

Red Wall Blues

Rob Gandy^a and Scott Foster^a

a Liverpool Business School, Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, UK

Research, using data from the four general elections between 2010 and 2019, has shown that British MPs are increasingly likely to represent constituencies in the region of their birth [<https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2022.2088178>][<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/trends-in-region-based-localism-among-mps-2010-2019/>]. It highlighted that by 2019 more than half of British MPs were born in the region in which their constituency sat. There were clear partisan differences and a centre-periphery divide; but no overall gender divide. That the current older cohort in the Commons was less local than their younger colleagues means that this trend will probably continue, given they are the most likely to retire in the coming years.

Arguably the most significant phenomenon in 2019 was the collapse of the ‘Labour Red Wall’. Therefore, one question to be asked is whether the issue of ‘localism’ might have played a part? After all, there were many examples of the Labour Party placing (or perhaps parachuting) favoured candidates from the south of England into safe seats in its northern heartlands. Examples of London-born MPs who were in safe northern seats included: Luciana Berger (Liverpool Wavertree); Hilary Benn (Leeds Central); Rachel Reeves (Leeds West); and Ed Miliband (Doncaster North).

The phrase ‘Red Wall’, which has become a key term in Britain’s political lexicon, was first coined by James Kanagasooriam [<https://doi.org/10.1177/20419058211045127>]. He identified 42 constituencies which had a strong possibility of the Conservatives winning the seat from Labour in 2019; either for the first time ever, or for the first time in recent history (since the early 1990s). He used four quantitative criteria, which were based on constituencies having:

1. had a significant Leave vote in the 2016 European Union referendum (greater than 55 per cent);
2. had a substantial minority Conservative vote in recent elections (Conservative vote share greater than 25 per cent in 2017);
3. seen this minority vote growing ever more threatening to Labour (Conservative swing greater than five per cent from 2010 to 2017); and
4. a residual below the 75th percentile.

However, despite Kanagasooriam being quite specific and clear about his methodology, the term ‘Red Wall’ became to be used quite generically (and lazily) in the media; as though there was some huge ‘Great Wall of China’ construction stretching across and either side of the M62. Sometimes the whole of the regions which encompassed the identified constituencies (viz. North East, North West, East Midlands, West Midlands and Yorkshire & Humber) were so attributed implicitly. Given such (wide) variation in the term’s usage, this research opted to set a lower and an upper limit to the definition. The ‘Minimum Red Wall’ was Kanagasooriam’s 42 seats, whilst the ‘Maximum Red Wall’ was all constituencies in the five aforementioned northern England regions plus six seats in North East Wales (Alyn and Deeside; Clwyd South; Clwyd West; Delyn; Vale Of Clwyd; and Wrexham). Of course, this ‘Maximum Red Wall’ is very broad and included Conservative and Liberal Democrat seats, and therefore should be looked at as being significantly different in nature to the ‘Minimum Red Wall’ cohort. Nevertheless, as many commentators will assume varying definitions, these two limits represent a reasonable definitional range.

Results

Table 1 shows the analysis for both the 'Minimum' and 'Maximum Red Walls', with comparisons with the situation in the rest of England & Wales. It was seen that in 2019 successful Conservative candidates were predominantly local (as defined by representing a constituency in the region of birth), with figures of 73.3% for the 'Minimum' and 66.7% for the 'Maximum'. Those who crossed multiple regional boundaries were small in number (2 for the 'Minimum' and 3 for the 'Maximum').

Many Labour MPs who lost their seats crossed multiple regional boundaries (30.0% for 'Minimum' and 31.9% for 'Maximum'). Notably 73.8% of Labour MPs who retained their 'Minimum Red Wall' seats were local, and nine out of ten MPs who crossed multiple regional boundaries were defeated. Just under 40% of such MPs were defeated for the 'Maximum Red Wall'. This suggests that localism was one factor at play.

The overall impact was that local MPs increased from 59.5% to 73.8% for the 'Minimum' and from 47.2% to 51.7% for the 'Maximum'. What is particularly interesting is that the 48.4% local candidates for the Conservatives for the 'Maximum Red Wall' compares to 32.0% in the rest of England & Wales; with corresponding figures of 55.4% and 60.7% for Labour. This suggests that both parties rely more on local candidates in their opponents' heartlands. Perhaps, to some degree, this reflects the practice of parachuting preferred candidates into their respective safest seats?

If the definition of 'local' were to be broadened to include MPs serving a constituency in a region adjacent to that of their birth (which might only be a few miles away if they are from the border areas) then it is seen that the percentage increased from 73.8% in 2017 to 92.9% in 2019 for the 'Minimum', and from 72.8% to 79.5% for the 'Maximum'.

Levelling Up

The 'Maximum' definition is possibly the better proxy of the two when thinking about whether the Conservatives' promise of 'Levelling Up' might have had an influence in people's voting. How much this was the case in the 2019 general election, when there were other prominent issues such as 'Getting Brexit Done', is open to argument. However, the fact that two-thirds of Conservative MPs newly elected to these seats were local is important as they will want to hold the government to account, given that it is directly relevant to their constituents and they will fear that without the promised investment their seats will be at risk. As Boris Johnson stated, the government needed to earn the trust of Labour voters who 'lent him' their vote to deliver his decisive Conservative majority.

One thing that should not be ignored is that the creation of devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales prior to the Millennium saw increased opportunities for ambitious politicians almost exclusively from these regions; and arguably set a context for the increased localism observed for MPs above. The creation of ten metro-mayors and 35 police and crime commissioners in England has further served to emphasise regional localism, which is relevant to 'Levelling Up' as greater powers are devolved from Whitehall. These metro-mayors will anticipate greater voter support the more that they 'fight for their patch'. Therefore, it is interesting to note that six of them were born in their local region and one grew up in it, having moved there at age 10-months. Two who were from outside a region had been MPs representing constituencies in the region; and the final mayor worked in the region and was previously a local councillor. In total six had previously been MPs.

Conclusions

The analyses shown here support the contention that (regional) localism is increasing and will probably continue to increase in politics in England, as well as the United Kingdom as a whole [<https://doi.org/10.1080/13572334.2022.2088178>][<https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/trends-in-region-based-localism-among-mps-2010-2019/>]. The need for candidates to be 'local' is likely to intensify, leading to elections where all the main candidates have (or pretend to have) local credentials; and so, the scope for parties to parachute preferred candidates into safe seats may become more constrained. The choice of Labour candidates for the next general election in those 'Red Wall' seats it lost to the Conservatives in 2019 will be particularly interesting!

Number of words = 1,207

References quoted:

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Table 1 Patterns in Localism in ‘Labour Red Wall’ Seats in 2017 and 2019

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