# Who Will Win the 2019 General Election?

## *By Dr Graham Gudgin*

In one sense the 'People's Vote' campaign achieved their repeat vote on Brexit. This is not in the form of the desired second referendum but in yet another general election. For Leavers the circumstances of this vote are favourable.

A pro-Brexit Government can influence the terms of the election. In Boris Johnson the Tories have a formidable campaigner and he begins with a commanding lead in the polls. Even so, the 2019 election is highly uncertain.

There are several reasons why few pollsters are confident of the likely outcome.. Although Boris Johnson's Conservatives are well ahead in the polls as the six-week campaign begins, the memory of 2017 looms large. A 20% lead for Theresa May at the start of the 2017 campaign melted away to almost nothing and the Tories emerged with no majority in Parliament.

Party allegiance has become increasingly fluid as views on Brexit cut across traditional allegiances. The multiplicity of major parties, in a first-past-the-post election, also makes the outcome in seats highly volatile. Even small movements in support can result in huge swings in seats. The volatility is magnified when one or more parties' votes are geographically evenly spread across constituencies. Even with a majority of votes the outcome in seats is uncertain.

### The 2017 Background

An irony of the current situation is that there had appeared to be a return to two-party dominance in British general elections. In 2017 the Conservatives and Labour gained 82% of the votes between them and the Liberal Democrats only 8%. In 2019 polls show a collapse in the Labour vote from 40% in 2017 to only 25% in 2019. Tory support, at 37% (compared with 42%) in 2017, is holding up better as Johnson has clawed back half of the poll gains of the Brexit Party.

The Liberal Democrats clear, if undemocratic, position on reversing Brexit has led to a doubling in their support, now running at 17-20% in the polls. Their recovery is mainly responsible for Labour's loss of support, since both parties compete for the same anti-Brexit vote.

The starting point in the current struggle to win seats is the legacy left by the 2017 general election. This is shown in the chart below in which each dot represents one of the 632 constituencies in Great Britain. The election triangle is divided into three areas by the red lines. The upper left area represents Labour wins, and the lower right Tory wins. The lower left area includes constituencies won by other parties including the Scottish Nationalists and Plaid Cymru. Liberal Democrat wins are mostly within the oval, showing that they were precarious victories quite close to being won by the Tories.
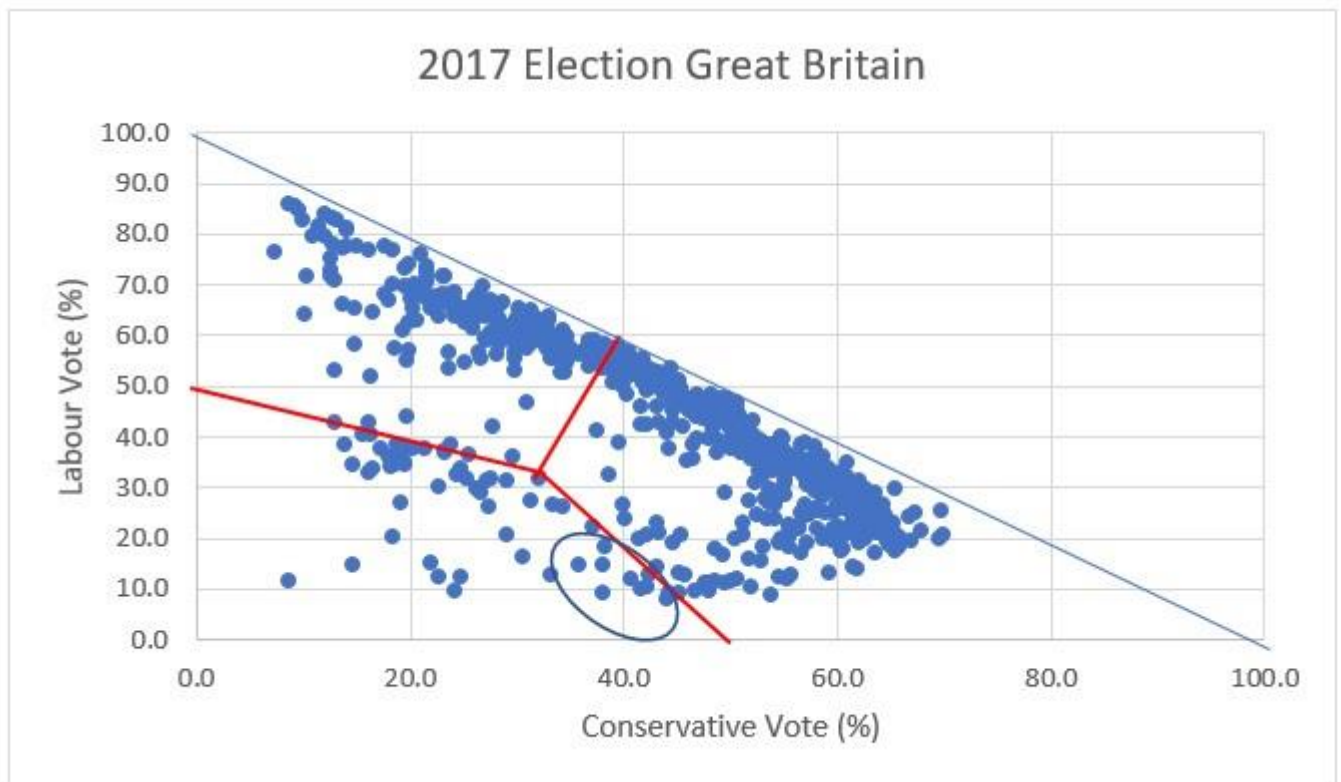


