

Towards a ‘New English Regionalism’ in the North? The Case of Yorkshire First

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Abstract

Traditionally, the debate over English devolution has been framed by mainstream parties, favouring a top-down approach. However, this scenario has recently started to change, particularly in the areas with stronger regional identities such as the North of England. In 2014, the first regionalist party (Yorkshire First) was created, followed by the North East Party and the Northern Party. Such actors overtly challenge the narratives of regionalisation that have prevailed so far, and endorse bottom-up regionalism. This article offers the first analysis of these ‘new regional voices’ in the North, and seeks to assess emerging tensions between regionalisation and regionalism in the devolution debate. To achieve this, it concentrates on the case of Yorkshire First, drawing on documentary analysis and the results of a membership survey. It will be argued that, although still limited in its impact, the rise of Yorkshire First signals the presence of a political vacuum in the region which has been left open by mainstream politics, and that regional identity and territorial cleavages *do* matter in the current debate on devolution in the North of England.

Keywords: devolution, English regionalism, regional identity, regionalist parties, Yorkshire First, party membership

Introduction

CHRISTOPHER Harvie’s depiction of English regionalism as ‘the dog that never barked’¹ was, for many politicians, academics and commentators, underlined by the public rejection of the then Labour government’s plans for an elected regional assembly in the North-East of England in 2004. Indeed, after the resounding No vote in the North-East referendum, many argued that English devolution beyond London was dead. And yet, in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, the so-called ‘English Question’ has returned to the top of the political agenda and, with it, political and public debate on English ‘regionalism’ has intensified. For the first time, *all* the main political parties outlined alternative approaches to English devolution in their 2015 general election manifestos, paying particular attention to issues related to the North–South divide across England. The Conservatives, now in government, are maintaining their electoral promises, pressing ahead with their

Devolution Deals and Northern Powerhouse agenda, while also introducing legislation on English Votes for English Laws.

However, this time around mainstream parties are not the only actors seeking to influence the debate on devolution in England. Three new regionalist parties in the North of England were established in 2014: Yorkshire First, the North East Party and the Northern Party. Although some regionalist parties have been active for a while across England (e.g. Wessex Regionalists and Mebyon Kernow), this is a phenomenon without precedent in the North. Thus, the rise of these ‘new regional voices’ seems to illustrate the saliency not only of the English Question in general, but also of its territorial permutations—pointing towards a form of ‘new regionalism’ which is taking a particularly Northern flavour.

Yorkshire First, the North East Party and the Northern Party share common devolution claims and, taking inspiration from the example of Scotland, argue for the establishment of a Yorkshire Parliament, a North East Assembly and a pan-Northern Assembly,

respectively. They also actively seek to politicise regional identities, placing historical, cultural, economic and territorial distinctiveness at the heart of their political message. Their values are not based on exclusionary ethnic motives, but revolve around the idea of inclusive, civic and progressive regionalism. Furthermore, they are committed to a different style of politics: favouring a bottom-up approach to decision and policy-making as an alternative to 'Westminster politics'.

In spite of being formed just a year before May 2015, they fielded more than twenty candidates across the North of England in the general election. In the end, they did not fare well in the results—but this is perhaps unsurprising, especially considering that these are minority parties at their first major electoral competition, and they had to face a number of crucial challenges. In particular, their scarce resources, their young and fragile internal organisation and structures, their lack of campaigning skills, as well as a limited media impact, inevitably hampered their efforts. Indeed, a look at the history of the SNP² clearly shows that it takes time for minority parties to make significant political breakthroughs at general elections.

Hence, the aim of this article is not to reflect on the electoral fortunes of new regionalist parties in the North. Instead, the goal here is to understand the reasons behind their emergence, so as to assess the political and representation vacuum they fill, the type of regional agenda they propose and the way in which they seek to politicise regional spaces from the bottom up, mobilising regional identities. To achieve this, the article will focus specifically on the case of the first and largest regionalist party created in 2014, Yorkshire First (YF), drawing on documentary analysis and the findings of a unique survey conducted with its supporters. Before offering an analysis of YF, an overview will be provided of the way in which the English regional agenda has developed and evolved.

