

URBAN VOTE 2010:

The new urban political landscape

Claire Maugham, May 2010

Summary

The Centre for Cities provides independent research and policy advice on urban economies for city leaders, Whitehall and employers. Our research programme this year is producing practical recommendations to help cities grow private sector jobs.

The economy is the most important issue for urban voters, and support for the political parties is closely linked to how well they have addressed local concerns over economic issues. We have analysed the 2005 and 2010 General Election results to chart political support in urban areas.

- Since 2005, Labour MPs have lost some support from urban voters – but Labour is still better-represented than the other parties in urban areas. The party has also made gains at local council level.
- The Conservatives did not gain significant new representation in cities on 6 May – particularly in places which face a tough economic outlook.
- The Liberal Democrats have seen virtually no increase in support in urban areas, and have lost council seats to Labour – for example, losing control of Liverpool City Council.
- The new coalition government therefore needs to reconnect with urban voters' economic concerns and forge a new approach to regeneration in cities if it is to gain the support of voters across the country.

The political map was re-drawn in the General and Local Elections earlier this month, with voters' allegiances changing. Our analysis of the 2005 and 2010 General Election results shows that while Labour has lost support from urban voters, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats have not gained significant new representation in cities – particularly in those whose economies have suffered most during the recession.

This analysis also raises questions about the impact that a new voting system would have on political representation in the cities. While Labour has lost support since 2005, it has not lost significant numbers of seats in urban areas due to the strength of its core support in Northern cities – in the six largest cities outside London, Labour received less than half (42 percent) of the votes cast on 6 May, but ended up with more than three-quarters (77 percent) of the Parliamentary seats. A system based on alternative votes could mean that Labour would be less certain of retaining so many seats in areas of strong support.

We have been looking closely at the shape of the urban vote since before the 2010 election campaign began. Using polling data on voting intentions gathered by Ipsos MORI between February 2009 and February 2010, we found earlier this month that Labour had lost support since the 2005 General Election in many cities.

Gordon Brown was unpopular everywhere in the run-up to the election, with more than half of voters in each city we looked at dissatisfied with the way he was doing his job as Prime Minister. But voters remained in two minds about David Cameron. Nick Clegg had good personal net approval ratings with urban voters even before the election campaign began – although this was not reflected in pre-election voting intentions. Ipsos MORI's polling showed Lib Dem support to be lower in the year before the campaign began (19 percent) than it had been in the actual 2005 election result (23 percent).

Our pre-election polling also demonstrated that the economy was the most important issue for urban voters, ahead of race, immigration and crime.

Background to the methodology

We have analysed the 2005 and 2010 General Election results in London and a selection of sixteen other cities:

- **Major cities:** the six largest cities by population size outside the capital (Manchester, Leeds, Liverpool, Sheffield, Newcastle and Birmingham)
- **Struggling cities:** five that have struggled for many years to recover from industrial decline and the impact of previous recessions (Hull, Doncaster, Stoke, Hastings and Barnsley)
- **Buoyant cities:** five small cities with strong economies that have generated private sector jobs and businesses over the last decade (Milton Keynes, York, Reading, Brighton and Cambridge)

For each grouping, we have looked at the number of votes cast for each party across each city as defined by the Department for Communities and Local Government's Primary Urban Area (PUA) definition – that is, the city and the surrounding built up area. The PUA definition of London is wider than the usual definition of 'Greater London'. We have not looked at individual constituencies.

Figure 1: General Election results 2005 & 2010 (London and city groupings)



Horizontal lines = 2010 national average

Labour's urban dominance in its final term

After the 2005 election, Labour was the dominant political force across the urban areas we analysed. Its lead over the Conservatives was a decisive 24 percentage points with both our groups of major and struggling cities. The lead was smaller in London, and Labour and Conservatives were neck and neck on 35 percent support in our group of buoyant cities. Liberal Democrat support in urban areas was either at, or below, its national average of 23 percent.

