Another mountain to climb: Labour's electoral challenge in the 2020s

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Summary

To win a majority at the next election Labour needs to gain 123 seats, almost twice as many as it required at the 2019 election.

This figure actually under-states the extent to which Labour's position has deteriorated. To secure the 'winning post' marginal seat Labour now needs an electoral swing of 10.3 percentage points, almost three times more than the swing it needed to win the 2019 election.

Labour will need to consider intermediate goals. At the next election it will need to secure 43 seats to deprive the Conservatives of a majority (requiring less than a 4 percentage point swing), or 83 seats to govern in partnership with the SNP (requiring a 7 point swing).

63 per cent of the seats Labour needs to win are in the north, the midlands and Wales; 13 per cent are in Scotland; and 24 per cent are in southern England.

104 of the 123 seats Labour needs to win are in towns not cities (by contrast over half of existing Labour seats are in cities).

Only 30 per cent of the 123 seats Labour needs to win voted 'remain' in the EU referendum, compared to around half of Labour's existing seats.

Political conclusions

Labour must make major progress in this parliament to have a hope of winning power within 10 years. A decisive change in direction is needed.

The party's top priority must be to win support in towns and small cities in Wales, the north and the midlands. The party must choose its new leadership wisely, by asking who can earn the trust of potential voters in these areas, while not alienating existing supporters in big cities.

There is no electoral future in fighting a rear-guard action on Brexit. Senior Labour politicians need to emotionally and psychologically accept the reality of leaving the EU.

Labour must again debate how it works with other progressive parties because its best hope of returning to power is to govern in partnership. The new leadership should consider saying this in public and committing to build relationships with other parties. More controversially, if Labour really wants to return to power quickly, it may need to consider formal alliances.

Figure 1: Labour target seats at the next election (ordered by size of required percentage swing)

0% to 2.5% swing	2.5% to 5% swing	5% to 7.5% swing	7.5% to 10% swing	10% to 12.5% swing
1 Bury North	26 Ynys Mon	56 Milton Keynes North	92 Uxbridge & South Ruislip	122 Dunfermline & West Fife
2 Kensington	27 Peterborough	57 Norwich North	93 Glasgow North	123 **Scarborough & Whitby**
3 Bury South	28 Derby North	58 Workington	94 Stoke-on-Trent North	124 Croydon South
4 Bolton North East	29 Stroud	59 Filton & Bradley Stoke	95 Crewe & Nantwich	125 South Ribble
5 High Peak	30 Wrexham	60 Milton Keynes South	96 Glasgow Central	126 Glasgow North West
6 Gedling	31 Aberconwy	61 Sedgefield	97 Harrow East	127 Welwyn Hatfield
7 Heywood & Middleton	32 Pudsey	62 West Bromwich West	98 Newcastle-under-Lyme	128 West Dunbartonshire
8 Blyth Valley	33 Vale of Glamorgan	63 Ipswich	99 Crawley	129 Edinburgh North & Leith
9 Stoke-on-Trent Central	34 East Lothian	64 Altrincham & Sale West	100 Clwyd West	130 Lanark & Hamilton East
10 Chipping Barnet	35 Lincoln	65 Blackpool South	101 Na h-Eileanan an Iar	131 Morley & Outwood
11 Delyn	36 Hyndburn	66 Northampton South	102 Corby	132 Edinburgh East
12 North West Durham	37 Hastings & Rye	67 Shipley	103 Scunthorpe	133 South Thanet
13 Chingford & Woodford Green	38 Wakefield	68 Coatbridge, Chryston & Bellshill	104 Camborne & Redruth	134 Erewash
14 Kirkcaldy & Cowdenbeath	39 Glasgow North East	69 Bolsover	105 Colchester	135 Bournemouth West
15 Bridgend	40 Darlington	70 Midlothian	106 Bishop Auckland	136 Blackpool North & Cleveleys
16 Dewsbury	41 Watford	71 Wolverhampton North East	107 Carmarthen East & Dinefwr	137 Great Grimsby
17 Warrington South	42 Hendon	72 Preseli Pembrokeshire	108 Stevenage	138 Ceredigion
18 Clwyd South	43 **Wycombe**	73 Barrow & Furness	109 Bolton West	139 Kingswood
19 Burnley	44 Truro & Falmouth	74 Rushcliffe	110 Bournemouth East	140 Hexham
20 Birmingham, Northfield	45 Don Valley	75 Cities of London & Westminster	111 York Outer	141 East Kilbride, Strathaven & Lesmahagow
21 Wolverhampton South West	46 Reading West	76 Rother Valley	112 Carmarthen West & South Pembrokeshire	142 Bromley & Chislehurst
22 Leigh	47 Colne Valley	77 South Swindon	113 Inverclyde	143 Paisley & Renfrewshire North
23 Keighley	48 Southport	78 Airdrie & Shotts	114 Glasgow South	144 Thurrock
24 West Bromwich East	49 Redcar	79 Loughborough	115 Shrewsbury & Atcham	145 Dover
25 Vale of Clwyd	50 Southampton, Itchen	80 Worcester	116 Gloucester	146 **Middlesbrough South & East Cleveland**
	51 Arfon	81 Glasgow South West	117 Carlisle	147 Paisley & Renfrewshire South
	52 Stockton South	82 Copeland	118 Rossendale & Darwen	
	53 Broxtowe	83 **Pendle**	119 Finchley & Golders Green	
	54 Rutherglen & Hamilton West	84 Northampton North	120 Monmouth	
	55 Calder Valley	85 East Worthing & Shoreham	121 Macclesfield	
		86 Morecambe & Lunesdale		
		87 Motherwell & Wishaw		
		88 Glasgow East		
		89 Penistone & Stocksbridge		
		90 Wimbledon		
		91 Ashfield		