The English regional agenda: between regionalisation and regionalism

The debate on English 'regionalism', as part of the wider English Question, dates back

decades. Political discussion around these themes has long been characterised by a consistent ambiguity concerning the type of regional agenda used to address issues of territorial governance in England. Ostensibly, over the past two decades political parties have sought to promote some form of political regionalism. However, in practice, their approach has been strongly top-down and centre-driven—and thus more akin to achieving a system of *regionalisation*, or at best *functional regionalism*, in England.

As Michael Keating has aptly argued, there is an important qualitative difference in these similar-sounding concepts. Regionalisation refers to the (re)organisation of the central state on a regional basis for the delivery of (some of) its policies, including regional development ones.³ It is essentially a top-down process aimed at creating administrative sub-units in a state. Functional regionalism, as defined again by Keating, is not too dissimilar from this, as it refers to institutions designed by the centre around specific policies and tasks, facilitating the creation of interest groups and policy communities which include some actors and exclude others.⁴ According to the same typology, however, political regionalism is profoundly different: it refers to general mechanisms of representation and policy-making which have a functional remit but are based on communities of identity and principles of autonomy and/or self-government.⁵ Thus, it is a bottom-up process, which often implies movements demanding decentralisation of *substantial* political powers. In spite of a much-heralded rhetoric of empowering communities from the grass roots and deepening democracy, mainstream parties in England have retained strong centralist impulses, developing a narrative of regionalism which frames this primarily in functional, rather than political, terms.

For the most part, it was Labour that led the agenda on this issue. During the 1980s the party initiated an internal discussion over regional strategies, in particular as a means to address economic disparities between the North and the South of England. These endeavours were then translated into political commitment, and became part of the 1997 Labour manifesto. Once elected, Labour laid out a 'two-phase' process, aimed

at creating regional development agencies (RDAs) and voluntary regional chambers first and thereafter holding referendums in the English regions that showed an appetite for directly elected regional assemblies (ERAs). The first phase of the plan was immediately implemented and in 1998 RDAs were created. The second phase, though, proved more controversial, and Labour committed to ERAs only in its second mandate. Between 2002 and 2003, the party published official documents to set out the powers and competences of ERAs and select the first regions to hold referendums—these were the North-East, North-West and Yorkshire and the Humber. In the end, only the vote in the North-East went ahead. However, this turned into a stinging failure (77.9 per cent of No votes, with a turnout of 47.8 per cent) and ERAs were shelved. Subsequently, the government turned away from the idea of directly elected regional bodies and started to focus primarily on RDAs, city-regions and the Northern Way.

As claimed elsewhere,⁶ in the period between 1997 and 2010 the Labour party's approach to regional devolution focused primarily on the economic (rather than the democratic) aspect of devolution. There were at least three reasons for this. First, within Labour, there was strong intra-party resistance to the establishment of a regional system of political devolution. John Prescott and some Northern MPs supported ERAs, but the mainstream of the party, which included the PM and other senior figures, showed little desire to move beyond the RDAs architecture. Second, the Treasury and the Cabinet played a key role in hampering Prescott's plan, obstructing any attempt to include substantive powers in the regional assemblies package. Third, the regional campaigns in the North-East were not particularly successful in putting any real pressure on the government and in harnessing support for ERAs in the region.

As a result, it could be argued that while externally promoting a regionalism agenda in the North of England, Labour was seeking to pursue a strategy of *regionalisation* during its time in government. Little space was given to political devolution from the bottom up, with substantial powers for the regions. This was epitomised by the prioritisation of

RDAs, the lukewarm support for ERAs and the post-referendum veer towards the Northern Way. Thus, this specific type of regionalism was centrally driven and focused on economic development, and lacked coordinated pressure from the grass roots in the form of regionalist movements or parties.

Although the new Coalition government elected in 2010 disbanded the regional institutions created by Labour, the overall approach to devolution in England has not changed in recent years. The architecture of devolution has taken a different shape and the focus of decentralisation measures has shifted from wider (administrative) regions to the local level, with a particular emphasis on city-regions. And yet, even under the current Conservative government, regional devolution continues to be a centre-led process, planned and conducted in line with the British tradition of elite-to-elite negotiations. This is particularly evident in the recent Devolution Deals agreements and the Northern Powerhouse agenda, as clearly explained by Kenealy in this volume. While it is certainly a novelty to see the Conservative party endorsing devolution in England, once again the government's approach conceives this as a means to address economic disparities and fix the problems of the regions lagging behind.

