

Rhetoric vs. Reality: Political Motivations Behind High Speed 2 (HS2) Decision-making

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This project asks whether British prime ministers Boris Johnson's and Rishi Sunak's decisions to cancel part of High Speed 2 (HS2) – a rail line intended to connect major cities in the United Kingdom – stem from political motivations or practical infrastructure concerns. Previous researchers have examined the importance of access to high-speed rail (HSR) networks outside of major metropolitan areas and the effects of this on regional economies. Using public choice theory as a theoretical lens, this project examines the political factors influencing the cancellation – or funding – of the major rail project. The research uses a mixed qualitative and quantitative method to assess the political rhetoric and realities surrounding HS2's development. Specifically, the project employs a comparative analysis of government policy papers, reports, and press statements from the respective prime ministers and public opinion polling, election results, and transportation data. This project argues short-term political decisions played a greater role in the rail project's cancellation than potential infrastructure concerns or post-pandemic travel patterns. For instance, the cancellations reflect Johnson's commitment to maintaining political cohesion and party support and Sunak's priority of improving his public image ahead of an election. Citing the UK's history of regional economic disparities exacerbated by Conservative policies, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of how party politics shape the development of large-scale infrastructure projects.

Key Words: United Kingdom Railway, Politics and Infrastructure



The double decker's upper level gives a clear view into a poorly lit construction site in Central London. Beyond blue fence panels labeled "HS2," railway tracks lead into Euston Station, and the bus snakes through the adjacent traffic lane lined with cones. The acronym gives no immediate indication of the fenced-off area's purpose, but a quick Google search does: "High Speed 2...connecting the UK's north and south...largest infrastructure project in Europe...terminating at Euston...under construction." The next morning at the neighboring King's Cross Station, delays and cancellations flash across schedule boards, mostly affecting northbound trains controlled by private companies; *maybe HS2 will fix that*, I thought. Fourteen months later, the acronym pops up again. In a former train station turned conference hall in Manchester, British Prime Minister Rishi Sunak announces his decision to halt the northern section of the major rail project, *The New York Times* reports. With the Conservative Party's 2023 conference slogan, "Long-term decisions for a brighter future," projected above him, Sunak argued commuters' post-pandemic travel habits did not justify HS2's escalating costs; the public money must go elsewhere. As I read about pauses to government funding and contractor plans in disarray, I wondered if the rail line would ever make it to Euston, let alone the North.

The High Speed 2 (HS2) rail project's evolution reflects the United Kingdom's need to reinforce its decades-old rail network, promote economic growth, and address regional imbalance. Beyond its technical function as the rail network's new and improved backbone, historical factors such as socio-economic conditions and political dynamics influenced the development of HS2. Though the UK's "North-South divide" traces back to the 19th century, since the 1980s, Conservative Party policies designed to achieve national economic revival have instead increased regional disparity (Martin, 1988). By 1997, under Conservative leadership, the privatization of the nation's rail industry after decades of state ownership led to more expensive train tickets since users rather than taxpayers pay the major share of the fares (Dobruszkes et al., 2022). Following the Conservative Party's pledge to revitalize, or "level up," the North in 2019, the gap in transport funding has grown; in the 2021-2022 fiscal year, the government spent £905 per head on transport in London and the South East compared to £442 per head in the North East (Mayes et al., 2023). The historical context of the UK's rail industry and social differences frames the government's decisions to scale back northern sections of the HS2 project. Since 2010, shifting Conservative policies and successive prime ministers have delayed the project's development and created uncertainty regarding its future.

As a high-speed route connecting major cities in the North and Midlands regions with London, HS2 was proposed in 2010 to address issues of rail capacity and efficiency while stimulating economic growth outside the prosperous capital and southern region. The project aimed to "shrink" the country and propel the UK into a new era of modern transportation – similar

to high-speed rail (HSR) in France or Japan – acting as a vital initiative in the UK’s neglected infrastructure landscape. After the UK’s successful partnership with France to build High Speed 1 – better known as the Channel Tunnel – the then-Labour government laid out plans for new HSR lines throughout England and potentially Scotland (“High-speed rail plans announced,” 2010). The proposed Y-shaped rail line intended to have two major parts: Phase 1 running from London to Birmingham, and Phase 2 travelling northeast and northwest, toward Leeds and Manchester, and interchanging in Birmingham (Department for Transport, 2010). Because accessibility to London determines the socio-economic circumstances of many UK cities, HSR lines can spur economic growth in cities along the route through additional services and reductions in train times (Chen & Hall, 2011). The 2023 cancellation of Phase 2a – the northeastern leg – raised questions about the government’s commitment to regional unity. While initial HS2 plans were seen as a step in bridging the gap between the South and the North and Midlands, the decision highlighted tension between short-term economic considerations and the nation’s goal of creating a more balanced economy.

As the proposal gained momentum over the years, HS2 became emblematic of the government’s challenges in balancing national growth, regional priorities, and politics. Support from Conservative Party members dwindled due to controversies surrounding the megaproject’s rising costs, potential environmental damage, and poor management, consequently leading to the suspension and cancellation of Phase 2. In 2020, the former chairman of the HS2 company, Douglas Oakervee, and then-Prime Minister Boris Johnson gave the project the go-ahead and confirmed the original rationale was still valid; in his independent review, however, Oakervee speculated “London could derive more benefits from HS2 than places outside of London” (Oakervee, 2020, p. 95). Less than two years later, Johnson’s long-delayed Integrated Rail Plan (IRP) for the North and Midlands halted construction on the northeastern section going toward Leeds (Department for Transport et al, 2021). As a cabinet member, Rishi Sunak championed the project and wanted to reinstate the route canceled by the IRP, but in October 2023, as prime minister, he scrapped the northwestern (Birmingham-Manchester) route, citing pandemic-related costs and dwindling rail capacity; instead, he announced Network North, a plan to redistribute the funds to other transport projects in the region (“Conservative leadership race,” 2022; Parker, 2023). Both Johnson’s and Sunak’s alternative plans for HS2 shifted focus away from the North, therefore undermining the project’s original purpose. To understand the motivations behind the prime ministers’ decisions, this research explores the changing politics and government reports shaping the rail project’s future.

