THE LONDON SCHOOL OF ECONOMICS AND POLITICAL SCIENCE ▪

British Politics and Policy

Home   About   General Election 2015 coverage   British Government at LSE events

Book Reviews   Democratic Dashboard   🔍

London bucks the UKIP surge and appears headed in a direction far removed from the rest of the UK

It should come as no surprise that UKIP failed to make significant gains in London during the recent European and local elections. A global and European city that benefits immensely from how the UK is currently run and which is home to the UK's largest non-British population was never going to be fertile territory for a party campaigning on an anti-immigration, anti-Europe and anti-London ticket. The results highlight that Britain's capital city is growing into a more distinct political space in the UK, writes **Tim Oliver**.

Share

The local and European election results provided UKIP with a series of spectacular gains across the UK. Coming first in the UK's elections to the European Parliament meant they became the first party since the start of the twentieth century to secure first place in a UK-wide election ahead of the Conservatives, Labour or Liberals. The party even secured its first MEP in Scotland, a part of the UK often (if not entirely accurately) seen as more pro-European.

But UKIP's achievements – especially in the local election results that

took place on the same day across certain areas of England and Wales – were dampened by the party's inability to make a breakthrough in London. Securing only ten councillors across London played a part in lowering UKIP's overall projected national share of the vote to 17% (on a turnout UK-wide of about 34%), less than the 23% from local elections in 2013. UKIP's one London MEP was elected on a 6.10% increase in votes, but with 16.87% of London's votes this was UKIP's second lowest regional result and increase in support after their result in Scotland. The party that succeeded in London was Labour. As I argued in March, London has long been difficult terrain for UKIP with polling showing Londoners to be amongst the least Eurosceptic in the UK.

Many point to London's large international and immigrant population as the reason for Londoners not backing UKIP and its policies on immigration. Approximately 36.7% of London's population (according to the 2011 census) was born outside the UK. About 10.3% come from elsewhere in the EU, with a larger proportion coming from areas such as South Asia. London's white-British population remains the largest single group of residents, but is now around 45% of the city's population. As home to the UK's largest ethnic minority communities, Londoners have long grappled with the politics of immigration and racial politics. UKIP's leader Nigel Farage might have felt awkward at hearing no English spoken on a train journey into central London, but for most Londoners hearing a multitude of other languages spoken is an everyday experience. London's constantly changing population also makes putting down roots unnecessary. As Tony Travers argues, 'The word Londoner is an entirely inclusive concept'. For Tessa Jowell, Labour MP for Dulwich and West Norwood and former Minister for London, 'These [2014 election] results show London as an open, tolerant and diverse city'. Survey data confirms Londoners are less racist than people elsewhere in the UK.
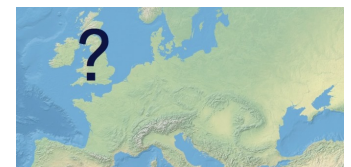
A view of London through the Thames Barrier

As an explanation this can only go so far. As Tim Stanley has pointed out, London is not exactly immune from racial problems having seen major riots caused in part by racial tensions and the Metropolitan Police continues to face allegations of institutional racism. Londoners are also more than aware that the city's insanely high property prices are in part thanks to an influx of rich foreign residents. London also showed something of a divided response with support for UKIP being found in London's outer areas such as Havering and Bexley.

London's population also gives it a unique identity which causes some problems and opportunities for UKIP. The 2011 census showed that more Londoners (about 31%) identify themselves as British than in any other region of Great Britain. This should not be a surprise given London is home to British institutions such as the monarchy, the BBC or the British

Museum. Black and ethnic minority groups are also more likely to identify with being British than English, and they constitute a large proportion of London's population. So why did the party that labels itself with 'UK' struggle with voters who more closely identify themselves with being British? Research by the IPPR into English identity found that people who identify themselves as British tend to be less Eurosceptic than those who identify themselves as English. As Ben Wellings has argued: 'Euroscepticism is the most formed-up expression of English grievance and an ideology that provides the political content for English nationalism'. At the same time we must not overlook that 37% of Londoners identified themselves as English, and Scotland also elected its first UKIP MEP. UKIP then can secure support across the UK and identities, but the low results in both London and Scotland reminds us
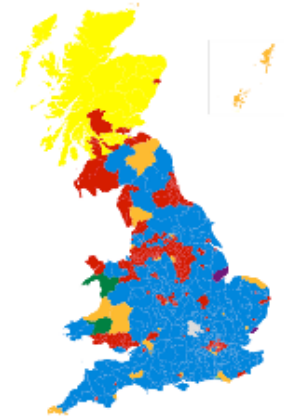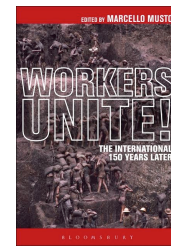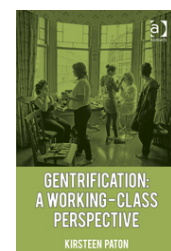
that it remains in large part a party driven by an emerging – or changing – English nationalism.

