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Conservative support in Northern England at the 2015 general election.

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In this Brief, the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI) considers the electoral performance of the Conservative Party across the three regions of Northern England at the 2015 general election. It focuses not only on seats won, but also the ranking and vote share of Conservative candidates in Northern constituencies, and how this has changed since 2010. The Brief therefore contributes to several important post-election debates in the UK. It considers whether perceptions of the Conservative Party as largely absent from Northern England are fair, and whether the perceived rise of UKIP in the North has harmed the party's support base. Furthermore, it enables reflection on the notion that the Labour Party's defeat at the election arose due to an over-emphasis on winning support in its Northern 'heartlands' at the expense of appealing to voters elsewhere in England.

Background

- The fact that George Osborne is the only member of the Cabinet with a constituency in the North is a fact that has been highlighted by some commentators to suggest that the new majority Conservative government does not legitimately represent Northern England.
- The flipside of this suggestion is that the Labour Party's heavy defeat at the 2015 general election came from adopting a left-wing policy programme that appealed primarily to its Northern England 'heartlands'.
- The rise of the UK Independence Party (UKIP) adds another dimension to this narrative. It has often assumed that UKIP is benefiting from an anti-immigration sentiment in parts of Northern England, appealing to traditional Conservative supporters and thus replacing the Conservatives as Labour's principal opponents in the North.
- There is clearly a need to consider in greater depth how the Conservative Party performed in Northern England at the 2015 general election. While Labour still dominates the North in terms of parliamentary seats, this does not necessarily mean that the Conservative Party does not appeal to a significant portion of Northern voters.
- This analysis is relevant also to the ongoing debate within the Labour Party regarding party leadership and electoral strategy. The view promoted, to some extent, by all of the emerging Labour leadership candidates is that Labour needs to broaden its appeal away from its heartlands, and towards voters in the South.
- However, the desertion of Labour's supporters in Scotland to the Scottish National Party (SNP) offers an important challenge to the logic of such arguments, prompting the need to understand better the nature of Labour's strength in Northern England.

Evidence

- In the North-East, the Conservative Party won 3 seats (10.3%) in 2015, compared to 2 (6.9%) in 2010. It also finished in second place in a further 15 seats,

compared to 14 in 2010, meaning the party finished in first or second place in more than 60% of seats.

- The party increased its vote share in almost 60% of seats in the North-East, including an increase of 5 percentage points or higher in more than 20% of seats.
- The Conservative Party made less progress in the North-West, albeit from a much higher base. In 2015, it repeated its 2010 outcome of 21 seats (28.4%).
- Although the party increased its vote share in only around 40% of seats, it finished second in 39 seats (compared to 37 in 2010), meaning the party finished in first or second place in more than 80% of seats in the North-West.
- Of the three Northern regions, the Conservative Party is traditionally strongest in Yorkshire and Humberside. In 2015, it won 19 seats (35.8%) in the region – the same total as in 2010.
- However, the proportion of seats in which the party increased its vote share was only around 40%, and it finished second in fewer seats (16 in 2015, compared to 23 in 2010).
- More detail on the Conservative Party's performance in Northern constituencies in 2010 and 2015 is included in the Annex.

Analysis

- The Conservative Party is clearly a significant electoral force in the North.
- The notion of Northern England as a Labour Party stronghold, while the Conservative Party controls the South, is too simplistic. The Labour Party performed well in London at the 2015 general election, and the evidence outlined above shows also that the Conservative Party is in a relatively strong position in the North.
- The Conservative Party made most progress in the Northern region where it has traditionally been the weakest, the North-East, most obviously by gaining an additional seat, but also by increasing its vote share in the majority of seats.
- Less progress was made in the North's largest region, the North-West, although support for the party was largely stable.
- The apparent rise of UKIP across Northern England appears not to have significantly threatened the Conservative Party. The challenge was most evident in Yorkshire and Humberside, where the party lost a significant number of second-place finishes. However, it still won more than a third of the seats in the region.

- This evidence also implicitly challenges the assumption that the Labour Party needs to focus on broadening its appeal to voters in Southern England. Although it is correct to argue that the Labour Party is unlikely to win a majority based on its strength in the North alone, its position in Northern England cannot be taken for granted.

Conclusion

Although the Labour Party remains dominant in most parts of the North, the Conservative Party has nevertheless to be taken seriously as an electoral force in this part of England. The 2015 general election proved that the threat posed by UKIP to the party's support base in the North has been over-estimated. George Osborne appears to be attempting to capitalise on the Conservative's strength in Northern England by imposing the 'metro mayor' model on Northern cities. Given that these roles will be elected on a city-regional basis, it will mean that voters in rural and suburban areas in the North – where the Conservative Party is strongest – will have a direct influence over the political leadership of currently Labour-dominated urban areas. The Labour Party clearly cannot afford to take its traditional strength in Northern England for granted. The evidence contained in this Brief suggests therefore that the assertion that Labour must above all broaden its appeal to voters in Southern England in order to win a majority at the next election is somewhat simplistic. What is more, it might be undermined in the meantime in its core Northern cities by the new government's 'metro mayor' strategy.

Annex

Conservative Party performance in Northern England parliamentary constituencies

	North West		North East		Yorkshire & Humberside	
	2010	2015	2010	2015	2010	2015
Seats won (% total)	21 (28.4)	21 (28.4)	2 (6.9)	3 (10.3)	19 (35.8)	19 (35.8)
Second places (% total)	37 (50.0)	39 (52.7)	14 (48.3)	15 (51.7)	23 (43.4)	16 (30.1)
Place improved (% total*)	-	12 (22.6)	-	8 (29.6)	-	3 (8.6)
Vote share increased (% total)	-	29 (39.2)	-	17 (58.6)	-	23 (42.6)
Vote share increased ≥ 5pp (% total)	-	5 (6.8)	-	6 (20.7)	-	7 (13.0)

Source: SPERI calculations based on results available at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/shared/election2010/results/> (2010) and <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/election/2015/results> (2015).

*Excludes seats already held by the Conservative Party



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