



General Election 2019: How Labour lost England

A report from the English Labour Network

February 2020

Introduction

This English Labour Network paper highlights:

- How the Conservatives election victory was almost entirely in England and amongst voters whose primary national identity is English.
- That Labour has a long-standing and deepening crisis in its relationship with English voters that must be addressed if the party is ever to win again.
- How in 2019 the party failed to make any attempt to address English voters or the governance of England.

There is no path back to power that doesn't run through England and English voters. In our conclusion we make three recommendations as to how Labour can recover.

National politics within the United Kingdom

For many years, the UK has actually compromised four separate political nations. In each part of the union general and national elections (i.e. UK parliament and national parliament/assembly elections) are contested by different parties and different parties win in each nation. 2019 was no exception. The Conservatives won in England, but lost ground in Scotland. They made gains in Wales¹, but Labour still won there. Northern Ireland is apart, but the Conservatives erstwhile allies lost support. The Conservative gains in England were concentrated in seats outside the major cities where the electorate is significantly more like to emphasise its English identity.

Labour has consistently refused to address the weakness of its English support. The last time Labour beat the Conservatives in the popular vote in England was in 2001². The Conservative majority in 2015 came off the back of a campaign that exploited English fears that the SNP would dominate a hung parliament and minority Labour government. Labour itself has been nearly wiped out in Scotland where the politics of national identity are critical. Despite all these warning signs of the power of national identity, UK Labour has resolutely refused to recognise the salience of England and English identity.

English national identity and recent English elections

We can explore the relationship between national identity and voting patterns using data collected by the Centre for English Identity and Politics, now based at Southampton University³. In YouGov polls for the last three general elections, around 29% of voters

¹ Recent Welsh elections and the Brexit vote have been aligned more closely with England, possibly reflecting a significant part of the Welsh electorate that does not identify strongly as Welsh. Nonetheless, Wales still constitutes a distinct national political space.

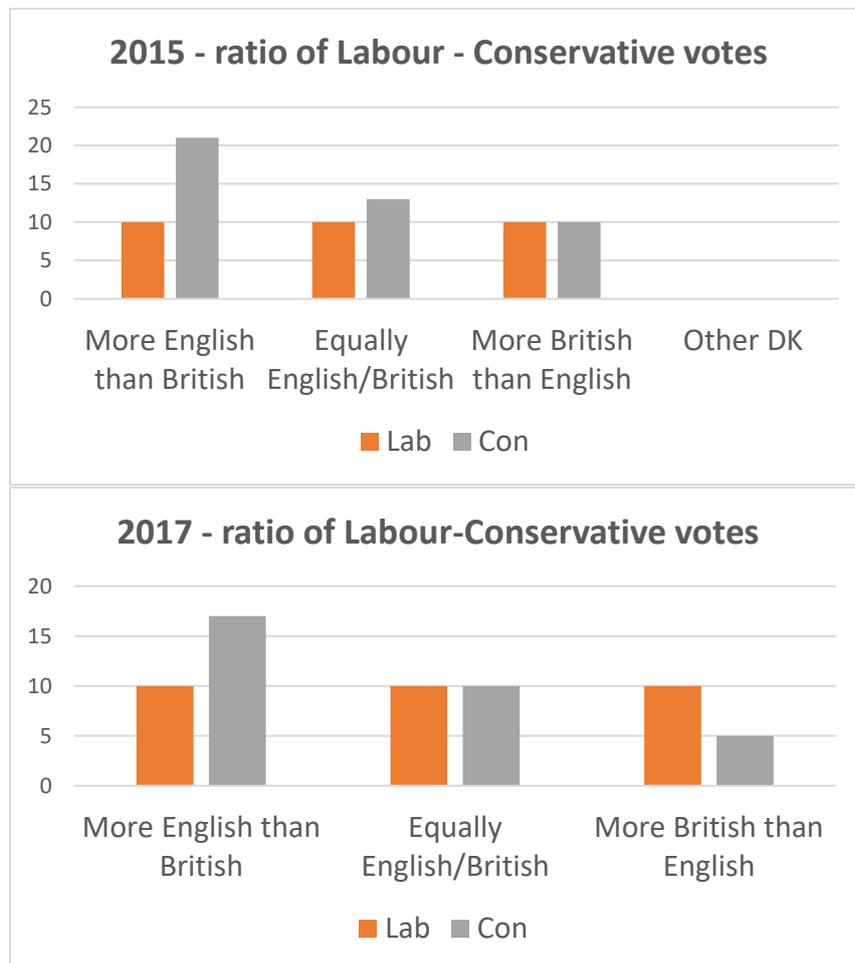
² Labour won most seats, partly because our vote was distributed most 'efficiently' and partly through superior organisation and campaigning.

