Labour in English towns

A Policy Network Paper

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About the Author

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About this report

This paper is an attempt to understand the geographical realignment that has taken place in English politics. Why have English towns become a lag on Labour’s national performance, and what can the party do about it? Original analysis of recent election results in England are accompanied by a comparison with centre left performance in other countries, as well as a presentation of polling conducted for Policy Network. Ultimately, it is argued, Labour must combine an economic agenda for towns, for which a consensus is starting to emerge, with a focus on healing the cultural divides in society. This requires an emphasis on meaningful social contact, constructive dialogue and integration between communities across the nation.
1. Introduction

At the 2017 election Labour achieved its highest vote share since the landslide of 2001, with 40 per cent of the vote. Despite this marked improvement, the Conservative party also increased its vote share compared to 2015, and even took five seats from Labour mitigating losses elsewhere. In fact, in England, despite being a good night overall for Labour, the party went backwards in 126 seats, with a swing to the Conservatives.

Very few of these 126 constituencies are in England’s ‘core cities’.1 A few are rural seats, but most are in towns in the midlands and north of England: Ashfield, Bolsover, Mansfield, Walsall North, Dudley North, Dudley South, Rotherham, Chesterfield, Burnley, Barnsley East, to name just a few. Many of these seats remain safely Labour, but the direction of travel shows that even in an election where Labour closed the gap significantly on the Tories, Labour is struggling to win back trust in many of what would once have been considered its traditional heartlands. Analysis by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) shows that on average, the swing to Labour in towns was less than half that in core cities.2

The 2018 English local election results only confirmed Labour’s towns problem. In London, while not hitting the heights of more fevered expectations, Labour held its own and continued its dominance of the other core cities. Yet in several local authorities based around towns Labour actively went backwards, for example losing control of Amber Valley, Nuneaton and Derby, with its performance in those councils helping supress the party’s national vote share. It is clear that a year on from the Corbyn surge, Labour’s lacklustre performance in English towns is a stumbling block to getting the party into Downing Street.

It also matters for the long term because it could lead to a fundamental shift in the Labour coalition, similar in magnitude to the breaking of the New Deal coalition in the United States that lasted until the late 1960s, where southern Democratic heartlands and ‘Yankee’ Republican districts flipped. If Labour is forced to appeal to ever-more affluent voters in the home counties to compensate for losses in northern and midland towns, the party will have to change beyond recognition.

But the stakes are also high for Labour’s more immediate electoral prospects. The party’s list of target seats it must gain in order to win a majority is more evenly balanced between constituencies in the north and south of England, but again most contain at least one town with a population of 25,000 or more but are outside the core cities. Among the top 64 targets it needs to win a majority of one, 42 are in England, and of these 31 are ‘town’ constituencies. To lay the foundations for a two-term government strong enough to really transform Britain, Labour should be aiming for something closer to a hundred-seat gain. Of its top 100 targets, 63 are in England, of which 49 are ‘town’ constituencies.

Put simply, Labour cannot win without making significant progress across England’s towns.

1. Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield

This paper is an attempt to understand the geographical realignment that has taken place in English politics. Why have English towns become a lag on Labour’s national performance?

Section one combines a review of existing research with original analysis of recent election results in England to show the transition that has taken place. Section two puts these developments in England in a wider, global context. Section three provides further analysis of the election results to examine the causes of the transition, accompanied by original analysis of polling conducted for Policy Network to look at attitudinal differences between residents of English towns and cities. The final section discusses these findings and recent attempts to tackle Labour’s underperformance in towns from various traditions within the party. Ultimately, I argue that while an inclusive economic policy is an important part of the solution, healing the cultural divide requires a strong emphasis on meaningful contact, constructive dialogue and social integration between communities across the nation.
2. What has happened?