The North of England remains the main (although not the only) recipient of devolution—and continues to be framed within a dominant centripetal narrative according to which Westminster 'knows better' regarding how to address the North's problems. This has led to the creation of new devolution policies that have been agreed for the most part between the Treasury and local elites, and are characterised by feeble powers, modest budgets, vast responsibilities and substantial control from the centre.⁷

Within this context, political regionalism is simply discarded as an unsuitable option. The paradox here is that while the Conservatives justify this choice by arguing that the English regions on which Labour's agenda of devolution rested are artificial entities, both the city-regions and Northern Powerhouse frameworks that underpin their strategies seem no more organic or entrenched in the imagination of the local populations than their predecessors. In fact, a recent poll

conducted by the BBC showed that a vast majority of people in the North of England had either never heard of, or knew nothing about, the Northern Powerhouse.⁸

This brief reconstruction of the evolution of the English regional agenda shows how top-down regionalisation has so far been the dominant approach, while political regionalism is relegated to the margins of the debate by mainstream political actors. This is a relevant point to note, because it shows how, to date, both Labour and the Conservatives seem to have failed to acknowledge that the process of increased territorialisation of politics in the UK is not confined only to the Celtic nations of the UK, but is starting to gain relevance also in England.

Indeed, the continued emphasis on the North as the obvious recipient of regional devolution seems to have gradually triggered a process of 'self-discovery' across the area. In particular, the Scottish referendum has (re-)ignited a debate on devolution in the North, and has served as a powerful example of how civil society and territorially based parties can influence the political process from the bottom up. Moreover, both the work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention in the 1980s and the subsequent Scottish independence referendum have helped to highlight how devolution is not just about economic development, but could and should also be about improving democracy.

These arguments have been picked up by civil society organisations. Groups such as the Hannah Mitchell Foundation, the Northern Citizens' Convention, 38 Degrees Manchester, the #VoteOnDevoManc campaign, the Northern branches of Unlock Democracy and the We Share the Same Skies collective are all voicing the need to turn the current debate on economic, top-down devolution into one about democratic renewal and sustainable governance in the North of England. Most of these organisations have been active for a while, but the thrust of the Scottish independence referendum has provided an important source of inspiration for them. At the same time, recent developments in the Conservative government's devolution agenda in England have prompted them to enhance their activities, and offer alternative views.

This new 'devolution momentum' has also distinctive, grass-roots, political connotations

—as reflected in the rise of regionalist parties in the North of England since 2014. As previously noted, this is a new phenomenon. Both in the popular imagination and in the political discourse, the North of England is often depicted as having a strong regional distinctiveness. Yet, traditionally, territorial identity in the North has not been overtly politicised by regionalist movements and has instead been channelled by mainstream parties, and in particular by Labour. As a result of this, regional distinctiveness has been subordinated to the national dimension of politics and identity, and for the most part has been subsumed by class values/alignments. This helps to explain why the English regional agenda has so far repeatedly taken the shape of a top-down process of regionalisation, while grass-roots regionalism has never flourished. However, the creation of regionalist parties in the North of England adds a new, crucial element to the debate. In particular, their emergence signals an attempt to reverse dominant narratives of regionalisation, and throws light on the potential implicit in the politicisation of regional identities.

All together, these elements seem to point in the direction of a form of 'new regionalism' in the North, about which very little is known and that requires further investigation. So far no research has been developed around the emergence of regionalist parties in this area. The following sections cover this gap, offering an analysis of YF.

New regionalism in the making? The case of Yorkshire First

The presence of regionalist parties in political systems is a well-established phenomenon across Europe, and in some of the UK nations, such as Scotland and Wales, nationalist parties have been or are in public office. In this context, England is, in many respects, an exceptional case. Here, regionalist parties such as the Wessex Regionalists or Mebyon Kernow never managed to carve a niche for themselves within a political landscape that has traditionally been defined by class⁹ rather than territorial cleavages, and within an electoral system that tends to play against minority parties. Furthermore, English nationalist parties have been only sporadic

expressions of right-wing exclusionary and ethnic sentiments, which never proved particularly popular at the ballot box.