The research project examines whether Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak are making infrastructure or political decisions when scaling back and canceling Phase 2 of HS2. Both the former and the current prime minister failed

to consider the project's benefits for the North, showing a clash between short-term politics and long-term national or regional growth. Therefore, the research will compare government rhetoric surrounding HS2 to the reality of the rail line. Specifically, the project looks at rhetoric in Johnson's Integrated Rail Plan (2021) and Sunak's Network North Plan (2023) to uncover justifications surrounding HS2's development. Using evidence from these reports, the research will examine variables such as rail capacity and project funding to understand the leaders' arguments; the project utilizes existing rail usage reports from the Office for National Statistics and the Office of Road and Rail Data Portal. Furthermore, the project references how public choice theory may explain if politicians used HS2 decision-making as an electoral strategy. The timeline of unkept "levelling-up" promises, planning, and funding uncertainties shows a lack of ambition from the UK government to execute large infrastructure projects quickly and cost effectively. Accordingly, the research will show the importance of considering wider economic, social, and environmental impacts in governments' decisions surrounding transportation projects.

Overall, this paper argues Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak made political decisions, rather than infrastructure decisions, when canceling the second phase of HS2. The project details the politicians' approach and stances regarding the rail project prior to becoming prime ministers, before discussing external political factors – such as election results and public polling – that may have influenced decision-making during their times in office. First, the literature review summarizes research on the regional impacts of high-speed rail and its development. The mixed methods research design collects government reports and external data, using thematic coding strategies to answer whether the politicians were primarily making political or infrastructure decisions when cancelling the second phase of HS2. The analysis shows how each prime minister cherry-picked external data to make an argument against sections of the project, not accounting for political reasonings such as forthcoming elections. The analysis argues that, in the context of elections, short-term political decisions played a greater role in the cancellation of the second phase of HS2 than potential infrastructure concerns or post-pandemic travel patterns. Finally, the discussion section explores how public choice theory framework best explains the prime ministers' decisions and suggests potential policy implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

High Speed Infrastructure

A growing body of literature is concerned with the importance of access to high-speed rail (HSR) networks outside of major metropolitan areas. Previous studies have found a correlation between HSR and regional economic growth. Specifically, scholars reported rail connections to and from major

cities or provinces – the most important markets – have indirect positive impacts on small- and medium-sized cities. Bonnafous' analysis of France (1987) concluded the purpose of HSR is to provide direct and profitable services between two cities, and for these services to be profitable, one must be a major capital (p. 130). Adopting a similar position, Chen and Hall (2011) aimed to fill a gap in the literature by examining regional economic impacts of HSR in the UK. The case study argues against economists' predictions that rail networks benefit metropolitan areas, e.g., London, at the expense of smaller cities or rural areas (Chen & Hall, 2011). The existing research considers economic impacts when evaluating transportation policy decisions and examines the broader infrastructural implications beyond major metropolitan areas. In the case of HS2 in the UK, new research can provide insight into how political and economic factors shape policymaking surrounding the project.

Other scholars have debated the regional economic benefits of HSR projects outside of concentrated metropolitan areas. Several studies suggest HSR does not contribute to regional economic growth; therefore, such projects are not economically viable investments. Contrary to previously mentioned studies, evidence suggests regional economic effects are likely concentrated around stations or major metropolitan areas, leading to short-term benefits in peripheral regions (Vickerman, 1997). In the cases of Germany and Portugal, economic restructurings resulted in HSR projects' rising costs, public opposition, and completion delays; furthermore, the authors point to political – not economic – motivations as the drivers in the projects' implementation (Szobi et al., 2023, p. 30). Regional connections to HSR may drain surrounding economic activities, therefore negatively impacting smaller cities (Albalade et al., 2012, p. 347). However, a relatively small body of literature mentions how historical development or political decision-making can shape HSR ambitions. A new comparative study across different regions and countries can help identify best practices and potential areas for improvement in leveraging HSR for regional economic development. Therefore, this research project aims to find whether economic or political decisions hold greater influence on HSR policymaking in the UK.

While several lines of evidence suggest HSR infrastructure alone is not likely to be transformative for the economy, literature acknowledges such projects can have a more significant impact when coupled with other policy efforts. Authors consider the impacts of alternative transportation methods, such as highways. According to Sánchez-Mateos & Givoni (2012), "it is likely that a new HSR line will result in accessibility reduction and inferior position for the rail in the competition with other modes and mainly road transport" (p. 112). Furthermore, road projects employing local labor may be more beneficial to "poor" regions compared to large-scale rail projects (Vickerman, 1997, p. 36). By examining the influence of broader policy goals and considerations of alternative transportation, this research project aims to contribute

to the ongoing debate on the strategies for enhancing regional development and rail accessibility. Investigating the political and infrastructure considerations behind canceling the rail project can explain competition between different transportation modes and inform future policy decisions.

A recent qualitative study described how HSR networks around the world are socially exclusive. Accordingly, the authors noted the potential of HSR projects to exacerbate existing social imbalances. Dobruszkes et al.'s study (2022) describes the social inequalities associated with HSR use and calls for a more comprehensive understanding of the social and political dimension of HSR services. For example, travel methods associated with HSR are linked to economic factors like higher income, as well as other categories of exclusion, e.g., geographical or time-based. The authors raise the issue of taxpayer-funded transportation projects not benefiting the masses, suggesting the exclusion in the UK is primarily due to economic factors (Dobruszkes et al., 2022, p. 101). This research project aims to address overlooked political questions of HSR projects by analyzing government rhetoric and political decision-making.

Public Choice Theory

The use of public choice theory allows researchers to apply economic methods to politics to explain how and why political decision-making occurs. As the theory assumes personal goals primarily motivate policy outcomes, scholars agree small interest groups have more influence over political decision-making than the majority group. For example, since politicians are interested in maximizing power and profits, candidates seeking reelection prioritize securing votes from "median voters" and special interest groups (Butler, 2012, p. 16). Furthermore, small groups – such as private businesses or lobbyists – influence the government decision-making process "at the expense of large numbers of taxpayers or consumers" (Orchard & Stretton, 1997, p. 412). Therefore, research shows the interests of a small group can lead to government failures or inefficiencies detrimental to the public (Butler, 2012). Applying public choice theory to national infrastructure decision-making can uncover the motivations of politicians and interest groups, such as local constituencies or environmentalists. The theory provides a framework for research exploring how self-interests can impact the implementation of infrastructure projects.

