
Northern Blues

The Conservative case for local electoral reform

By Nick Tyrone & Chris Terry

Report
& Analysis



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 Reform
 Society

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Foreword

by Peter Osborne

The Conservative Party is dogmatically opposed to proportional representation (PR).

Two arguments have been made against PR, the first one of which is principled. The Conservatives have claimed that PR, because it will almost always favour coalitions, creates the circumstances for weak and divisive leadership. This argument has real strength. For example, the Thatcher government never enjoyed an outright majority of the popular vote. Yet she could always rely on a parliamentary majority, and it was this majority that allowed her to use robust measures to tackle the over-mighty unions and economic collapse of the 1970s. If Britain had functioned under PR, it might never have been possible to tackle the unions.

The second argument is selfish, namely that the First Past the Post (FPTP) system favours the Conservative Party. It gets more Conservative MPs into Parliament than any other method known to man. This second argument is much less attractive than the first, but it is probably more powerful.

This report challenges the Conservative orthodoxy. It makes the argument by appealing to the Conservative self-interest, but in a way which is sophisticated enough to appeal also to the national interest. Nick Tyrone and Chris Terry make the extremely convincing case that the politics of FPTP is wiping out the Conservatives across northern England. They make their argument through compelling use of statistics.

The case they make is hugely persuasive. They focus on the north of England, where the Conservatives find themselves in the position of the Lib Dems across most of Britain, or Labour in the south-east. **Thanks to FPTP the Conservatives find themselves effectively driven out of large parts of the north, unable to claim any more to be the national party.** The authors show that Tory support in the north

is actually reasonably strong. Without PR it just doesn't look or feel that way. For example in 2010 in Sheffield the Tories had no seats at all on the council. Under PR they would have had 12 out of 84. The Conservatives won 25% of the vote in Tameside in 2012, yet held just five out of 57 seats. With PR they would have secured 14. And so on.

As the authors show, the effect is disastrous. Without local councillors the Tories lack troops on the ground and lose a strong local base. The authors point to the collapse of the Conservative vote in the Oldham East & Saddleworth by-election of 2011 as a manifestation of this syndrome.

As the Conservatives become less visible on the ground, rival parties become the main opposition. In some areas the Liberal Democrats, always opportunistic, have become the new party of working-class Toryism. Elsewhere UKIP are starting to do the same.

Many of the best Conservative minds are at present trying to work out how to regain the party's former position in northern England. They are wise to do so. It would be terrible were the Conservatives to collapse into a political party which speaks only for southern England and parts of the Midlands. **Reading this report has persuaded me that proportional representation in local elections may be part of the answer.**

Introduction

Breaking the taboo

The vast majority of Conservative party members and leaders are hostile to a change in the voting system, either for Westminster elections or for local government.

The AV referendum made this abundantly clear: almost no Conservative voices came out for reform, and certainly none among the party leadership.

But it was not always so. The high-water mark for Conservative dalliance with proportional representation was 1974, after a general election which saw the Conservatives get a higher vote share than Labour, but fewer seats. At its apex, Conservative Action for Electoral Reform had over 60 MPs in support.

Since then, despite memorable moments such as Professor Tim Bale trying to convince David Cameron to announce Tory support for proportional representation (PR) as his 'Clause Four' moment, enthusiasm within Conservative ranks for electoral reform has waned considerably.

But now may be the time for a rethink within Tory circles, at least at the local level. The party has been all but driven out of local government in the north of England, despite there being potential for considerable Conservative support in many areas. This makes the electoral maths infinitely more difficult when it comes to Westminster. Councillors equate to activists, which equate to further Conservative support and the chance to win back seats.

A more proportional voting system at the local level would improve Conservative representation in the north of England, and other areas where the party is weak. It would mean more people across the country hearing the Conservative message, becoming party activists and turning out to vote – both locally and nationally.

