British Politics and Policy at LSE: While the Conservatives are working with a tailwind in the Red Wall, in our blunder-prone system the local elections remain unpredictable

Page 1 of 2

While the Conservatives are working with a tailwind in the Red Wall, in our blunder-prone system the local elections remain unpredictable

*2019 saw a Conservative break-through in the so-called Red Wall, now established as the critical battleground of British politics. The 2021 local elections may tell us something about electoral trends in the Red Wall. The Conservatives may be in a 'virtuous circle' of success in local and parliamentary elections, but their attempt to build a durable appeal there around 'levelling-up' is flawed, argues **Lawrence McKay**.*

To have any path to power following the next general election, Labour must win back the so-called Red Wall. In 2019, Labour was dismayed not only to see traditional northern marginals, such as Bury North, fall to the Conservatives, but a swathe of breakthrough Tory gains straddling the Midlands and North in seats such as Bolsover and Leigh. Although some in Labour harbour reservations, Keir Starmer's opposition is putting its chips on a Red Wall recovery (with the vague hope that the Lib Dems can undermine the Conservative vote in other parts of the country). Equally, holding the former 'Red Wall' may represent the path to electoral hegemony for the Conservative party, which prior to 2019 had not formed a reliable governing majority since Thatcher's 1987 victory.

The councils and the campaigns

The bumper crop of council and mayoral elections represents an early test for the parties' Red Wall appeal. In some Red Wall areas (especially those where the relevant seats were last up for election in 2017), Conservatives have already achieved some breakthrough, notably in the mayoral elections of Tees Valley and the West Midlands, which in retrospect appear to be the canary in the coal mine for the 2019 Red Wall collapse. In others, especially those up in 2016, the Conservatives have huge electoral upside: take Burnley, where the parliamentary seat went Conservative in 2019 but in which received a grand total of 6% of the vote in the 2016 local elections. However, many of these contests are unlikely to tip council control owing to election by thirds, so the extent of success in Red Wall areas may be disguised.

At a local level, the experience of 2019 is likely to intensify the campaigning effort of both parties in the Red Wall. There is especially tangible evidence of this for the Conservative Party, which is fielding almost twice as many candidates as they did in 2017 in some Northern Red Wall authorities such as Rotherham, where it is historically weak. Tory success in the Red Wall may be furthered by its new MPs, both through improving its local message and its campaigning. First-termers are notably focused on their local areas, and many have been keen to secure 'quick wins' for their constituents to establish their reputation early on, enhancing a message that their party is delivering. The presence of a local MP normally energises a local party and its members, potentially translating into greater success in local election campaigns.

Red Wall voting, Red Wall issues?

Red Wall politics is now characterised, at least in part, by a contentious debate around 'levelling up'. The Conservatives have made early moves to give the impression of delivering on levelling up as part of the Budget and through its 'Towns Fund' to local authorities. This narrative has been contested by Labour, who argue it is a sticking plaster on the damage done by austerity and that the funds are often misdirected. Yet the damage to the new Northern Tory brand has been mostly self-inflicted. The inept approach to tiered restrictions and COVID-19 relief for Manchester has allowed Labour to argue that the government is treating the North 'with contempt', and made a folk hero of Andy Burnham in parts of the Red Wall (now a common presence on the election literature of council candidates in the North West).

British Politics and Policy at LSE: While the Conservatives are working with a tailwind in the Red Wall, in our blunder-prone system the local elections remain unpredictable

Page 2 of 2

Research shows that Red Wallers appear widely supportive of levelling up – seeing strong potential for government to deliver for their area. However, they remain sceptical of the likelihood of delivery and whether the government cares for their area and the North/Midlands, indeed, tending to see the Labour party as more likely to care for their area and region. Precursors of levelling up such as HS2 have also proved controversial issues in local elections, suggesting it could be less unifying in practice than in theory. It is therefore unclear whether there is more political upside or downside from setting levelling up on the agenda, though these local elections will undoubtedly be fought on a swathe of other issues.

Indeed, local elections are not always as localised as we might expect, and this may be especially true in a period which has put the spotlight on national politics and politicians. The Labour campaign focuses above all on nurses pay, a national-level decision but one with strong resonance in the Red Wall: 'the Conservatives have not increased pay for NHS staff' was voters' second-most popular reason not to vote Conservative in recent Red Wall polling (after the Barnard Castle debacle). Meanwhile, the Conservatives seek to make hay with their 'vaccine bounce', an issue on which they garner sky-high approval from voters. In this context, it is possible to imagine an unusually uniform swing emerging from the elections, perhaps with a squeeze from the two major parties and fewer local idiosyncrasies such as success for independents.

Conclusion

The Red Wall is the critical battleground of English politics. Local elections prior to 2019 signalled the possibility of a Tory breakthrough and events in May could prove a signal of the future electoral trend in the Red Wall. The Conservatives may find themselves in a virtuous circle, where local government success has potentially benefited them at general elections, and where sitting MPs can improve the party's local campaign and message. However, it would be a mistake for Conservatives to assume – either on the basis of their 2019 success or events at these local elections – that they have built a durable Red Wall appeal around 'levelling up', which has not yet become a dominant issue for voters, and which, as it does emerge, may prove a weak or even a risky message in these areas. While the Conservatives are working with a tailwind in the Red Wall, in our blunder-prone system the political weather remains as unpredictable as ever.

_____

About the Author

Lawrence McKay (@lawrencemckay94) is a postdoctoral research fellow on the TrustGov project. His research concerns the relationship between geography, inequality and political trust.

Photo by Cyrus Crossan on Unsplash.