By investigating the political and infrastructure considerations behind canceling HS2, the research project aligns with the broader debate on transportation policy and regional economic development. Like previously mentioned research, the project examines the broader social and economic impacts of HSR beyond major metropolitan areas, as well as the influence of alternative transportation methods. The proposed project aims to contribute to the existing literature by focusing on the wider economic, social, and political considerations impacting the major HSR project in the UK. Specifically,

I investigate whether Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak made infrastructure or political decisions when scaling back and canceling Phase 2 of HS2. To bridge a gap in the literature, the focus on government rhetoric and policymaking addresses overlooked political questions regarding HSR projects. This project explores the political impacts on HSR development by analyzing the potential shift in rhetoric across governments. While previous studies have examined the economic impacts of HSR networks and national projects, this research focuses on political influence in transportation policymaking.

RESEARCH DESIGN

To assess Rishi Sunak's and Boris Johnson's rhetoric surrounding HS2, the project's primary data sources are Johnson's Integrated Rail Plan for the North and Midlands (IRP) and Sunak's Network North plan. The project also references Douglas Oakervee's (2019) review of the rail line to determine trends in the decision-making and government rhetoric surrounding the rail line. The IRP serves as a primary source for understanding Johnson's stance on HS2 and the government's first approach at scaling back a northern section of the rail project; the report followed Oakervee's independent review of the project's potential costs and benefits. Similarly, Sunak's Network North outlines the government's plans and decisions regarding HS2 in the North. The official government plans, independent reviews, and historical policy implementations will show the rationale behind canceling Phase 2 of HS2. As the research project aims to uncover patterns in the decision-making and government rhetoric surrounding HS2, these data sources were primarily used in evaluating Johnson's and Sunak's political and infrastructure decisions regarding the rail project.

To trace changes in the prime ministers' rhetoric and arguments over time, i.e., before and after taking office, the research utilized newspaper articles and government press releases spanning from 2019 to 2023 about the HS2 Phase 2a and Phase 2b cancellations. Specifically, gathered press releases and British news coverage using the Lexis Nexis newspaper database and the website of the Prime Minister's Office (<https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/prime-ministers-office-10-downing-street>). The prime minister's website is a direct source of political stances and the official narrative surrounding the HS2 cancellations via press releases and speeches. The data from Lexis Nexis' newspaper database also traces the project's evolution and changes in political rhetoric over time. Additionally, the news sources capture the public discourse and reaction to the cancellations, which potentially influence policymaking. Put together, press data from the prime minister's website and the Lexis Nexis' newspaper database trace the rail project's evolution, as well as the changing political rhetoric and public discourse surrounding the decisions made regarding HS2. Therefore, the data provides further context into whether political considerations or infrastruc-

ture concerns drove Johnson's and Sunak's decisions to cancel the second phase of HS2.

The project uses both government surveys and independent polling data to track changes in public opinion and rail usage over time. Specifically, I utilized datasets from two independent research firms and two non-ministerial government departments, the Office of Road & Rail (ORR) and Office for National Statistics (ONS). The independent research firms YouGov (<https://yougov.co.uk>) and Redfield & Wilton Strategies (<https://redfieldandwiltonstrategies.com>) contributed public opinion poll data from 2019 to 2023 tracking Britons' beliefs about HS2's planning, implementation, and cancellations. These datasets also include demographic information relevant to the research, such as political affiliation and region of residence. Furthermore, to supplement the independent research, the ORR (<https://www.orr.gov.uk>) and ONS (<https://www.ons.gov.uk>) statistics contribute quantitative data representing passengers' rail usage and travel habits by region. The ORR and ONS maintain a large archive of rail and transport data, as well as census data documenting citizens' methods of traveling to work (<https://www.ons.gov.uk/datasets/>). The quantitative polling data provides a wider view of external factors influencing the cancellation of the northern legs of HS2. The research project uses public opinion data to gain insight into political decision-making outside of the government policy papers and prime ministers' rhetoric.

The project gathered information pertaining to the Phase 2 route of HS2 using a mixed methods approach. To fully cover the arguments of scaling back the rail project, I collected data from news and government sources (qualitative) and research firm and government agency data (quantitative). On Lexis Nexis, to ensure newspaper data reflected the politicians' times in office, I set the date range to correspond with each prime minister's term, i.e., "2019-2022" or "2022-present" and used the search terms "[prime minister's surname]," "HS2," and "Phase 2." On the prime minister's government website, to collect the prime ministers' speeches and press releases regarding Phase 2 of HS2, I looked for documents sorted under the website's "Transport" topic (and "rail" and "transport planning" sub-topics), marked as "news and communications," and authored by "Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street (Number 10)." From Redfield & Wilton's research page and YouGov's homepage, I collected appropriate results after searching "HS2" and, on YouGov specifically, filtering for "surveys results." Then, using the ORR's Statistics and Data Portal, I collected annual "regional rail usage" datasets from 2019 to 2023 for the "East Midlands," "West Midlands," "North West," and "Yorkshire and the Humber" regions (<https://dataportal.orr.gov.uk/statistics/usage/>). Finally, from the ONS' 2021 census reports, I collected regional transportation statistics using the "method used travel to work" variable, filtering for the term "train." The collection approach integrated qualitative arguments and quantitative data to help answer the

“why” behind policymaking. This method is useful in identifying the influence of public opinion on government decision-making and infrastructure considerations.

To understand the motivations behind the prime ministers’ decisions, the project analyzed the government reports, public opinion, and changing rhetoric shaping the rail project’s future. Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, I sought any correlations or divergences between rail usage and political rhetoric. Accordingly, the research project considers wider economic, social, and environmental impacts in governments’ decisions surrounding transportation projects. First, I thematically coded the politicians’ decisions and statements for recurring arguments such as “economic growth,” “environmental impacts,” “capacity,” “infrastructure,” and “costs.” Next, the data from the ORR, ONS, and two independent research firms either support or contest the prime ministers’ given rationale, explaining whether political or infrastructure arguments are the norm. The two-part method compared both data types to determine the extent to which politicians’ statements and positions support the existing rail data. To identify and categorize the key themes in the politicians’ statements, the qualitative analysis involved thematically coding government reports and news releases for recurring arguments related to the decision. Comparing quantitative data with the qualitative findings provided a clear picture of whether the politicians’ statements align with the actual trends and opinions related to the rail project.

