

**SCOTTISH  
FABIANS**

# **WINNING BACK “THE FIRST RED WALL”**

SCOTLAND AND THE PATH TO A LABOUR  
GOVERNMENT

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## A LABOUR GOVERNMENT?

Last Autumn analysis undertaken by the Fabian Society demonstrated the scale of the challenge facing Labour in the aftermath of the 2019 General Election and examined 150 potential target seats, where Labour came closest to winning in 2019.

Winning this many seats matters for Labour because the party needs to gain 124 seats to secure a majority of one. Of the 150 seats identified 25 were in Scotland. From a starting point of one seat this may seem a tall order, yet the Labour Party cannot form a majority Government without winning back seats in Scotland. Scotland must be one of the key battlegrounds for Labour going into an election.

Our communities across the UK are struggling as the cost-of-living crisis spirals out of control yet the Conservatives seem preoccupied with finding the next “culture war” to fight. It therefore falls to Labour to define the future of the UK and present a distinct vision of a socially democratic UK and demonstrate the difference a Labour government can make to communities.

Rightly, Keir Starmer and Anas Sarwar have ruled out any post election deal with the SNP, in successive elections, suggestions of a Labour-SNP alliance harmed Labour not just in Scotland but also in English marginals where voters rejected the idea of the SNP holding the balance of power.

The Labour Party therefore must be ambitious and aspire to win seats across the length and breadth of the UK, including Scotland. The Conservatives and the SNP have made clear that they want the next election in Scotland to be about “muscular” unionism versus independence therefore it is only Labour that can deliver a programme for a reformed and better UK.

Under the leadership of Anas Sarwar, Scottish Labour has arrested its decline and made significant progress in the local elections in May, taking second place from the Tories and gaining control of several councils. This achievement in the short space of a year should not be underestimated. It was not so long ago that Scottish Labour was being written off as a political force and was seen to be in terminal decline.

The Scottish Fabians have analysed the granular geographical and voter preference data generated by those elections in Scotland. The seats Labour needs to win in Scotland all occupy Scotland's political middle ground and were the former Labour heartlands in Scotland. It is impossible to win the 25 seats needed for a Labour government without winning votes from the SNP

Our analysis quantifies the size of the opportunity for Labour and demonstrates that statistically 25 seats are within its grasp. There is no doubt there is still a mountain to climb but the path to a Labour government is now clear.

In recent weeks there has been much media attention on the SNP and now the Greens stating that the next General Election will be a "de facto" referendum. The task for Scottish Labour over the next few months and into 2023 is to speak to voters, particularly younger and more aspirational voters about the economy, public services, and the cost-of-living crisis.

The focus of Scottish Labour should be to demonstrate a clear difference between the SNP and Labour in terms of policy in Scotland and the Tories in the UK. Whilst the SNP and the Greens obsess over a second independence referendum, Scottish Labour must offer a bold alternative not only on what matters to voters— living standards, public services, job security and climate change. In particular, the party must convince low to middle income voters it has answers to the economic insecurities and failing public services that blight their lives.

Scottish Labour can demonstrate the difference it makes in power by its performance in the Labour councils it holds. There also needs to be an internal review of areas where Labour exceeded expectations to learn the best way to organise, communicate and ultimately win.

Labour depends on Scotland to achieve a majority government and Scottish Labour's future success demands a wide coalition of voters across Scotland towns and cities. The more that UK Labour look like the next government the more the choice becomes clear for "soft" SNP and Green voters who clearly prefer Labour to the Tories and want a government that can address the issues affecting the whole of the UK.