London's British identity sits with its international one. A large part of the material wealth of London is tied to the economic vibrancy of the European market as part of wider transatlantic and global markets. Britain might not be in the Euro, but that does not stop London handling more euro foreign-exchanges than the Eurozone combined. Nor does it stop London being the headquarters of one hundred of Europe's top 500 companies. Companies such as Goldman Sachs and the Lord Mayor of London have warned of the cost to London and the UK of an exit from the EU. As the BBC's Economics editor Robert Preston argues: 'Much of the rest of the UK sees globalisation and its manifestations – such as immigration – as disempowering, impoverishing and a threat. Whereas for Londoners, globalisation is an economic competition they are apparently winning'.

London also wins from a political setup and relationship with both the UK and the EU that works well for it. Its mayor, assembly, the organisations that represent the 'City of London' such as its Lord Mayor, its numerous councils and groups, MPs, MEPs and Lords, and its intimate connections with British government in Whitehall, Royal Court in St James's, and the UK Parliament and Supreme Court in Westminster give it a combined political voice far greater than anywhere else in the UK. The British media are also based largely in London. As a result the EU and UK Government do not appear as remote and uncontrollable as they might in other areas of the UK. There could be no clearer example than David Cameron wielding the UK's EU veto to defend the interests of financial institutions based largely in London. As Mayor of London, former Conservative MP Boris Johnson has rarely held back from attacking the EU, perhaps better capturing any unease amongst Londoners about the EU than UKIP have been able to. Londoners might be less Eurosceptic than people elsewhere in the UK, but that level of support is hardly overwhelming and could decline should the EU-City of London relationship break down.

London's privileged position, population and identity has not passed unnoticed. UKIP's own campaign was in part 'anti-London'. 'London' has become a by-word for something that is distant, strange and out of control, similar to Brussels across the EU or Washington D.C. in the US. While London has long been a place slightly apart from the rest of Britain, today people across the UK, and especially England, increasingly view
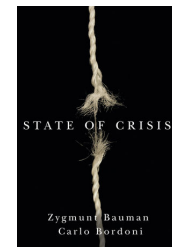
London as a place far removed from the country they feel they inhabit. Suzanne Evans, a former Conservative councillor for Merton who defected to UKIP but lost her seat in the recent local elections, blamed UKIP's poor performance in London on its young, educated, cultured, media-savvy population that can't understand the heartache felt by the rest of the country. This might have been picked over for her insinuation that UKIP supporters elsewhere are old, not educated (to a certain extent Londoners are indeed younger and on average better qualified) or cultured and that the 'media-savvy' were somehow duped by media criticism of UKIP. But her warning that London is becoming a place apart from the rest of the UK has been echoed elsewhere.

It is easy to see why London appears headed in a direction far removed from the rest of the UK. We should not be surprised that London is developing as a more distinct political space – and one seeking more autonomy – in a way similar in some respects to that witnessed in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Some developments in London have gone further than in other areas of the UK and are likely to continue spreading across England and the rest of the UK. By 2050 a third of Britain's population could be from black and ethnic minority groups, UK central government is coming under increased pressure to cede powers to areas such as Scotland and within England, Britain's various identities are in flux, and the EU and globalisation will remain realities London, England and the rest of the UK cannot run away from.

This presents a series of dilemmas for UK government and British politics. In order to avoid London moving too quickly ahead of the rest of the UK, the UK government will come under increased pressure to more fairly distribute the economic gains from the EU and globalisation that are currently accruing mostly to London. It will need to do so while tackling unease about immigration and population change, while also allowing less centralised control so decisions on such matters can be taken at a more local, city or regional level. Such decentralisation may offer a way for Labour, Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats to better manage their appeal to both metropolitan voters and more traditional backers elsewhere. UKIP's support elsewhere in the UK serves as a reminder that while London matters because of its size, economic and political power and because it is something of a sign of the Britain to come, focusing on the capital city will not be enough to win elections and manage the whole UK.

