

Ron Johnston Obituary

Influential academic who specialised in electoral geography and debunked the myth that people vote according to their class

When Ron Johnston was a young lecturer, it was seen as something of an oddity for a geographer to spend his time looking at statistics. Geography, his older colleagues agreed, consisted in the description of human and physical features of a landscape, and their interactions. To Johnston, this conception seemed limiting.

He sought a method that could explain those interactions scientifically and found it in quantitative geography, the idea sprung from American universities that geographers might analyse people the way chemists analyse substances: by coming up with hypotheses about them, then seeing whether those hypotheses are borne out by the data.

His first attempts to bring quantitative geography into British seminar rooms were met with bemusement. Having heard him read a statistical analysis of British election results, one of his colleagues sniffed, "Is this what's known as political science?"

Johnston's specialism was the geography of elections. He was a prolific researcher whose easy, donnish manner hid his industry. During his time as a professor at Sheffield University he produced paper after paper debunking the assumptions of his field. One such assumption was that people voted predominantly according to their class. In his book *The Geography of English Politics* (1985) he showed that the voting intentions of people of the same class varied widely across the country and that other factors must be at play.

Johnston also found evidence to contradict the assumption, commonly held among electoral geographers, that local campaigns in general elections did not count for much and it was the national campaign that won the votes. On the contrary, he found that there was a strong positive correlation between the amount spent on a local campaign and its outcome.

Perhaps his most significant discovery was that the arrangement of constituencies in Britain greatly favoured Labour over the Conservatives. With David Rossiter and Charles Pattie, he found that had the two parties won an equal share of the vote in 1997, Labour would have attained 82 more seats. The figure was 142 for 2001, 112 for 2005, and 54 for 2010. As a result he became the expert to whom politicians from across the spectrum would go to learn about this knotty issue, and in 2010 he was commissioned by the British Academy to write a paper, "Drawing a new constituency map for the United Kingdom". The next year he was appointed OBE for services to scholarship.

In 2006 he and Pattie compiled their papers on electoral studies together into one book, *Putting Voters in Their Place: Geography and Elections in Great Britain*. There were 300 of them.

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Johnston's droll humour, love of terrible puns and generosity with his time made him fun to work with, but his indefatigable work ethic could also be intimidating. It seemed as though there were more hours in his day than in everyone else's. He even wrote about the one hobby he took up to take his mind off work — competitive bellringing — and claimed, perhaps facetiously, that his book on the subject, *An Atlas of Bells*, was his bestselling publication.

Ronald John Johnston was born in 1941 in Swindon, Wiltshire, to Louis and Joyce (née Liddiard). He retained a fondness for Swindon throughout his life and would never miss the opportunity to illustrate a geographical point with its example. He attended the Commonweal School in Swindon before studying geography at Manchester University, where he met Rita Brennan, a fellow student. They married in 1963 and had two children, Chris, who became vice-president of logistics for Sodexo, a catering company, and Lucy, a professor of psychology at Murdoch University, Perth, Australia. Rita and their children survive him.

Johnston's first teaching positions were at Monash University in Melbourne and Canterbury University in New Zealand. He returned to England in 1974 to teach at Sheffield, where, aside from his main line in electoral studies, he also studied the geography of racial segregation. He found that the United States had the most racially segregated cities in the anglosphere and that Australia and New Zealand had the least.

He was made vice-chancellor of Essex University in 1992, but resigned from the role in 1995 to return to researching and teaching, taking up a position at Bristol University.

The joy of research was, for him, only that of getting to the bottom of things. He was the second most cited geographer in the world between 1981 and 1985 and the author or co-author of 50 books and 800 papers. The last email one friend had from him, on the day he was rushed to hospital, was about his latest publication.

Ron Johnston, OBE, geographer, was born on March 30, 1941. He died of a heart attack on May 29, 2020, aged 79