Wycombe = Tories lose majority
Pendle = Majority for Labour + SNP
Scarborough = Labour majority
Middlesbrough South = Labour majority, without gains from SNP

The mountain to climb

In June 2015 the Fabian Society published *The Mountain to Climb: Labour's 2020 challenge* which presented a bleak analysis of the electoral challenge facing the party, following Ed Miliband's 2015 defeat. Today we repeat that exercise. But this time the outlook is even worse.

Figure 1 shows the Labour party's new target seats that the party must aim to win. Capturing them will take a local swing from the incumbent party to Labour of between 0.1 percentage points and 12.5 percentage points.

Some of the seats on the list are classic marginals like Lincoln or Reading West. A larger number are ex-industrial 'Red Wall' seats lost by Labour in 2019, such as Blythe Valley or Stoke-on-Trent North. There are also formerly safe Conservative seats where the demographics are changing in Labour's favour, such as Wycombe or Chingford and Wood Green. Finally there are over a dozen Scottish seats held by the SNP.

To win Labour will need to gain seats in all these categories because it requires at least 123 seats at the next general election to form a majority of one.[1] This is almost twice as many new seats as the party needed to win before the 2019 election. However this headline figure actually under-states the extent to which Labour's electoral position has deteriorated.

Figures 2 and 3 shows Labour's new 'mountain to climb', with respect to the electoral swing the party needs in marginal seats. At the next election to win a majority of one Labour will need almost three times the swing that it required for victory this year. Before this year's election securing the 'winning post' marginal seat required a 3.6 percentage point swing; now it will take a 10.3 percentage point swing to win the 123rd seat, Scarborough and Whitby. This leaves Labour with a significantly steeper 'mountain to climb' than after the disastrous 2015 election which left it needing an 8.7 percentage points swing to win the 2017 election.

Figure 2: Compared to before the 2019 election Labour needs to gain almost twice as many seats to win a majority. It needs an electoral swing almost three times greater.

	Seats required	Percentage swing required
2010	68	4.6
2015	94	8.7
2017	64	3.6
2019	123	10.3

Labour's future prospects will be even worse if it cannot make progress in Scotland. To secure a UK majority without regaining seats in Scotland, Labour will need to win 57 per cent of the constituencies in England and Wales. Winning the 123 seats it needs just in England and Wales will require an electoral swing of over 12 percentage points in English and Welsh marginal seats.

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[1] The analysis in this paper is based on existing constituency boundaries. A redrawing of boundaries can be expected during the coming parliament in time for the next election. However following the 2019 election result it is not clear what impact boundary changes they would have on the state of the parties.