Many of the traditional arguments against proportional representation for Westminster elections do not hold at the local level (see p10). And in any case, there should not be anything about the principle of proportional representation that offends modern Conservatives. A fairer voting system such as the Single Transferable Vote (STV) allows people more individual choice at the ballot box; it helps to break up monopolies of power and vested interests; and it incentivises parties to seek representation across the country, not just in their strongholds.

Perhaps it is time for Conservatives to break the taboo on electoral reform, at least at the local level. After all, it is not only better in principle to have a fairer voting system – it is better in practice too.

This report examines the effect of a more proportional voting system for local elections on Conservative electoral fortunes, particularly in the north of England. We find that a switch to a more proportional system such as the one used in Scottish local elections (STV) would significantly improve Conservative representation in areas previously considered to be 'no go'.

The Conservatives should support a fairer voting system for local elections. This change would give voters more choice, and ensure that fewer votes are wasted in ultra-safe seats where parties are entrenched. What is more, it would give the traditional Conservative claim to represent the whole nation a basis in reality rather than rhetoric.

Tories in the north

A spiral of decline

1. See 'Access All Areas: building a majority' ed. D Skelton, Renewal 2013. Available at: http://www.renewalgroup.org.uk/Access_All_Areas_v1.0.pdf

2. See 'Divided Kingdom', The Economist 20 April 2013. Available at: <http://www.economist.com/news/briefing/21576418-diverging-politics-labour-north-and-conservative-south-make-england-look-ever-more>

3. The Conservatives had five councillors in the Oldham East and Saddleworth constituency at the time of the 2011 by-election. They had six councillors on Oldham borough council, but none of these were within the constituency boundaries.

The Conservatives find it increasingly difficult to gain seats, even at the local level, in certain parts of the country – but particularly in the north of England¹. In the north, the party has never recovered from the eradication of the majority of its local base in the early and mid-1990s.

As we saw during the Eastleigh by-election in 2013, the number of councillors a party has in a constituency can make a large difference to who wins the Westminster seat. The Liberal Democrats had all 40 district councillors and all six county councillors in the constituency. The Conservatives held four seats on Eastleigh borough council, but these were all technically within the Winchester constituency. This meant the Liberal Democrats knew where their voters were and had the ground troops ready to mobilise them. Without a local base like this it can be almost impossible for any party to gain ground in a constituency. Even with reasonably high vote shares, success is hard to come by when those vote shares habitually fail to translate into seats.

Crucially, **the Conservatives are not devoid of support in the north of England, and there is potential for future growth despite concerns to the contrary**. In many northern areas the Liberal Democrats, always successful at facing in multiple directions, have become the new vehicle of traditional working-class Toryism. In places like Merseyside, Newcastle and Sheffield, the Lib Dems have become the primary opposition to Labour – largely by squeezing Conservative support. UKIP has also been on the rise in the north, beating the Conservatives into second place in recent by-elections in South Shields, Rotherham and Barnsley Central. This demonstrates, if nothing else, that support for a right-of-centre party is not out of the question for many northerners.

While the north of England is unlikely to become a Conservative stronghold in the near future, the party clearly underperforms when considering the demographics of the region². Nebulous factors like history, identity and culture clearly have something to do with the party's relative failure in the north, and the legacy of the Thatcher era still holds sway.