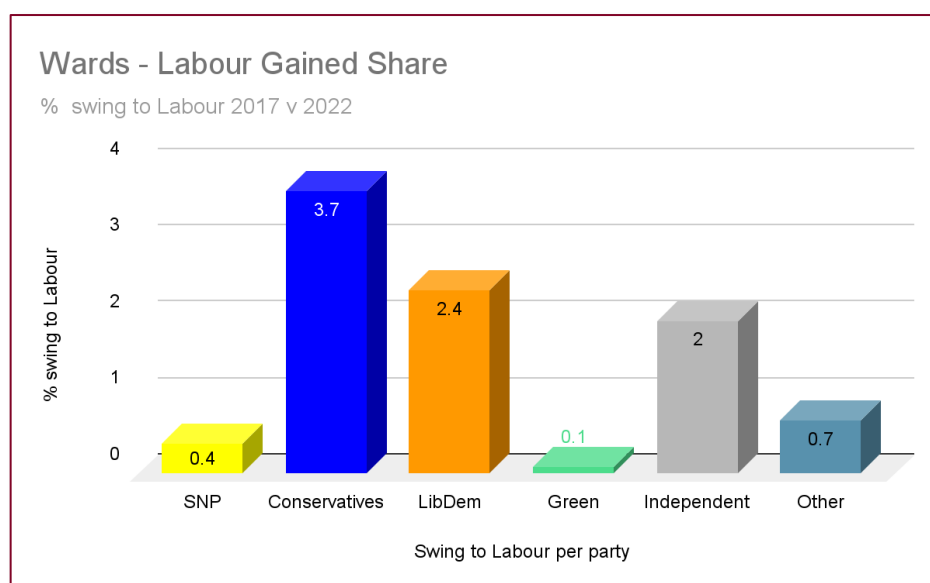
These voters want a change to the status quo, it is the job of the Labour party to convince them that the fastest route to changed and reformed UK is through a Labour government in Westminster.

## STATE OF PLAY 2022

The local elections in May saw Labour take second place from the Conservatives and increase its vote share by 1.6 percentage points. This primarily came at the expense of the Conservatives. The losses Scottish Labour had previously seen to the SNP stabilised and the years of declining vote share for Scottish Labour halted. This is quite an achievement for a party that was written off by many, sitting in third place and with a new leader only elected the year before. The next step for Scottish Labour has to be making inroads into the SNP vote.

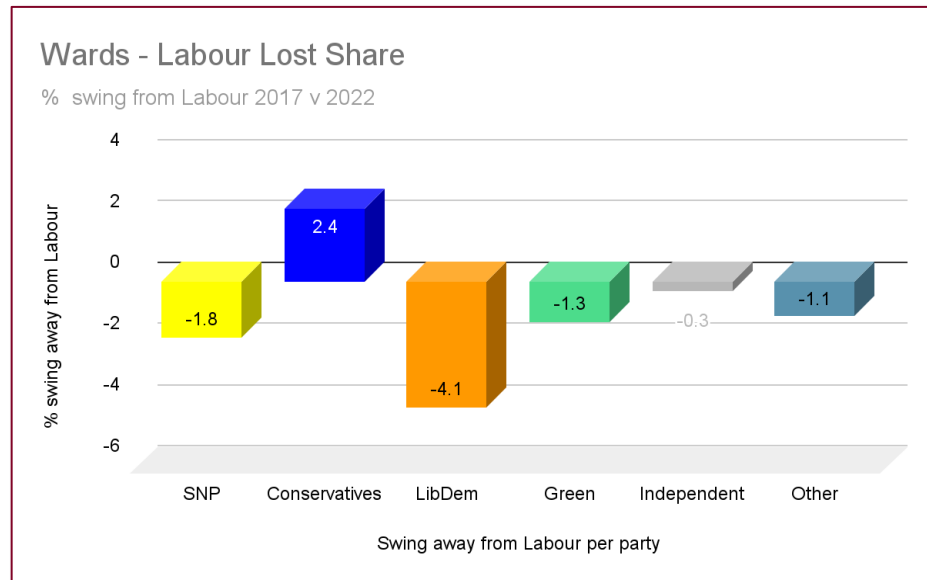
Figure 1. shows the gains Scottish Labour made relative to other parties in wards where they increased their vote share (compared to 2017). So, in the wards where Labour made gains, it was mainly at the expense of pro-union parties, the Lib Dems, and Conservatives.

**Figure 1. Wards where Scottish Labour gained vote share compared to 2017**



Conversely, Figure 2. shows that in wards where Labour lost vote share, it was losing votes to the SNP, the Greens, and the Lib Dems, with more modest gains versus the Conservatives. Even in wards where Labour did well this was mainly at the expense of the pro-union parties, with gains from the SNP and the Greens minimal.

