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Increasingly local: the regional roots of British Members of Parliament, 2010-2019

Abstract

Drawing on data from four general elections between 2010 and 2019 this note shows that British MPs are increasingly likely to represent constituencies in the region of their birth. By 2019, more than half of British MPs were born in the region in which their constituency sat. We find clear partisan differences, but no overall gender divide. There is also a clear centre-periphery divide. The less local nature of current older cohort in the Commons – the most likely to retire in the next few years - means that these trends should continue in the same direction in coming elections.

Keywords: general elections; localism; political parties; politician mobility; presence; representation

The concept of geographic representation is common to almost all electoral systems (Rehfeld, 2005). It is frequently accompanied by the expectation that those elected will have roots in the areas they represent. Sometimes this manifests itself in electoral law – in the form of formal residency requirements – while elsewhere it is just a norm, but either way in Europe the preference for local parliamentarians is so common that it is often ‘considered a natural order, bordering on banality’ (Pedersen et al., 2007). The phrases used to describe those without such links, such as the US ‘carpetbagger’ or the French *parachutist*, are rarely positive.

Of all the European states studied by Pedersen and his colleagues, the UK – which does not have residency requirements for parliamentary candidates – was the country with fewest parliamentarians with local roots (Pedersen et al., 2007, 169). Candidates with local connections were the norm in nineteenth century Britain, but they had become less common by the middle of the twentieth. The turn of the current century, however, saw an uptick in MPs coming from the area they represented (Rush, 2001). Alongside this – perhaps even because of it – there has been a growing academic interest in the extent to which British parliamentarians are local to their constituencies and the consequences thereof. There is clear evidence that the British public want their MPs to be local to the constituency (Campbell and Cowley, 2014; Campbell et al., 2019, Cowley, 2013, Johnson and Rosenblatt, 2007) and that there is some electoral advantage to them being so (Arzheimer and Evans, 2012, 2014; Collignon and Sajuria, 2018; Evans et al, 2017) although the actual behavioural consequences of this are less clear-cut (Sällberg, and Hansen, 2020).

Yet our knowledge of how local British MPs are is still partial. These data are not collected or reported systematically by official bodies – such as the briefing papers published after each election by the House of Commons library – or in academic or other studies of elections. They are missing, for example, from the “Nuffield” series of books, as well as from works such as the *Times Guide to the House of Commons*. Studies that do exist often offer snapshots of individual elections or periods of time. We lack anything like comprehensive data.

This is in part because the extent to which an MP is or is not local is open to multiple definitions, unlike some of the other demographic or political characteristics of MPs that are collated. As one study of the subject noted: “Is it dependent on place of birth? Or schooling? Or residence? (And if so, for long?) Or place of employment? Or service on the local council? Or even, as with some MPs, a dynastic link to a seat that their parents or grandparents previously held? And is it coterminous with the precise borders of the constituency, or with some broader area, such as a city or a region?” (Childs and Cowley, 2011, 6-7). Existing studies have used various definitions, depending mostly on what researchers are attempting to demonstrate or test, ranging from work that does not define the term at all, to others employing an all-encompassing broad definition or focusing on single characteristics, such as residence (for example Arzheimer and Evans, 2012) or birth (Field, 1997; Gandy, 2014).

In this note, we provide time series data across four British general elections, utilising place of birth. Unlike some characteristics, this has the advantage that it cannot be altered to make a candidate appear more electorally appealing. Candidates can, for example, move into a constituency – or even just rent a flat – to give themselves the appearance of being local, but they cannot do much about where they were born. Its obvious downside is that an MP may be born in one place but move away when very young, growing up in a different part of the country, perhaps then acquiring very deep

roots away from their place of birth.¹ The goal of this article, however, is not to argue for a particular definition of what “local” means, but to analyse the extent to which British MPs are becoming more or less local over time and to try to tease out what is driving that change. The precise definition being utilized here therefore matters less than the extent to which we find change over time.