Figure 3: Labour has a mountain to climb at the next election. It requires a local swing of 10.3 percentage points to win its 123rd target seat and secure a majority of one
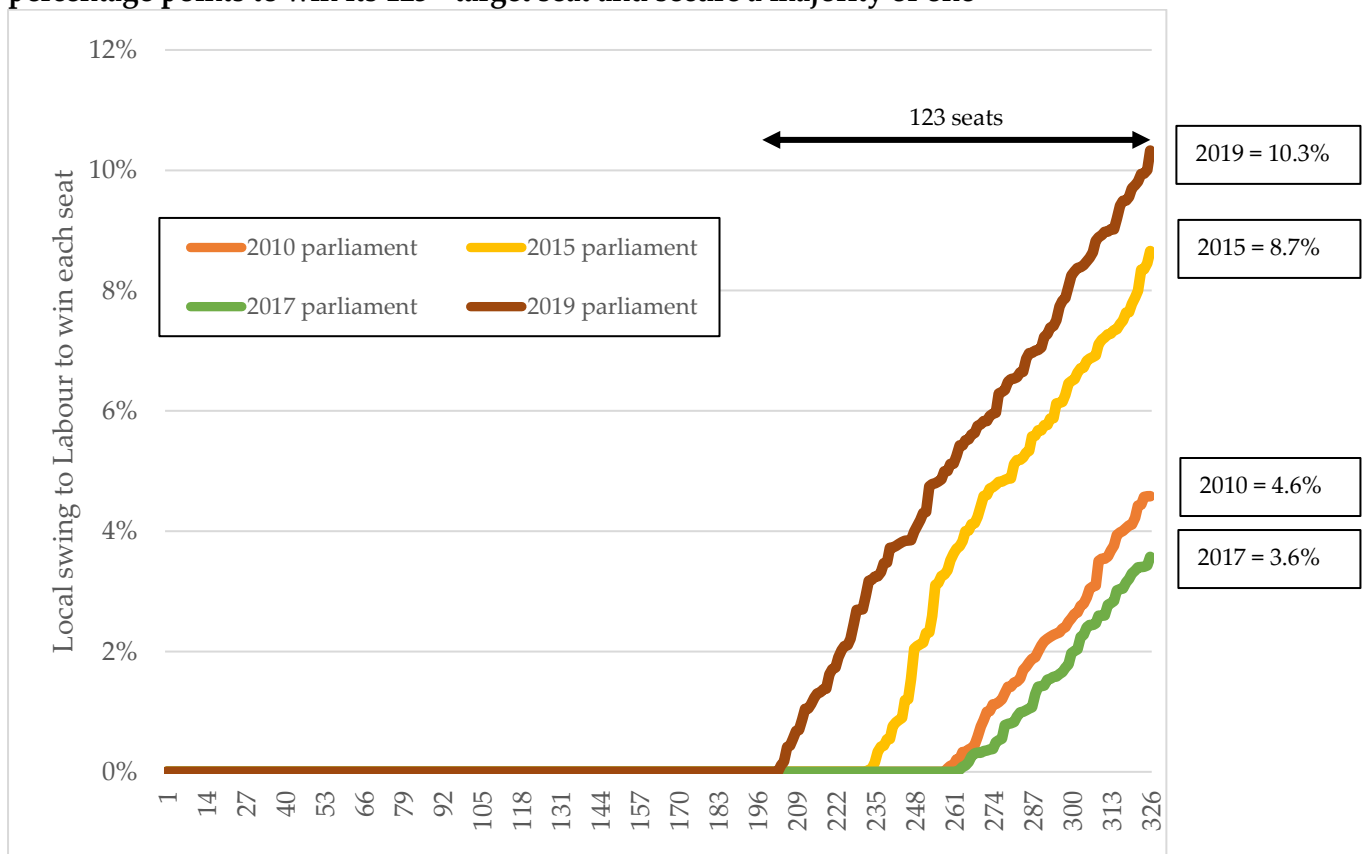
Intermediate goals

A swing on this scale in England and Wales is almost inconceivable. This means that for Labour to return to government the party will either need to defeat the SNP or work with the SNP. The latter scenario seems more likely. Labour would need to gain 83 seats (but not from the SNP) to be able to govern with the support of the nationalists. Even this would require Labour to secure a swing in English and Welsh marginals of 7 percentage points, to secure seats like Pendle.