Archives

Select Month ▼

Join us on Pinterest

Yesterday's visitors

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our comments policy *before posting. Image credit:* [Duncan]

About the Author

Tim Oliver *is a Fritz Thyssen Transatlantic Post-Doctoral Fellow for International Relations and Security (TAPIR) at the Center for Transatlantic Relations at the Johns Hopkins University Paul H. Nitze School of Advanced International Studies, Washington D.C. Educated at the University of Liverpool and the London School of Economics, he has worked in the European Parliament, the House of Lords, and taught at UCL, LSE and as a senior lecturer at the Royal Military Academy Sandhurst.*

Related

European elections: Predicted results for every region in the UK
In "Democratic Audit"

If the European Parliament voting system were changed to an open-list system, many voters would switch their support from UKIP to the Conservative party
In "Andy Eggers"

Just like in 2004, UKIP is poised for its best result yet in the European elections, but a Westminster breakthrough remains unlikely
In "Featured"

June 2nd, 2014 | Euroscepticism, Featured, Tim L Oliver | 2

Comments

2 Comments

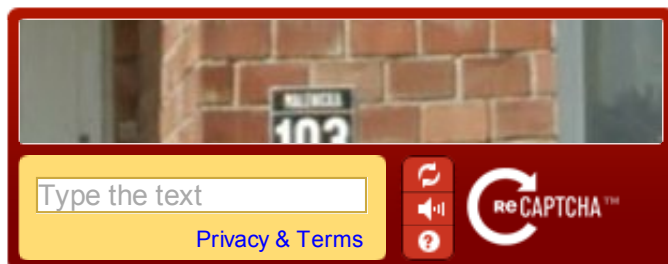**Barry Davies** June 3, 2014 at 7:49 am - Reply

So basically you are saying that because London has a high population of foreigners from the eussr nations they are not going to vote for UK independence then, hardly rocket science is it?

Tod March 12, 2015 at 5:24 pm - Reply

Er, Barry, did you read the piece? There's a bit more to it than that.

Leave A Comment

| Name (required) | Email (required) | Website |

Comment...

Type the text

Privacy & Terms

ReCAPTCHA™

POST COMMENT

☐ Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

☐ Notify me of new posts by email.

Visit our sister blog: LSE Impact of Social Sciences blog

🔊 **THE LSE'S GENERAL ELECTION BLOG**

The Loser Takes It All – The SNP after the referendum

April 13, 2015

On the dynamics of leader effects in British general elections

April 13, 2015

The South West – contest by contest

April 11, 2015

Who forms the UK government in the event of a hung parliament?

April 10, 2015

Visit our sister blog: LSE EUROPP blog

🔊 **UPCOMING LSE PUBLIC EVENTS**

General Election: The Opposition Leaders' Debate - screened live, followed by a debate

LSE Africa Summit 2015

15th Social Study of ICTs Workshop

The World Beyond Your Head: how to flourish in an age of distraction

Myanmar: politics, pragmatism and foreign policy

Myanmar's 2015 Elections: hopes, expectations and certitudes

Visit our sister blog: LSE Review of Books

🔊 **LSE PODCASTS**

Seeing What Others Don't: the remarkable ways we gain insights [Audio]

Designing the Urban Commons: Lessons from the Field [Audio]

The Greek Economy: current developments and future prospects [Audio]

Which Digital Strategy for France and Europe in an Age of Disruption? [Audio]

Engaging Citizens: a game changer for development? [Audio]

Above the Parapet - Women in Public Life [Audio]

Visit our sister blog: LSE USAPP blog

🔊 **LSE RESEARCH ONLINE**

The United Kingdom and Europe: should it come or go?

10 questions for the EU about a Brexit

London, England, Britain and Europe: places apart?

Book review: three Germanies: West Germany, East Germany and the Berlin republic by Michael Gehler

Book review: new dynamics in East Asian politics: security, political economy and Society by Zhiqun Zhu

Written evidence to the House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee's inquiry into Government Policy Towards the USA

Bad Behavior has blocked **10729** access attempts in the last 7 days.