Our results cover the period between 2010 and 2019. This was a politically volatile period which saw: a Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government in 2010 and the subsequent electoral collapse of the Liberal Democrats; the Scottish Independence Referendum and rise of the Scottish National Party; the rise of UKIP and the Brexit Referendum; the resultant negotiations with the EU and the emergence of a political divide based on ‘Leave’ and ‘Remain’. The result was a historically high number of MPs switching parties, especially after 2017, as well as significant changes in the make-up of the House of Commons, most importantly the dramatic rise in the number of SNP MPs and the equally noticeable fall in the number of Liberal Democrats in 2015, followed by a collapse in the number of Labour MPs in 2019.

These electoral shifts did affect the extent to which British MPs were local – because, as we detail below, the partisan composition of the Commons does matter here – although overall, across the decade, we still find a clear increase in the proportion of British MPs with local roots defined broadly. This has been a result of change at each election, with newer cohorts of MPs being noticeably more local than the MPs they replaced.

Methods and data

We collected data on place of birth for all MPs elected at any of the four general elections between 2010 and 2019. In most cases the required data could be inferred from publicly available sources such as MPs’ personal websites and newspapers or supplementary sources such as *Who’s Who*. Emails were sent directly to MPs if data was unavailable, with follow-up telephone calls where necessary. Following Gandy (2014), we code MPs’ birthplace to one of the twelve standard UK regions or nations (which hereafter, for brevity only, we refer to as regions). This is a broad definition of “local”, but it has very real advantages in terms of both data availability and coding. For example, information about the precise place of birth is often not available or may be too general for any more detailed categorisations. Plus, in many cases the actual place of birth will be a hospital, which may or may not be in the same constituency in which the parents lived and the child grew up. In addition, constituency boundaries change over time, which can make working out whether someone was born in a constituency next to impossible over the passage of time. Utilising broader areas, such as regions, avoids all these issues. Moreover, as noted above, our interest here is anyway in change over time. Self-evidently, different definitions of what constitutes ‘local’ will generate different figures, but we are more interested in the extent to which things are changing.

These data were supplemented by additional data on age, sex, and political party. We have excluded by-elections and each set of data below reports the statistics for the relevant general election. By this, we mean not only that we exclude any MP elected only at by-elections and report data just for those elected at the general elections, but also that we categorise party gains and holds from one general election to another, excluding any intervening by-elections or defections.² Anyone born outside the UK was allocated to a single “non-UK” category; this stayed relatively consistent throughout the period at around 5%.

¹ At the most extreme, for example, Gandy (2014) reports one MP who believes they were born in London but were adopted immediately after birth and brought up in the Midlands.

² In practice this affects only a handful of cases, such as Douglas Carswell, John Bercow, Lindsay Hoyle, or Zac Goldsmith.

Results

Table 1 shows the percentage of MPs who represented a constituency in the region of their birth (which we hereafter refer to as 'local'), broken down by sex and party.

Between 2010 and 2019 the overall figure for local MPs rose by seven percentage points, up from 44.5% to 51.5%, with the figure increasing election-on-election. By 2019, then, more than half of British MPs represented a Westminster constituency that was in the same region as their birthplace.

Overall, 281 constituencies (that is, 43.2% of the total) were represented by the same MP in 2019 as they were in 2010. Even in a period of dramatic electoral change such as this decade, changes in the composition of the Commons will still be relatively modest and evolutionary at each election. Yet of the MPs who sat for the same seats in 2010 and 2019 38.8% were local compared to 61.2% of the rest of MPs elected in 2019.

There were clear party differences. In all four elections, Labour MPs were noticeably more likely to be local compared to Conservatives (by between 16 and 18 percentage points), although both major parties saw roughly equal rises in the percentage of local MPs over the decade. In 2010, 33.7% of Conservative MPs were local; this rose to 40.0% by 2019. The figure for local Labour MPs rose from 51.6% to 57.9% over the same period.