It is interesting to note how in areas like the North of England, which have been the recipients of successive waves of 'regional' decentralisation and have stronger regional identities compared to many other parts of the nation, territorial identities have rarely been overtly politicised. To some extent, this may be due to the fact that the North has long been a Labour stronghold. However, the vote haemorrhages registered by Labour in recent years, together with increased trends of party and class dealignment, growing feelings of disaffection towards 'traditional politics' and the grievances generated by long-standing hyper-centralist governance stances orchestrated by successive governments, have opened a space for new political voices in the North. It is against this background that regionalist parties have started to emerge in this area.

YF is the first regionalist party that was established in the North. It was formed in April 2014 by regionalist activists and former Liberal Democrat and Labour party members. From the outset, the main aim of YF has been that of promoting the creation of a Yorkshire regional government, in the form of a directly elected assembly, with powers similar to the Scottish Parliament. Such claim is based on the belief that decisions that affect Yorkshire must be made in the region rather than in London by Westminster, and that Yorkshire should therefore have the authority to shape its own future.¹⁰ Thus, YF calls for a system of substantial political regional autonomy, but does not seek independence. The party manifesto clearly states that YF wants to give a stronger voice to Yorkshire, so as to create a United Kingdom that works for all of its nations and regions.

In terms of values, an analysis of the party's official documents shows that YF promotes a form of progressive and inclusive political regionalism, founded on civic principles, with a view to overcoming traditional left-right positions and placing the territorial dimension (i.e. regional distinctiveness, as well as the interest of the region and of its inhabitants) at the core of its political message. YF endorses a different style of politics that contrasts with and offers an alternative

to what its manifesto defines as the over-centralised approach of Westminster parties. In its view, therefore, the interests of the party should always come after those of the region and its people, and the functioning and organisation of YF itself should clearly reflect such stance. Hence, YF has no party whip system, and all the representatives are free to vote based on evidence and their conscience so as to achieve maximum benefits for Yorkshire. To this end, the party abides by the Bell Principles. This is a code of conduct for elected representatives formulated by the ex-independent MP and former BBC correspondent Martin Bell, which demands that politicians should behave to the highest of standards, follow the Seven Principles of Public Life set out by Lord Nolan in 1995 (i.e. selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and democratic leadership) and embrace other values such as pluralism, non-discrimination, transparency and respect.¹¹

The party manifesto sets out an agenda based on eight key themes: democratic voice, economy, energy, connectivity, environment, institutional reform, education and skills and identity. The safeguard and promotion of regional identity plays an important role in the party's rhetoric and the distinctiveness of Yorkshire is presented not only as a unique source of sense of belonging and pride, but also as the basis on which a prosperous political and economic future for the region could be built. Ethnic and exclusionary identity markers are overtly rejected, and 'Yorkshireness' is conceived in civic, democratic and inclusive terms. Within this frame, Yorkshire is depicted as a region with clearly defined historical boundaries, specific cultural traits and symbols (e.g. a distinctive accent/dialect working almost as a surrogate for a language; its own flag; a range of products branded as Yorkshire, such as tea), shared values (e.g. solidarity, cooperation, sense of community) and a distinctive economy, made of diverse yet coherent sectors weaved together across the region.

The discourse of the North-South divide plays a key role in sustaining such narrative, and 'the centre' (i.e. the South, London, Westminster) is 'the other' against which YF constructs its political programme and identity. Therefore, the party supports a

restructuring of the state architecture in order to create a real system of political regionalism that would enable Yorkshire to achieve autonomy and reverse its marginal status by gaining direct decision and policy-making powers.

Thus, YF can be seen as an idiosyncratic political party in the English context—one which defines itself on the basis of the centre–periphery cleavage¹² rather than the traditional class one, using territorial as well as cultural, historical and economic distinctiveness as the key issues on which its whole agenda is built. This indicates that YF represents a new and interesting political actor in the North, which challenges the traditional precepts of the British political system and the way in which this conceives territorial governance. Hence, beyond the analysis of the key values, issues and cleavages that characterise the party, it is interesting to ‘look inside’ YF, focusing on the party on the ground—so as to assess the basic features of the bottom-up form of regionalism it promotes and the political gap YF seeks to fill—while also exploring the socio-political profile of its supporters, and their views on key issues such as decentralisation strategies and identity. To achieve this, the article will draw on the findings of an original survey with YF supporters conducted by the author.

