

Scottish Parliament election preview: From four party politics to further consolidation in the South of Scotland?

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*The Scottish Parliament elections are upon us, with the SNP expected to consolidate their current dominance over Labour and the Conservatives. Here, **Alistair Clark** looks at the contest in the South Scotland region, an area which has had a recent history of four party politics but may be seeing its political profile shift.*



Anyone looking at a map of the 2003 Scottish parliament election results in South Scotland would be struck by the fact that all four main parties were relevant contenders in the region. Labour, the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats all held seats in the region, two each for the smaller parties, and five for Labour. The SNP were also strong challengers, second place in three marginals behind the Conservatives (Galloway & Upper Nithsdale), Labour (Kilmarnock and Loudon) and the Liberal Democrats in a three way marginal with Labour also involved (Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale).

By 2007, Labour still held five constituencies, but the Conservatives had added a third to their total, won from the Liberal Democrats. Following the redrawing of boundaries prior to the 2011 elections, the Liberal Democrats had dropped out of the picture, affected by the national swing against the party because of its participation in the UK coalition government. Instead, the SNP advance was echoed here, the party winning four seats, against three for the Conservatives and two for Labour. Given the Conservatives' long term resilience in the region, this is probably the only area in the country in which an [anthropologist could have managed](#) to study local campaigns run by the party.

The region is diverse. It contains the local authority areas of Scottish Borders, South Ayrshire, and Dumfries and Galloway, as well as part of the territory of East Ayrshire, East Lothian, Midlothian, North Ayrshire, and South Lanarkshire councils. It runs from the rolling hills of the Borders and the banks of the river Tweed, to the former

mining and industrial areas of Ayrshire and the Lothians, from Robert Burns country in the West, to Walter Scott territory in the Borders. Important local issues have included job losses and unemployment in post-industrial areas and the Borders textile industries, and issues relating to farming in a largely rural area. The opening of the Borders railway line between Edinburgh and Tweedbank marked a significant, if limited, infrastructure gain for the region.

Ayr

Ayr has been held by the Conservatives since John Scott won it from Labour in 2003. He contests the seat once again. As a long term incumbent, he faces a challenge from the SNP's Jennifer Dunn, Labour's Brian McGinley and Robert Simpson for the Liberal Democrats. It was held on a majority of only 3.3%, or 1113 votes, in 2011, making this a Conservative-SNP marginal. If the SNP win Ayr, this would make it the first time a party other than the Conservatives have held it since the Scottish Parliament's first term. The SNP's army of activists won't have it easy however. In 2011, the Conservatives accounted for 70% of party campaign spending in the area, highlighting their ongoing strength and local organisation. Unemployment and health are issues locally. Ayr has a 6.5% unemployment rate and ranks 33 of 73 in terms of poor health.

Carrick, Cumnock & Doon Valley

This was a Labour-held seat, held by the former Scottish Executive minister and Labour leadership candidate Cathy Jamieson for Labour between 1999-2011. In 2011 it was won by the SNP's Adam Ingram, who was subsequently appointed minister for Children and Early Years, at the fourth attempt when Jamieson had switched to Westminster in 2010. In 2016, it is being contested by the SNP's Jeanne Freeman, who rose to prominence during the Independence referendum with Women for Independence. She defends a 9% majority against challenges from Labour's Carol Ann Mochan, the Conservatives' Lee Lyon and the Liberal Democrats' Dawud Islam. It would be a major surprise if Freeman came under much pressure. The challenge for the others, particularly Labour, is to fight for second place and close the gap to the Nationalists.

Clydesdale

Clydesdale was once a long time Labour seat, with the party holding it from 1999-2011. It was won in 2011 by the SNP's Aileen Campbell on 49.9%. She returns to contest the seat again, defending a 14.1 majority from Labour's new candidate in the constituency, Claudia Beamish. There is some additional local colour in Clydesdale. The South of Scotland has long had a tradition of independent politics in local government. Two former party rebels, former SNP local councillor Bev Gauld and former Labour councillor Danny Meikle, [contest the election](#) as independent candidates. They face Jennifer Jamieson Ball for the Liberal Democrats, and Alex Allison for the Scottish Conservatives. Barring some major upset, this will be an SNP hold on May 6th.

Dumfriesshire

A relatively well-off and low unemployment seat, Dumfriesshire (and its predecessor constituency, Dumfries) has not changed hands since the first Scottish parliament election in 1999. Held by Labour's Elaine Murray, she is standing again in 2016, defending a majority of 3170 votes and 9.9% despite having offered to stand down for then party leader Jim Murphy so he could be elected [to the Scottish parliament](#). She faces three competitors. The most high profile is the occasionally controversial journalist and SNP regional list MSP Joan McAlpine. The Conservatives were placed second in Dumfriesshire in 2011. Dynasty politics may or may not be an apt description here as they are represented by Oliver Mundell, son of the current Scottish secretary David Mundell who holds the equivalent Westminster seat, after a little [local difficulty over his selection](#). The Liberal Democrats' Richard Brodie fights the seat again, hoping to achieve more than the 4.4% received in 2011. Murray's sizeable majority and long-time incumbency means she retains a sizeable advantage over her competitors, although if predictions of SNP success are borne out, this may well not be enough for her to hold the seat.