Some have put Labour’s underperformance in towns down to a political realignment resulting from Brexit and the rise and fall of UKIP: a big worry among Labour supporters prior to the 2017 election was that for many working class former Labour voters, UKIP was acting as a ‘gateway drug’ to voting Conservative.3 However, the trend is a much longer term one, dating back to at least the 2010 election. Compared to 2005 England’s major cities – even their more affluent parts – are now strongholds that Labour wins even when it is struggling nationally, while more and more towns have become marginal or swung to the Conservatives. Ian Warren’s analysis shows that of the 151 seats categorised as ‘other urban’ – that is, urban constituencies not within the 30 largest population centres in Britain – Labour now holds just 59, down from 107 in 2005. By contrast, Labour continues to hold the vast majority (128 out of 188) of seats in major urban areas (core cities and the surrounding urban sprawl), down just nine from 137 in 2005.4 Jennings and Stoker argue of June 2017:

“This was not a Brexit election – or a Brexit ‘realignment’ – in that the vote is better seen as a symptom the longer-term geographical bifurcation of politics; less revenge of the ‘Remainers’ and more a continuing battle of mobilisation between cosmopolitan and non-cosmopolitan areas.”5

Deprivation and decline

This bifurcation is sometimes characterised as Labour becoming a party of the affluent, liberal middle classes at the expense of the poorer and working-class voters whose interests the party was founded to advance. But this characterisation is largely misguided: Labour still performs well among those on the very lowest incomes.6 It has also continued to do well in in the most deprived parts of the country, which are disproportionately in inner-city areas. If we use the index of multiple deprivation (IMD) as a guide, we can see that Labour has gained in some more affluent constituencies such as Sheffield Hallam, but still performs best (figure 1), and if anything has tended to gain more since 2005 (figure 2), in more deprived constituencies.

Index of multiple deprivation7

The 2015 index of multiple deprivation is the government’s official measure of relative deprivation for small areas in England. It ranks every neighbourhood from 1 (most deprived) to 32,844 (least deprived). These rankings can then be used to place larger geographical areas such as local authorities and parliamentary constituencies on a similar scale.

The overall index is made up of seven sub-indices of deprivation: income; employment; education, skills and training; health and disability; crime; barriers to housing and services; living environment. In turn, each of these is made up of a basket of indicators based on the most recent data available (mostly 2012/13).

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Figure 1: Labour party margin of victory/defeat at 2017 election, by English constituency index of multiple deprivation (1=most deprived)

![Figure 1: Labour party margin of victory/defeat at 2017 election, by English constituency index of multiple deprivation (1=most deprived)](image)

Figure 2: Conservative to labour swing between 2005 and 2017 elections, by English constituency index of multiple deprivation (1=most deprived)

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However, this too is only a part of the story. NEF's analysis applies a measure of relative economic decline to parliamentary constituencies, and finds that since 2005 the Conservatives have tended to increase their vote share in areas that have suffered the most decline, with the reverse true for Labour (see figure 4).
Index of relative decline

The index of relative decline includes measures such as changing rates (mostly since 2001) of economic activity, numbers of businesses, overall population and population with a degree. On this measure Manchester central, for example, has experienced the least economic decline (or most progress) of any constituency, despite being the 9th most deprived constituency according to the IMD.

Figure 3: Labour party margin of victory/defeat at 2017 election, by English constituency index of relative decline (1=most deprived)

Figure 4: Conservative to Labour swing between 2005 and 2017 elections, by English constituency index of relative decline (1=most decline)


9. Thanks to Will Jennings for making available to Policy Network the full IRD dataset.
The IMD and the index of relative decline (IRD) are not correlated with one another. For example, many core city constituencies are heavily deprived but have not experienced decline, while many town constituencies such as Clacton, Rochdale, Grimsby, Rotherham, Blackpool South, Walsall North and Burnley are both highly deprived and have experienced more economic decline compared to other parts of the country. These are the areas where Labour has struggled the most: among (23) constituencies that were within both the 100 most deprived and 100 most in decline, there was a 1 per cent swing away from Labour, compared to a national 2 per cent swing in the other direction.

Labour’s fortunes have declined most in areas – typically post-industrial towns – that have not experienced recovery since the 2008 crash and in some cases have never really recovered since decline in the 1970s and 1980s, failing to provide new and quality job opportunities. It has improved most in inner cities that, despite still exhibiting high levels of poverty, deprivation and inequality, are on the up and connected to the global economy.
3. Global decline

This trend is not unique to Labour in England. Scottish Labour, once dominant, was all but wiped out at the 2015 election by the separatist SNP, with only a modest recovery in 2017 and the Conservatives gaining twice as many seats at the nationalists’ expense. While both the Conservatives and Labour gained votes in most seats across Scotland, the Conservative recovery was much larger in Scotland’s major towns compared to the core cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow. The average Labour to Conservative swing was six percentage points across constituencies in Aberdeen, Dundee, Paisley, East Kilbride, Inverness, Livingston and Hamilton, compared to just two points across Edinburgh and Glasgow. The political context is very different, but the trend is in a similar direction.