The group most likely to be local, however, were those from parties other than the largest two, with this group seeing an even larger increase in the percentage of local MPs. In 2010, just over 60% of MPs from the other parties were local; by 2019 this had risen to 86.7%, a jump of 25 percentage points. The high figure for this group is in large part because they include the nationalist parties in Scotland and Wales, and the parties in Northern Ireland; such parties are more likely to be represented by MPs from those countries: 92% of SNP MPs in 2019 were local, as were 75% of Plaid Cymru MPs, along with 94% all parties in Northern Ireland. The sharp rise in 2015 was the consequence of the loss of many Liberal Democrat MPs, a group which had 49% local MPs in 2010, together with the large influx of SNP MPs in the same election, almost all of whom were born in Scotland. After 2015, the figure for "others" changes only very slightly. One additional consequence of the SNP's rise is that, because in 2010 83% of Labour MPs in Scotland had been born in Scotland, the percentage of local Labour MPs from 2015 onwards would have been even higher had it not been for the events of the 2015 election.

By contrast, there was little difference by sex. Female MPs are marginally more likely to be local than their male counterparts, but by 2019, just over half of MPs of both sexes were local. Both sexes also saw increases in the percentage who were local election-on-election. Within parties, however, there were some differences. Just over half of male Labour MPs were local throughout the period, but for their female colleagues there was an increase from 48.2% to 59.6%, while at the same time the gender balance within the parliamentary party shifted, from men making up over two-thirds (68%) of the Parliamentary Labour Party in 2010 to being just under half (49%) in 2019, a change that influenced the overall figures for the party. By contrast, the percentage of local MPs was very similar for both male and female Conservative MPs over the period and there were much less dramatic changes in the composition of the parliamentary party.

Table 2 examines the turnover of MPs in more detail. It shows the figures for new MPs where a seat changed hands and where a party held a seat at each general election. It also shows the figures for MPs leaving Parliament and being re-elected. Of the new MPs elected in 2015, for example, 64.8% were local. Those who came in where the party holding the seat changed were noticeably more local (71.2%) than where the seat was inherited by an MP of the same party (56.1%). Yet both of these

figures were greater than the percentage of local MPs among those who remained in the Commons (39.8%). Of those who left, 55.4% were local, but those who retired from parliament (46.1%) were less local than those who were defeated (65.9%).

The same pattern holds true for both 2017 and 2019, with MPs who entered the Commons being more local than those who left *and* more local than those who remained, and with those coming in as a result of taking a seat being more local than those who inherited a seat from the same party. In all three contests, those MPs who came into Westminster as a result of taking a seat from a rival party are around 70% or more local. Although we lack data on all candidates, it seems safe to infer from this that where parties are fighting marginal seats they do seem less likely to have parachuted in outside candidates.

The cumulative effect of these changes on the composition of the Commons is shown in Table 3, which reports the decades of birth of MPs and the extent to which they are local. The percentages of MPs who were local were broadly similar up to 2017 for each of the older (pre-1970) age groups: that is, generally in the low 40s. By comparison roughly half of MPs born in the 1970s are local. The pattern for MPs born in the 1980s & 1990s however is very different, with between 62.5% and 72.6% being local. This higher degree of localism in the youngest MPs has had the greatest impact on the overall situation because as the less local older MPs have retired or died they have been replaced by younger MPs; there were 102 (15.7%) MPs born in the 1930s & 1940s in 2010 but only 21 (3.2%) in 2019, whilst there were 16 (2.5%) MPs born in the 1980s & 1990s in 2010 and 138 (21.2%) in 2019. In other words, going forward, as the older MPs leave the Commons, we should expect to see yet further increases in the percentage of MPs who are local.

Figure 1 shows the geographical differences for each of the four elections. In each graph the X axis is the percentage of MPs in that region who were born within the region – that is, the percentage of MPs in each region that are local. The extent of the differences is obvious. In some regions, local representation is the norm. In both Northern Ireland and Scotland, for example, over 80% of MPs were local in all four of these elections, and in several cases the figure rises above 90%. MPs in Wales are also overwhelmingly local, with the North East and the North West of England not far behind. Yet in other parts of the UK local representation is the exception. Under a quarter of MPs sitting for seats in the East of England, for example, come from the region.