The survey results

The explorative study on which this section draws was conducted between 1 and 31 March 2015, and consisted of a CAWI survey. This involved an online questionnaire including a total of thirty-five questions, focusing on four key dimensions (i.e. socio-demographic profile; political profile; party organisation; devolution and identity). The questionnaire was administered via email by YF to all its affiliates, who could then decide whether to take the survey online. Hence, the study was based on a self-selected non-probabilistic sample. It should be noted that up until the summer of 2015, YF did not have an official membership, as the party was against the idea of charging an affiliation fee. For this reason, the survey’s respondents would be better defined as supporters of the party rather than full members, as they were enrolled on the base of signing the

Yorkshire Pledge¹³ promoted by YF since its inception, outlining the party’s strategy and aims. As of the end of March 2015, YF had 807 supporters; of these, 196 took the survey—thus, about a quarter of the registered supporters participated in the study.¹⁴

In terms of socio-demographic profile, most of the supporters (50.0 per cent) live in West Yorkshire, in metropolitan areas (with more than 100,000 inhabitants). The average age is 44 years, and most of the supporters are white (82.7 per cent) and male (79.6 per cent). They have a high level of education (64.5 per cent hold a university or higher degree) and very high interest in politics. The data also shows that over 70 per cent of the respondents read politics news daily, or engage in political discussions more than five times a week. This suggests that YF supporters invest a high level of cognitive resources into politics, and therefore have high potential to be mobilised politically by the party.

Analysis of the incentives and reasons that led the respondents to support YF offers very interesting insights. First, the main focus is on collective rather than individual incentives, and a vast majority of supporters (68.4 per cent) joined YF because they believe the party is capable of promoting change in society. Second, the data suggest that some supporters may feel a sense of detachment from mainstream politics (Table 1): some of them decided to join YF because they do not feel represented by traditional parties, i.e. Labour, Conservatives or Liberal Democrats (18.9 per cent), and they also perceive that these actors are not capable of capturing and understanding the needs of Yorkshire (17.8 per cent). On the other hand, they also find some appeal in the fact that YF gives a distinctive political voice to the identity of Yorkshire (19.9 per cent) and to its people (21.9 per cent). However, the most remarkable finding here is that supporters do not necessarily stand with YF due to ideological alignment: only 2.0 per cent of the respondents feel that the party represents their core ideological values. Indeed, as illustrated in Table 2, there appears to be a marked difference in where supporters place themselves and YF on the left–right spectrum. While more than 60 per cent of the respondents define themselves as

Table 1: Assessment of the reasons why respondents have become members of Yorkshire First (% agreeing with propositions)

I do not feel represented by any of the traditional political parties (Labour, Conservatives, Lib Dem)	18.9
None of the mainstream parties understands the needs of Yorkshire	17.8
YF promotes the interest of Yorkshire	8.2
YF gives political voice to the identity of Yorkshire	19.9
YF represents my ideological values	2.0
YF gives voice to the people of Yorkshire	21.9
YF promotes direct democracy	11.2
N.	196

Table 2: Assessment of supporters' ideological placement, explaining how they place themselves and Yorkshire First on a left-right scale (% agreeing with proposition)

	Self-placement	Yorkshire First
Left	25.5	5.1
Centre-left	34.6	25.5
Centre	17.5	29.1
Centre-right	10.2	6.1
Right	1.5	1.0
Not placed	10.7	33.2
N.	196	196

left or centre-left, they perceive the party as being either more moderate (i.e. centre/centre-left) in its positions (54.6 per cent), or outside conventional ideological views (33.2 per cent).

Drawing together this data, the picture that emerges indicates that supporters seek in YF a type of political representation that goes beyond traditional ideologies and values. Supporters perceive themselves as more left-wing than YF, but they seem to be willing to accept such ideological compromise because they find in the party an alternative political voice that focuses on the territorial dimension and the preservation of regional interests and identity. Looking at the voting behaviour of supporters in previous elections, we see that a vast majority of them used to vote for the Labour party (30.4 per cent in the 2010 general election) or the Liberal Democrats (35.3 per cent), or abstained (14.7 per cent); only small percentages voted for the Conservatives (7.6 per cent), UKIP (2.2 per cent) or other right-wing parties

(0.5 per cent). Hence, YF fills a centre-left representation vacuum by politicising and emphasising the importance of the territorial/regional dimension, which, in the view of its supporters, traditional centre-left parties are not able to represent or have lost touch with.