Across Europe, centre left parties are in decline, losing ground in multiple directions, but particularly to the centre right and populist right and left. In some cases, such as France (PS), the Netherlands (PVDA) and Greece (PASOK), the collapse has been almost total, and across the board. In others, such as Germany, clear parallels with the British trend can be seen. While the German Social Democrats (SPD) are in retreat and the British Labour party gained ground at the last election, the post-industrial town is a particular source of concern for both.

Take the east German state of Brandenburg. Its towns were industrial heartlands of the GDR, supplying energy, steel, cars and other manufactured goods, but reunification was followed by privatisation and ultimately economic decline, unemployment and outward migration. In the 1990s and 2000s the state was a stronghold for the SPD, even alongside significant residual support for the successor to the former ruling communist party.

Since 2005, though, the Brandenburg electoral map has shifted from a sea of social democratic red to the Christian Democrats’ (CDU) black in federal elections. In the four major population centres outside the state capital of Potsdam – Cottbus, Brandenburg, Frankfurt (Oder) and Oranienburg – the decline to 2017 is particularly stark, even compared to 2005, an election the SPD lost (see figure 6). In the former manufacturing town of Frankfurt an der Oder, the constituency for which also includes Eisenhüttenstadt (literally ‘ironworks city’), the SPD has fallen from first to fourth place, halving its vote share within three election cycles.
Across the state, in which the majority live in small and medium-sized population centres of between 15 and 170 thousand, there has been a net swing of 12 points from the SPD to the CDU since 2005. The SPD has suffered losses in big cities too, but not as great. In Bonn, the swing is 0.2 points, in Frankfurt it is 2 points, Munich 3 points, and in Hamburg and the western districts of Berlin it is 5 points.

Outside Europe, where social democracy has its roots, the wider progressive left has experienced similar trends. In the US, many of the crucial votes that switched away from the Democrats in the

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2016 presidential election were in towns in the Midwest Rust Belt, previously America’s industrial heartlands, now synonymous with decline and the ‘left behind’ narrative. States such as Michigan and Wisconsin, which had not voted for a Republican presidential candidate since the Reagan landslides of the 1980s, went for Trump alongside Blue (Democrat)-leaning Pennsylvania and the traditional swing states of Iowa and Ohio. Indiana, which Obama took by a slim margin in 2008, gave Trump a nineteen-point margin of victory.

While big Rust Belt cities like Pittsburgh, Detroit and Milwaukee voted for Clinton by clear margins, smaller population centres like Muncie (Indiana), Bay City (Michigan) and Clinton (Iowa) flipped from blue to red on swings of around 14 percent. In Ohio, the major conurbations of Cleveland, Toledo, Columbus and Cincinnati stayed solidly Democrat (with small swings in Clinton’s favour in the latter two), but many of the smaller population centres were won by Trump on big swings (figure 7). Warren, for example, formerly home to steel production but now suffering after decades of deindustrialisation, with a poverty rate of 35 per cent and a population decline of 36 per cent since 1970, was narrowly won by Trump in 2016. Until that election Trumbull county, for which Warren is the county seat, had been won by the Democratic presidential candidate in every election since 1972.12

Figure 7: 2016 presidential election results by county of large and medium Ohio towns and cities (dot size indicates population)13

Sources: Townhall.com and US Census Bureau 2010

Of course, each country has its own historical and geographical context, social and economic forces and political traditions. Former holiday resort towns such as Scarborough, Blackpool and Clacton, and the decline they suffered as international travel became cheaper and easier, have no real parallel in continental Europe or the US. Race plays a very different role in American politics than it does in the UK, and the same social democratic traditions of Western Europe are not replicated across the Atlantic. Deindustrialisation in the context of reunification in Germany has, of course, played out differently to deindustrialisation in England, with different political outcomes for the former industrial heartlands of the GDR. The British and American electoral systems have probably helped avert French and Dutch proportions of wipeout for the centre left.