The Y axis shows the percentage of MPs born in a region who have a constituency in that region. Again, there are some very large differences across the UK. The majority of MPs who were born in London, for example, do not sit for seats in London. The same is true, in all four parliaments, for the South East and the East of England. By contrast, the majority of those born in Wales or the North East sit for constituencies in those regions.

A 'self-sufficient' region would be represented by the co-ordinate (100, 100), where all the MPs with constituencies in a region were born in that region, and no one from that region represented a constituency outside the region. The nearer a region is to the top right-hand corner the more self-sufficient it is (with Scotland (93,71) and Northern Ireland (94,65) the best examples in 2019). The nearer a region is to the bottom left-hand corner the more politician mobility is taking place; that is people come in from outside to represent constituencies and natives go outside their region of birth to get elected (with London (45,32) and East of England (21,44) the best examples in 2019). Regions positioned below the 45° diagonal are those which have more MPs born in them than there are constituencies; that is, more MPs move out than move in. The reverse is the case for regions above the 45° diagonal. In the case of London, for example, this meant that Londoners only represented 33 (45%) of the 73 London seats, whilst there were 70 (68%) elected to constituencies outside the capital.

The changes in these geographical differences over time are, in most cases, relatively minor, although in line with the overall increase in local MPs, most regions see their percentage of local MPs rise over the decade.

Table 4 shows the percentage of MPs born in each region compared to that region's percentage of the UK population, for each of the four parliaments. For example, in 2010, 4.4% of MPs were born in the North East; the North East makes up 4.1% of the UK's population; the deviation is therefore +0.3, indicating that there are slightly more MPs born in the North East than we might expect from the region's population size. When calculating these figures, we have excluded MPs born outside of the UK, so if every region was represented proportionately to MPs born in the UK the deviation figures would all be zero. As is clear, they are not. Instead, some regions consistently over-supply British Members of Parliament. The table is sorted by the deviation in 2019 (although the ranking is broadly similar in all four parliaments). Five regions see their 'off-spring' overrepresented constantly (Scotland, the North West, London, Wales and Northern Ireland), while five are under-represented in all four parliaments (the West Midlands, the South East, the South West, the East Midlands and the East of England). The remaining two regions vary, seeing very slightly over-representation sometimes, slight under-representation other times.

Discussion and conclusion

Every British general election brings with it complaints about the parachuting of candidates into constituencies. Yet these cases might be in danger of drawing attention away from a more widespread and countervailing trend: that for the most part, British MPs are becoming more local.

Here we have utilised a deliberately broad definition of local. Yet we argue that it still has considerable utility, especially when trying to measure change over time. It shows evidence of a clear increase in the percentage of British MPs who have regional roots. There are obvious partisan differences, but even though the political composition of parliament has undergone significant changes over this period, we still find election-on-election increases in the percentage of MPs with such roots. By 2019, more than half of British MPs were born in the region in which their constituency sat.

At the same time, it is very striking how differentiated this practice is, when examining different parts of the UK. The differences between London on the one hand and Scotland, Wales, and North Ireland on the other are perhaps the most obvious, as a clear-cut case of centre-periphery differences. The former sees fewer than half of its constituencies represented by people born in the region. In the latter however, being from the region is clearly important when it comes to selection for winnable seats, to the point in Scotland and Northern Ireland especially where it is now almost *de rigueur*. Those born in all four of these regions are disproportionately represented in the Commons overall. The differences between these regions and places like the South West, the East Midlands or the East of England – from where people born seem disproportionately unlikely to become MPs – should also be of note.

The relatively small number of seats that change hands at each general election, even in an era of relative political turmoil, means that these changes are mostly evolutionary, but their consistency is striking and the accumulated effect after multiple elections is still clear. Moreover, the nature of current older cohort in the Commons – the most likely to retire in the next few years - means that there is the potential for these trends to continue in the same direction in coming elections. It would take a significant decline in the percentage of new MPs to be local for these trends to go into reverse any time soon. We therefore expect to see British MPs becoming increasingly local in the future.