Even making progress on this scale is historically unusual so depriving the Conservatives of a majority at the next election may be the best that Labour can hope for. This would need Labour to gain 43 seats which requires a swing in marginal seats of less than 4 percentage points, with Wycombe the (surprising) 'winning post' seat.

In this context, it is worth noting that one reason the Conservatives won a convincing majority is because the 'progressive' vote is split. The Liberal Democrats had a disappointing 2019 election in terms of seats. But Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens combined secured more support (46.3 per cent of votes cast) than the Conservatives and the Brexit party combined (45.6 per cent). There are 56 Conservative seats where the combined vote of Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Green Party was higher than the Conservative vote.

Geography lessons

There are no alternatives to rebuilding Labour's strength in traditional ex-industrial 'heartland' seats. Figure 4 shows that 63 per cent of the 123 seats that Labour needs to win to secure a majority of one are in the north, the midlands and Wales. A further 13 per cent are in Scotland while only 24 per cent are in southern England.

In Scotland, Wales, the north and the East Midlands Labour's new target seats make up a high share of all the seats in the region (between 24 per cent and 35 per cent of local seats). This raises questions about whether the party will be able to effectively rebuild relationships and target resources in all these areas. This is particularly true in places where Labour has few sitting MPs left, including Scotland, the East Midlands and North Wales.

Overall Labour remains very strong in London (with two thirds of seats) and strong in Wales, the North West, Yorkshire and Humber, and the North (over 50 per cent of seats). But Labour is now little stronger in the West Midlands and (especially) the East Midlands than in southern England outside London.

Figure 4: Geography of the target seats needed to achieve a majority of one (ie the 123 seats with the smallest required swing)

	Labour targets	Labour seats	Total seats	Targets as a % of total	Labour seats as a % of total
North West	18	42	71	25%	59%
Scotland	16	1	59	27%	2%
Wales	14	22	40	35%	55%
Yorkshire and Humber	13	28	54	24%	52%
East Midlands	12	8	46	26%	17%
West Midlands	10	15	59	17%	25%
North	10	19	33	30%	58%
London	9	49	73	12%	67%
South East	8	8	84	10%	10%
South West	7	6	55	13%	11%
East	6	5	58	10%	9%

Figure 5 shows that across the country, over half of Labour's existing MPs represent cities with over 250,000 inhabitants – 49 are from London and 55 from 16 cities outside the capital. By contrast, among the 123 target seats only 19 are in cites with a population of over 250,000 while 104 represent towns and smaller communities. This could pose a significant challenge to the party in rebuilding in the areas it needs to target, as existing MPs will naturally channel the perspectives of their urban constituents.

**Figure 5: 85 per cent of the seats Labour needs to win are outside big cities**

	Labour targets	Labour seats
London	9	49
Other large cities (250,000+ population)	10	57
Towns/rural	104	97

Accepting Brexit

The geographic difference between Labour's current seats and the seats the party needs to target plays out in different Brexit voting patterns. Figure 6 shows that a majority supported 'remain' in around half of the seats the Labour party now holds. The same is true in the case of only 30 per cent of the seats Labour needs to target.

In this respect, Labour's target seats resemble all the other seats in Great Britain much more than they resemble the party's current seats. However it's important to recognise that this is a difference of degree and on Brexit there is not a vast gulf separating current seats and target seats. For example, at least 60 per cent voted 'Leave' in a quarter of existing Labour seats and a quarter of Labour targets.