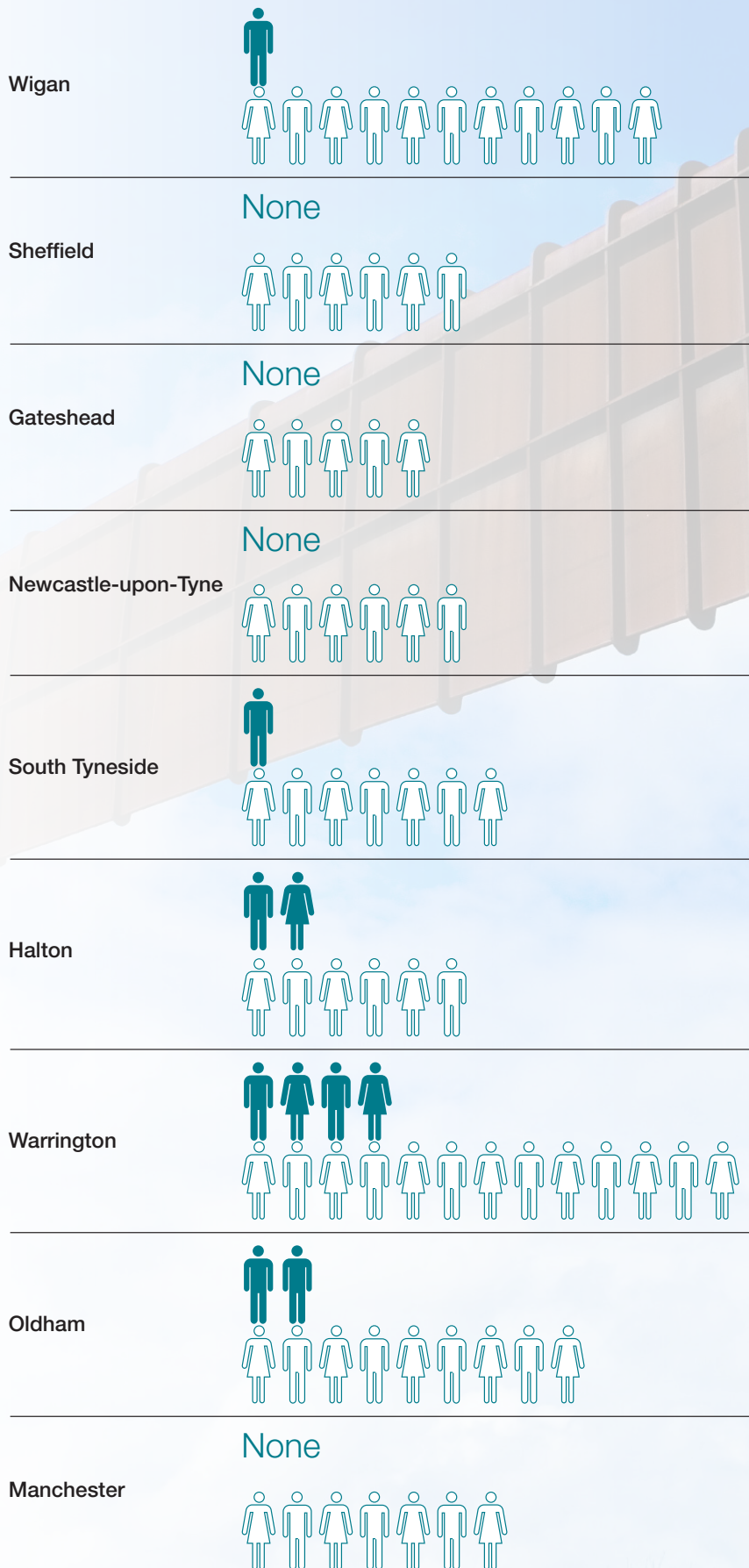
But such factors tend to grow weaker over time. In their place is another, more systemic problem for Conservatives in the north – the lack of northern elected representatives. While the party does have cabinet ministers with northern origins (such as William Hague, Eric Pickles and Baroness Warsi) many areas lack Conservative local role models.

A lack of councillors creates a lack of infrastructure. This can lead to a negative feedback loop of the kind seen in Eastleigh: a weak Conservative vote leads to a weak Conservative infrastructure, which leads to an even weaker Conservative vote, leading to an even weaker Conservative infrastructure.

This lack of infrastructure affects Westminster politics as well. Take Oldham, for example. In the 2010 general election the Conservatives were only 5.5% behind Labour in Oldham East and Saddleworth, and in the 2011 by-election the seat could have been described as a three-way marginal. However, the party's lack of councillors in the region³ and weakened party structure contributed to the perception that the Conservatives were 'sitting this one out'. The party could never have matched the Liberal Democrat or Labour ground campaigns, and even with an influx of activists from elsewhere they would not have had as good information about where the Tory vote was residing. This allowed the Liberal Democrats to squeeze out the Conservative vote.

