

Red Wall: The Definitive Description

The 'Red Wall' has become a key term in Britain's political lexicon. **James Kanagasooriam**, who coined the phrase, and **Elizabeth Simon**, trace the emergence of the Red Wall as a concept, and argue that while it has been widely misunderstood and misused, the Red Wall has significant implications for predicting future elections.

The increasing salience of cultural issues and Brexit, have eroded traditional patterns of class voting in Britain – working class electors no longer overwhelmingly back Labour, and segments of the middle class have moved away from the Conservatives. Other demographic cleavages, including age, education and geography, have

emerged to supplant the class cleavage. This realignment poses a challenge for the Conservatives. Their 2010 to 2015 coalition and 2015 majority governments were built on winning over culturally liberal and economically moderate to fiscally conservative voters, many of whom would go on to vote Remain, in addition to those who had more traditional conservative

views. Post-2016, there was a sense that the Conservatives could appeal to Leave-minded voters but would face challenges amongst their Remain voters; with the inverse occurring for the Labour Party.

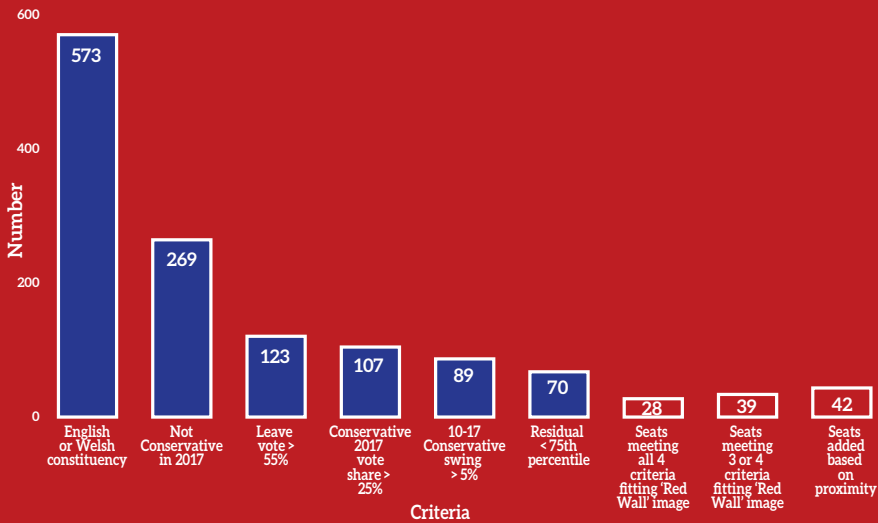
The Conservatives' 2017 campaign was predicated on this 'rotation' strategy. They would offset Remain losses by making gains in Labour's traditionally working-class heartlands. There was inbuilt scepticism about the logic of this strategy. Not only had many of these seats in the North and Midlands never voted Conservative, owing to a long held, and deeply ingrained, cultural image of the Tories as the party of the rich, but Theresa May's attempts to

Table 1: Regression Model of Area-level 2017 Conservative Vote Share

Variable	Estimates
Intercept	0.89*** (0.05) [0.78, 1.00]
Deprived on 3 or more measures	-4.34*** (0.19) [-4.71, -3.97]
Level 4 educational qualifications	-1.27*** (0.06) [-1.39, -1.15]
Age 55-64	-0.36* (0.17) [-0.69, -0.03]
Managers, directors and senior officials	2.88*** (0.21) [2.48, 3.29]
Sales and service occupations	-1.53*** (0.24) [-2.00, -1.05]
Welsh language skills	-0.26*** (0.04) [-0.33, -0.19]
Merseyside	-0.09*** (0.02) [-0.12, -0.06]
N	573
R2	0.86

Statistical significance denoted by: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Standard errors of OLS coefficients are reported in parentheses and their 95% confidence intervals in square brackets.

Figure 1: Identification of Red Wall Seats



detoxify the party brand were hampered by a commitment to fox hunting, which, in the words of one *ConservativeHome* columnist, served to convince 'potential...switchers... that [this] Prime Minister was the same as any other Tory'. With the 2017 election results counted, it seemed the Conservatives' 'Northern tilt' had not materialised. The party took just three seats which had never voted Conservative from Labour, and only six Labour seats in total.