East Lothian

This constituency is held by Iain Gray, the MSP who led Labour to landslide defeat at the last 2011 Scottish parliament election. He is probably best remembered in that campaign for fleeing from protestors in Glasgow Central station into a sandwich shop, all caught on TV. [Gray has held the constituency since 2007](#), with Labour also holding it in the previous two elections. This used to be a very safe Labour seat, with, in 2003, a 26.2% majority. It is now an ultra-marginal seat, with Gray defending a majority of 0.5% and 151 votes from the SNP's DJ Johnstone-Smith, who is a historian. History may well be on his side with a small majority to overcome and his party surging in the polls. The Liberal Democrats field Ettie Spencer, while the Conservative candidate is Rachel Hamilton who is also a regional list candidate, third on the Conservative list. Iain Gray will likely still be elected even if he loses the constituency – he is ranked 1st on Labour's regional list.

[Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire](#)

This is currently solid Conservative territory, although in the first two Scottish parliament elections it was a Liberal Democrat stronghold, reflecting historic Liberal strength in the Borders and this area in particular. It is currently held by John Lamont with an 18.5% majority of 5,334 votes. Remarkably Lamont came within 328 votes (and a fraught early morning recount) of leading the Conservatives to winning a second Westminster seat in the equivalent 2015 general election constituency, which would have made the Conservatives the second largest Scottish party in the House of Commons. He faces Paul Wheelhouse, an economist, former regional list MSP and Community Safety Minister, for the SNP. The Liberal Democrats field Jim Hume, also an experienced sitting regional list MSP, while Labour's candidate is Barrie Cunning. The size of Lamont's majority means that, in normal circumstances, his seat would be very safe. As the SNP tide has shown, these are not normal circumstances. If polls showing the Nationalists sweeping all constituency seats are correct, Lamont [could be facing a major battle](#).

[Galloway and West Dumfries](#)

This is currently held by the Conservative Party, and it (and its predecessor seat) have been successfully defended by former Holyrood Presiding Officer between 2007-11, Alex Fergusson since 2003. The former Galloway and Upper Nithsdale seat was actually held by the SNP between 1999-2003. It remains a Conservative-SNP marginal, with only a 2.9% or 862 vote majority. The Conservative candidate, Finlay Carson, will not benefit from an incumbency advantage however, Alex Fergusson now having stood down for 2016. In addition to any wider swing, this gives the SNP's Aileen McLeod a very good opportunity to win the seat back for the first time in thirteen years for the Nationalists. Labour's Fiona McDonnell and Liberal Democrat Andrew Metcalf make up the list of constituency candidates.

[Kilmarnock & Irvine Valley](#)

Previously held for two elections in its Kilmarnock and Loudon incarnation by Labour's Margaret Jamieson, this seat has been held by the SNP's Willie Coffey since 2007. With an 18.8% majority, Coffey's hold on the seat looks very secure. He faces a three party challenge. Labour fields local volunteer worker and party activist Dave Meechan. The Liberal Democrats are represented by archaeology student Rebecca Plenderleith. The Conservative candidate is Brian Whittle, a former medal winning athlete who contested the equivalent seat in the 2015 general election for the party. Both unemployment and health look likely to be local campaign issues as the constituency is ranked highly on unemployment and poor health indicators.

[Midlothian South, Tweeddale, and Lauderdale](#)

The predecessor constituency, Tweeddale, Ettrick and Lauderdale used to be a Liberal Democrat stronghold, with the Lib Dems holding the seat from 1999-2011. It was won by the SNP's Christine Grahame at the third attempt in 2011. On the Republican wing of the SNP, she was already an experienced MSP, having been a regional list member for South Scotland from 1999 prior to winning the constituency in the 2011 SNP landslide. This is a very safe seat for the SNP, holding a 15.5% majority against the second placed Liberal Democrats. The Lib Dem candidate is a youth worker, formerly employed in the oil and gas industry and member of the Scottish youth parliament, Kris Chapman,

who is a first time candidate in this constituency. Labour offer Fiona Dugdale as their candidate, who is also placed eighth on the party's regional list. Local Borders councillor Michelle Ballantyne contests the constituency for the Conservatives.

The Contest for Regional List Seats

In 2011, the SNP won four of the region's six top up seats to Labour's two. However, Labour only polled 16.8% of the vote regionally in that contest. The Liberal Democrats and Conservatives polled 15.3% and 14% respectively. All were a very long way behind the SNP's 43.2% in the region. John Curtice has shown how the SNP managed to maximise both parts of the electoral system in 2011 to effectively negate the 'top up' aspect of the [additional member system used for Holyrood](#). Assuming the vote goes how the SNP are campaigning for it to go – #bothvotesSNP is the Twitter hashtag on the party's campaign literature – and the polls are suggesting, it is hard to see them not having a similar performance in 2016. Undoubtedly the other three parties, and Green and other candidates, will have to perform considerably better than in 2011 if they are to have a chance of pushing back against the SNP in this regard. If both Labour and the Liberal Democrats continue their respective downward slides however, it is certainly not hard to see the Conservatives winning a regional list seat given that the party's support is likely pretty stable in what has become one of its strongest areas in the country.

Five Labour constituency candidates are also on the party's regional list, as are eight of the Conservative candidates. Constituency candidates Joan McAlpine, Aileen Campbell and Jeanne Freeman top the SNP list, although the placement of the latter two of those is a bit of a puzzle given that they hold constituencies quite safely. Liberal Democrats are bowing to the inevitable to some degree and only offering three candidates on the regional list, all of whom are also standing as constituency candidates.

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