Conservatives in the north: the effect of a fairer voting system

● Conservative councillors 2012 ○ Conservative councillors under Proportional Representation*



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*Based on share of vote in 2012

The table below shows nine northern councils where **Conservatives have a significant share of the vote which is not translating into council seats.**

Conservative vote shares in each of these areas went down in each successive election, with the sole exception of Wigan between 2010 and 2011. One could argue that this is mostly down to having a Conservative prime minister – after all, governing parties almost always lose local seats. However, longer-term analysis shows that the Tory vote share in these areas has shrunk consistently, whether or not the Conservatives were in power at the time of the election. For instance, in Manchester the Conservative share of the vote has fallen from 44.8% in 1973 to

7.6% in 2012. Even after 11 years of a Labour government in Westminster, the Conservative vote failed to recover. In 2008, at the height of Labour's unpopularity, the Conservatives managed just 14.2% in Manchester compared to 12.9% in 1996 when they were still out of power.

These figures suggest that a negative feedback loop has set in: declining vote share has led to declining numbers of seats and a corresponding weakening of infrastructure. This has negatively impacted vote share, compounding infrastructural problems, and so on.

It raises the question: **how can the Conservatives ever halt this spiral of decline?**

	2010 Vote	2010 Seats	2011 Vote	2011 Seats	2012 Vote	2012 Seats	Notes
Wigan	18.8%	8	19.6%	5	15.3%	1	
Sheffield	14.6%	0	11.7%	0	7.3%	0	Greens got 11.2% and 1 seat in 2011 and 10.5% and 2 seats in 2012 due to more efficient vote spread
Gateshead	12.2%	0	11.3%	0	8.1%	0	
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne	14.5%	0	11.4%	0	7.6%	0	
South Tyneside	14.4%	3	14.2%	1	12.7%	1	
Halton	19.5%	6	19.3%	3	10.6%	2	
Warrington	28.6%	6	27%	6	22.5%	4	In 2011 Lib Dems got 23.1% of the vote and 4 seats
Oldham	25.5%	5	19.2%	4	14.8%	2	
Manchester	12.1%	1	9.0%	0	7.6%	0	

This table shows the total number of Conservative councillors on each council at the time of each election, and not just the number of Conservative councillors elected in the third up for election each year. All these councils are elected by thirds.

PR in the north

Local potential

4. We have assumed the number of seats under PR perfectly represents the number of votes cast under the current system. Of course there is no way of predicting exactly how voters would behave when presented with a preferential voting system such as the Single Transferable Vote.

No electoral system is perfectly proportional, but some systems are more proportional than others.

If local elections in England were held under the Single Transferable Vote (STV) – as they are in Scotland (see p12) – then we can assume there would be a much more accurate reflection of the vote share in the numbers of seats won by all of the parties. For the Conservatives, this would represent a sea change in their fortunes in the north of England.

would have declined to 70 seats. But this still represents a different ball game compared to the current reality of ten seats.

It is possible to imagine that the reverses at local level usually associated with taking over the reins of power in Westminster would be less severe under PR. If, for instance, the Conservatives had had 12 councillors in Sheffield in 2010, as opposed to none, this would have represented a significant activist base through which to rally

	2010 Vote	2010 Seats under PR	2011 Vote	2011 Seats under PR	2012 Vote	2012 Seats under PR
Wigan	18.8%	14	19.6%	15	15.3%	11
Sheffield	14.6%	12	11.7%	10	7.3%	6
Gateshead	12.2%	8	11.3%	7	8.1%	5
Newcastle-Upon-Tyne	14.5%	11	11.4%	9	7.6%	6
South Tyneside	14.4%	8	14.2%	8	12.7%	7
Halton	19.5%	11	19.3%	11	10.6%	6
Warrington	28.6%	13	27%	15	22.5%	13
Oldham	25.5%	15	19.2%	11	14.8%	9
Manchester	12.1%	12	9.0%	9	7.6%	7

This table assumes elections for the whole council rather than elections by thirds.

