

The seats Labour needs to win in the next election do not fit into easy stereotypes: they are different from one another and from the seats it currently holds



Luke Raikes examines the challenge facing the Labour Party in the next election by painting a statistical picture of the 150 seats where the party came closest to winning in the last election. He argues that Labour must look far beyond the 'Red Wall' and instead focus on towns, as well as win back support in Scotland with a strong offer that combines devolution and unionism.

As Labour deflates from an eventful conference, they must shift their focus to the next election. We could be halfway through this parliament already if, as some expect, an election is called in spring 2023. Labour has a mountain to climb and there is no shortcut to the summit: 123 seats is a long way to go to win a majority.

But to stand a chance, Labour must look at the challenge objectively. They cannot afford to be overly sentimental for old 'heartlands' in the former 'Red Wall', or to be led astray by the comforting allure of Remain Tory seats in the south. The numbers don't add up in either. Labour must win a variety of seats to stand any chance of forming the next government. Our research has analysed the challenge that lies before the Party.

[We analysed the 150 seats](#) where, in 2019, Labour came closest to the winning party. That's not the only way to choose target seats, but it is a good start. We assume current boundaries – an election fought on the proposed new boundaries will just make Labour's job slightly harder. Labour's task can be broken down into four challenges.

Formerly loyal Labour seats

Formerly loyal Labour seats have dominated recent commentary – they are a minority of target seats, but a sizeable one. Setting aside Scotland for a moment, there are 125 potential targets in England and Wales. 41 used to be loyally Labour and were lost in 2015, 2017 or 2019. Most of these would be considered former 'Red Wall' seats and, while many have quite small majorities, they have often been on a long-term trajectory away from Labour since 2005 which could make winning them back harder.

Rarely or never Labour seats

Longstanding Conservative seats have attracted some recent attention, but only a handful might now be winnable for Labour. 33 seats are currently Conservative, haven't been won by Labour since 2001 or before, and require a local swing of less than 13%. Many of these might be considered 'Blue Wall', where demographic change and the Remain side of the Brexit divide seem to have harmed the Conservatives' prospects.

These seats tend to attract a lot of attention, perhaps because they confound old expectations, offer tantalising high-profile Tory scalps, and give some hope to the Party looking for a mirror image of their experience in the Red Wall. They are perhaps also tempting to those uncomfortable about finding common ground with northern working-class voters. But these seats are very few in number and have some of the largest majorities to overcome. Despite its name, therefore, the Blue Wall is categorically not the mirror image of the Red Wall. Worse, it threatens to distract the Party or keep it in a 'metropolitan-Remain' comfort zone that will alienate voters in almost all the other seats they need to win. It is a good objective for the Liberal Democrats, but not Labour, as John Curtice has already [shown](#).

'Swing' seats and seats last won in 2005

A further 51 of the 125 England and Wales seats have actually been won by Labour in relatively recent political history – either in 2005 or since, but never consistently. 34 of these last voted Labour in 2005, but the Party's aggregated vote share in these seats, relative to its national vote share, is more promising: it never dramatically slipped away, rose between 2017 and 2019 and is now only slightly below its 2005 level. A further 17 of the 51 are 'swing' seats, having changed hands more than once since 2005, and often with the smallest majorities to overturn. These often get overlooked, but they are vital and relatively winnable.

Scotland

Finally, there are 25 Scottish seats Labour must target. Labour now has only one Scottish MP and reclaiming 25 seats will be a serious challenge. Labour's recent performance in these seats isn't as dreadful as many assume: in 2017, six voted Labour and all 19 others had an SNP majority of 4,000 or less – nine of these had an SNP majority of around 1,000 or less.

The truth is that no one group of seats is enough to win a majority. So how can Labour tackle four challenges in one campaign? What do these seats have in common that Labour might draw on? In England and Wales, they are mostly outside of major cities: 95 of the 125 constituencies are made up either of towns, villages or smaller communities; many are in the North, the Midlands and Wales and 68 are *not* adjacent to major cities.

They are also more often around the 'middle' compared to all 573 England and Wales seats. Few seats tend toward either extreme, in terms of age, ethnicity, homeownership and C1 social grade households. The distribution does tend to skew toward having fewer graduates, more voters in C2 and DE households, more leave voters, lower house price inflation, and lower employment growth.

In Scotland, all 25 potential targets saw an increased vote for the SNP in 2019, and many are clustered around the Scottish median in the extent for their support for remaining in the EU and for the SNP.

The variation within the 150 might seem to pull the party in different directions, and the sheer number of seats needed to win is indeed daunting. But while the scale of the challenge is unprecedented, both major political parties have usually won with a broad appeal to different places.

2019 was an exception that threatens to mislead: Johnson targeted the 'Red Wall' over a single issue, counting on the fact that loyal Tories elsewhere wouldn't dare risk Jeremy Corbyn in No 10. There is little for Labour to learn from that strategy, and they must avoid the temptation to react at the next election by simply trying to reverse the 2019 result in the Red Wall, or to copy Johnson's trick in the Blue Wall.

Instead, Labour must look at the evidence. That evidence suggests two priorities. First, they must generally appeal to the common ground, and the 'middle'. These seats differ, but they have a great deal in common and are rarely extreme. Labour's task is to respect differences, but appeal to those commonalities. Second, they must develop a better alternative to 'levelling up' that makes them competitive in towns and in places experiencing relative decline. Simply hoping that the Conservatives' regional growth agenda fails, is unlikely to win the Party much support where it's most needed.

So this is Labour's challenge. It is hard. Labour has rediscovered a desire win elections, and to trust evidence: it cannot be ignored or wished away. There are no shortcuts to a Labour government. To have any chance of winning power at the next election, Labour must 'retool', and work urgently toward that goal.

About the Author



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