ANALYSIS

The lack of clarity surrounding HS2’s objectives made the project vulnerable to shifts in political priorities and susceptible to short-term decision-making. Since 2009, successive governments altered HS2’s purpose from enhancing travel times to improving rail line capacity and, most recently, as a means of “levelling up” the country. The Labour government explored the proposal in detail in a 2010 paper, concluding HS2 “offer[ed] a balance of [economic] benefits unmatched by any other option and should be at the heart of the long-term development of inter-city travel in Britain” (Department for Transport, 2010, p. 151). The David Cameron-led coalition government passed a parliamentary bill in October 2013 to start the project under the same rationale (“HS2: Cameron hails,” 2013). However, the same month, Cameron’s government published a strategic case for the project, stating the main objectives for HS2 were to improve rail capacity and connectivity with shorter, more reliable journey times; in May 2013, the National Audit Office had called these objectives unclear (Department for Transport, 2013, p. 18; Morse, 2013, p. 9). Boris Johnson’s and Rishi Sunak’s decisions to cancel the second phase of HS2 reflects a pattern of indecision or short-term thinking plaguing the project since its inception. Instead of committing to

a long-term strategy, immediate political considerations swayed successive governments' planning of HS2.

Boris Johnson's position

Johnson's evolving stance on the project, from expressing concerns as mayor of London to announcing its continuation and partial halting as prime minister, suggest political pressures shaped HS2's development. Moreover, Johnson's going against expert opinion shows the prime minister folding to Conservative Party criticisms. As mayor, Johnson expressed concerns about the route's infrastructure encroaching on the capital city and, in 2018, urged the government to prioritize other northern transport projects ("London Mayor Boris Johnson," 2011; Shipman, 2018). In February 2020, Johnson – now prime minister – announced the project would go ahead, calling it "a controversial and difficult decision;" the decision followed an independent review by Douglas Oakervee, former chairman of HS2 Ltd., who concluded the government should complete the project in full ("HS2 go-ahead controversial," 2020; Oakervee, 2020, p. 12). However, in November 2021, despite the recommendation, Johnson scaled back the project – cutting the north-eastern (Birmingham-Leeds) route, or Phase 2b – in the Integrated Rail Plan (IRP), potentially in response to ongoing pressure from Tory colleagues and constituents (Department for Transport, 2021; Mason, 2020; see Figure 1). Johnson's choice to scale back the project aligns with the UK government's trend of prioritizing political gain over broader infrastructure needs. In short, the decision appears to be less about the project's merits and more about Johnson's commitment to maintaining political cohesion and support within the Conservative Party.



Figure 1: HS2 Route (2023). Source: [hs2.org.uk](https://www.hs2.org.uk) via BBC News (2023)

Johnson presented the project as a key policy priority before the Phase 2b cancellation, evident in press releases from the Prime Minister's Office. Moreover, Johnson's rhetoric indicates his preference for novel and inadequate infrastructure projects. In July 2019, Johnson committed to regional growth and "level[ing] out opportunities" through a new Manchester-Leeds rail route separate from HS2, "one of his top domestic priorities" ("PM pledges new Manchester-Leeds Rail Route," 2019). Despite proposing vastly expensive infrastructure projects in the past, Johnson also prioritized "improvements that can happen in the short term, not just big engineering schemes that will take years" (Walker, 2021; "PM pledges new Manchester-Leeds Rail Route," 2019). Furthermore, on February 11, 2020, after confirming HS2 would go ahead alongside improvements in local transport, Johnson stated his stance was "not and never [would] be an 'either/or' between big projects and local services" ("PM confirms HS2 will go ahead," 2020). If Johnson believed pushing the project would solidify a legacy as "man of the people," then scaling back HS2 showed the prime minister placed greater value on his image within the Conservative Party. Even though Conservatives later pushed Johnson out of office, the IRP was an attempt at appeasing all voters and avoiding further party disarray.

Rishi Sunak's position

Rishi Sunak's changing opinions on HS2 also indicate deliberate efforts to shape his public image ahead of the 2024 General Election. Additionally, Sunak used the project as a talking point in the first 2022 Conservative leadership election. While campaigning in Leeds in July 2022, Sunak defended the project and remained skeptical of Johnson's proposed alternatives, expressing interest in reinstating the canceled northern branch ("Conservative leadership race," 2022). Specifically, the former member of Johnson's cabinet "want[ed] to see HS2 trains brought up to Leeds and..., as chancellor, funded the projects to look at how best to do that" ("Conservative leadership race," 2022). However, in October 2023, as prime minister, Sunak scrapped the northwestern (Birmingham-Manchester) route, citing rising costs and dwindling rail capacity due to the pandemic, and instead announced the Network North transport plan, disregarding Johnson's IRP ("PM redirects HS2 funding," 2023). Like Johnson, Sunak's positions on HS2 appear to be less about infrastructure planning and more about aligning key policies with electoral prospects. Both the 2022 campaign position and 2023 cancellation reflect Sunak's need to break away from Johnson following the former prime minister's scandals.

<p>“HS2 is the ultimate example of the old consensus. The result is a project whose costs have more than doubled, which has been repeatedly delayed and it is not scheduled to reach here in Manchester for almost two decades and for which the economic case has massively weakened with the changes to business travel post Covid. <i>I say, to those who backed the project in the first place, the facts have changed</i> [emphasis added]. And the right thing to do when the facts change is to have the courage to change direction. And so, I am ending this long running saga. I am cancelling the rest of the HS2 project” (Sunak, 2023).</p>
<p>“We’ve taken the decision many should have done: but didn’t. We’ve ended the HS2 drama and in its place will embark upon a full-scale national reinvestment in the infrastructure people actually use and want and the skilled workforce who’ll build it. And no more hiding: no more pretending in the face of overwhelming evidence” (Sunak, 2023).</p>

Table 1: 2023 Conservative Party Conference Speech Mentions HS2. Source: Sunak, R. (2023)

Sunak suddenly reversed on HS2 shortly before a party leadership conference to position himself as a decisive leader. Moreover, the decision shows indifference toward Conservatives’ “Levelling Up” agenda. In the weeks before the 2023 Conservative Party conference, Sunak declined to commit to building HS2 to Manchester amid cancellation speculations but called the project “one of the many things [Conservatives] are doing to level up across our country” (“UK PM Sunak declines to commit,” 2023). Moreover, *The Guardian* reported the prime minister was “said by those close to the HS2 project to have long disliked it and to be more opposed to building the northern section than [Chancellor Jeremy] Hunt,” then Britain’s top financial official (Helm & Savage, 2023). Accordingly, Sunak refuted previous support for the project in the conference’s keynote speech (see Table 1). The prime minister’s reluctance to commit to the project shows other policies take precedent, especially with an election looming. By framing HS2 as a departure from the “old consensus,” Sunak broke from past Conservative governments (and the party’s current flagship policy), potentially to appease certain constituencies or to bolster election prospects.