The table above shows how many seats the Conservatives would have won in our nine case studies in 2010 to 2012, under perfect proportional representation (PR)⁴.

Under PR, the number of Conservative seats would have still declined between 2010 and 2012, demonstrating the natural swing against a governing party in the electoral cycle. But this decline would have taken place against a radically different baseline. **Instead of having a total of 29 council seats across these nine areas in 2010, the Conservatives would have held 105 seats.**

By 2012, the number of Conservative councillors

support over the next few electoral cycles. Perhaps they could have held on to the almost 15% vote share the Conservatives enjoyed in 2011 in Sheffield and maintained a significant presence on the council. Without any councillors, no record can be traded on and no momentum can be established. It is no wonder that Conservative vote shares are in decline.

When the results of elections fail to reflect the votes cast, people start to feel that their votes are being wasted. They may even start to vote tactically, further cementing their preferred party's inability to break the spiral of decline. It is often in this way, and not due to some ideological or philosophical shift, that parties wither on the vine.

The case for local PR

Defying expectations

Historically, electoral reform has not been high on the Conservative agenda. Even at the height of Conservative interest in reform in the 1970s, it remained a minority issue in the party.

But many of the arguments which Conservatives often cite against electoral reform for Westminster simply do not hold sway when it comes to local elections.

Take four of the most common arguments used against proportional representation (PR):

- PR destabilises government
- PR prevents voters from being able to 'throw the rascals out'
- PR is too complicated for voters to understand
- PR breaks the constituency link between representatives and voters

The argument that PR makes for unstable government is based on the idea that it increases the number of parties which gain representation, makes it harder for one party to retain overall control and forces parties to go into unstable and shifting coalitions with each other.

However, at the local level, councils are already more than used to coalitions, and often have to function when there is no overall party in control. The current First Past the Post (FPTP) system for electing councils therefore does not necessarily create 'stable' one-party government.

The argument that PR prevents voters from being able to 'throw the rascals out' is similarly based on the assumption that FPTP produces clear one-party winners of elections. As with the previous argument, at the local level this is not always the case. And where there are strong one-party governments, the vagaries of FPTP often make strong opposition parties unviable – meaning voters have no one to vote for if they want to 'throw the rascals out'.

Across many parts of the country, but particularly in the north of England, the Labour party holds between 90% and 100% of all the seats in an area, sometimes without even securing a majority of the votes. A few prime examples of this are:

Council	2012 Labour Votes	Labour Seats held
Knowsley	75.0%	100%
Sandwell	72.0%	94.4%
Tameside	56.6%	91.2%
Manchester	62.4%	90.6%

Based on trends in Manchester and Sandwell, it is likely these councils will be 100% Labour after 2014, joining the ranks of those councils with no opposition whatsoever. Having a decent opposition is a vital part of a healthy democracy.

The number of Labour councillors in these areas suggests that no one there votes Conservative at all. But that is not the case. If we take the Conservative vote in these areas and then allocate seats based on proportionality, it demonstrates the potential for there to be a genuine Conservative opposition even in areas thought to be 'no go' for Conservatives:

Council	2012 Con Votes	Con Seats held	Con Seats if PR
Knowsley	6.2%	0/63	4
Sandwell	18.8%	2/72	14
Tameside	25.2%	5/57	14
Manchester	9.0%	0/96	9

If parties are able to retain such huge majorities of seats on such relatively small shares of the vote, clearly this severely limits the people's ability to 'throw the rascals out'.

Then there is the argument that PR makes for

complicated voting systems which confuse the voter. This is based on the fact that proportional systems require the existence of multi-member constituencies and preferential voting.

