neighbours.

This offers evidence that, like Americans, the British seek to sort themselves into a group with similar people: living in areas with ideological views similar to our own can contribute to a sense of 'fitting in' and 'feeling at home'.

However, the desire to fit in is unlikely to be the driving factor for relocation. Political alignment is an insufficient 'push' factor to cause the decision to migrate. Our findings suggest that the desire for political affinity affects where we choose to move to, but not our decision to move in the first place.

Our study shows that the phenomenon of the American 'Big Sort' is also happening in the UK. This sorting of politically like-minded people can reduce the diversity of opinion we are exposed to and discourage political debate.

As the timer for the next UK election ticks down, these findings suggest that political parties could have a difficult job on their hands: self-selected regional political polarisation will make it more difficult to sway districts from set opinions and ideals. ◀

About the authors

Vincenzo Bove is Professor of Political Science at the University of Warwick, and a CAGE Associate.

Georgios Efthymoulou is Senior Lecturer in Economics at The University of Sheffield.

Harry Pickard is Lecturer in Economics at Newcastle University.

Publication details

Efthymoulou, G., Bove, V., & Pickard, H. (2021). Micromotives and macromoves: Political preferences and internal migration in England and Wales. CAGE Working Paper (no. 600).