Regional considerations

Canceling the second phase of HS2 and investing in alternative regional transport is a shared strategy by the prime ministers to address cost concerns and prioritize more feasible infrastructure projects. In keeping with the Conservative’s “Levelling Up” agenda, Johnson and Sunak’s decisions prioritize redirecting funds to better connect cities in England’s North rather than with London. Initially, the Oakervee Review speculated “London could derive more benefits from HS2 than places outside of London,” and following the review, Johnson set out a £96 billion investment to benefit the Midlands and the North, the “largest and most ambitious” government investment in the railways (Oakervee, 2020, p. 95; Department for Transport, 2021, p. 10).

Following Sunak’s decision, press releases detailed how new plans would “[benefit] more people in more places, more quickly” (Prime Minister’s Office, 10 Downing Street et al., 2023; see Table 2). According to Sunak, HS2’s economic case points to almost half the project’s benefits going to London and the South East, rather than the North and Midlands; instead “every pound” saved from not proceeding with Phase 2 of HS2 would instead be “quickly” reinvested in “hundreds” of transport projects across the country (Department for Transport, 2023, p. 5, 15). However, speculation about HS2’s benefits for London compared to other regions raises questions about the equitable distribution of resources, and despite Sunak’s promised “rapid” reinvestment in numerous projects, the timeline and costs of the alternative investments remain unclear. Moreover, this point assumes the politicians are only making regional or infrastructure considerations when weighing the pros and cons of HS2, which is highly unlikely.

“Rather than delivering HS2 Phase 2 new line between Birmingham and Manchester, the Prime Minister is taking action to deliver greater frequency and quality of transport infrastructure across the whole country” (“PM redirects HS2 funding,” 2023).
“Spiralling HS2 costs redirected to build Network North and fund raft of transport projects across the country, delivering the strong, reliable connections people depend on every day” (“PM redirects HS2 funding,” 2023).
“As a result of the decision to scrap the extension of HS2, every region will now receive investment in the modes of transport that matter to you most” (“Find out about every new transport project in your region,” 2023).
“A fully funded £2.5 billion West Yorkshire mass-transit system, giving the region better connections to Bradford and Wakefield. Leeds will no longer be the biggest European city without a mass-transit system, with up to seven lines potentially created as part of a transformed network, eventually linking Leeds to Bradford, Halifax, Huddersfield, and Wakefield – all in operation before HS2 would have reached the region” (“Find out about every new transport project in your region,” 2023).

Table 2: Regional considerations noted in Sunak’s press releases

The former prime minister considered the project’s impacts on constituencies with strong voter turnout in the 2019 General Election, while the current prime minister considers voting intentions ahead of the upcoming General Election. Johnson’s and Sunak’s decisions align with the preferences – or concerns – of the Conservative electorate, perhaps to maintain or strengthen the party’s support base. The politicians prioritized HS2 construction in the Midlands because the constituencies’ voters strongly impact Conservative victories: much of the line runs through rural areas, or “safe” seats for the Conservative Party (see Figure 2). Additionally, the East & West Midlands constituencies strongly supported electing Johnson in 2019; therefore, Johnson’s decision acknowledges the constituencies’ voters who at the time opposed HS2 (Figure 2; “HS2 fails to inspire,” 2019). Sunak’s decision may be an attempt to appeal to a wider variety of voters following the May

2023 local elections, where Conservatives lost councilors in almost every region of England, including the South East, East, and East Midlands, and the West Midlands and North West regions (“Local elections 2023,” 2023). Johnson’s decision prioritized HS2 construction and local transport investments in areas crucial for Conservative victories and where support for the party was strong, while neglecting then pro-Labour areas, i.e., Leeds. However, Sunak’s cancellation may serve to appeal to current voter preferences across the country.

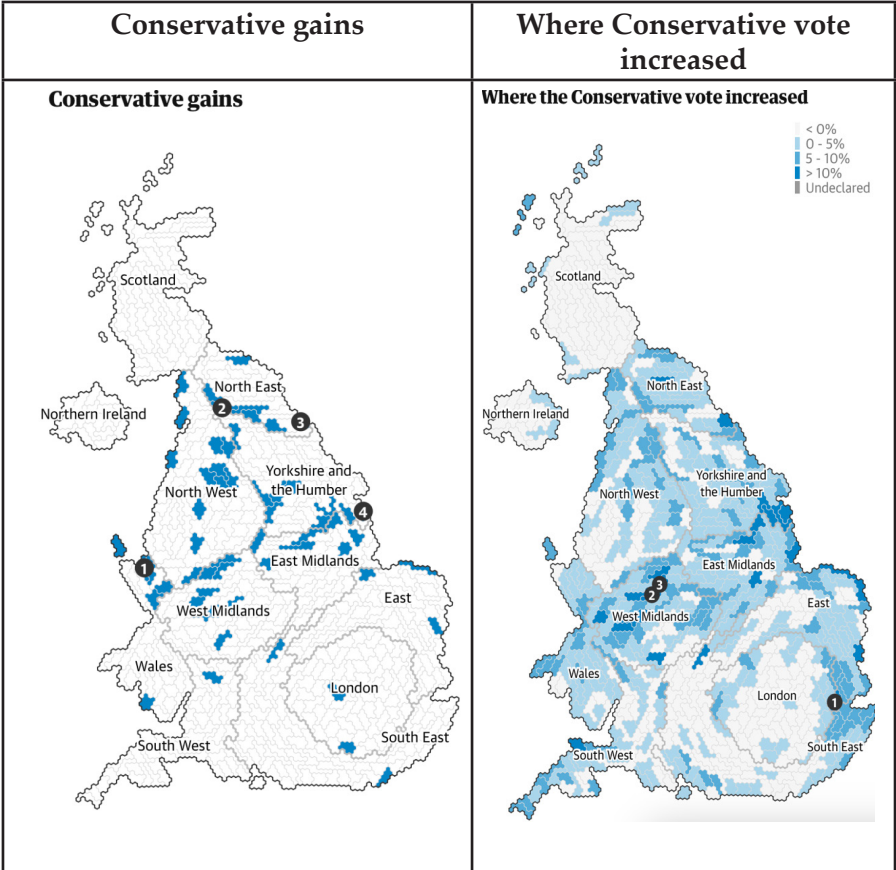


Figure 2: UK General Election 2019 results. Source: Holder, J., Voce, A., & Caelainn, B. (2019)