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Table 1. MPs with regional connections, by party and sex, 2010-2019

	% of MPs representing constituency in region of their birth				Total Number			
	2010	2015	2017	2019	2010	2015	2017	2019
All MPs	44.5%	47.2%	48.6%	51.5%	650	650	650	650
All Conservative MPs	33.7%	34.8%	36.6%	40.0%	306	330	317	365
All Labour MPs	51.6%	50.9%	53.6%	57.9%	258	232	261	202
All Other MPs (inc Speaker)	61.6%	84.1%	83.3%	86.7%	86	88	72	83
All Female MPs	45.5%	49.7%	51.7%	53.2%	145	191	207	220
All Male MPs	44.2%	46.2%	47.2%	50.7%	505	459	443	430

Table 2. MPs with regional connections, by entry and exit to parliament, 2015-2019

	% of MPs representing constituency in region of their birth			Total Number		
	2015	2017	2019	2015	2017	2019
Defeated MPs	65.9%	60.6%	57.7%	91	66	78
Retired MPs	46.1%	48.7%	38.6%	102	39	83
All MPs who left Parliament	55.4%	56.2%	47.8%	193	105	161
Re-elected MPs	39.8%	45.7%	48.9%	457	545	489
Newly Elected MPs where Party changed	71.2%	74.3%	69.1%	111	70	81
Newly Elected MPs where seat was held	56.1%	42.9%	69.1%	82	35	80
All New MPs	64.8%	63.8%	69.1%	193	105	161

Table 3. MPs with regional connections, by date of birth, 2015-2019

	% of MPs representing constituency in region of their birth				Total Number			
	2010	2015	2017	2019	2010	2015	2017	2019
All MPs	44.5%	47.2%	48.6%	51.5%	650	650	650	650
MPs born in 1930s & 1940s	43.1%	42.6%	40.5%	28.6%	102	54	42	21
MPs born in 1950s	46.3%	42.8%	44.4%	47.6%	214	159	151	105
MPs born in 1960s	40.4%	42.7%	42.0%	44.5%	198	220	207	200
MPs born in 1970s	46.7%	52.7%	50.6%	53.8%	120	165	166	186
MPs born in 1980s & 1990s	62.5%	67.3%	72.6%	65.2%	16	52	84	138

Table 4. Regional sources of MPs, 2010-2019

Region of Birth	% of UK Population 2014	% of MPs 2010	Deviation 2010	% of MPs 2015	Deviation 2015	% of MPs 2017	Deviation 2017	% of MPs 2019	Deviation 2019	Difference between Deviations: 2019-2010
Scotland	8.3%	13.1%	4.9	13.1%	4.8	13.3%	5.0	12.7%	4.4	-0.4
North West	11.0%	13.5%	2.4	13.5%	2.4	14.4%	3.4	14.7%	3.6	1.2
London	13.2%	17.9%	4.6	18.0%	4.8	17.6%	4.4	16.8%	3.6	-1.1
Wales	4.8%	5.8%	1.1	6.0%	1.2	6.0%	1.2	6.4%	1.6	0.5
Northern Ireland	2.8%	3.6%	0.7	4.1%	1.2	4.4%	1.5	4.2%	1.4	0.7
Yorkshire & the Humber	8.3%	8.0%	-0.3	8.8%	0.5	8.6%	0.3	8.3%	0.0	0.4
North East	4.1%	4.4%	0.3	4.4%	0.3	3.9%	-0.2	3.9%	-0.1	-0.5
West Midlands	8.8%	5.7%	-3.2	5.5%	-3.3	5.5%	-3.3	6.8%	-2.0	1.2
South East	13.7%	12.3%	-1.4	12.5%	-1.3	11.3%	-2.4	11.6%	-2.2	-0.8
South West	8.4%	5.7%	-2.7	5.2%	-3.2	6.3%	-2.1	6.0%	-2.4	0.3
East Midlands	7.2%	4.5%	-2.6	4.2%	-3.0	4.2%	-3.0	4.2%	-2.9	-0.3
East of England	9.3%	5.5%	-3.8	4.9%	-4.5	4.5%	-4.8	4.4%	-4.9	-1.1

Figure 1. The regional mobility of MPs, 2010-2019