³ The Centre's website is currently in transition between Winchester and Southampton University. For further details of the polls on which this paper is based please contact Professor John Denham j.denham@soton.ac.uk

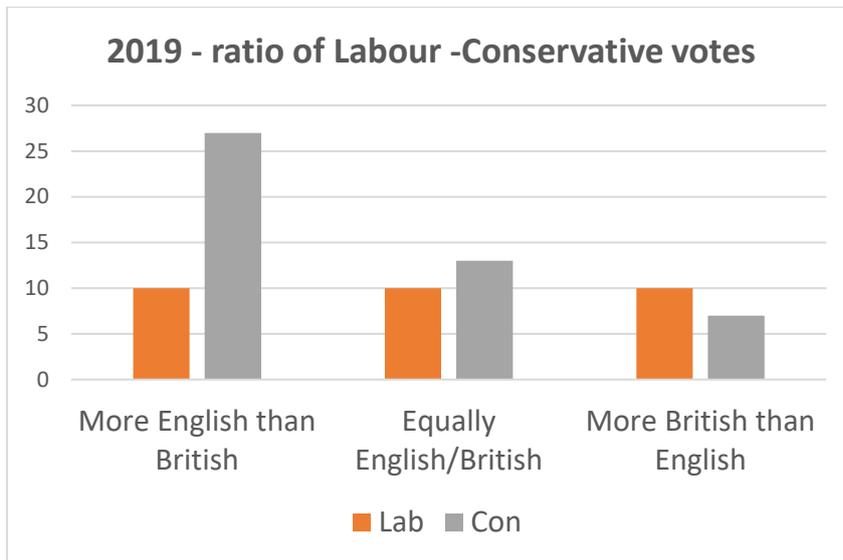
identify as 'more English than British', 40% as 'equally English and British' and 20% as more British than English. About 10% are 'Other' or 'Don't know'

The Conservative victory in 2019 was achieved almost entirely amongst the 'More English than British'. In this group, Conservatives received 27 votes for every 10 gained by Labour. Amongst the 'equally English and British' Conservatives had 13 votes for every 10 by Labour. Labour still won amongst the 'more British than English' (with 10 votes to 7 for the Tories).

The three charts below show the same comparison from 2015, 2017 and 2019.⁴



⁴ Note: these were all polls conducted towards the end of the campaigns, but are not exit polls and so give an approximate estimate of voting behaviour