Alternatives to HS2

Sunak contends large investments in rail infrastructure are futile since cars are the most popular mode of transportation in the UK. The Network North report presents the argument for investing in road infrastructure to reflect recorded travel habits. According to a 2019 transport report, 76% of

UK households had access to at least one car (Department for Transport, 2019, p. 20). In 2021, outside of London, all regions in England saw around 70% or more people travelling to work by car (Department for Transport, 2022). However, Sunak’s justification is not reflective of popularity as much as insufficient alternatives in regions outside London. The broader approach to transport risks widening the gap in adequate access to transportation options, particularly among non-car owners. The government’s inability to simultaneously address local transport, road infrastructure, and national rail projects reflects a lack of political will.

Sunak’s decision aligns with his government’s pro-car stance and commitment to watering down net-zero policies. While Network North promised the North and the Midlands more public transport schemes, Sunak’s priorities heavily focus on road projects. Prior to the Phase 2 cancellation, Sunak listed the needs of drivers as a transport policy priority, slamming “anti-car measures” at the expense of public transportation users and net-zero policies (Walker, 2023). In the report, Sunak confirms his support for car usage multiple times, specifically through the goal of improving motorways neighboring HS2’s original route (see Table 1; Department for Transport, 2023, p. 25). By December 2023, following Sunak’s promise to reinvest HS2’s funding in “hundreds of transport projects across the country” including a “record investment of £8.3 billion to fix the blight of potholes,” the Department for Transport confirmed the money fixed potholes in London (Department for Transport, 2023, p. 5, 26; Brown, 2023). In pitting public transport users against drivers, the move fails to recognize citizens often use cars because public transport is unreliable or nonexistent. Furthermore, Sunak’s vague outline of improved road networks further reflects a lack of clear planning, the same issue testing HS2.

“Our plan breaks with the failed consensus of the past, which saw too much investment go to Westminster’s transport priorities. Instead, we’re going to invest in the transport that really matters to people – the roads, buses, and railways they use every day” (p. 4)
“Buses are the most popular form of public transport, yet we spend three times as much on trains. Outside London, many rely on cars, yet our local roads are congested and poorly maintained” (p. 4)
“We must also focus on the transport routes that matter most to people: the modes that people use, and what they want to see improved. Most total passenger journeys are by road, with 88% of passenger miles by car, van or taxi, and four in five households outside of London having access to a car. The majority of public transport journeys are by bus, with investments in the bus network delivering significant returns. And the vast majority of journeys are local, with nearly three-quarters running less than 5 miles” (p. 10)
“The £6.5 billion we are investing in HS2 this year is 23% more than what we are investing in the entire road network” (p. 11).
“And to improve everyday local journeys for people, such as more buses and better roads, we will tackle the scourge of potholes across the country and support hundreds of bus routes in the North and Midlands” (p. 24).

"Strategic road projects, such as the M6 Junction 15 between Manchester and Birmingham and providing funding to dual the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham" (p. 25).
"Ensuring the delivery of 70 road schemes across the country – including 21 in the North, 10 in the Midlands, and 39 in the rest of the country" (p. 25)

Table 3: Sunak’s pro-car stance in Network North. Source: Department for Transport (2023)

Financial considerations

Supporters of Johnson’s and Sunak’s cancellations argue cost overruns made HS2’s original plans financially unviable. Therefore, distributing funds to a greater number of smaller projects is a more worthwhile endeavor. The government initially estimated HS2 would cost £37.5 billion (in 2011 prices) but the expected cost increased dramatically; due to inflation increases and the project’s growing scope, the 2015 budget of £55.7 billion for the whole of HS2 increased to £100 billion (Norris & Tetlow, 2023). Because of inaccurate estimates and continual delays, Johnson stated costs could be better spent elsewhere for the same amount or less, e.g., £96.4 billion total (Department for Transport, 2021, p. 31). Similarly, Sunak argued the cost-benefit case no longer held because HS2 would return “possibly as little as 80 pence for every £1 invested by the taxpayer” (Department for Transport, 2023, p. 15). However, HS2 now costs over twice as much for half the track. Furthermore, the government is not “saving” any taxpayer money with the cancellation by reallocating funds elsewhere. Any proposed alternative schemes may undermine the reliability of the Conservative government, given the uncertain status of the projects’ completion.

Johnson’s and Sunak’s decisions ignore the timeline of project mismanagement and lack of government oversight contributing to HS2’s cost overruns. Specifically, the prime ministers’ infrastructure and cost arguments primarily rely on pandemic-related issues such as inflation, rather than a weak post-Brexit economy. The initial 2010 policy paper assessing the HS2 plan concluded that the then-estimated £30 billion total cost “reflected its finding that construction costs for major projects in the UK are higher than for comparable projects elsewhere in Europe” (Department for Transport, 2010, p. 9). For instance, building infrastructure in the UK costs far more than in most other places, with major rail projects estimating £262 million per mile; the completed first phase of HS2 may cost £396 million for each mile of track (Burn-Murdoch, 2023). Furthermore, in July 2023, the Infrastructure and Projects Authority published an annual report stating the Birmingham-London route of HS2 “appears to be unachievable,” while Crewe-Manchester “appears feasible,” but “significant issues already exist” (Slow, 2023). In disregarding known planning and cost issues affecting HS2, the government’s lack of political will drove the cancellations. The ministers’ short-term strategies also fail to consider that the value of a completed first phase is significantly less without the completion of the second.

Post-pandemic travel patterns

The pandemic’s impact on travel patterns influenced both prime ministers’ decisions to cancel legs of HS2. Johnson’s approach, however, highlights a more genuine intent to prioritize infrastructure development than Sunak’s decision, which aligns with his government’s road priorities. Johnson expected travel patterns to rebound following the pandemic, and evidence from the National Infrastructure Commission justified investing in new rail services like the prime minister’s proposed alternatives for HS2 (Department for Transport, 2021, p. 38). Yet, Sunak used the pandemic to justify the cancellation, saying it “significantly changed the travel patterns [HS2] was originally designed to serve” and “while road travel has recovered to pre-pandemic levels, train journeys are still down by 20 per cent” (Department for Transport, 2023, p. 5, 16). Attributing railway challenges solely to the pandemic should not justify halting a major infrastructure project. Johnson citing the National Infrastructure Commission’s finding makes his decision regarding HS2 look more reasonable. Likewise, Sunak’s argument about dwindling rail numbers – true or not – upholds a pro-car approach to transportation planning.