**Figure 2. Wards where Scottish Labour lost vote share v 2017**



## THE OPPORTUNITY

This report makes use of the granular geographical and voter preference data<sup>1</sup> generated by local elections in Scotland to project Labour's performance onto proposed Westminster constituencies and predict the outcome of a future General Election in Scotland. The local election data consisted of c.275,000 different voter preference combinations across c.300 wards<sup>2</sup>. Our analysis examines where voters put their second and third party preferences to give an indication of the kind of voters Labour has a chance to capture in the future. The report then uses demographic data to examine the groups of voters Labour is doing well with, relative to the SNP, and the groups where progress has been more limited.

Councillors in Scotland are elected under a proportional system - Single Transferable Vote (STV). STV allows voters to numerically rank candidates from any party in order of choice. After local elections, a full preference report for every ward is issued by each local authority in Scotland. This report shows how every voter in Scotland ranked candidates on their ballot paper.

Preference reports show Labour has relatively broad appeal compared to other parties. Table 1. shows Labour won 23% of the vote via first preferences with a further 15% selecting Labour as their

second party preference. A total of 38% of voters in Scotland therefore ranked Labour as their first or second preference.

**Table 1. Percentage of votes (total) cast for Scottish Labour by preference (Local Election 2022)**

FIRST PREFERENCE VOTES	23%
SECOND PREFERENCE VOTES	15%

As you would expect to see in a country divided along constitutional lines, a majority of voters voted in line with that divide, 63% of SNP voters and 45% of Green voters did not rank Labour at all but 37% of SNP voters put Labour in their top three. In a binary choice of Labour government versus Conservative government this matters.

However, when we look at Nationalist voters who voted across constitutional lines to vote Scottish Labour as their second party choice, we can start to see the potential Labour has. 20% of both SNP and Green voters put Labour as their second party preference, representing 9% of all voters (in comparison, half of Green supporters put the SNP as their second preference). Whilst SNP voters were the least likely to put Labour second, in absolute terms they still represent a pool of voters more than 40% larger than the number of Tory voters who put Labour second.

**Table 3. Percent of SNP voters who expressed a preference for Labour (Local Election 2022)**

Labour 2nd Preference Party and 2 <sup>nd</sup> Preference Candidate	9%
Labour 2nd Party Preference	11%
Labour 3rd Party Preference	5%
Labour outside top three	13%
No votes for Labour	43%

## THE NEXT GENERAL ELECTION

The proportional systems in Holyrood and local government elections allow Labour representation which roughly reflects its support. However, General Elections present a much bigger challenge for the party. The first past the post system means Labour's 18.6% of the vote was only enough to win a single seat in 2019.

Our analysis of the local elections results shows that if these results were repeated in a General Election, (under new boundaries) Labour would win 3 seats in Scotland and be competitive in 10 more. (0-4% swing).

**Table 4. Projected General Election results based upon Local Election 2022**

WINNING	COMPETITIVE
Edinburgh South	Edinburgh South West
East Lothian Coast	West Dunbartonshire
Glasgow West	Hamilton and Clyde
	Glasgow East
	Glasgow South West
	Glasgow Central
	Glasgow South
	Rutherglen
	Midlothian
	Glasgow North

### Strategic choice: Pro-UK Consolidation versus soft SNP/Green

Scottish Labour has a choice to make between following a pro UK consolidation strategy thereby slugging it out with the Tories to be the “no-compromise” pro UK party of choice or converting current SNP/Green voters with bold alternatives on the cost-of-living crisis, public services, job security and changing the UK to work for all.

In recent elections much has been made of tactical voting by pro-UK voters as a way of beating the SNP. Our model tested that proposition by giving Scottish Labour 50% of all Conservative and Lib Dem voters who placed Labour 2nd at the local elections and 33% of those voters who placed Labour 3rd. The model also assumed some consolidation of the nationalist vote, allocating 50% of Green voters who selected the SNP as their second preference at the local elections to the SNP.

Despite the Conservative Party vote being reduced to historically low levels, Table 5. demonstrates adopting this approach would only result in Labour winning four seats.