The main difference in England compared to other countries is that at the last election the main party of the centre left increased its vote share dramatically overall – not enough to win – but an outlier in a broader international picture of decline. We could, therefore, ask a different question: why, in an international context of centre left decline led from towns, is the Labour vote holding up?

We might argue, for example, that Brexit has taken the heat out of the populist surge that saw UKIP finish second in many of these town seats in 2015 and then collapse just two years later. Alternatively, we could interpret Labour’s relatively strong performance not as a victory for the centre left, but a result of the party’s transformation into a populist left party with more similarities to Syriza or Podemos than the German SPD or French PS. Others have pointed to strong residual party identification in England, with Labour still the default choice for many older, working class voters, and a residual distrust of the Conservatives in many communities that suffered from deindustrialisation in the 1980s.

The collapse of the Liberal Democrats is also relevant here. In 2005 and 2010 the Liberal Democrats positioned themselves to the left of Labour on many issues and won the votes of many who would traditionally have voted Labour by siding with those opposed to the UK’s involved in the Iraq conflict, and students and graduates who opposed the introduction of university tuition fees. Former Lib Dem voters switching to Labour has been a big part of its national recovery, helping to mitigate losses to UKIP (in 2015) and the Conservatives (in 2017), and there are no direct parallels to this in other parts of Europe or North America.

But these divergent cases do have at least one thing in common: whether the overall trajectory is up or down these second-tier population centres, and particularly post-industrial towns, are a lag on centre left performance.
4. Why has Labour struggled in towns?

**Brexit**

Perhaps the most pervasive explanation for the realignment that took place at the 2017 general election is that it was related directly to Brexit. On the one hand, many white, liberal-minded, middle class remainers in university towns and the more affluent pockets of core cities, as well as some affluent ethnic minority voters, had been swayed by David Cameron’s brand of ‘liberal’ conservatism, but were put off by Theresa May’s hard Brexit vision. On the other hand, most leave voters were either already Conservative voters, or had switched from Labour often via UKIP or non-voting, persuaded that May’s government would deliver on Brexit. NEF’s analysis lends support to this point of view, finding that cities with high levels of employment in knowledge-intensive, private-sector services were likely to be hit hardest by Brexit, and had swung most heavily to Labour (e.g. cities such as London, Bristol and Leeds but also some southern towns such as Reading, Slough and Worthing). Conversely, less globally connected population centres were likely to be hit less hard and had swung more to the Conservatives (e.g. Barnsley, Burnley and Hull).14

Using Chris Hanretty’s estimates of EU referendum results at a constituency level, we can see what looks like a Brexit effect: the most heavily remain-voting constituencies experienced the biggest swings to Labour, while the most heavily leave-voting constituencies swung to the Conservatives (figure 8).

**Figure 8: 2015-17 Conservative to Labour swing and EU referendum leave vote, by English constituency**15

However, we can also see the same trend, albeit to a lesser extent, for the swing that occurred between 2005 and 2015 (figure 9). This can hardly be attributed to the parties’ respective post-referendum Brexit positions, and instead fits with Jennings and Stoker’s argument that the 2017 realignment is part of a much longer process.

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We can see from this that the EU referendum and the parties’ subsequent positioning may have accelerated the political realignment that has seen core cities (and, as the NEF analysis reveals, some more globally connected towns, particularly in the south of England) become more Labour-inclined, while many towns, particularly post-industrial towns in the Midlands and North of England, have swung away from Labour.

However, importantly, this movement did not begin in June 2016, or even May 2015. It is part of a much longer process that has been underway at least since the 2010 election (the distribution of ‘yes’ and ‘no’ votes at the 2011 AV referendum was an early warning sign). The geographical distribution of the vote to leave the EU could well be another symptom of the same underlying factors that have driven the realignment at elections, rather than its cause.

