# The importance of geography, demographics, and identity in analysing the 2018 local elections

*__John Denham__ highlights some of the underlying shifts in political behaviour and geography as revealed in the recent local election results. He concludes by offering some thoughts on the challenges facing the political parties in framing their response.*

The snap judgements on popular opinion often leave a lasting impression. It is still easy to find people who believe that most Leave voters were working class, former Labour-voting northerners than relatively well-off, middle-class southern Tories. At the same time, media coverage and commentary tends towards the political surprise, rather than the measured reality. Right after the 2016 referendum, Labour's difficulties with part of its former base were seen as more interesting than the much more widespread rejection of the Conservative PM's call for a Remain vote.

The headlines from 2018's local elections have a similar feel. Labour is seen as having failed in London, despite having done rather well. The correspondence between Leave areas and swings to the Conservatives have led many to claim a link, despite the lack of any evidence that this was actually a strong factor in how people decided to vote. So, in this case, the political surprise came in Labour's failure to deliver its own hype, and the insistence of many commentators to force everything through a Brexit prism.

Rather than offer a profound new analysis of the locals, I instead want to highlight some of the underlying shifts in political behaviour and geography. In each area, our understanding is incomplete and, as far as I know, no one has yet drawn the threads together.

## Geography matters

Will Jennings has plotted the relationship between the swings and population density. Labour's strong performance in London and other major cities was offset by swings to the Conservatives in many towns and smaller cities in the rest of England. Labour certainly had disappointing results in key northern towns. As always, there are exceptions, qualifications, and regional variations. Labour gained seats in Worthing, for example, and within Southampton the pattern of Labour gaining in more middle class and diverse areas and slipping back in working class areas, established in the 2015 and 2017 general elections, was repeated.

## Demographics matter

The changing demographic make-up of each locality is significant here. We are not always looking at people switching their vote: communities are not necessarily the same as they were ten years ago. As the Centre for Towns has mapped, many smaller towns have been losing their young people as many more are now able to go university or seek graduate jobs elsewhere. These trends will intensify the electoral impact of older, more working class, less mobile voters. Ian Warren points out that these young people are drawn to London, but not necessarily for ever. Young families are able to often move out into neighbouring regions. These down-from-London individuals may not always be appreciated for their impact on house prices, but they may also bring their (Labour leaning) London voting habits with them when they leave the capital.

## Identity also matters

To geography and demographics, we need to add identity. In a previous blog I showed that, while 'equally English and British' is the most widely-held national identity, the 'more English' outnumbered the 'more British' in all but the larger cities, and most strongly in the smallest communities. While few 'weaponise' their national identity ('I'm voting x because I'm English/British') there is evidence from successive Future of England surveys that the most clearly-held national identities seem to reflect different worldviews, with the English being more critical of the EU, the consequences of devolution, and the lack of devolved government for England. Intriguingly, while the 2017 Future of England survey showed Labour slightly ahead of the Conservatives amongst voters of all identities as 'best to stand up for the interests of England', 19% thought that no party stands up for the interests of England. Nearly half of all English voters thought that Brexit was worth jeopardising the peace process in Northern Ireland.

**The challenges facing Labour and the Conservatives**

It's a reasonable speculation that these pro-England, union-sceptic and anti-EU voters will be strong English identifiers. At the margins –voters who are very strongly either English' or 'British' – national identities may signify much more than national allegiance; becoming communities of peoples holding quite different assumptions about what sort of country this is or should be. The movements of people to and from the cities and towns are concentrating and mixing these distinct communities in new ways.

The strategic question for the main political parties is whether they can win England without making an effective appeal across these national identities. The recent local elections suggest that they have to, but that both face difficulties. In part, these come from their own members. Tory activists share many of the same instincts as English identifiers, being sceptical of the EU and even of the value of the union itself. The influential Paul Mason recently rejected suggestions that Labour should appeal to the more socially conservative parts of the electorate, saying 'the actual membership of Labour, and its core vote, is drawn from the educated, salaried, cosmopolitan and pro-global modern workforce of big conurbations'.

Both major parties need to broaden their appeal beyond the instincts of their core members. It's not clear that they can do so without engaging directly with both the national identities at play in England.

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