**Table 5. Pro-UK General Election Projection**

WINNING	COMPETITIVE
Edinburgh South	Rutherglen
East Lothian Coast	Glasgow East
Hamilton and Clyde Valley	Airdrie and Shotts
West Dunbartonshire	Motherwell and Clydesdale North
	Inverclyde and Bridge of Weir
	Edinburgh South West
	Glasgow West
	Midlothian
	Linlithgow and Bathgate
	Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath



	Renfrew South
	Kelvin North

Both the SNP and the Greens have declared they will fight the next General Election as a de facto referendum, this will benefit the Conservative, allowing them to retreat into a “safe” position of “muscular unionism,” we have already seen this messaging from Liz Truss. Scottish Labour must be seen as the party that can speak to voters across the constitutional divide as demonstrated above there is little to be gained by further consolidation of the pro-UK vote.

Alternatively, if Labour were to succeed in winning over 50% of the SNP and Green voters who put Labour as a second preference and 33% of those who put Labour as a third preference, they would win 17 seats and be within a 4% swing in another 7. This is within touching distance of the 25 seats we said Labour needs to win in Scotland to win an overall majority at UK level.

This is purely arithmetical - simply put there are many more SNP voters in the places Labour has a realistic chance of winning seats. Indeed, all the target 25 seats, where Labour came closest to winning in 2019, are held by the SNP. It is simply not possible for Scotland to break out from constitutional deadlock without Scottish Labour winning over SNP and Green voters on a broad policy platform that will unite the country.

**Table 6. SNP/Green Squeeze**

WINNING	COMPETITIVE
Hamilton and Clyde	Glasgow South West
West Dunbartonshire	Kelvin North
Airdrie and Shotts	Glasgow Central
Edinburgh South	East Kilbride and Strathaven
East Lothian Coast	Glasgow South
Motherwell and Clydesdale North	Glasgow North
Renfrew North	East Kilbride and Strathaven

Coatbridge and Bellshill	Central Ayrshire
Inverclyde and Bridge of Weir	Glenrothes and Loch Leven
Rutherglen	
Glasgow East	
Renfrew South	
Midlothian	
Edinburgh South West	
Glasgow North	
Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath	
Linlithgow and Bathgate	

## WINNING SCOTLAND'S HEARTLANDS

Our analysis overlaid census data and mosaic groups onto the 2022 local election results to identify key characteristics of the voters in places Labour won, and crucially of voters in places Labour needs to win.

Mosaic data is a consumer classification system which synthesises demographic and geographical data at the level of the individual. It is made up of 15 groups and 66 types within these groups. For the purposes of this report, we have calculated the largest mosaic group in each ward in Scotland these key groups represent Scotland's "heartlands" in terms of voters it is essential for Labour to win from the SNP. These groups make up our towns and villages across the country.

Labour has been making progress versus the SNP in wards that are older, poorer, and more ethnically diverse. The wards where Labour is doing well, relative to the SNP, can be split into two distinct groups: diverse urban communities and older, lower income communities.

The latter are typically elderly people who live alone with growing health problems and older couples living in modest homes in the neighbourhoods they settled in many years ago. Labour is also making progress with urban communities who are typically social renters either in more diverse city locations or in outlying estates.

However, less progress is being made in wards with higher proportions of successful young families, skilled manual workers and students or young professionals who are renting. These voters can range from young families budgeting to make ends meet in low-cost homes, forward thinking and aspirational younger households in private suburbs and older more stable homeowners.

Our target seats such as Hamilton and Clyde, East Lothian and Midlothian are where these younger, more aspirational voters make up a large proportion of people living in middle value properties, perhaps moving to one of the new housing estates there to start or expand their families. It is these voters Labour must target and in these estates Labour must campaign.

In the seats where we outperformed expectations based on density of these voters, we must look at local campaigns on the ground and learn from their success.

