

# Green councillors, Labour MPs: time for the Greens to stop wishing away reality and shift strategy



**Nick Martin** explains why the best course of action for the Green Party is to give their all to elect councillors who will increase the prospects for climate action in local communities. But at the national level, the vain quest for more MPs should give way to a recognition that the best hope for a decisive change in national direction is the election of Labour government.

Buoyed by a small bump in recent opinion polls, the Green Party of England and Wales has started planning for a general election in 2024. The Party's social media pages brim with optimism but in reality, the Party faces two daunting obstacles to progress in national politics: an electoral one and a political one. These obstacles are so great that a rethink of the Party's electoral ambitions is necessary.

The challenges to smaller parties posed by the UK's first-past-the post electoral system are well known. Votes spread evenly throughout the country do not easily translate into seats in Parliament. At the 2015 general election, for example, a combined five million votes for UKIP and the Green Party (16.4% of the total) translated into just one representative in Parliament. For the Greens the electoral landscape after the 2019 General Election is discouraging to say the least. The party enjoys second place in just two seats and the size of swing required for the Greens to win a second MP, at between 20% and 30%, is beyond any it has achieved at a Parliamentary election in the past.

Take the seat of Bristol West which the Greens came within 6,000 votes of winning in 2015. At last years' general election, Labour's majority was more than 28,000 and the Greens need a swing of 18.7% from Labour to win the seat at the next contest. To win the party's second-best prospect – Dulwich and West Norwood – an even bigger swing of 24.5% from Labour is needed. To put this in perspective, when Caroline Lucas won Brighton Pavilion to become the first Green MP in 2010, she did so on a swing of just 8.4%. It is hard to foresee circumstances in which the Party can attract voters on the scale needed to unseat secure incumbents in its target seats.

Even if the Greens could achieve unprecedented electoral swings, the question of where these voters would come from, and with what effect on the national outcome, cannot be dodged. It is not possible to target all groups of voters simultaneously and so the Greens need a clear idea of the most available voter, the voter most sympathetic to their cause.

The Liberal Democrats, bumping along at around 6.5% in the polls, are already at their base level of support and their voters are unlikely to be the source of the electoral surge the Greens require. There can be little doubt that the best hope for progressives of unseating the Conservative government in four years' time rests with the Labour Party. However, as the British Election Study shows, the very voters the Green Party needs to achieve any sort of electoral breakthrough are the same voters the Labour Party needs to retain in order to win a general election. This suggests that a Green electoral surge can only come from Labour and consequently at the likely cost of a Conservative government. This has obvious implications for the Greens' agenda of climate action and social justice. This then is the political obstacle facing Green strategists.

A closer look at evidence from the British Election Study (BES) is warranted. Wave 19 of the BES Panel Survey collected the views of some 30,000 electors just after the 2019 General Election. The [Panel data](#) shows that Labour voters were more than four times more likely than Conservative voters (61% compared to 13.5%) to have a favourable view of the Green Party. Table 1 shows several ways in which Green and Labour supporters are alike, and how unlike Conservative voters they both are. Labour and Green supporters are younger, more highly educated, more left-wing and, supporting the stereotype, much more likely to be *Guardian* readers than Conservative supporters This is a fact recognized by the Greens in their current targeting of those left-wing voters it sees as disillusioned with Labour's direction under the leadership of Keir Starmer.

## Key Demographics of Green, Labour and Conservative Voters

	Green voters	Labour voters	Conservative voters
% vote share 18-25-year-olds	4.2	43.9	
% vote share 66+ year-olds	1.8	17.6	
% educated at undergraduate level or above	60.3	57.6	
Left-right self-placement (scale 0=most left-wing to 10=most right-wing)	4.02	3.15	
% readers of the Guardian	36.4	40.6	

Source: British Election Study

In contrast to the lack of progress at the national level, the Greens have been very successful in winning seats in local government. At the last round of local elections in 2019, the party more than doubled its number of elected councillors to nearly 400. The party has a minority administration in one major city and holds the balance of power in several other districts. At the local level, therefore, it has great potential to demonstrate the value of electing Greens to lead sustainable local action.

What political choices then do the Greens need to make? Putting up general election candidates in hundreds of seats will squander resources of time, energy, and money in lost deposits that could be better deployed on local campaigns. Increasing the Green vote is very unlikely to lead to result in additional Green MPs but is likely to hurt the prospects of defeating the Conservatives in 2024. Meanwhile, action to address the climate crisis is increasingly urgent. While the Labour Party's version of the Green New Deal may be second best to that of the Greens, Labour, unlike the Greens, has a real prospect of putting it into action.

It is time for the Greens to stop wishing away reality and instead to shift strategy. At the local level the Greens should give their all to elect councillors who will increase the prospects for climate action in local communities. But at the national level, the vain quest for more Green MPs should give way to a recognition that the best hope for a decisive change in national direction is the election of Labour government at the earliest possible opportunity. This will require progressives of all hues to stand aside in nearly all cases to enable Labour to unseat as many Conservatives as possible. Can the Greens rise to this challenge, putting aside the short-term wishes of its activists in the interests of a change in government? Or is the party totally invested in an illusory quest for more parliamentary representation no matter what the likely consequences? A lot depends on the answers.

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### About the Author



**Nick Martin** is a lecturer and PhD candidate in Political Science at the University of Amsterdam. He was previously Chief Executive of the Green Party of England Wales.

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