The great majority of constituencies are close to the upper diagonal line indicating that they were two-party contests with few votes going to any other party,

**Party Support in 2019**

How is this likely to change in 2019? Rising support for the Liberal Democrats and Brexit parties threatens to convert the 2019 election

into an unstable and unpredictable four-party contest in England and Wales. The withdrawal of Brexit Party candidates from Tory-held seats makes little difference to the instability.

The prospect of a four-party election in 2019 threatens similar instability to the three-party contests of the 1920s, or the Liberal (or Liberal Democrat) upsurges in the 1970s and in 2010. The potential instability of contests between three of four parties in many constituencies is exacerbated by an increased threat of local tactical voting including with the modern innovation of co-ordination through social media.

**Projected Outcomes for 2019.**

To assess what could happen in the 2019 election the outcome has been modelled across all 650 constituencies. The projection below assumes that national party support in the polls at the start of the election campaign continues through to polling day, i.e:

Conservatives 37%

Labour 25%

Liberal Democrats 17%

Brexit Party 11%

SNP (in Scotland) (37%)

Plaid Cymru (in Wales) (11%)

The projected vote in each constituency starts with the actual vote in 2017 and assumes a uniform national swing in each constituency. The projection distributes the Brexit Party's 11% support across constituencies in proportion to UKIP support in the 2017 general election. Three-quarters of the votes for the Brexit party are assumed to come from the Tories and one quarter from Labour. Votes for the Green Party, SNP and Plaid Cymru are initially assumed to be unchanged from 2017.

The resulting number of seats predicted from this exercise are as follows:

| | |
|---|---|
| Conservatives | 372 |
| Labour | 178 |
| Liberal Democrats | 21 |
| Brexit Party | 3 |
| SNP | 51 |
| Plaid Cymru | 4 |

In addition, the Green Party is assumed to hold its single seat in Brighton and the Speaker changes from a Tory to Labour. The overall outcome is then a surprisingly large Conservative majority of 95.  If DUP support for the Government continues and Sinn Fein continue their policy of abstention, the Consrvative's effective majority could rise to 127.