At the local level, we already have multi-member wards in the vast majority of cases. And Scottish local elections have demonstrated that voter turnout has remained stable despite the introduction of the supposedly more complicated Single Transferable Vote (STV) system (see p12).

Finally there is the argument that PR breaks the constituency link by requiring huge constituencies with multiple representatives. Again, at the local level this argument founders, as people arguably have much more connection to their council than they do to their ward. Ask someone (not involved in politics) where they live, and they are much more likely to mention their local authority than their ward.

The Scottish example

How PR helped

Since 2007 Scottish local councils have been elected by the Single Transferable Vote (STV). The Conservative Party has arguably benefited directly from STV, especially when compared to what the results might have been under FPTP. Perhaps the biggest change has been the way in which it has allowed the Conservatives into councils where it had no representation before.

STV has also allowed the Conservatives greater entry into local council cabinets. After the 2012 local elections the Conservatives have been involved in a minority government in South Ayrshire. They are also the senior coalition partner in Aberdeenshire where they are in coalition with the Lib Dems and Independents. They are the junior coalition partner in Aberdeen (with Labour and Independents), in East Ayrshire (SNP), East Lothian (Labour), Falkirk (Labour and Independents), Moray (Independents), and Stirling (Labour).

The Conservatives are in government with every other major party in Scotland in nine out of 32 councils. This is even more impressive as 11 Scottish councils have single-party administrations. Of those, the Conservatives are providing support from outside cabinet in Clackmannanshire, Fife, Inverclyde, Perth and Kinross, South Lanarkshire and West Lothian.

Thus in the Conservatives' weakest region of Britain, they have nevertheless managed to hold real power and influence in line with their support. These are the benefits – both in principle and in practice – of a fairer voting system. It allows parties to exert influence where they have genuine support, and even where they are outnumbered. It gives fair representation to voters' views at the ballot box, and it gives parties the opportunity to reflect these views in the corridors of power.

Conclusion

The One Nation fallacy

5. See 'The British General Election of 2010', by P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh. Palgrave Macmillan, 2010.

Many Conservatives look at the electoral map of Britain and wonder how – with Tory no-go areas in most of Scotland, the north of England and increasingly in Wales – they can ever hope to attain a majority again.

Fifty years of societal change are coming to fruition in British politics. People no longer divide along simple class lines. Society has become much more fluid, and much more complex. In many respects this is to be welcomed, but it also means that those old identities which tied us to political parties have declined. Identities such as ethnicity, gender, age, educational level and values have all become more important. As a result our politics has become increasingly multi-party.

Societal changes have also resulted in an increasing polarisation of British regions. While it is true that the north of England has always tended to be more favourable to Labour than the south, recent decades have seen this trend turn into a genuine divide.

This polarisation has increased the probability of hung parliaments in Westminster by reducing the number of marginal seats. Before 1974 there were always more than 150 marginal constituencies. After the 2010 election there are only 85⁵. This means parties must win larger and larger swings in order to take control of Parliament. With more than 150 marginals, a national swing of around 1% would switch the control of around 3% of seats. Today that same amount of swing, with the reduced number of marginal seats in play, would only see a shift of around 1.5% of seats.

If the Conservatives are going to fight this trend, then they will have to rebuild their former bases in the north. A renewed core of activists would allow them to run stronger campaigns for parliamentary seats. For the Tories, the best chance of doing this may be through supporting

the introduction of proportionality into local elections so that their vote is reflected fairly on councils across the north.

Of course the notion of electoral reform goes against the grain of much recent Conservative history. But the principle of proportionality should not necessarily offend Conservatives as much as it often does. After all, PR gives people more choice and helps to prevent blocs of power from becoming entrenched. It is also a truer reflection of the democratic principle that all should have a stake in the way the country is run.

Perhaps the time has come for the Conservatives to advocate both the pragmatic and the principled thing to do – and that is to introduce a fairer voting system into local elections.

