

The General Election Battlefield

It is now confirmed that 2019 will be a general election year. We will go to the polls (except for those of us voting by post) on 12th December. For psephologists, at least, Christmas really will come early this year.

There will doubtless be many claims over the next few days, as happens in every general election, that this is the most important election in a generation. And who knows – this time around it may even be true! What almost certainly is true is that this is a highly unpredictable election. It takes place against a very uncertain electoral context. Over recent decades and general elections there has been, as the British Election Study team have documented, a growing trend for *individual voter volatility*: that is, members of the electorate have become much more willing to switch from one party to another that successive general elections. We have also seen, particularly during 2019, very substantial *aggregate volatility*, with support for most of the major political parties rising and falling very rapidly. A third source of uncertainty is how, in what seems certain to be a multi-party election and one where divisions over Brexit may disrupt traditional patterns of electoral support, votes may translate into parliamentary seats.

In this uncertain context, mapping out the election battlefield is a particularly hazardous task. It would not amaze me to see, once all the votes have been cast and counted, that some seats we had long considered safe for one party or another have ended up changing hands. Nonetheless, I think it does make sense to try and map out what – at least on paper and based on the election outcome in 2017 – are the main battleground seats: the most obviously vulnerable seats of those that parties are defending, and their potential targets for gains. I will therefore do that here for each of the major parties here in Wales.

In the tables that follow I have colour-coded the party that is the closest competitor in a party's 'Vulnerable' seats, and which is the incumbent party in its 'Target' seats. I have then placed in *italics* the seats where the incumbent MP has already indicated that they are standing down. (Substantial research has shown that incumbent MPs normally generate at least a modest personal vote; the lack of an incumbent MP defending the seat would normally increase the chances of challengers gaining that seat).

Labour

Vulnerable	% Swing	Targets	% Swing
<i>Wrexham</i>	2.6	<i>Arfon</i>	0.2
<i>Vale of Clwyd</i>	3.1	<i>Preseli Pembrokeshire</i>	0.4
<i>Gower</i>	3.6	<i>Aberconwy</i>	1.0
<i>Cardiff North</i>	4.0	<i>Vale of Glamorgan</i>	2.1
<i>Newport West*</i>	4.2	<i>Carmarthen West & South Pembs</i>	3.7
<i>Delyn</i>	5.4	<i>Clwyd West</i>	4.3
<i>Bridgend</i>	5.5		
<i>Clwyd South</i>	5.8		
<i>Alyn & Deeside</i>	5.9		
<i>Ynys Môn</i>	7.1		

*Based on 2019 by-election, not 2017 general election

When looking at Labour marginal and potential target seats, a number of things stand out. A first is that, of the seats Labour currently hold in Wales, none are ultra-marginal. In fact, of all those seats that Labour won 2017 across Britain, none of the thirty most marginal ones are in Wales. (The most marginal Labour-held seat in Wales, Wrexham, is number 31 in terms of percentage marginality). On uniform swings, Labour would lose five Scottish seats before it lost its first Welsh one.

Another thing to note is that, of those Labour-held seats that are vulnerable to a swing against the party of up to eight percentage points, none of them are in the south Wales valleys. These communities all voted for Leave in June 2016, and there has been lots of talk about this – in a Brexit-focused election – weakening their long-standing electoral ties to the Labour party. But we would need to see very large swings in such seats for any of them to come seriously into play. On paper, at least, none of them is obviously marginal.

There are several more vulnerable Labour seats around the edges of the valleys: in Newport, in Cardiff, and in Bridgend. But the greatest concentration of Labour vulnerability in Wales is undoubtedly the arc of seats in north-east Wales: Wrexham, Vale of Clwyd, Delyn, Clwyd South, and Alyn and Deeside. All of these are potentially vulnerable on modest to medium-sized swings.

There are four possible Labour targets in Wales which could fall to smaller swings than any Labour-held seat. Only a modest further move to Labour from its already very strong 2017 performance could thus yield even greater rewards. Beyond that, though, and a couple of other seats, Labour’s potential for gains in Wales seems limited. But the main reason for that is simply that Labour already hold most of the seats in Wales! There are thus certain innate limits on how much further they can potentially advance.

Most of Labour’s potential close fights look like straight battles with the Conservatives. That is the inevitable consequence of a 2017 election where the two traditional parties re-asserted (perhaps for the last time?) their old dominance. The most obvious exception is Ynys Môn: won by Labour last time with the Conservatives in second, this seat (where incumbent Albert Owen is standing down) may well also see a strong challenge from Plaid Cymru (who, of course, hold the seat for the National Assembly).