The final part of the survey focused on the supporters' views regarding devolution and territorial identity. Perhaps unsurprisingly, considering that this is the main claim made by YF, a vast majority (96.6 per cent) of the respondents are either in favour or strongly in favour of the establishment of a Yorkshire regional assembly, with substantial political powers similar to those granted to the Scottish Parliament (Table 3). The idea of an independent Yorkshire also has some leverage (18.5 per cent strongly agree and 27.2 per cent agree with this view). But one of the most interesting data points emerging from the study concerns the fact that the respondents are overtly in favour of decentralisation of powers at all sub-regional levels. YF supporters believe that more powers should be granted to local governments (82.3 per cent) as well as city-regions (68.2 per cent), and they also seem to be in favour of having powerful elected mayors (61.2 per cent).

This suggests that YF supporters do not simply want a Yorkshire regional assembly with strong powers; they also want the latter to 'work towards the bottom' as an agent of change and a key institution able to prompt further governance from below, while giving Yorkshire stronger political influence at the centre as well. Thus, a Yorkshire assembly is not perceived as the 'best' or only recipient of devolved powers; instead, in the view of

Table 3: Assessment of supporters' views on decentralisation of powers (% agreeing with propositions)

	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	N.
Yorkshire should become independent	18.5	27.2	17.3	37.0	196
Yorkshire should have its own elected regional assembly (with powers similar to Scotland)	75.6	21.0	2.3	1.1	196
Cities in Yorkshire should have their own elected mayors	36.5	24.7	23.5	15.3	196
City Regions should be granted more powers	38.7	29.5	14.5	17.3	196
Local governments should be granted more powers	45.7	36.6	12.0	5.7	196

the respondents, such body should provide a virtuous meso-level, functioning as a nexus between the local and national levels, tying together the architecture of territorial governance from the bottom up.

Concerning identity, the aim of the questionnaire was not just to shed light on the relevance of the regional dimension, but also to understand if and how this links to other categories of territorial identity. While the famous 'Moreno Question', designed to assess territorial identity in relation to political autonomy in Scotland, used Scottish and British as alternative categories against which respondents could define themselves, this would not have been appropriate here. This is due mainly to three, interconnected reasons. In the first place, being a regional rather than national identity, Yorkshireness is more ambiguously defined than, say, Scottishness. Second, Yorkshire is often depicted as being part of the North of England—a more fluid and ambiguously defined 'vast region' that nevertheless makes sense to its inhabitants as an identity and social space.¹⁵ Third, Yorkshire and the North can be seen as distinctive regional spaces but, unlike Scotland for instance, they are still part of England—thus in terms of identity there might be overlaps.

Finally, Britishness too takes a specific connotation in England. As many studies have illustrated,¹⁶ while Scottishness and Britishness could be defined as 'dual identities', Englishness and Britishness have long been perceived as conflated. Hence, based on the complexity and potential overlaps that

characterise territorial identities across the North of England, the survey sought to test identities in terms of 'layering' rather than in opposition to each other. To achieve this, the study assessed how the respondents defined their identity in relation to each individual category (i.e. Yorkshire, Northern, English, British) on a scale from 1 (not at all) to 10 (a lot), rather than by means of contrasting and alternative categories (e.g. Yorkshire not English; or more Yorkshire than English) (Table 4).

Overall, 89.3 per cent of the respondents define themselves distinctively and primarily as Yorkshire. Other identity categories also feature strongly among YF supporters: 76.1 per cent also felt Northern, 57.9 per cent English and 65.8 per cent British. This is interesting because it suggests that regional identity in Yorkshire is not perceived as being exclusive or exclusionary or defined in

Table 4: Assessment of identity categories (%). Responses to the question: 'Some people think of themselves as British, while others may think of themselves as English, or Northern, or Yorkshire. On a scale from 1 (= not at all) to 10 (= a lot), how much would you say you feel...'