Despite Sunak’s shortsighted claims about changing commuter patterns, rail travel is growing in the UK. The substantial increase in total passenger journeys indicates a demand for rail upgrades like HS2. Data from the Office of Road and Rail illustrates total passenger journeys are rebounding post-pandemic (see Figure 3). Although business and commuter traffic decreased following the pandemic, leisure travel increased, and passenger numbers are higher than pre-pandemic (“Rail commuting up 8%,” 2023).

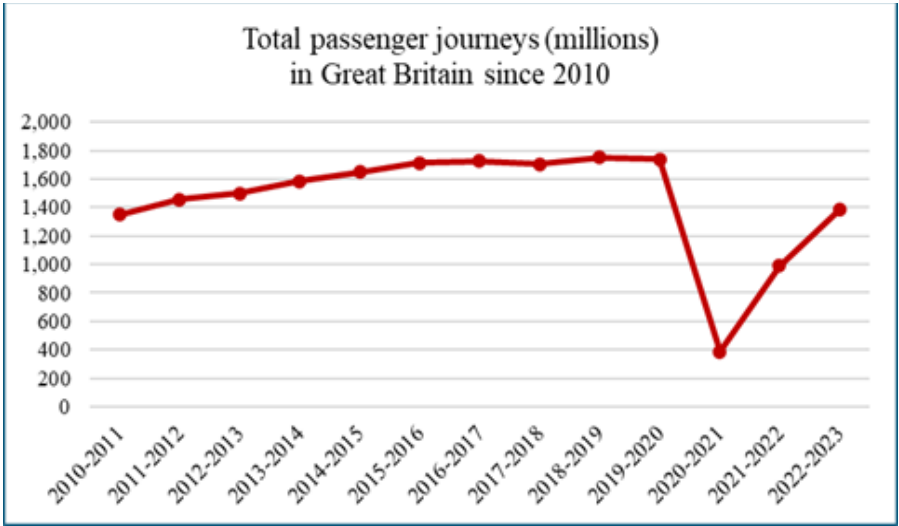


Figure 3. Source: Office of Road and Rail Data Portal

Therefore, to justify the cancellation, Sunak overlooked current data showing a growing demand for rail services. The prime minister's decision prioritizes broader political agendas over addressing the evolving needs of transportation infrastructure.

Public opinion

Despite divided public opinion, during Boris Johnson's term, a higher proportion of Conservative voters supported HS2 compared to Labour and Liberal Democrat voters. However, polls later indicated increased opposition from the whole electorate, regardless of party affiliation. YouGov data from 2019 shows a split among voters: 39% supported HS2 plans and 38% opposed, and more Conservatives supported the plan than Labour Party members; in 2020, a larger portion of Labour and Liberal Democrat voters than Conservative voters supported HS2's cancellation (YouGov, 2019; Redfield & Wilton Strategies, 2020). Polarized public opinion persisted into 2021; polling in July 2021 showed a plurality (43%) of Britons opposing HS2, compared to 29% supporting HS2 and 25% neither supporting nor opposing the rail line (Redfield & Wilton Strategies, 2021b). Moreover, a significant majority of Britons (56%) aware of HS2 expressed skepticism about its value for money, believing the project would not offer a good return on investment (Redfield & Wilton Strategies, 2021a). The widespread skepticism about HS2's value for money among the British public transcends partisan views. Therefore, a genuine assessment of the project's feasibility and cost-effectiveness possibly motivated Johnson's decision to cancel part of HS2, rather than political expediency.

Sunak's decision did not reflect the project's support among the public, although a substantial portion of the electorate agreed with the cancellation. The decision aimed at addressing more pressing issues and resonating with a broader swath of the electorate. Through appealing to public sentiment, Sunak sought to solidify support across party lines. Voters generally supported building the full rail line prior to Sunak's decision (see Appendix Tables 2 & 3). However, a plurality of Britons supported the final decision to scrap the Birmingham-Manchester section of HS2; among the group, a majority of 2019 Conservative voters supported the decision, while a plurality of 2019 Labour and Northern voters opposed (Redfield & Wilton Strategies, 2023; see Appendix Table 5). While the public agreed the government should reallocate money elsewhere, only 25% thought Sunak would invest savings in alternative projects (see Appendix Table 4; Topham et al., 2023). The prime minister's decision to cancel HS2 is not merely about the project but also about positioning the government favorably ahead of an election. Sunak appears responsive to the concerns of his party, while potentially attracting support from disillusioned voters who prioritize the government's fiscal responsibility over ambitious infrastructure plans.

DISCUSSION

Public Choice Theory

Public choice theorists focus on an individual or interest group's attempt to achieve private goals by influencing public sector choices. For this reason, public choice theory may explain how Sunak's and Johnson's political opportunities (e.g., election prospects in the UK's plurality voting system) influenced the prime ministers' decisions to cancel the second phase of HS2. For instance, the analysis finds Johnson cut the first phase of HS2 in response to backlash from Conservative colleagues. With the interest of gaining more party support, Sunak's decision to cancel the second phase influenced his image as a more progressive or decisive Conservative leader than his predecessors. Furthermore, another finding suggests Sunak's promises of vague and drawn-out "levelling up" alternatives to the rail project are a tactic to keep constituencies voting for the Conservative party well into the future. Public choice theory supports the analysis' argument that political incentives influenced HS2 policymaking more than infrastructure or financial considerations. Relating to the theory's assumption personal goals primarily motivate policy outcomes, each prime minister's decision regarding HS2 considers the longevity – or legacy – of his time in office.