## WINNING 25 - A ROADMAP

- If the local election results were repeated in a General Election Labour would win 3 seats in Scotland and be competitive (within a 4% swing) in 10 more. This represents a huge improvement from 2019 it is not sufficient to help Labour win an outright majority at the next general election.
- Labour cannot improve on this by squeezing the unionist vote – even by bringing the Tory vote down to historically low levels Labour would be projected to win just 4 seats.
- Squeezing SNP/Green voters and identifying those most likely to switch to Labour can deliver the 25 seats Labour need to win in Scotland.
- Whilst half of Green supporters put the SNP as their second preference 20% do so for Labour. Furthermore, 20% of SNP voters put a Labour candidate as their second preference indicating there is a significant number of pro-independence voters who do not vote along purely constitutional lines. These are the voters Labour can target in a General Election where the stark choice is a Labour PM or Tory PM.
- The data demonstrates that whilst Labour is doing well with some voters the SNP still has a broad appeal across the largest groups of voters, in the “heartlands” of Scotland.
- Just as UK Labour must recapture seats in the north lost to the Tories, the challenge for the Scottish Labour Party is to appeal to voters in these once Labour seats lost to the SNP.
- There were a number of seats that Scottish Labour outperformed expectations demographically and the next steps will be to look at why they outperformed and see if there are lessons there for both UK and Scottish Labour on winning these seats back in a General Election.

APPENDICES

Figure 1. Winnable Seats – Pro UK Squeeze

Assumptions: Labour win 50% of Lib Dem / Tory 2<sup>nd</sup> preferences & 33% of 3<sup>rd</sup> preferences

75% of Independents Assigned to 2<sup>nd</sup> Preferences

50% of Scottish Greens assigned to SNP

Conservative vote comparable to historic lows during Blair government

PRO UK SQUEEZE

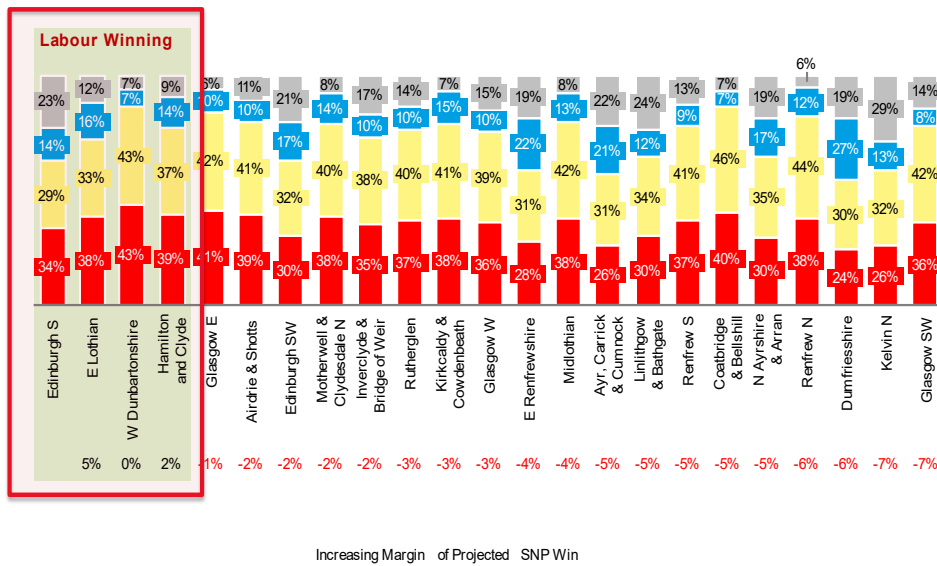


Figure 2. Winnable Seats – Nationalist Squeeze

Labour win 50% of SNP / Green 2<sup>nd</sup> preference & 33% of 3<sup>rd</sup> preferences