	Not at all (1–2)	A bit (3–5)	Quite (6–8)	A lot (9–10)	N.
British	11.2	23.0	27.0	38.8	196
English	18.0	24.1	29.2	28.7	195
Northern	12.7	11.2	28.1	48.0	196
Yorkshire	7.1	3.6	12.3	77.0	196

stark opposition to other dimensions. Yorkshire identity emerges therefore as layered and tightly interconnected with other overarching territorial identities. Such finding can be seen as having a number of implications. First, it denotes, once again, that the regional dimension does resonate among YF supporters as a meaningful identity marker, and therefore has the potential to be mobilised and politicised. Second, the layered character of Yorkshireness can be linked back to, and to some extent reflects, the views on devolution preferences offered by YF supporters. These too, in fact, indicate strong support for interconnected measures of decentralisation, in a context in which the regional dimension works as the nexus between the local, the regional and the national levels. Thus, the way in which YF supporters see themselves in terms of identity might be impacted by and connected with the debate on devolution.

Third, and related to the previous two points, the way in which YF supporters define their identity seems to link with favourable attitudes towards *integrative regionalism* claims. This is important to note because it implies that those supporting the new form of bottom-up regionalism promoted by YF are not motivated in their choices by a discourse of grievances towards overarching state structures. Instead, they seem to favour a system of territorial autonomy that does not operate in isolation from or in contraposition with the UK government, but seeks instead to integrate regional distinctiveness within the political, social and economic framework of a diverse, overarching nation-state. Currently, however, no other political party has embraced such an integrative regionalist narrative, therefore leaving a void that is being filled by new regional actors such as YF.

In sum, the findings reveal that YF support comes from a highly educated and politically active section of the society that however feels disenfranchised from mainstream politics and traditional political parties. Supporters mainly have a left-wing political background; in terms of ideology, they perceive themselves as more left-wing than YF, but are attracted to some extent by the party's aim to politicise and give voice to the regional dimension. They are in favour

of devolution measures at large and want a Yorkshire assembly with substantial powers, which is also able to coordinate other sub-regional devolved bodies and give more political leverage to Yorkshire at Westminster. They have a strong sense of regional identity, but this is layered and connected with, rather than defined against or rejecting, other dimensions of territorial sense of belonging. This suggests a propensity towards integrative forms of political regionalism that do not seek to break away from existing state structures but aim at achieving a degree of autonomy within such architecture, so as to democratise and improve the ways in which regional interests are represented and pursued.

Conclusions

While the English regional devolution agenda has traditionally been characterised by a top-down approach of regionalisation, the analysis developed in this article shows that in the contemporary context new pressures for a system of political regionalism are forming from the bottom up. This is particularly true in regions like Yorkshire, where the presence of historical and cultural heritage, regional identity and a distinctive economic outlook have now started to provide the basis for regional autonomy claims—so as to revert from the bottom-up entrenched processes of economic and social peripheralisation.

Analysis of the YF manifesto and documents, together with the results of the survey conducted with its supporters, denote the emergence of a nascent grass-roots form of regionalism in Yorkshire that breaks away from past experiences and seeks to challenge the dominant narrative of regionalisation. The 'new regionalism' represented by YF is certainly still in an embryonic state, and so far has not had any real impact in major electoral competitions. Like other new regionalist parties in the North, YF has still to build political expertise, strengthen its ideological and policy line beyond the rhetoric of regionalism and find ways to raise the funding necessary to gain greater visibility and influence. It also needs to create a 'democratic regionalism momentum' and exploit regional identity in a more consistent

manner, building a stronger sense of community and kinship around this that speaks to the entire regional electorate, so as to garner wider support and improve its results.

However, this does not mean that such new political voices should not be taken seriously or simply discarded as eccentric expressions of populist regionalism. From a political analysis perspective, the emergence of regionalist parties in the North of England is an interesting phenomenon and could be read as a sign that something is changing in the English political landscape, especially with regard to the way in which regional governance is conceived. Regionalist parties alone may not be the only answer to pave the way towards a real system of political devolution in the North. However, as noted above, these actors are not operating in isolation. Recently, a growing range of grassroots movements and civil society groups have emerged across Yorkshire, the North East and the North West with the aim of influencing the debate on devolution from the grass roots.