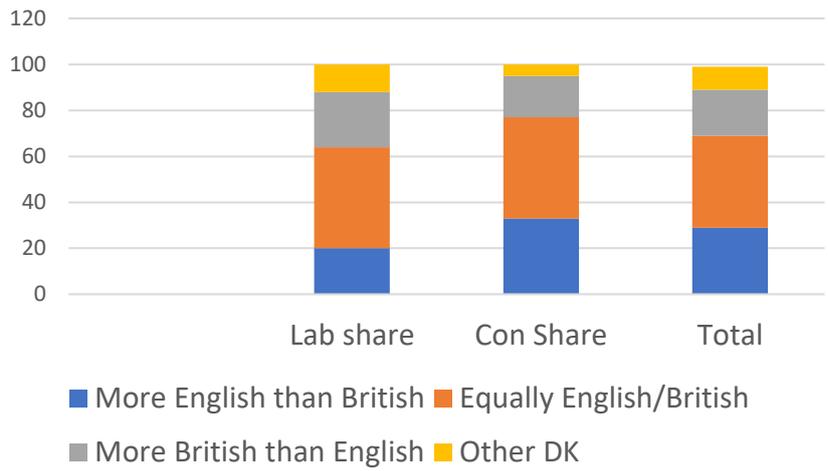


They show Labour’s weakness amongst the English-identifying electorate in each of the three elections. 2019, however, was significantly the worse performance of the three. There was a partial recovery amongst these voters in 2017: Conservatives received 17 votes to every 10 votes for Labour down from 21 in 2015. This was almost certainly the result of former UKIP voters returning to Labour in the belief that Brexit had been resolved. The Conservative lead remained very large.

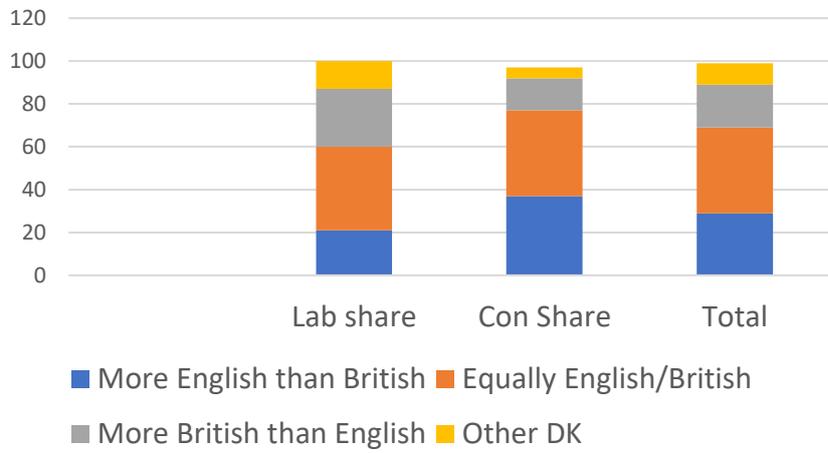
The 2015 – 2019 elections confirmed Labour’s growing reliance on voters who did not emphasise their English identity. In 2015, 36% of Labour’s vote came from those who were ‘more British than English’ or Other/Don’t Know. In 2017 it rose to 40% and in 2019 it hit 44%. It may surprise some to learn that nearly one in six of Labour’s vote last December came from those who neither identify as English or British. This is almost twice those voters’ representation in the electorate.

The three charts below show the composition of the votes received by the Conservatives and by Labour. They illustrate very clearly how the Conservative lead over Labour has been achieved by extending their support amongst the ‘More English than British’. In 2015, 33% of the Tory vote came from this group, rising to 37% in 2017, and 40% in 2019. If we remember that over this period, the Conservative share of the vote in England rose from 40.9% to 47.2%, this represents a very dramatic expansion of their base amongst English identifying voters.

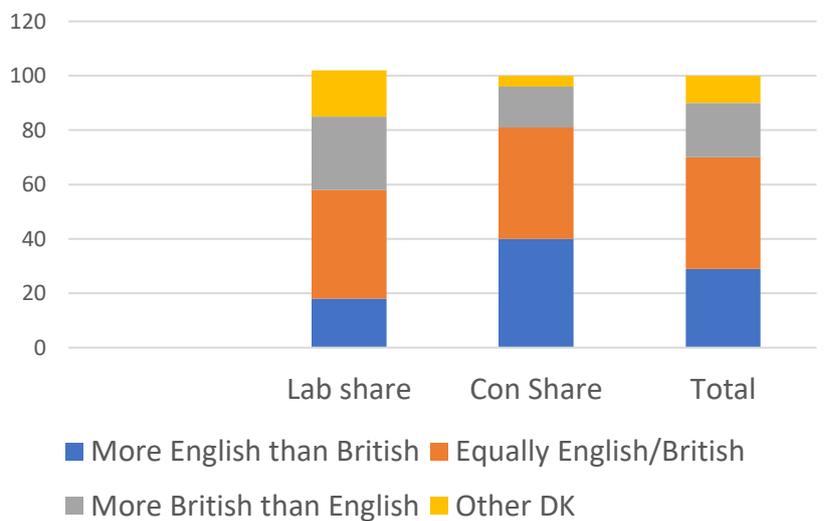
2015 Vote share by identity



2017 - Vote share by identity



2019 - Vote share by identity



By comparing the estimate vote share by national identity with the votes cast for the major parties at each election, we can make an estimate of the number of voters received from each segment of the voters.

