

## **Sharp fall in Labour support leaves door open for Tories**

**John Curtice**

There will be 650 seats up for grabs when the country eventually goes to the polls. Boris Johnson's hopes of winning a secure overall majority are likely to rest on what happens in fewer than 80 of them. For it is in these seats that the psephological challenge facing the prime minister will be played out.

Elections in Britain are often thought of as a battle between the Conservatives and Labour. However, the most immediate threat to the realisation of Mr Johnson's ambition does not come from Jeremy Corbyn. Rather it comes from the Liberal Democrats and the SNP.

At 18 per cent on average in the polls, up ten points on 2017, the Liberal Democrats have recovered from the disastrous drop in their popularity after the coalition years. The recovery has occurred entirely among Remain voters.

Meanwhile, at 34 per cent, the Conservatives are still nine points adrift of what Theresa May won in 2017. Consequently, many seats could well see double-digit swings from the Conservatives to the Liberal Democrats — especially in constituencies where there was a substantial Remain vote in 2016.

Fortunately for Mr Johnson, even double-digit swings will not necessarily deliver many gains for Jo Swinson. Even if we allow for the possibility that there might be as much as a 15 per cent swing in seats where at least 45 per cent voted Remain in 2016 and where the Liberal Democrats have been strong locally, there are fewer than 20 seats where the Tories look vulnerable.

All but one of these (St Albans) have previously been won by the Liberal Democrats in a general election or a by-election, while one (Brecon and Radnorshire) has already been recaptured in last month's by-election. As our map shows, all but a handful lie south of Birmingham.

Many of the 35 seats held by the SNP are highly vulnerable. So are those held by their opponents. Therefore even small swings could make a significant difference to the outcome in Scotland. Only a 2.5-point swing from the nationalists could see five more Scottish Tories making the trip to Westminster alongside the 13 that have sat in the Commons for the past two years.

Conversely, eight of the 13 Tory seats are vulnerable to less than a five-point swing to the nationalists. SNP support has edged up three points or so in Scottish polls, while the Conservatives have suffered a nine-point drop.

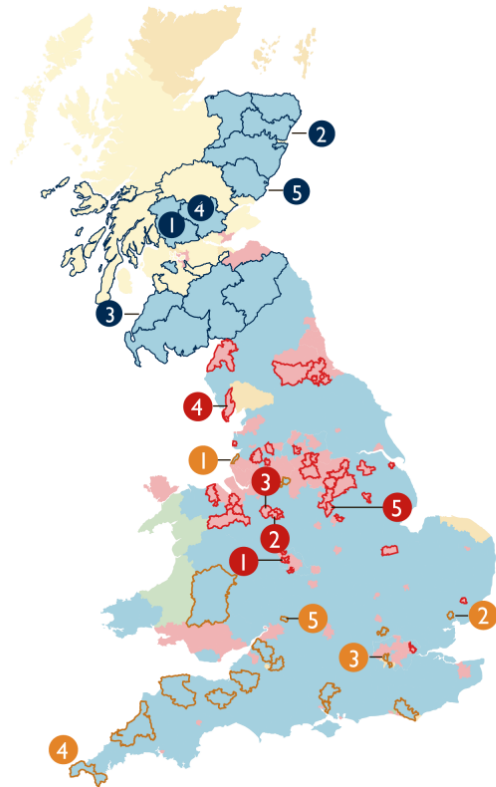
That points to a six-point swing to the nationalists and the potential loss of ten Tory seats. Only in three instances is the Leave vote big enough that the party might hope to stem the tide locally. If these are the places where Mr Johnson could lose ground, where are the places where his hopes of a majority lie?

## Johnson's challenge the key election battlegrounds

- Conservatives v SNP marginals
- Conservatives v Lib Dem marginals
- Conservatives v Labour marginals

Base map shows 2017 election results

- Conservative
- Labour
- SNP
- Independent
- Lib Dem
- Plaid Cymru
- Green



### Top five seats in play Share of the vote 2017 %

○ Scotland and the SNP threat	Leave % 2016	○ Liberal Democrat challenge	Leave % 2016	○ Pro-leave Labour/ Conservative marginals	Leave % 2016
1. Stirling		1. Southport		1. Dudley North	
Con 37.0	32.2	Con 38.6	45.5	Con 46.4	71.4
SNP 36.7		LD 26.4		Labour 46.4	
2. Gordon		2. Colchester		2. Newcastle-under-Lyme	
Con 40.7	44.5	Con 45.8	51.0	Con 48.1	61.6
SNP 35.8		LD 16.9		Labour 48.1	
3. Ayr, Carrick & Cumnock		3. Richmond Park		3. Crewe & Nantwich	
Con 40.1	42.9	Con 45.1	27.7	Con 47.0	59
SNP 34.1		LD 45.0		Labour 47.1	
4. Ochil & Perthshire South		4. St Ives		4. Barrow & Furness	
Con 41.4	39.2	Con 43.1	55.1	Con 47.0	56.7
SNP 35.2		LD 42.5		Labour 47.4	
5. Angus		5. Cheltenham		5. Ashfield	
Con 45.1	48.1	Con 46.6	42.7	Con 41.6	70.5
SNP 38.5		LD 42.1		Labour 42.5	

Conservative support might be nine points down on 2017, but Labour's has fallen by 16 points. That means Labour could fall behind the Tories in many of their marginal seats — perhaps especially so where the constituency voted heavily for Leave.

Mr Johnson's signal electoral achievement so far has been gradually to squeeze the support of the Brexit Party, nearly all of whose support (unsurprisingly) comes from Leave voters. It is

that movement that has enabled him to secure a nine-point lead over Labour in the polls. He will hope to win over even more Brexiteers between now and election day, not least perhaps by persuading them that a vote for Nigel Farage would be a wasted vote that could simply pave the way for a pro-Remain Labour government.

If he succeeds, the effect is most likely to be felt in Labour-held marginal seats where more than 55 per cent voted Leave. Our map identifies 38 such seats, all of which would fall to the Conservatives on a 7.5 point swing or less.

They can hardly be described as traditional Tory territory. Only one failed to vote for Tony Blair in 2005, and seven elected a Tory MP in 2010 or 2015. Half are in the north of England, while another dozen are in the Midlands.

The Conservatives have already demonstrated their ability to garner votes in this pro-Leave slice of England. In two thirds of these seats the increase in the Tory vote between 2015 and 2017 was greater than the rise in Labour support.

Mr Johnson has to hope that, if he can win over yet more Leave voters, he will succeed in building on the progress that Mrs May made in these vital seats two years ago. For that seems to be his route map to electoral success.

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