75% of Independents Assigned to their 2<sup>nd</sup> Preferences

50% of Scottish Greens assigned to SNP

### NATIONALIST SQUEEZE

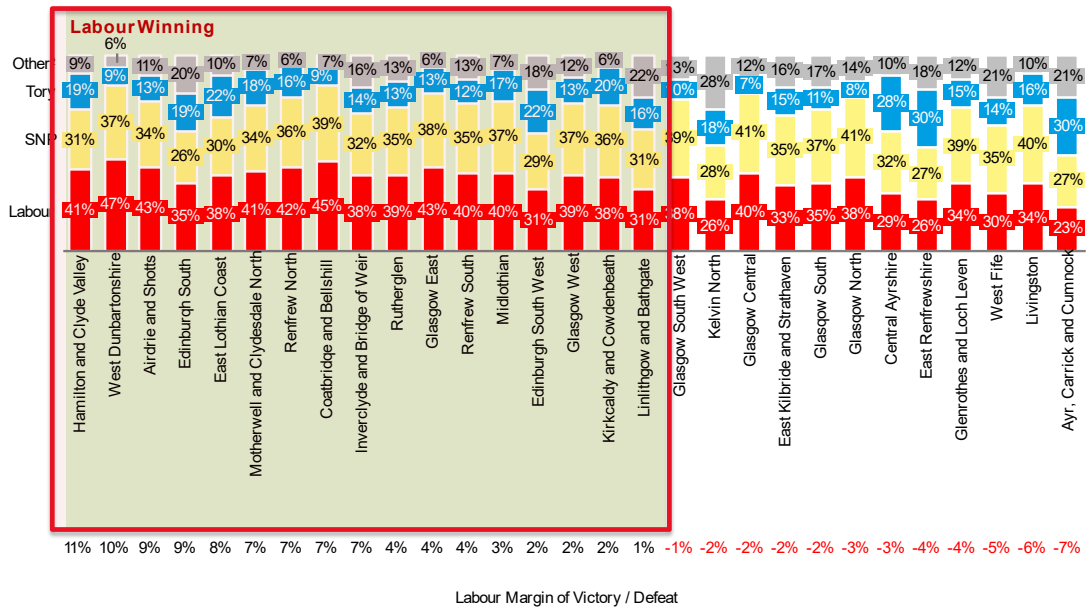
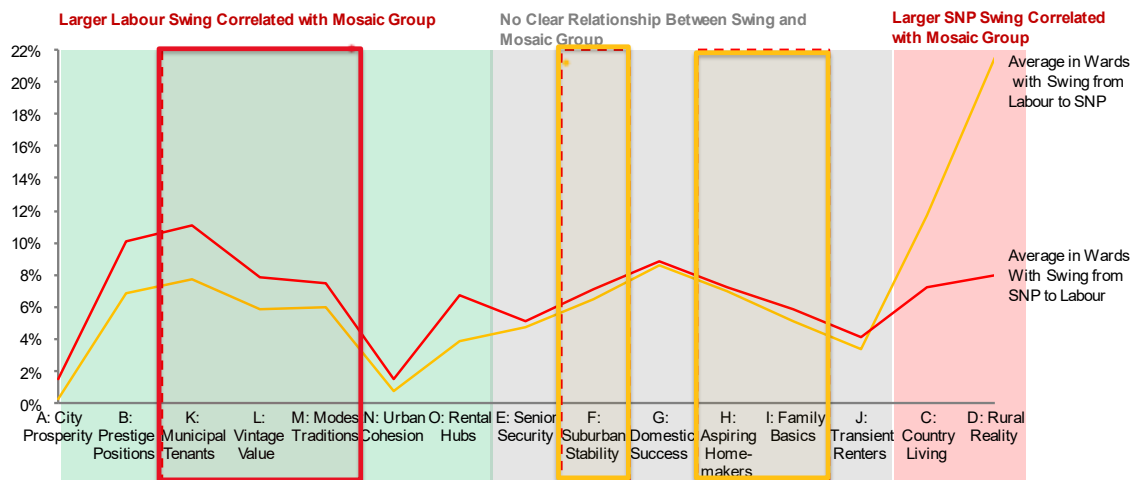


Figure 3. Labour swing versus SNP swing as per mosaic group share  
 Group highlighted representing key groups in the seats Labour need to win.

### Average Mosaic Group Share of Ward Population vs Labour/SNP Swing 2022



## Acknowledgments

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We are hugely grateful to Zack, Jake and Lewis who generously donated their time to conduct the analysis for this report.



## END NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Our model was built using 2022 local election voter preferences / vote share and census / Mosaic demographic data. This was compared at the ward level to c.130 demographic characteristics from the 2011 census and 2022 Mosaic data to identify which characteristics correlated most strongly with Labour's vote share and swing to / from Labour. Voter preference, vote share and demographic data was also mapped from wards to proposed constituencies to estimate the results in the next general election.

<sup>ii</sup> 4 councils could not provide data;

Na h-Eileanan an Iar, Kilmarnock and Loudoun, North Ayrshire and Berwickshire

Add explanatory footnote: e.g. individuals who voted SNP, SNP, Labour as their first 3 candidate preferences (Labour is their 2nd party preference)