Conservatives

Vulnerable	% Swing	Targets	% Swing
Preseli Pembrokeshire	0.4	Brecon and Radnor*	2.3
Aberconwy	1.0	Wrexham	2.6
Vale of Glamorgan	2.1	Vale of Clwyd	3.1
Carmarthen West & South Pembs	3.7	Gower	3.6
Clwyd West	4.3	Cardiff North	4.0
		Newport West*	4.2
		Delyn	5.4
		Bridgend	5.5
		Clwyd South	5.8
		Alyn & Deeside	5.9
		Ynys Môn	7.1

*Based on 2019 by-election, not 2017 general election

The potential Conservative battlefield in Wales is largely the converse of the Labour table: the party's most obviously vulnerable seats are all ones where Labour came second in 2017, and nearly all potential Conservative targets are Labour-held.

The main exception is Brecon and Radnor – scene of the high profile by-election during the first days of the Johnson Premiership during the summer. Here, the Liberal Democrats managed a large swing for Jane Dodds to take the seat in the by-election; it needs a much smaller swing back to the Tories for Fay Jones to retake it for the Conservatives.

Plaid Cymru

Vulnerable	% Swing	Targets	% Swing
Arfon	0.2	Ynys Môn	7.2
Ceredigion	0.2	Llanelli	17.6
		Blaenau Gwent	18.4

Writing down the figures for Plaid Cymru perhaps helps to explain why they opposed the calling of the general election. The election offers the party little scope for gains, and plenty for losses. The party equalled its best ever Westminster seat total of four in 2017. But two of those four seats were won by achingly close margins. Arfon is clearly vulnerable if Labour should have a good general election, while the Ceredigion seat of Ben Lake is certainly under threat from the Liberal Democrat revival. Meanwhile, Plaid have only limited obvious scope for gains. The party's main target seat is one where they came third in in 2017! Meanwhile, the next two most winnable seats for Plaid, at least on paper, are both seats where the party needs huge swings to gain them and also places where Plaid have had notable internal difficulties within their local constituency parties. Simply holding steady at four seats would constitute a good general election for Plaid.

Liberal Democrats

Vulnerable	% Swing	Targets	% Swing
Brecon and Radnor	2.3	Ceredigion	0.2
		Montgomeryshire	13.3
		Cardiff Central	24.5

After having been wiped off the board in Wales in 2017, for the first time ever since the creation of a Liberal party, the only way was up for the Welsh Liberal Democrats. Their by-election win in Brecon and Radnor put them back in the game. But Jane Dodds will likely have a hard fight to hold on to her seat there. Among other seats, Ceredigion is an obvious marginal, and the party have popular former MP Mark Williams to fight it for them. Beyond that, however, the scope for Liberal Democrat progress in Wales looks very limited. The party's performance in 2017 was so dire that they only saved deposit in two other seats across the whole of Wales. Regaining Montgomery looks like a big task, although the retirement of the popular local Conservative MP Glyn Davies may help the Lib-Dems. But re-taking Cardiff Central looks nearly impossible.

Brexit Party

The Brexit Party's poll ratings have declined since the May European elections, and it is likely to be very difficult for them to actually win a parliamentary seat in Wales. However, it remains very possible that they could poll significantly in plenty of seats. Knowing where they might do best is a little difficult to predict: the party obviously has no past general election record, while even if we consider them the successors to UKIP, the latter's 2017 performance was dismal as to give us little guidance. Perhaps the best place to look for areas of likely relative Brexit Party strength is to see where they polled most strongly in the European elections. Although those elections were counted at the level of local authority boundaries, Prof Chris Hanretty of Royal Holloway-University of London has [estimated](#) constituency-level results. From those estimates, the highest Brexit Party vote shares in May were in the following seats:

Constituency	Brexit Party Estimated %
Alyn and Deeside	43.4
Delyn	40.6
Blaenau Gwent	39.5
Islwyn	39.4
Torfaen	38.9
Clwyd South	38.8
Carmarthen West & South Pembs	37.3
Newport East	36.9
Preseli Pembrokeshire	36.8
Caerphilly	36.0
Clwyd West	36.0

Thus, we can see that the Brexit Party in May generally performed most strongly in north east Wales and in the eastern south Wales valleys. Given that several of these seats are marginals, the strength of the Brexit Party performance there – and who they take any votes from -could well be very important, even if the party is not strong enough to win these seats themselves.