The pattern of victories across mainland constituencies is shown in the election triangle below.
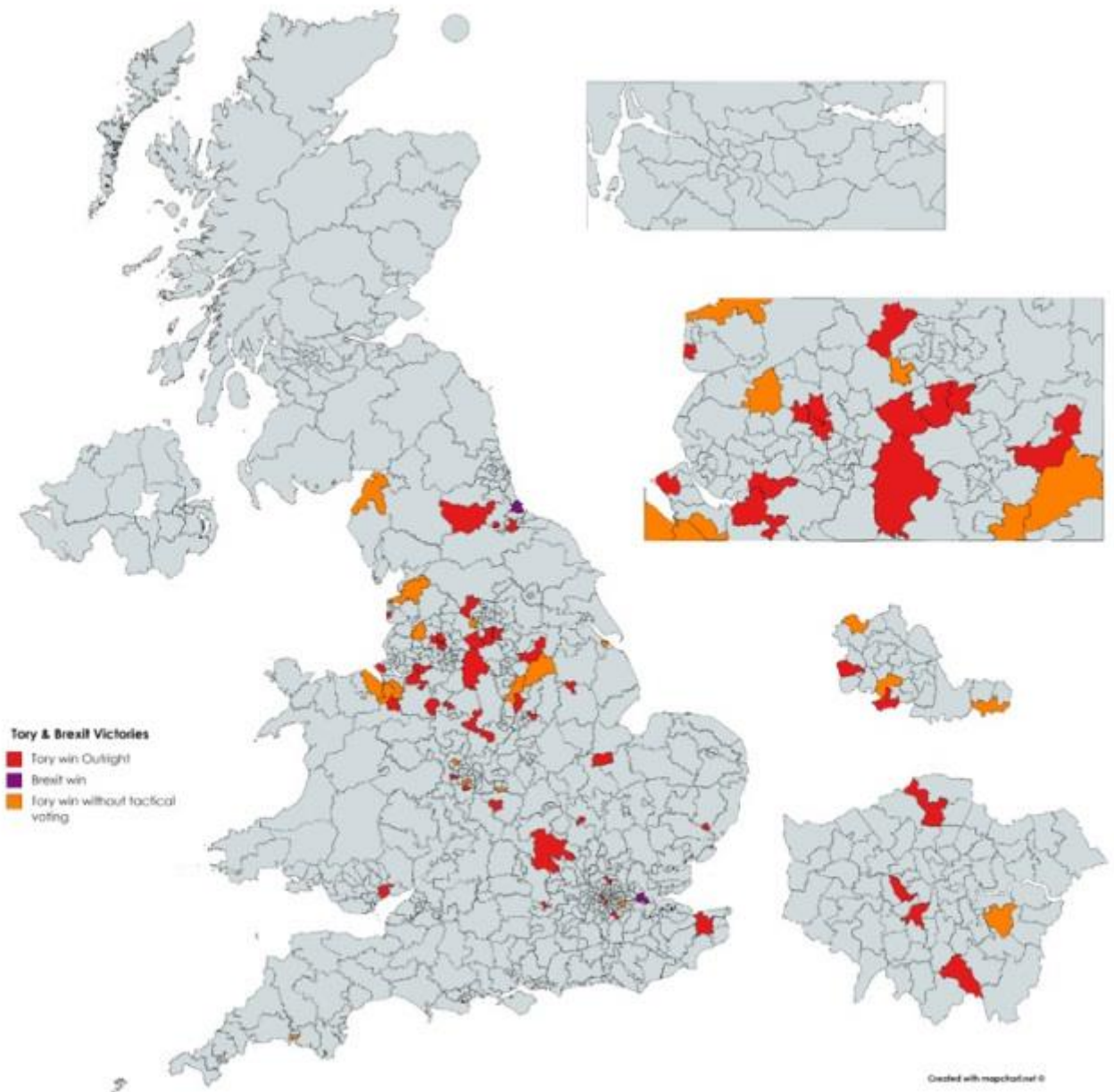
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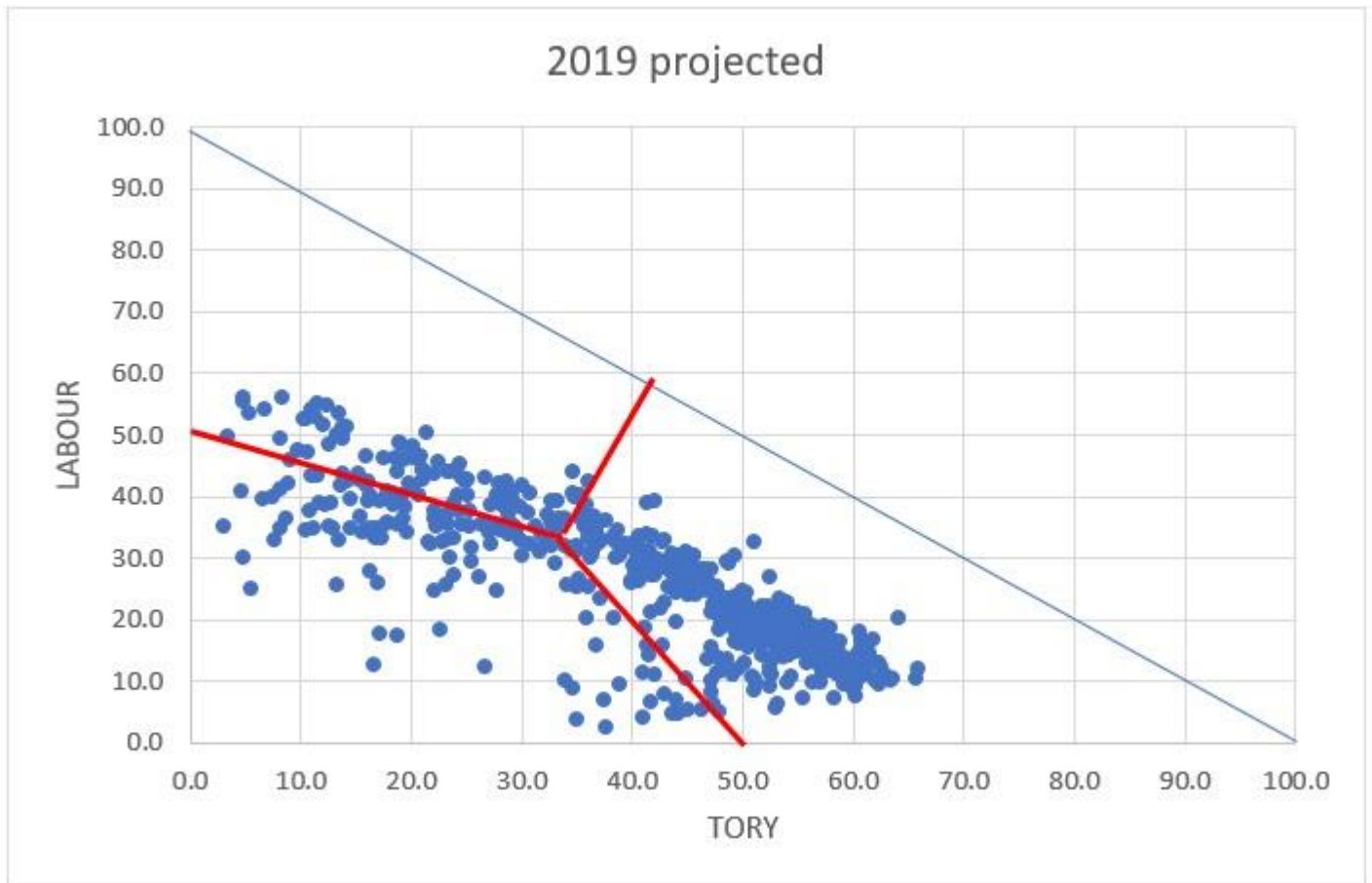
This diagram shows a classic multi-party outcome with many seats closer to the (red) winning lines. The Liberal Democrat upsurge takes many more seats from Labour than from Conservatives because the Brexit fault-lines pit Labour against Liberal Democrats on the pro-remain side. It is this split opposition that underpins the projected Tory victory.

