

Leverhulme Doctoral Scholarships Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies (PIRS) University of Southampton

RECRUITMENT CYCLE for studentships starting: October 2025 (Cohort 2)

SUPERVISORY TEAM

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STUDENTSHIP PROJECT TITLE

Left Behind Places and Democratic Resilience

OVERVIEW

‘Left-behind’ places have been central to British politics in recent years, especially since the 2016 referendum. This project will use a mix of quantitative and qualitative methods to explore how some left-behind places in the UK demonstrate greater democratic resilience than others in terms of participation, interest, satisfaction, and trust.

SUMMARY

In recent years, concerns have been raised about the democratic resilience of so-called ‘left-behind’ places. This project addresses the puzzle that, in the UK, some left-behind places appear to be demonstrating more democratic resilience than others. Cases will be identified using extensive statistical analysis. Intensive case-study research will be used to explain these cases. Lessons will be drawn for how to promote democratic resilience in the future.

The student will construct a theoretical framework from literatures in geography, political science, and interdisciplinary resilience studies. They will use advanced quantitative methods to analyse official statistics and public opinion data, including construction of indices and small area estimation of public opinion (multi-level regression post-stratification estimation). They will use qualitative methods to complete the case-study work, including archival research, elite interviews, and focus groups. Training in methods will be provided as appropriate.

In addition to the Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies, the student will join: the Economy, Society, and Governance Research Group in the School of Geography and Environmental Science; and relevant research centres in the Department of Politics and International Relations, including the Centre for Democratic Futures and the Centre for Political Ethnography. Based on their project, the student will contribute insights to these programmes regarding left-behind places, democratic resilience, and related topics like political engagement, efficacy, satisfaction, trust, and resentment.

PROJECT CONCEPT

Rationale

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, a series of economic and cultural shocks – from the 2007-2008 global financial crisis to historically high levels of immigration to Europe – have produced a category of people – older, less educated, more socially conservative – described by political scientists as ‘left behind’ (Ford and Goodwin 2014), concentrated in localities described by geographers as ‘left-behind places’ (Pike et al 2024).

How have such places responded to these shocks? Their citizens have reported feelings of political resentment, on which they have acted by voting in particular ways e.g. for UKIP and Brexit (Ford and Sobolewska 2020). Beyond such voting patterns, there are concerns that citizens in such places are becoming politically dissatisfied, distrusting, and disengaged. There are concerns about ‘democratic erosion’ in such places; that democracy may not be resilient enough to cope with twenty-first century crises, associated political resentment, and the political opportunism of populist politicians (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018).

The puzzle addressed by this project is that, in the case of the UK, some left-behind places appear to be demonstrating more democratic resilience – more democratic elasticity and less democratic brittleness – than others. We have indirect evidence of this in the form of varying levels of support for Britain’s two main parties across left-behind places (Furlong and Jennings 2024). This project will examine more direct evidence and, for the patterns found, pursue explanations and policy options.

Key objectives

1. To identify cases of left-behind places that demonstrate more or less democratic resilience than predicted by extensive statistical research.
2. To explain these cases of high/low democratic resilience using intensive case-study research.
3. To draw lessons for how to promote democratic resilience in the coming years (when regional inequality and associated political discontent are likely to persist in some form).

Methods

An interdisciplinary theoretical framework will be constructed from literatures in geography, including the locality studies of the 1980s (focused on variation in local responses to globalisation and deindustrialisation) and evolutionary economic geography (focused on variation in development paths taken by localities), and political studies, including recent work on conceptualising and measuring democratic health at various geographical scales (see Clarke et al 2018).

To address Objective 1, localities across the UK will be described and compared using secondary statistical data measuring:

- Left-behindness (official statistics for demography, prosperity, and educational attainment; public opinion survey responses for liberal and conservative attitudes).
- Democratic erosion/resilience (official statistics for turnout in elections and demographic representation in local government; public opinion survey responses for engagement with politics, political interest and knowledge, satisfaction with government and the political system, trust in politics and government, and belief in ability to influence politics).

Four cases will be selected for intensive research: two localities demonstrating more democratic resilience than predicted by modelling of secondary statistical data; and two demonstrating less democratic resilience than predicted.

To address Objective 2, case-study research will be completed in these four localities, involving:

- Additional statistical analysis of locally available secondary data.
- Archival research in local organisations (councils, parties, community organisations) and libraries/record offices.
- Interviews with key informants (local politicians, activists, community leaders).
- Focus groups with a range of citizens.

To address Objective 3, findings will be integrated from the four case studies, with a focus on: what makes a place democratically resilient (the factors, mechanisms, and contingencies); and which of these items are amenable to policy or practice intervention (by national government, local government, or community groups).

Wider implications

Findings will inform the policies and practices of national government, local government, and community groups – all of whom have long-term interests in ‘levelling up’ left-behind places, but also shorter term interests in strengthening local democratic resilience in the meantime.

Findings will also inform the growing academic literature on left-behind places and political discontent. A more direct focus will be placed on democratic erosion and resilience in left-behind places. Conceptual advances in geography, especially in evolutionary economic geography, will be combined with empirical advances in political studies, especially in the measurement of democratic health. Public opinion research common in political studies will be combined with place-based ethnographic research more common in geography. The medium-term promise of the project is development of a historically sensitive *evolutionary political geography* – capable of explaining local democratic resilience in terms of contingencies, collective learning, development paths, and so forth.

Findings will also advance the interdisciplinary academic literature on resilience (next section).

Contribution to interdisciplinary resilience studies:

The project will draw from interdisciplinary resilience studies to conceptualise democratic resilience, in the case of left-behind places, as the capacity of local democratic systems to cope with disturbances (economic and cultural shocks, plus associated political resentment) by adapting while maintaining their essential democratic functions (communication, participation, representation, and so on).

The project will also contribute to interdisciplinary resilience studies in at least three ways. First, it will combine insights from geography (its focus on place and spatial variation) and political science (its focus on conceptualising democratic functions and measuring democratic health). Second, it will build an evolutionary political geography on the foundations of evolutionary economic geography. This will be a new political geography focused on spatial distributions, temporal sequences, local (political) development paths, domino effects (path dependence), pendulum effects... Third, the project will identify the (local) factors, mechanisms, and contingencies promoting (democratic) resilience. Importantly, it will distinguish between those factors and mechanisms amenable to policy intervention, and those contingencies explaining current patterns but less amenable to policy intervention.

Please list and describe any specific/additional technical training or support to undertake and successfully deliver this project. *Note that students recruited into this programme will undertake a bespoke training curriculum. Students and their supervisory teams will also identify generic skills gaps to address through training courses offered by the University's Doctoral College.*

At the start of the project, the student will complete a training needs assessment. Some of these needs will be met by the Programme for Interdisciplinary Resilience Studies. Some of these needs will be met by completing training courses or auditing modules offered by the School of Geography and Environmental Science, the department of Politics and International Relations, the South Coast Doctoral Training Partnership, the National Centre for Research Methods, and Public Policy at Southampton. Specific training needs may include: advanced quantitative methods training (e.g. small area estimation of public opinion/multi-level regression post-stratification estimation); and qualitative methods training (archival research, elite interviews, focus groups). Where specific training needs cannot be met by formal training opportunities, such training will be provided informally by the supervisors: Nick Clarke (specialising in qualitative methods); and Will Jennings (specialising in advanced quantitative methods).