Figure 6: 70 per cent of the seats Labour needs to win supported 'leave' in the EU referendum. This matches other non-Labour seats, rather than existing Labour seats.
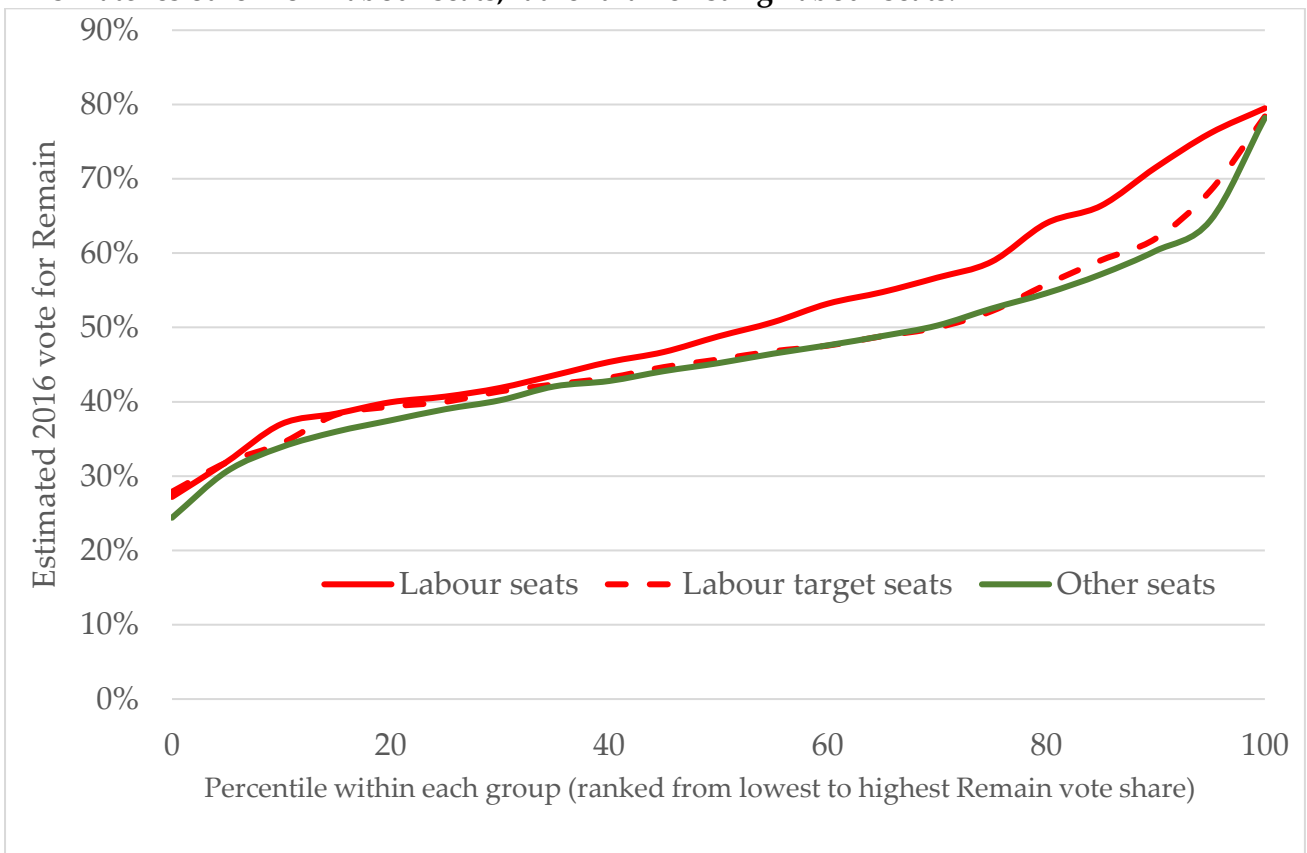
Constituency estimates calculated by Chris Hanretty

Political conclusions

Labour has suffered a crushing defeat and is very unlikely to return to majority government in a single electoral cycle. But if the party does not make major progress over the next 4 or 5 years it cannot expect to secure power even after a further 10 years in opposition. A decisive change in direction is needed immediately.

For the Labour party to recover it must rebuild support across the whole of Great Britain, but the new electoral map means that its top priority has to be Wales, the north and the midlands. The party's mission must be to win support in towns and small cities, not the large cities that it already dominates.

This poses a profound challenge for the party because its members, activists and politicians tend to come from large cities and are more socially liberal and pro-European than left-leaning voters in many towns. The party must choose its new leadership wisely, by asking who can connect and earn the trust of potential Labour voters in the 123 target seats the party needs to win without alienating existing supporters in big cities.

There is no electoral future in Labour fighting a rear-guard action on Brexit. The new leadership will need to show that it fully accepts the Brexit result and recognises that the question of EU membership is settled for a generation. Merely stating this publicly will not be enough. Senior Labour politicians need to emotionally and psychologically accept the reality of Brexit.

Labour must again debate how it works with other progressive parties, a subject which has always been hard for Labour because of its tribal internal culture. The party's new leadership will need to consider publicly accepting that a return to power is likely to involve a partnership with other parties and to commit to building relationships in advance of an election. More controversially, if Labour really wants to return to power quickly, it may need to consider formal alliances with other parties.