The conventional wisdom was that the Conservatives could not claim victory in 2019 by repurposing their 2017 strategy. This view, which was rooted in a tendency to focus only on seats won in 2017, obscured an important wider reality. While the Conservative Party indeed made just three gains in Labour's heartlands in 2017, there were substantial swings towards the Conservatives in many historically safe low-wealth Labour seats. Taking three

dramatic examples, the constituencies of Bishop Auckland, Blyth Valley and Stoke-on-Trent North, saw the Conservative vote share increase by more than 20 percentage points between 2010 and 2017, while remaining under Labour control. Viewing election data through this lens highlighted to us that, unbeknownst to many, the tide had already begun to turn in 2017 – working class voters in Labour's heartlands were switching allegiance for the first time ever, or at least the first time in recent history. If the tide went out in a future election, this realignment was far more likely to have a profound impact on the electoral map. And this is exactly what happened in December 2019.

In the lead up to the 2019 election, polls predicted a comfortable Conservative victory – with Politico's poll of polls indicating they would take 44 per cent of the national vote, and Labour 33 per cent, on the day prior to the election. However, given that polls had largely failed to predict the 2015 Conservative majority, the 2016 Leave vote and the 2017 hung Parliament, there was widespread concern about polling error. Precisely because the Conservatives' Northern tilt had failed in 2017, this sentiment led to a belief that the same scenes would play out again in 2019 – with Conservative gains predicted in the North again not coming to fruition. Consequently, the core focus of commentary prior to that election, was whether the Conservatives would lose key marginals – including Guildford, Wimbledon and, even Boris Johnson's own seat, Uxbridge and South Ruislip – and who the benefactors might be.

This combination of events created the perfect storm. While data clearly indicated that a fundamental political realignment was poised to take place in Labour's heartlands, this evidence was treated with great caution by political pundits working within their priors. The 2019 fall of the Red Wall should not have come as a shock – for those viewing the past decade of election data in more objective terms and taking emerging trends at face value, it was evident this was coming.

Identifying the Red Wall seats

Given clear signals in the data (Fieldhouse et al, 2017) suggested the Conservatives

were poised to make gains in 2019 that had eluded them in 2017, ahead of the election we set out to pinpoint precisely where these might come. Our analysis started from the premise that around 85 per cent of the variation in area-level support for the Conservative Party, in England and Wales, is explained by constituency demographics. This is illustrated clearly by the regression model presented in Table 1. Analysing model residuals allowed exploration of the extent to which constituencies' 2017 Conservative vote shares varied from what was expected, based on aggregate demographics. In simple terms, this showed in which seats the party should have performed significantly better and worse, at the 2017 election.

Residual analysis revealed a striking pattern – Conservative underperformance was not randomly distributed but highly geographically concentrated. As negative residuals are indicative of Conservative underperformance, seats exhibiting negative, or very small positive, residuals can be seen as 'corrections waiting to happen'. Any gains made in Labour's heartlands would likely come in these underperforming seats. While Conservative underperformance was deemed a necessary predictor of whether seats would switch allegiance in 2019, it was not deemed sufficient. For seats to have a strong possibility of doing so, they would also likely:

1. have had a significant Leave vote in the 2016 European Union referendum (greater than 55 per cent);
2. have had a substantial minority Conservative vote in recent elections (Conservative vote share greater than 25 per cent in 2017);
3. have seen this minority vote growing ever more threatening to Labour (Conservative swing greater than five per cent from 2010 to 2017);
4. have a residual below the 75th percentile.

These four quantitative criteria formed the primary basis for our identification of the Red Wall – a cluster of 42 constituencies in Labour's heartlands which were likely to turn blue, either for the first time ever, or for the first time in recent history (since the early 1990s) in 2019.

Qualitative selection was used to fine-tune,

and sense-check, the list of Red Wall seats drawn up based on quantitative analysis. Figure 1 provides a concise summary of how seats were selected. Seventy met all four criteria set. After judgement was used to exclude seats deemed too unlikely to switch allegiance, and geographic exclusions were made, just 28 plausible Red Wall gains, meeting all criteria, remained. An additional 11 seats, meeting at least three of the four criteria, were then designated part of the Red Wall through qualitative selection. Finally, a further three seats, which met two or less of the criteria, were also included based on geographical proximity to other Red Wall seats.