Johnson and Sunak made cancellations to the second phase of HS2 surrounding general elections, suggesting the decisions strategically responded to the preferences of specific constituents. Likewise, public choice theory states special interest groups have more influence over political decision-making than the majority group. Furthermore, since politicians are interested in maximizing power and profits, candidates seeking reelection prioritize securing votes from "median voters." In terms of special interest groups, the analysis found Sunak's decision may appeal to voters who are skeptical of large infrastructure projects or concerned about the rail project's escalating costs and unclear benefits. Likewise, Johnson – facing pressure from Conservative politicians and party members in the Midlands – canceled the project to possibly recognize concerns from the region's swing voters who influenced his election. Furthermore, in citing changes to travel patterns post pandemic, Sunak's decision aligns with his government's pro-car stance and commitment to watering down net-zero policies. Public choice theory assumes politicians need to remain popular to stay in power and therefore support legislation promoting the general interests of a specific party and voters. This framework supports the analysis' hypothesis that, when cancelling the second phase of HS2, Johnson and Sunak strongly considered the rail project's impact on the Conservative party's goal of avoiding election defeat.

Policy Suggestions

The UK government should consider finishing the full HS2 network in addition to completing smaller transportation projects across the country. Reinstating the rail project's second phase could offer a practical solution to the transportation challenges it was originally meant to serve, such as old infrastructure or overcrowded trains. Additionally, following through on the alternative plans outline in the Integrated Rail Plan and Network North would strengthen regional development in the North and Midlands. Past literature from Vickerman (1997) and Sánchez-Mateos & Givoni (2012) acknowledges HSR projects can have more significant impacts when coupled with other policy efforts, such as highways or bus systems; HSR infrastructure alone is not likely to be transformative for the economy. Furthermore, the findings show supporters of Johnson's and Sunak's cancellations argue HS2 is financially unviable and investing in more local infrastructure projects is more worthwhile. However, the analysis finds Sunak's Network North report – which names dozens of road projects as HS2 alternatives – uses car popularity, i.e., reliability, to justify the cancellation. Integrating smaller transportation projects with the HS2 network could improve passenger accessibility, reduce rail congestion, create more job opportunities, and promote social equity in underserved regions of the UK. Unless the government commits to both HS2 and local transportation projects – and integrates the wider infrastructure system – regional inequalities will only widen. That said, HS2 alone will not solve the North-South divide: British policymakers should also consider implementing long-term regional equality plans that do not just serve as electoral strategies.

In the future, British policymakers' proposed transport investments should be grounded in clear objectives and an overall transport strategy. A thought-out strategy – potentially determined by an independent body – ought to align with broad, long-term national objectives rather than short-term policies tied to a specific government. The analysis finds HS2's changing objectives over the years resulted in short-term decision-making from successive governments and, most recently, reflecting the current Conservative government's key policy, "Levelling Up." Furthermore, the lack of clarity surrounding the goals and benefits of HS2 led to controversies and polarized public opinion. And without clear objectives or decent cost-benefit analysis, the project's development lagged, and costs dramatically increased at taxpayers' expense. A broader vision for the future of transportation in the UK may help avoid short-term/ad-hoc decisions and ensure projects reflect the country's priorities even as facts change. If policymakers implement a clear transport strategy sooner rather than later, future governments can prioritize investments with the greatest positive impact on society, the economy, and the environment. Additionally, taxpayer money could be spent more wisely and efficiently if decision-makers evaluate a project's potential benefits against the costs and risks more accurately.

CONCLUSION

This paper argues Boris Johnson and Rishi Sunak made political decisions when canceling the second phase of HS2, primarily considering the impacts of the project in the context of elections and keeping the Conservative Party in power. Specifically, Johnson and Sunak undermined the project's continuously shaky objectives to make the cancellations appear to be the most logical. Branded to "level up" the UK, the decisions cast doubts about the country's potential to ever finish ambitious infrastructure projects due to political debates. The prime ministers considered their legacies, their party's power, and their "promised" policies in the decision-making process over infrastructure concerns. Johnson's decision cast him as a "man of the people"-type leader who appeals to all parties, and similarly, Sunak branded himself as a decisive leader who pledged to end a long-drawn-out and controversial project. The alternatives to HS2 act as more "political pledges" than anything, considering localized projects' completion rests on Conservative governments staying in power past Sunak's initial term. This project acts as a case study for why Western countries often fail at major infrastructure projects. For the UK in particular, the paper shows the government's propensity to draw the country down time over time, thereby placing it behind its peers; canceling HS2 can be seen as another major blow to the country's economy following Brexit. Furthermore, the project details how political failures play a role in the appraisals or cancellations of very large infrastructure investments.

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APPENDIX

Do you support or oppose building the HS2 rail link between London, Birmingham and Manchester?

	Total	Vote in 2019 Gen Election			Region in England			
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	North	Mid-lands	London	South
Total sup- port	47%	52%	58%	54%	49%	47%	54%	44%
Total oppose	33%	35%	35%	37%	34%	39%	23%	33%
Don't know	21%	13%	16%	9%	17%	15%	23%	23%

Source: YouGov. (2023, September 28). YouGov / The Times Results 26th - 27th September 2023

Do you support or oppose cancelling the portion of HS2 between Birmingham and Manchester, so high-speed trains only ran between London and Birmingham?

	Total	Vote in 2019 Gen Election			Region in England			
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	North	Midlands	London	South
Total sup- port	23%	28%	20%	16%	20%	29%	19%	24%
Total op- pose	52%	50%	61%	69%	62%	50%	55%	48%
Don't know	25%	23%	19%	15%	19%	21%	26%	28%

Source: YouGov. (2023, September 28). YouGov / The Times Results 26th - 27th September 2023

Do you think building HS2 is good or bad value for money?

	Total	Vote in 2019 Gen Election			Region in England			
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	North	Midlands	London	South
Good value £	15%	10%	18%	14%	18%	12%	24%	12%
Bad value £	58%	67%	60%	58%	56%	69%	48%	59%
Don't know	27%	24%	22%	27%	27%	19%	28%	29%

Source: YouGov. (2023, September 28). YouGov / The Times Results 26th - 27th September 2023.

Rishi Sunak has also cancelled the part of the HS2 rail link between Birmingham and Manchester... Do you think this was the right or wrong decision?

	Total	Vote in 2019 Gen Election			Region in England			
		Con	Lab	Lib Dem	North	Midlands	London	South
Right decision	37%	55%	22%	32%	29%	44%	33%	42%
Wrong decision	40%	27%	57%	49%	51%	38%	40%	33%
Don't know	23%	18%	21%	19%	20%	18%	27%	25%

Source: YouGov. (2023, October 6). YouGov / The Times Results 4th - 5th October 2023.