The thrust generated by the Scottish independence referendum and the success of the SNP have provided powerful examples for all these regional actors. But perhaps there is a broader lesson that can be drawn from Scotland on how to achieve a more substantial form of regionalism, which goes beyond these recent manifestations. The work of the Scottish Constitutional Convention in the 1980s, which brought together political parties such as Labour and the Liberal Democrats, civil society groups, churches and unions, was instrumental both to generate a constructive political debate that resonated among the society and to bring about an agreed proposal for devolution. A Constitutional Convention-style initiative for the North, or across England, could indeed have greater chances of success,¹⁷ and both regionalist parties and civil society groups have invoked and promoted this approach.

Hitherto, however, traditional parties such as the Conservatives and Labour have not been particularly keen to open up to such type of process, or to acknowledge that perhaps territorial politics, and with it the politics of territorial identity, do matter in the debate on devolution not only in the Celtic nations of the UK, but in England too.

Instead, for the most part, they continue to conceive devolution as a piecemeal process of regionalisation that seeks to reform territorial governance from the top down and concentrates primarily on economic motifs. But further failure to recognise the growing salience of territorial politics and identity in England could have broader implications. First, it could engender a polarisation of political expressions around the centre–periphery cleavage in the North as well as in other parts of England. Second, the obstinate focus on the design of artificial regional structures from above could lead to the creation of devolved institutions that are perceived as imposed by the central government, and which do not connect with or represent the local populations. This, in turn, could generate a democratic deficit that would widen further emerging territorial gaps.

Taken all together, these points seem to suggest that there might be a need to reconsider the current dominant approach to regionalism and devolution in England—envisioning a strategy where territory, identity and democracy are seen as key components, *together with* economic development, and opening up to an idea of governance that is not just led by the centre, but is inclusive and integrative; acknowledging in a positive way the territorial diversity that characterises the English polity, yet inscribing this within an overarching narrative of English nationhood. Indeed, in the long term, addressing the English Question in an effective and sustainable way could hinge on the ability of any political force to deal with such a complex task.

Notes

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- 5 Ibid.
 - 6 J. Willett and A. Giovannini, 'The uneven path of UK devolution: top-down vs. bottom-up regionalism in England—Cornwall and the North-East compared', *Political Studies*, vol. 62, no. 2, 2014, pp. 343–60.
 - 7 A. Giovannini, 'Devolution in England ignores the key lessons from Scotland's referendum', SPERI Blog, <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/2015/09/22/the-scottish-indyref-one-year-on/> (accessed 25 January 2016).
 - 8 Survey results available at: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-34787669>
 - 9 D. Butler and D. Stokes, *Political Change in Britain: Forces Shaping Electoral Choice*, 2nd ed., London, Macmillan, 1974.
 - 10 Yorkshire First Manifesto, <http://www.yorkshirefirst.org.uk/manifesto> (accessed 25 January 2016).
 - 11 A full explanation of the Bell Principles can be found at: <http://www.independentnetwork.org.uk/resources/bell-principles>
 - 12 S. Rokkan and S. Lipset, 'Cleavage structures, party systems, and voter alignments. An introduction', in S. Rokkan and S. Lipset (eds), *Party Systems and Voter Alignments. Cross-national Perspectives*, New York, Free Press, 1967, pp. 1–50.
 - 13 Yorkshire Pledge, <http://www.yorkshirefirst.org.uk/pledge> (accessed 25 January 2016).
 - 14 For the purpose of this study, only a selected part of the survey's data have been presented in the article. The full results of the survey are available at: http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/YFSurvey_Tables_A_Giovannini.pdf
 - 15 R. Hayton, A. Giovannini and C. Berry, *The Politics of the North: Governance, Territory and Identity in Northern England*, Leeds, Leeds University, 2016. e-Book available at: <http://speri.dept.shef.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Politics-of-the-North-Hayton-Giovannini-Berry.pdf>
 - 16 J. Osmond, *The Divided Kingdom*, London, Constable, 1988.
 - 17 A. Giovannini, 'Devolution in the North of England: time to bring the people into the debate?' Open Democracy, <https://www.opendemocracy.net/ourkingdom/arianna-giovanni-devolution-in-north-of-england-time-to-bring-people-into-debate> (accessed 25 January 2016).