**Demographics**

Two important demographic effects have taken place which may have contributed to the geographical realignment of politics. First, class-based voting has been eroded in favour of other demographic indicators. At both the 2016 referendum and the 2017 general election, age and education levels were better predictors of voting behaviour. A particularly strong Conservative to Labour swing has been seen among the under-25s since 2010 and all under-45s since 2015 (see figure 10), with these groups also much more likely to have attended university.
Again, there are parallels here with US politics: Hillary Clinton, and to a lesser extent Barack Obama, was strong among the young and well educated (as well as ethnic minority voters) but underperformed with older and white, working class voters. Indeed, British commentators have argued that Labour has gradually recreated an Obama-style voter coalition, and its failure to win elections has been down to the fact that Britain in the current decade has the demographics of the US in the 1970s, when the Obama coalition was also too small to win.\(^\text{18}\)

This has coincided with migration flows within the UK that together have contributed to these voting trends having a geographical effect. Using census data, the Centre for Towns has shown that despite population growth on average in every size of village, town and city since 1981, small and medium sized towns (up to 75,000 residents) have seen falls in their numbers of under-25s, but large rises in the number of over 65s, with the reverse effect occurring in core cities. The ratio of retirement-age to working-age residents has also risen in small and medium towns, but fallen in core cities where 25-44 year olds— a key age group for Labour at the 2017 election – account for 80 per cent of net population growth since the 1980s.\(^\text{19}\) Similarly, the Centre for Cities reveals a ‘brain drain’ problem affecting almost everywhere outside of London and the south east, with net outflows of degree holders replaced by inflows of people without degrees.\(^\text{20}\)

In addition, while class-based political voting has declined, this has been accompanied by important class-based swings. The link between being working class and being a Labour voter is less strong precisely because many working-class voters, particularly white working-class voters, have stopped voting Labour, or when returning to the main parties at the 2017 election, opted for the Conservatives in larger numbers. English constituencies with the largest numbers of white people in routine and semi-routine occupations exhibited the strongest swings to the Conservatives, and these are predominantly town constituencies: Grimsby, Ashfield, Barnsley East, Doncaster North, Bolsover, Mansfield, Hull and Hemsworth are among those in the top left-hand corner of figure 11.


As with age and education, when combined with changing voting behaviour, changes in the white working-class populations of towns have also adversely affected Labour’s chances. While this data is only available at a local authority level, again we can see a match up with many of those parts of the country where Labour has suffered a swing against it (figure 12). There are exceptions – Knowsley is one of the safest Labour seats in the country and became even more so in 2017, as did nearby solidly red Liverpool – but broadly the trend is there.

These demographic shifts – changes in the make-up of towns in the North and Midlands, alongside changes in voting behaviour among different demographic groups – are making it harder for Labour to win in these areas with its current voter coalition of young, well-educated (as well as ethnically diverse) voters. While in many of these seats Labour is still safely ahead, it is becoming harder to win the marginals while previously safe seats like Mansfield have flipped, and given the widespread sense that politics is becoming more volatile, the party would do well not to take anything for granted.
Attitudes

What is behind these demographic and geographic changes to voting behaviour? While, as shown above, the shift is much bigger than Brexit, the shifts do map closely onto narratives that have arisen around the referendum and, prior to 2016, UKIP’s rise. At the 2017 election, many UKIP-inclined leavers that Theresa May had targeted during the campaign opted for the Conservatives – not as many as early predictions had suggested, but enough to generate a swing away from Labour in many towns despite the national move in the other direction. Thus, the language of ‘left behind’ voters, the ‘losers’ from globalisation, the ‘somewheres’ (as opposed to the ‘anywheres’), the ‘communitarians’ (rather than cosmopolitans) and the ‘nativists’ (rather than globalists) resonates here, even if the dichotomies are crude.

Other research confirms the existence of such a divide in opinion between the demographic groups. In Open Owns The Future, Global Future shows that young people in Britain are overwhelmingly ‘open’ in their attitudes, favouring internationalism and a focus on global challenges, believing multiculturalism has strengthened Britain and that immigration has been a force for good. Demos research confirms the relationship of such factors with the leave-remain split, but also found that, controlling for demographic indicators such as age, education, ethnicity and income, the breadth of an individual’s social networks were an important predictor of an individual’s vote in the EU referendum and related ‘open’ vs ‘closed’ indicators. Those who had recently socialised with someone from another country, from another part of Britain, or even simply from a different town or city to their own, were more likely to have voted remain.