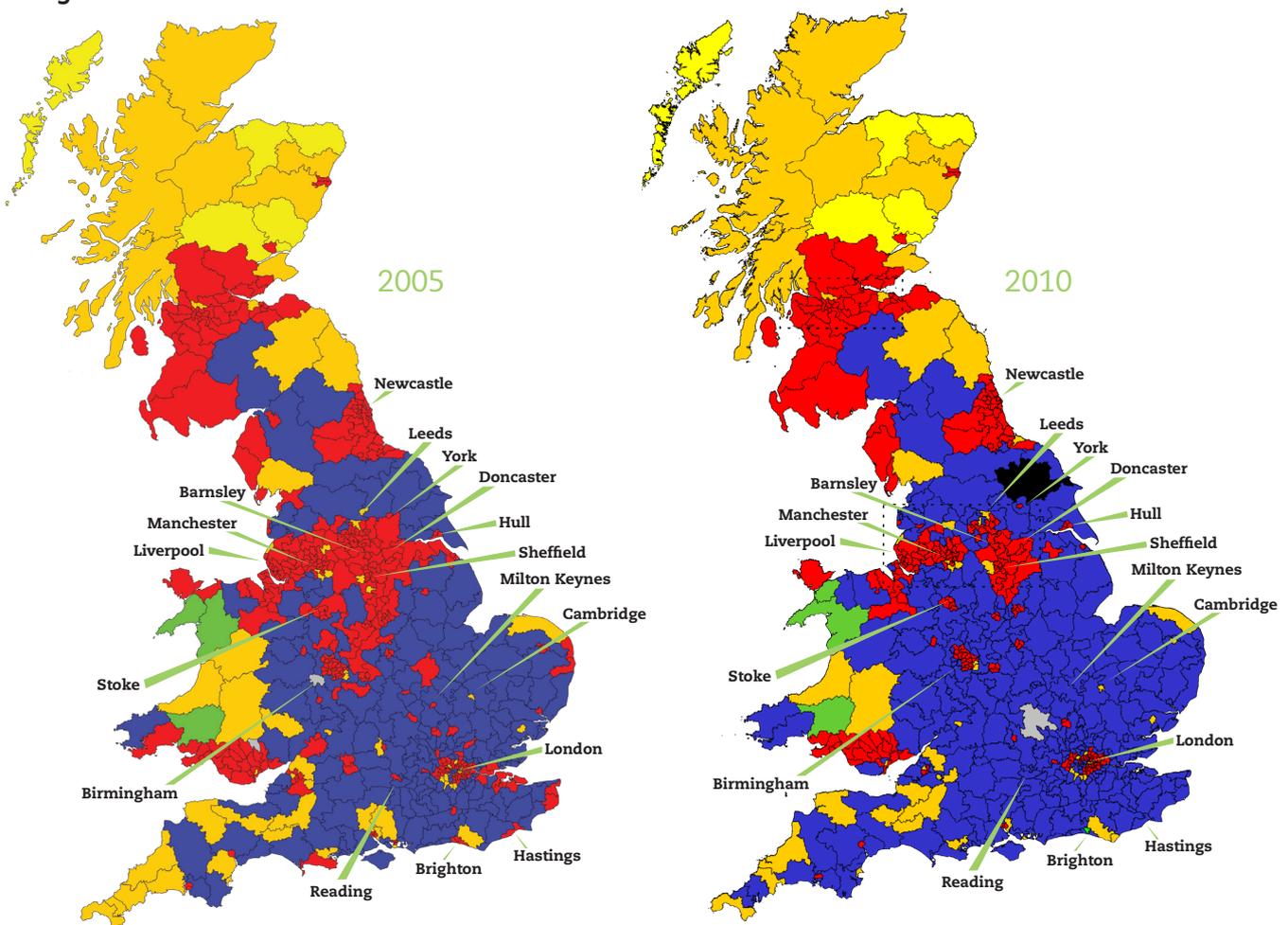
The new urban landscape

Now, Labour's lead in terms of the votes cast across urban areas has been reduced from 24 points to 15 points in our group of major cities, and from 24 points to 13 points in the group of struggling cities. The Conservatives have overtaken Labour in London, and in our group of buoyant cities – where they were neck-and-neck with Labour in 2005 – they now command a 14-point lead.

However, although the level of support in Labour's in urban areas has been weakened, David Cameron and the Conservatives have not gained significant new representation in cities – particularly those which face a tough economic outlook. They still hold no Westminster seats in Liverpool, Newcastle or Sheffield, and just two MPs in each of the Leeds and Manchester urban areas. Areas of Labour representation are still clustered around Northern cities, although they are smaller than they were after the 2005 General Election.

The Liberal Democrats have seen virtually no rise in their support from voters across all urban areas, reflecting their unexpectedly lukewarm performance across the country. In Sheffield, for example, Nick Clegg remains the sole Lib Dem (Sheffield Hallam) in a sea of red – given that Paul Scriven, the incumbent Lib Dem leader of Sheffield City Council, narrowly failed in his bid to become MP for Sheffield Central.

Figure 2: General Election results 2005 & 2010



The local picture

Labour's loss of 91 seats at the general election masks an important story at council level. On 6 May, Labour gained 412 Councillors and 15 Councils across the country. It took Liverpool from the Lib Dems and Coventry from Conservative rule, in addition to taking three councils from the Conservatives in London (Ealing, Enfield and Brent) and taking seven other London boroughs from no overall control.

Tony Travers has described Labour's good support at local level as an indicator which could signal a future resurgence in support for the Labour Party. It does mean that Labour politicians hold power in several major cities, at a time when the coalition government's rhetoric indicates it is considering devolving more power to local authorities.

The national coalition government could take some lessons from local politicians, many of whom have experience of working in coalition – Birmingham and Leeds, for example, have operated under fairly successful Conservative / Lib Dem power sharing arrangements for some time.

Conclusion

Each of the three main parties holds an important political stake in cities. For the Labour Party, any further loss of support in terms of Westminster representation in Northern cities would be symptomatic of a worrying gap between the party and its core support. If the Conservatives had done better in urban areas where a Tory MP is still a rarity, they would have had greater chance of securing a mandate to govern alone. And while the Liberal Democrats have a history of strong support at local council level, the 2010 election did not give them a breakthrough in terms of Parliamentary seats.

Our pre-election polling showed that the economy is at the top of urban voters' concerns. The Centre for Cities has chronicled the impact of the recession around the country – our annual index of cities, Cities Outlook 2010, showed that the recession had widened the gap between cities and that economic recovery would feel very different in different places. The coalition partners' showing at the polls proves they have not yet connected with urban voters on this issue.

The Labour opposition, too, will need to set out its vision for urban growth and new powers for cities – particularly given the prospect of a new electoral system, under which each individual vote would count for more in the urban areas of strong Labour support.

To address voters' concerns, the Conservative / Liberal Democrat administration needs a new approach to regeneration, which looks beyond shiny new buildings and defines a new reality for cities with varying levels of economic prosperity. The coalition partners need to look for solutions to the particular challenges faced by struggling cities which need to grow their base of private sector jobs. They will also need to alleviate brakes on economic growth, such as high house prices or congestion, in buoyant cities.

For more information on Centre for Cities' policy recommendations for cities, please visit www.centreforcities.org

Acknowledgements

Ipsos MORI

The Centre is grateful to Ipsos MORI for their polling and support of the Urban Vote project. See the full results of the city-polling at www.centreforcities.org/urbanvote

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May 2010
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