This analysis indicated that the Conservative Party's Northern tilt, which largely did not materialise in 2017, was likely to take hold in 2019. Shifts in voter behaviour that were already emerging in 2017, were now sufficiently geographically concentrated to alter the electoral map. The Conservatives were no longer locked out of the political rotation emerging in the wake of Brexit.

The Red Wall: Hits and misses

As constituency results were declared in the early hours of 13 December 2019, it became clear the Conservatives' Northern tilt was underway. Not only did the geographically concentrated mass of seats situated in the Midlands and North, which were turning blue either for the first time ever, or the first time in recent history, line up with our general definition of the Red Wall, but many 'winnable seats' identified pivoted as expected. When the final result was declared, 30 of the 42 Red Wall seats we listed had turned blue, 11 had not, and one became the Speaker's seat (see Figure 2). It is worth noting some of the seats we designated as potentially historic Conservative gains, which did not come to fruition, remained as Labour holds by extremely fine margins, for example, Coventry North West and Coventry South, were won with majorities of just 208 and 401 votes respectively.

A prediction accuracy of 73 per cent shows that viewing the Red Wall in our terms provided significant insight into the core trends defining the 2019 election. However, this headline success must not detract from the circa 30 per cent of cases

where our predictions missed the mark. It is from exploring why these 'misses' occurred that important lessons in psephology will be learned.

There are two main reasons Red Wall seats were misallocated in our analysis. The first is that there exist a range of relatively intangible, constituency-specific historic, social and cultural factors which shape aggregate voting patterns. While we can make statistical adjustments for some of these, for example by adding a Merseyside dummy to our regression model (see Table 1), and use qualitative judgement to make further corrections, it is not possible to capture all such variations. The second stems from a tendency to distrust the outputs of quantitative analysis, particularly when new trends are emerging, and 'override' these using qualitative judgements based on political priors. This can be seen clearly in that all three of the Red Wall seats selected which conformed to two or less of our quantitative selection criteria were misallocated. If we followed the data, rather than overcorrecting qualitatively, and included these seats based on geographical proximity to others selected, we would have achieved a better result. Further issues were caused by making corrections in the name of 'political common-sense'. For example, while Leigh and Redcar met all criteria specified, they were excluded from the final list of Red Wall seats, as our priors led us to believe idiosyncrasies of these localities would stymie Conservative support. Our judgement again proved wrong. Both turned blue for the first time in 2019.

Conclusions

While taking a more dispassionate approach to political analysis and placing greater trust in the data, is precisely what allowed us to stay ahead of the game, both in predicting the Red Wall would fall in 2019, and which seats would be at the core of this, ironically our failure to completely distrust our priors diluted the overall effectiveness of our predictions. Had we made this shift, the correct calls would have been made in the aforementioned cases and our hit rate would have been 80 per cent. The key lesson learned from the Red Wall is that taking an analytical leap of faith – by looking beyond our existing priors and trusting the data

more fully – can produce better predictions about how the electoral map will change, particularly when the dynamics of voter behaviour are shifting.

The Red Wall must be understood as an aggregate concept. To make individual-level inferences from this analysis is to commit an ecological fallacy. The Red Wall exists because for a highly geographically concentrated cluster of people, living across the Midlands and North, the Conservative Party no longer seems unappealing. This is not to say all Red Wall voters feel this way, or even that all Red Wall voters in seats which turned blue in 2019 feel this way – indeed, there remains a high level of variation in Conservative support between individuals within these constituencies. It is simply that in these seats, opinion is changing and in some, this has changed for enough individuals to engender an historic realignment. To speak of how Red Wall voters think, as Westminster often does, is to make a crude overgeneralisation.

Looking ahead

Will seats that turned blue for the first time since the 1990s, and in some cases, since the Second World War, in 2019, stay blue at the next election? While it remains too early to make confident predictions, our preliminary analysis suggests firstly, that the seats gained by the Conservatives in Labour's heartlands in 2019, could become the party's new safe seats and secondly, that more historic gains could be made at the next election. Several seats that were designated as part of the Red Wall and which emerged as marginal Labour holds in 2019, remain on course to tip the balance at the next election, and a range of Labour heartlands constituencies geographically contiguous with those which turned blue in 2019, are also now trending this way.

Selected references

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Figure 2: Red Wall 2019 Election Results



Constituency Results file, version 1.0.
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