While there are many diverse towns in England, Policy Exchange’s analysis suggests that they tend to be less well integrated than cities and the suburbs of major cities. This means that many town residents – particularly older residents who attended school before some of the more recent waves of immigration – may simply have not had the same opportunities as those in core cities to mix with those from other backgrounds.

The literature on intergroup contact theory supports the link the Demos research found, which has also been found in relation to support for Trump, and the lack of integration identified in many towns in the north of England may be a contributing factor – alongside other demographic differences with core cities – as to why voters in these areas have tended to fall on the ‘closed’ side of the new political divide.

The following analysis looks specifically at attitudinal differences between town and city residents, both in relation to the new political divide, but also regarding perceptions of the Labour party. It uses data from opinion polling conducted for Policy Network in the final week of the 2017 general election campaign (2-5 June 2017). The 2,140 English Respondents are split into 4 categories, based on where they live (figure 13).
At the 2017 election there were clear differences between town and core city dwellers on key issues relating to the cosmopolitan–communitarian schism that was talked about so much in the aftermath of Brexit and Trump. When asked whether they felt that increased ethnic and religious diversity had been good for Britain, just a third of town dwellers agreed, compared to a majority of those in core cities (figure 14).

When asked whether they felt globalisation – as respondents understood the term in their own words – had been positive or negative, there were important differences between town and city dwellers, and depending on whether the effect was at a micro or macro level (see figure 15). All groups were most positive about the impact of globalisation on the UK, and the least positive about the impact of globalisation on their local communities, with town dwellers particularly negative. Town dwellers were also much more ambivalent than city dwellers about whether globalisation had been good for them and their families. This suggests that there are many people in towns across England that recognise the aggregate benefits that globalisation has brought, but have not seen the benefits materialise in their own lives and immediate surroundings.

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**Figure 13: Town categories and opinion poll sample sizes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Rural</td>
<td>Population of less than 10,000</td>
<td>376</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small or medium town</td>
<td>Population of between 10,000 and 75,000</td>
<td>645</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large town</td>
<td>Population of more than 75,000 (except core cities)</td>
<td>554</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core city</td>
<td>Core cities as defined by Centre for Towns: Birmingham, Bristol, Leeds, Liverpool, London, Manchester, Newcastle, Nottingham and Sheffield ²⁸</td>
<td>565</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

²⁸ Centre for Towns (2018). Our Towns. Available at: https://www.centrefortowns.org/our-towns
Town dwellers were more likely to support a form of economic nationalism: almost two thirds agreed that the Government should prevent British companies based in Britain from being taken over by foreign companies, although there is strong support for this across the board (figure 16).

Figure 16: The UK Government should prevent British companies based in Britain from being taken over by foreign companies

Research by the Centre for Towns shows that town dwellers are more likely to feel that they and their local area have been sidelined by British society and have been ignored by politicians, compared to those in core cities. 68 per cent of town dwellers agreed that ‘politicians don’t care about my area’ compared to just 54 per cent of those in cities. City dwellers are more optimistic about the future of their local area than town dwellers.29
Our data shows that this lack of political trust in towns extends to both political parties. Labour was generally not trusted by the public on ‘making Britain a fair place to work hard, make a living, and do well for myself’, though it actually had a net positive score in core cities. The Conservatives had a worse net negative score among all except rural voters (figure 17).

Figure 17: To what extent do you trust or distrust each of the following parties to make Britain a fair place to work hard, make a living, and do well for yourself? Net trust over distrust scores

Town-dwellers were also less likely to have a favourable view of the Labour party than city dwellers (figure 18), but in small and medium towns in particular, Labour faced a problem of failing to convert those with a favourable view of the party into Labour voters (figure 19). The Conservatives faced that problem in core cities, but in towns managed to win many votes even among those without a favourable view of the party (figure 20).