On the other side, even if the Brexit party contests all 650 seats, its 11% of the vote is too little to take many seats from the Tories. The prediction is that the Brexit party might win only three seats (Hartlepool in the North-East Rother Valley in Yorkshire and Thurrock in Essex). Nigel Farage's decision not to contest Tory-held seats makes little difference to these projections because virtually all of these constituencies were expected to be won by the Tories in any case. The exception is Thurrock which the Brexit Party might have won. Where a Brexit Party withdrawal might have made a difference, i.e. in vulnerable Labour-held seats, the continued presence of the Brexit Party leaves the projected outcome unchanged.

This outcome assumes no local tactical voting.  To allow for tactical voting, a second scenario adopts a further assumption. This is that 25% of potential Liberal Democrat and Green voters switch to supporting Labour (or the SNP) in areas where the contest is close enough to make a difference. Even with the formal pact between LibDems, Greens and Plaid Cymru in 60 seats this would result in Labour winning only a further 21 seats and the SNP an extra two. The Conservative majority over all other parties then falls to 53. Again, the effective majority with continued DUP support and Sinn Fein abstention is much larger. The pattern of projected Tory gains across the UK is shown in the map below.

**Projected Conservative Gains in the 2019 General Election**

**Tory & Brexit Victories**
- Tory win Outright
- Brexit win
- Tory win without tactical voting

Created with mapchart.net ©

Is this a realistic outcome?  Could the degree of tactical voting between Liberal democrats be greater than the 25% assumed here? This is improbable since tactical voting is more difficult to organise even with modern social media communication. In a seat like Birmingham Edgbaston for instance, Labour (55%) had a clear lead over the Conservatives (40%) in 2017 with the Liberal democrats achieving only 4% and 1% for the Green party candidate.

Our prediction for 2019 is a very narrow win for the Tories which could be over-turned if the Green party stood aside and all of its supporters voted Labour. Since the result was not close in 2017 Liberal Democrat

supporters may not feel a need to switch to Labour (and hence to Jeremy Corbyn whom Liberal Democrats generally dislike) in order to prevent the Tories from winning.

Relatively few seats may thus be won through tactical voting. In addition, the Brexit Party's vote may melt away in constituencies where they do stand especially if a pro-Leave Tory is standing. Feedback from Brexit candidates suggests some resistance from Leavers in supporting the Brexit Party in such situations.

## Conclusion

The methods used above to project the outcome of the 2019 election still leave some implausible results. The assumed uniform swing towards the Liberal Democrats generates a quite large Lib Dem vote in northern, often former coalfield, constituencies with Labour majorities. Many of these areas like Ashfield in Nottinghamshire had a strong pro-Leave vote in the 2019 European election and have no tradition of supporting the Liberal Democrats. Even if some of these projected LibDem votes instead stay with Labour the projected Tory win is however unchanged especially with no Brexit candidate.

Without a major change in party support during the election campaign it looks likely that the Conservatives will win a comfortable majority. If so, Boris Johnson's Withdrawal Agreement will be passed and talks on a free-trade agreement will proceed. These, however, are big 'ifs'. Differential turnout may also change the result. In some areas working-class 'leave' voters are turning against voting on the grounds that their vote is ignored anyway. If this led to a large fall in turnout in Leave areas the outcome might change, although in exactly which direction is difficult to predict.