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Painting England's Towns (and Cities) Red: The 2024 Metro-Mayoral Elections

Thursday 2nd of May delivered a bumper set of elections across England for local and subnational government. In 9 combined authorities and London, voters went to the polls to elect metro mayors, 3 of which (East Midlands, North East, and York and North Yorkshire) elected their first mayor.

Mayoral combined authorities (MCAs) were introduced by the [Conservative-led coalition government](#) as part of a wider strategy to stimulate economic growth outside of London and the South East. To date, 11 MCAs have been established. In the first elections held in 2017, the Conservatives secured four mayoralties (Cambridge and Peterborough, Tees Valley, West of England and West Midlands), but lost Cambridge and Peterborough and West of England in 2021 and in 2024 were reduced to just 1 (Tees Valley).

A different picture has emerged for Labour. Andy Burnham, Steve Rotherham and Sadiq Khan secured third terms as the Mayors of Greater Manchester, the Liverpool City Region and London, while Tracy Brabin and Oliver Coppard were re-elected in the West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire MCAs. The 3 new MCAs also returned Labour mayors: David Skaith in York and North Yorkshire, Kim McGuinness in the North East and Claire Ward in the East Midlands. The election of the latter two bring the total number of female mayors to 3 and Labour mayors to 11.

While a glance at the national polls might lead some to conclude that a Labour victory across the MCAs was a foregone conclusion, these results do not have much relevance for the impending general election. [Recent research](#) by Centre for Cities shows that voters in MCAs tend to prioritise candidate quality over party preference, a trend that did not pass by those standing for election. Indeed, while all mayors since 2017 have somewhat emphasised a 'place first, party second' strategy, in 2024 this was significantly notable for the incumbent Conservatives. Both Ben Houchen in Tees Valley and Andy Street in West Midlands sought to distance themselves from the Conservative government in Westminster; [the former even forgetting to don a Conservative rosette during the final count](#). Instead, mayors (both Conservative and Labour) sought to sell their personal brand, with emphasis on local rather than national issues. This ultimately proved successful for Houchen who, bucking the prevailing anti-Tory trend, was re-elected with 54% of the vote (a loss of 19% compared to 2021), but did not deliver a third term for Street who lost by a very slim margin of just over 1500 votes.

Across the 10 mayoral elections in 2024, turnout averaged around 30%. This was down compared to the 2021 elections (33%) but was still a few percentage points ahead of the 27% average turnout in 2017. Excluding London, the highest turnouts were in Manchester and West Yorkshire at 32% while the lowest was in Liverpool City Region at 24% (perhaps explained by the absence of local elections across most of the region). Across all existing MCAs turnout decreased, with the exception of South Yorkshire where it slightly increased to 27%. In the three new MCAs, turnout was not far from the average, in the North East 31%, York and North Yorkshire 30% and the East Midlands 28%.

Akin to most local elections, the mayoral turnouts do not give much cause for democratic celebration. While [research](#) has shown that metro mayors have become recognisable figures across their regions (notably more well known than MPs), the biggest barrier to voting in May's elections was a '[lack of knowledge](#)' about the role of mayor. While a fairly recent innovation, metro mayors have become an important part of the political landscape, but more remains to be done by mayors and political parties to raise the profile of subnational governance and encourage greater citizen engagement.

The Unfinished Business of English Devolution

As the deadline for a general election approaches, there is a remarkable [cross-party consensus](#) on the future development of English devolution. For the time being, party manifestoes remain behind closed doors, but there seems to be a commitment from both the Conservatives and Labour parties to broaden and deepen devolution across England. In light of the results, there may be a knee-jerk response by the Conservatives to put the brake on further devolution, but with 6 more mayoral elections taking place in 2025 (four of which are new – Greater Lincolnshire, Hull and East Yorkshire, Norfolk, and Suffolk), there may yet be some cause for Conservative celebration. Likewise, Labour, as well as gearing up for the general election, will be eyeing up these mayoral contests, and buoyed by their recent results will hope to make a clean sweep of all 6 MCAs.

Recently, progress has been made in the delivery of more powers and responsibilities for MCAs through the signing of [trailblazer deals](#) for Greater Manchester and West Midlands and a [further transfer of powers](#) to Liverpool City Region, South Yorkshire and West Yorkshire. Interestingly, this progress has not satisfied the appetite – among Mayors or the public – for further devolution.

Over the last 8 months, I have been conducting interviews with Mayors, Chief Executives and officials across 9 MCAs, many of whom believe further devolution is necessary to continue to deliver for their regions. There is a general consensus that fiscal devolution is both a logical and necessary step to drive further economic growth and a missing piece of the English devolution puzzle. In the words of one mayor, ‘the sooner we move towards proper fiscal devolution and put a stop to having to run to central government with a begging bowl asking for more the better’. In his [acceptance speech](#), Andy Burnham called for the devolution of further powers, arguing ‘devolution in England is working and these elections show voters are buying into it, but it is time now to go much further’. [Polling conducted in March 2024](#), underlined this view, with growing support among the public for more policy power over areas like housing and transport to be held at the local rather than national level.

For whichever party wins the next general election, challenges remain. A shared challenge for both the Conservative and Labour parties will be to address the complex patchwork of English subnational governance and fill-in the map. In addition, more needs to be done to nurture more constructive relations between the MCAs and Whitehall/Government and enhance the centre’s understanding of devolution in England (and across the UK more broadly). The former, [as I have previously argued](#), requires formal intergovernmental machinery, such as a mayoral-ministerial council.

An additional challenge for Labour should it win the next general election will be how it manages multiple centres of power across England. As is the case for the Conservative Government and Conservative Mayors ([e.g. the clash between the government and Andy Street over HS2](#)), there are also tensions between Labour mayors and the party leadership. Interviewees in the MCAs heralded Sue Gray’s appointment as Keir Starmer’s Chief of Staff as a welcome development in bridging the gap between mayors and the leader’s office, but a Labour government will need to do much more to keep in check its [‘ingrained centralising tendencies’](#) and embed mayors within its policy-making processes.

Since their inaugural elections in 2017, mayors have made their mark. While their [powers are somewhat inhibited](#) by the character of English devolution as well as resource limitations and complex policy networks, they wield significant hard and soft powers. Beyond policy achievements, [most notably in the area of transport](#), mayors have considerable convening powers and give both visibility and voice to their regions on national and international stages.

In recent years, significant progress has been made to enhance subnational governance in England. After the next set of mayoral elections in 2025, almost 60% of England's population will be led by a metro mayor. The devolution genie is out of the bottle, but the rest of England must not be left behind!

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