Figure 18: to what extent do you have a favourable or unfavourable view of the Labour party?
While all groups were more likely to feel Labour had moved further away from its traditional working-class supporters, there were more in core cities that felt Labour had returned to its working-class roots. Only a quarter of town dwellers felt Labour had got closer to its traditional working-class supporters (figure 21).
The labelling of ‘left behind’ may in the past have been used in a patronising or dismissive way, to reduce genuine concerns that were uncomfortable for politicians to hear to a simpler problem of economic inequality. On the other hand, it is undoubtedly true that there is a perception, particularly strong among town dwellers that their area has been sidelined, socially, economically and politically, and not able to share in the progress achieved elsewhere in recent decades. Despite how many observers have interpreted the Brexit vote, the British people remain overwhelmingly positive about globalisation – much more than in France, for example. But this positivity does not extend to how those in towns feel it has impacted their own lives and local areas.

Despite eight years in opposition, Labour has still not been able to position itself as the champion of these town dwellers: just over a third have a positive view of the party. In that time, the Labour party has instead deepened its appeal among those in core cities, and the demographic groups disproportionately represented in core cities.
The various traditions within the Labour church have each offered their own solutions to the party’s struggles in England’s towns. There are differences in branding and minor differences of approach, but there is actually a great degree of overlap between these different plans: all focus on investment in local services, tax reform and good jobs.

On the pro-European centre left, Pat McFadden has called for a ‘Marshall plan’ for the working class, with education and particularly early years at the heart of economic renewal for left behind areas. He also calls for investment in the quality of infrastructure and the physical environment, alongside a robust defence of hard-won employment rights. For McFadden, as well as Roger Liddle who has echoed the call for a new ‘Marshall plan’, such a programme is only credible with the economic stability that membership of the European single market and customs union offers.

On the left of the party, John McDonnell has promised to develop a ‘British Mittelstand’, boosting high-investment, high-productivity firms, particularly in manufacturing. McDonnell has praised the ‘Preston Model’ of using ‘anchor institutions’ – education providers, housing associations, the local authority itself – to help local, responsible suppliers through procurement practices and pension fund investment. With many on the centre left also expressing admiration for the Preston Model, the main point of contention between left and centre left is over whether single market membership precludes investment, ownership and procurement strategies that could help develop town economies.

While both the centre left and the left have focused on economic solutions, less direct thought has gone into bridging the cultural divide. Even on the touchstone issue of immigration, figures on both the left and centre left have advocated throwing money at the problem through a ‘migration impact fund’ – giving extra funding to parts of the country that have experienced more immigration. This may well be a part of the solution, though there are reasons to think it could be counter-productive, but certainly doesn’t address the much wider cultural anxieties that high rates of immigration have raised, nor the wider disconnect between Labour and English towns.

Of all branches of Labour thought, it is perhaps those in the tradition come to be known as ‘Blue Labour’ that have been most concerned with tackling that cultural disconnect. While Blue Labour is sometimes portrayed as straightforwardly socially conservative or ‘reactionary’, in reality Blue Labour thinkers are more concerned with issues like dignity at work and community cohesion, and values such as reciprocity and solidarity. They tend to see Labour as becoming dominated by more Fabian, middle-class, liberal and cosmopolitan values at the expense of the trade union movement, the cooperative movement, working class communities and other institutions that impact their daily lives.

At times, under the slogan of ‘faith, flag and family’ Blue Labour has fallen into the more socially conservative, reactionary form of politics, but most of its supporters ultimately backed a ‘remain’ vote at the 2016 referendum, and its primary focus has been creating a more ‘moral’ and ‘human’ economy. Rachel Reeves’ recent pamphlet on the ‘Everyday Economy’ is clearly rooted in the Blue Labour tradition. Expertly tying under-investment in public services to family breakdown and ultimately poor labour market outcomes, Reeves links economic policy to some of the social issues that Labour has historically shied away from confronting.

But where it has taken up the issue of the ‘cultural divide’, Blue Labour has oscillated between simply ‘picking a side’ – invariably adopting a social conservatism that those from different traditions within
the Labour movement struggle to reconcile with – and joining the left and centre left in shifting the
debate back onto more comfortable territory of economic policy, often with the mandatory, cursory
nod to devolution and the principle of subsidiarity.