We can estimate that the Conservatives gained the support of an additional 1.625 million 'more English than British' voters between 2015 and 2019. Over the same period, Labour's support among these voters fell by 114,000 despite Labour's overall vote increasing by 1.065 million. (Even in 2017, when Labour's vote was 3.3 million higher than 2015, its vote from the 'more English' only rose by 630,000, a smaller swing than amongst other groups)

The period 2015 – 2019 was one of great political turbulence. The Liberal Democrat and UKIP vote shares collapsed, creating the semblance of a two-party system. The Brexit Party made a partial intervention in 2019. Labour's failure was its inability to increase its support amongst this volatile section of the electorate.

English voters and English interests

The correlation between voting patterns and national identity in England is a 21st century phenomenon. This may be why UK Labour has been so slow to recognise its significance. As recently as 2001 – when Labour last won the popular vote in England - there was no discernible pattern to the votes of English or British identifiers. The emergence of this 'political Englishness' (and a corresponding type of Britishness that rejects English identity) became apparent only over the past few elections. Unless Labour now responds and gains significantly more support from voters who emphasise their English identity, the path back to power is blocked.

National identities reflect world views. They comprise the ideas we have of 'who we are', and 'what we stand for'; they may contain 'explanations' of why we experience the world the way we do. The evidence suggests that this political Englishness has emerged as the identity of people who tend to live in places that have seen the worse of economic and social change; they feel less empowered to change things; their idea of national identity is very closely tied to their attachment to particular places and the people who live there; they are less likely to have been to university and, thus, less well equipped to compete in the emerging labour market. Older people and their families may once have worked in well-paid and well-regarded industrial jobs). This fits the profile of many of the voters we have been losing since the early 2000s including the 'Red Wall' seats in the most recent election.

Several different factors may have combined to prompt this groups of voters to have a new sense of their identity. Devolution raised a challenge to the idea that English and British were the same thing but also raised tangible concerns about the relative funding of public services. Most of these voters were ambivalent at the very least about Scottish independence. Membership of the EU, very large-scale immigration (the population of England rose from 49m to 56m between 2001 and 2018, largely through migration), and the sense of local decline all raised questions about who are people like us, who speaks for us, and who stands for our interests?

Many of the socio-economic issues these voters face will, we are sure, be covered by other parts of the Labour Together enquiry. But we want to highlight some aspects of ‘political Englishness’ that are specific to English identity and which are too often neglected⁵.

- These voters are very patriotic, both about England and Britain.
- They identify English issues and interests that are distinct from those of the union as a whole
- They overwhelmingly want political parties to stand up for English interests within the union. But despite their recent support for the Conservatives they tend to be sceptical that any party does
- They want more democracy, with a large majority favouring English MPs alone making English laws in Westminster. A smaller majority want a Parliament for England. Devolution within England to regional assemblies is unpopular. Devolution to combined authorities has support, though polls are inconsistent.

Why English identity matters, and why Labour gets it wrong

One of the most fundamental questions that voters ask – much more than about policy or ideology – is ‘does this party stand up for people like me’. Parties that do not respect identities that voters hold strongly are much less likely to gain their trust.

It would clearly be wrong to suggest that all Labour needs to do is to put a St George cross on its leaflets. But for many years the party has gone out of its way to alienate voters who do emphasise their English identity

- These voters are patriotic. Labour does not project itself as a patriotic party
- These voters are English. Labour refuses to mention England in any of its campaigns. While Labour was promising to ‘rebuild Wales’ and ‘rebuild Scotland’ in England the promise was to ‘rebuild Britain’
- These voters are English. Labour spokespeople never mention England even when the policy they are responsible to applies only to England. Policy documents often confuse devolved and non-devolved policies suggesting that party policy staff do not consider English issues properly.
- These voters are English. Even when, as in 2019, the only local elections in Britain are in England, no Labour campaign materials refer to England.
- These voters want a more democratic England. Labour does not acknowledge their legitimate concerns about the way England is governed. It has no serious proposals to devolve power within England.
- These voters want a more democratic England. The perception that Labour was opposed to Brexit was damaging, not just because of the policy itself but because it seemed to reject these voters’ desire to be heard and their conception of democratic sovereignty
- These voters have been disconcerted by mass immigration. Their strong sense of identity and community has been disrupted by changes they were not expecting. While some of this reaction is based on racism, for most it is more sense of

⁵ See [for example](#): We can supply detailed data to the Labour Together inquiry if required.

uncertainty and loss of a stable community. At least some Labour figures and activists have stereotyped anyone who is not actively in favour of large-scale migration as bigoted.

- These voters tend to live outside the major cities. Labour's image is overwhelmingly of a graduate middle-class party based in cities (and of London in particular).

Labour has no structures that allow Labour members in England to make policy for England (in the way that Welsh and Scottish members are allowed to do). Our proposals for this democratic change were dismissed by the 'democracy review'.

In the 2019 manifesto we were told that Labour's 'preferred option' was for a federal structure of nations and (English) regions. This policy has never been the subject of any consultation or conference decision and advocates a change that is unpopular with English voters, suggesting that it had been drafted to satisfy a particular Scottish perspective on the union.

How the Tories win England

The Conservatives also do not make frequent mentions of England and could also be accused of insensitivity to English identity. But in the absence of any alternative voice, the Conservatives have been able to play to at least three aspects of English identity that matter to these voters:

- They are clearly seen as a patriotic party.
- On Brexit they sided with these voters' conception of democracy and sovereignty.
- On immigration they have clearly been more prepared to acknowledge voters' concerns.

However, the polling evidence also suggests that English voters are not fully or properly represented by the Conservatives. This section of the electorate has been volatile across recent elections. It's also no more right-wing on economic issues than the population as a whole. For these reasons, Labour should be able to win more support if it learns the lessons of recent years.

The English Labour Network and the 2019 election

It is sometimes assumed that explicit references to England would put off other voters. However, our experience in the recent election suggests this is not true.

During the election campaign the English Labour Network ran a number of political adverts targeted at people who were sympathetic to Labour and living in a selection of 9 English towns, largely in industrial areas.

We took Labour campaign videos and gave them an English angle, making clear that the policies involved were England-only and that Labour had a strategy for England.

We did this knowing that it would not be possible to gain conclusive quantitative data showing the direct effects of these adverts in terms of winning votes for Labour, because feedback to the adverts would predominantly be based on the policy mentioned or on the general reputation of UK Labour.

But we knew that we would be able to gain important qualitative data through any comments regarding the English angle.

Across our videos there were:

- 93,000 impressions (appearances on feeds) across 34,000 users
- 8,200 plays of 15 seconds or more
- 133 shares
- 229 positive interactions
- 189 negative interactions
- 600 comments

The vast majority of those 600 comments were negative about Jeremy Corbyn, Labour's Brexit position and overwhelmingly about the amount of money Labour was going to spend and the amount of 'freebies' we were going to give away. (Given that our content was promoting Labour policies where money would need to be spent, this is perhaps unsurprising.)

Interestingly, only 2 of the 600 comments criticised the fact that the videos were English focussed rather than British.

Our conclusion was therefore that there is no 'downside' to Labour putting out videos with English branding. There is no good reason for Labour not to begin appealing to voters who feel English-more-than-British by showing this demographic that the party has a plan for England.

Conclusion

Labour simply must reach more English voters. We would urge Labour to:

- Recognise the significance of English identifying voters. It should recommend the development of a policy, communications and campaign strategy aimed at these voters. This should be integrated into, not apart from, the party's wider campaigning.
- Support changes to Labour's constitution to allow English Labour members to make policy for England.
- Support campaigns now for a constitutional convention and citizen's assembly to consider the governance of England. This could be convened by Labour local authorities.

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