There is no single cure for overcoming the new political divides that have made it harder for Labour
to win in towns. Focusing on building an economy that works for these places – as the left, centre left
and Blue Labour have all attempted to do – is undoubtedly a big part of the solution. Blue Labour
has occasionally gone further in adopting and championing some of the more socially conservative,
more parochial views prevalent in towns. While this approach, like Corbyn’s positioning on Brexit,
could help to pick up voters with carefully targeted messaging, it ultimately remains a balancing act:
picking up more socially conservative voters with, for example, harsher rhetoric on immigration, will
harm Labour’s chances in other parts of the country.

Healing the schism in Labour’s voter coalition has to start from the recognition that it is a real schism
in society too: a societal problem as well as an electoral one. Rather than picking a side, Labour has
to find a way to bring the country together.

In its next programme for government, Labour must find ways to promote social integration, contact
and cultural exchange between groups, crossing ethnic, religious, generational, class and political
boundaries. That means finding money for English as a Second Language (ESOL) that was cut to the
bone after 2010, and funding programmes that provide opportunities for exchange such as National
Citizen Service. It means retaining diversity requirements on faith schools. It means experimenting
with citizens’ assemblies made up of leavers and remainers to discuss Britain’s post-Brexit future.
Why not combine the Brexiteers’ demand for an ‘independence day’ bank holiday in June with the
organisational energy and values of the Great Get Together, the campaign inspired by Jo Cox? Leave
or remain, let’s have a day to celebrate what unites us.

But there are also things Labour can do while it remains in opposition. The leadership of the party
can set an example with the tone it uses in debate, and do more to call out those that seek to divide
within its ranks. It should advocate bringing the House of Commons closer to these communities.
Even if a full relocation is not feasible, it should use the refurbishment of parliament to at least hold
occasional debates in non-London settings. Above all, Labour should take advantage of the surge
in membership across the country to fulfil Corbyn’s promise of a ‘social movement’ by getting
serious about community organising. Labour should be walking the walk, not just talking the talk,
on making life better in every local area.

Labour can reverse the decline in towns, but it has to get to grips with the wider schism that has
opened up over the last decade or so, and understand that while Brexit is the immediate symptom,
the issues are much wider. Only when it finds a path to bringing the country together can it bring its
own voter coalition together to deliver a majority to transform Britain.
6. Technical appendix

Populus surveyed 2511 people online in Great Britain between 2-5 June 2017, including boosters of 2015 and 2017 Labour voters to ensure a robust sample size for detailed analysis. The overall results were weighted by 2017 general election results and down-weighted the 2015 Labour sample.

To determine the boundaries of towns and cities to categorise respondents, this analysis uses a combination of two geographical units created for the 2011 census: the built-up area (BUA) and the built-up-area subdivision (BUASD).

Built up areas are defined as land with a minimum area of 20 hectares, while settlements within 200 metres of one another linked into a single BUA and subdivided. Some towns (e.g. Solihull) are represented as a subdivision within a wider BUA (West Midlands), while others (e.g. Darlington) are ‘free-standing towns’ and not part of a wider BUA.

A process similar to that the Office for National Statistics used for its 2016 Towns and Cities Analysis, England and Wales is used to place individuals into named towns and cities for categorisation: for ‘free-standing towns’, the population figure for the BUA is used, while for towns and cities that are combined to form larger BUAs, sub-divisions are used. This means that for the purposes of this analysis Manchester, for example, is defined using the Manchester BUASD boundaries (population 510,756) rather than Greater Manchester BUA (population 2,553,379) which encompasses a number of towns of interest (e.g. Rochdale – population 107,926). The exception to this rule is London, for which there is no core BUASD. Therefore, here London is defined as the whole of Greater London BUA (population 9,787,426).

By combining this approach with the Centre for Towns’ list of core cities (in turn derived from Pike et al), it is worth mentioning that the nine English core cities are not – when defined in this way – the nine largest by population. Leicester, Bradford and Coventry BUASDs have larger populations than Nottingham and Newcastle. However, Nottingham and Newcastle are part of much larger BUAs than Leicester, Bradford and Coventry, and thus are more important hubs for commuting and economic activity.

36. A full description of the method can be found in ONS (2013). 2011 Built-up Areas – Methodology and Guidance. Available at: https://www.nomisweb.co.uk/articles/ref/builtupareas_usersguidance.pdf