

Trouble at the Labour (West Midlands) Corral? Preliminary Election Musings

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Yesterday's "announcement" by Nigel Farage that the Brexit Party would not be standing candidates in the 317 seats won by the Conservative Party in the 2017 General Election should have surprised no-one.

For as Farage himself stated in pointing out the bleeding obvious, to field candidates against sitting Tory MPs would risk splitting the leave vote and "usher in dozens of Liberal Democrat MPs" and therefore the increased prospect of another ("second") referendum on EU membership.[\[1\]](#)

Farage went on to state that the Brexit Party would "concentrate our total effort into all the seats that are held by the Labour party"[\[2\]](#). But what are Labour's overall chances in the upcoming Election on December 12th?

In seeking to answer this, I will focus this article on the West Midlands, where much of the campaigning effort of the Tories and the Brexit Party will be focussed, in the hope that they can pick up a swag of Labour-held seats.

The starting point of course has to be the current poll predictions as to the likely outcome of the election. Most polls predict a Conservative majority post-election; premised on likely gains in the Midlands and North of England, from Labour.

YouGov, for example, recently commissioned fieldwork (conducted between the 7th October – 4th November) to look at voting intention by region[\[3\]](#), the results of which are reproduced below.

Regional Voting Intention (% , figures in parentheses related to 2017 vote share)

Region	Conservative	Brexit Party*	Labour	Lib Dem	Green	SNP/Plaid
North East	26 (34)	19 (4)	32 (55)	15 (5)	7 (1)	
North West	33 (36)	14 (2)	30 (55)	17 (5)	5 (1)	
Yorkshire	34 (41)	14 (3)	29 (49)	16 (5)	7 (1)	
East Midlands	45 (51)	12 (2)	22 (41)	15 (4)	6 (2)	
West Midlands	43 (49)	12 (2)	23 (43)	14 (4)	7 (2)	
East of Eng	45 (55)	14 (3)	17 (33)	18 (8)	5 (2)	
London	29 (33)	6 (1)	39 (55)	19 (9)	5 (2)	
South East	41 (54)	12 (2)	16 (29)	23 (11)	6 (3)	
South West	41 (51)	13 (1)	17 (29)	21 (15)	7 (2)	
Wales	28 (34)	15 (2)	29 (49)	12 (5)	3 (0)	12 (10)
Scotland	22 (29)	6 (0)	12 (27)	13 (7)	4 (0)	42 (37)

Source: <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/08/regional-voting-intentions-show-both-main-parties->

*Figures in parentheses refer to UKIP 2017 election vote share.

Evident from this table is that the predicted vote share for both major parties is less than that achieved, and that Labour appear to be particularly suffering in this regard, with pro-remain voters migrating to the Lib Dems, Greens or SNP (in Scotland).

To the extent that the Brexit Party appear to be making inroads, it is difficult to tell whether this is more at the expense of Labour or the Tories. However, at face value, these figures (and other polling figures) don't look good for Labour.

Very simply put, if the "Remain" vote splits in the manner suggested above, then it is all but certain that the Conservatives will gain an overall majority in the next Parliament, with Martin Baxter at Electoral Calculus currently predicting an overall Tory majority of 114.^[4]

The Midlands (and West Midlands in particular) look especially promising for the Tories, with a number of Labour marginal seats looking highly vulnerable. This is reproduced in the table below (I define "marginal" here as a majority of less than 5,000).

West Midlands: Marginal Seats (2017 Election result)

CONSTITUENCY NAME	RESULT	FIRST PARTY	SECOND PARTY	MAJORITY	TURNOUT
DUDLEY NORTH	Lab hold	Lab	Con	22	63%
NEWCASTLE-UNDER-LYME	Lab hold	Lab	Con	30	67%
STOKE-ON-TRENT SOUTH	Con gain from Lab	Con	Lab	663	63%
TELFORD	Con hold	Con	Lab	720	66%
WARWICK AND LEAMINGTON	Lab gain from Con	Lab	Con	1206	73%
WOLVERHAMPTON SOUTH WEST	Lab hold	Lab	Con	2185	71%
STOKE-ON-TRENT NORTH	Lab hold	Lab	Con	2359	58%
WORCESTER	Con hold	Con	Lab	2508	70%
WALSALL NORTH	Con gain from Lab	Con	Lab	2601	57%
STOKE-ON-TRENT CENTRAL	Lab hold	Lab	Con	3897	58%
WEST BROMWICH WEST	Lab hold	Lab	Con	4460	55%
WOLVERHAMPTON NORTH EAST	Lab hold	Lab	Con	4587	60%
BIRMINGHAM, NORTHFIELD	Lab hold	Lab	Con	4667	61%
NUNEATON	Con hold	Con	Lab	4739	67%

Source: House of Commons Library[\[5\]](#)

At face value, the Tories could easily pick up 9 seats from Labour in the West Midlands, with Dudley North and Newcastle-Under-Lyme looking all but lost and 7 others “at risk”.

Even seats such as Wolverhampton North East and Birmingham Northfield (where the former MG Rover factory was) come into play here.

However, before we rush headlong into embracing such a prediction, let’s consider some mitigating factors. As the 2017 election result demonstrated, polling methodologies need to be interpreted with caution.

As the above figures for the West Midlands attest, turnout is critical, as “none-of-the-above” typically “wins” most elections.

Most non-voters would not choose to vote in the same pattern as actual voters. They typically more left-wing, younger, more mobile, more likely to rent a home etc. Youth turnout, student turnout and turnout amongst less-educated individuals is particularly hard to model.

If such groups are mobilised by Labour (as in 2017) then this could serve to increase the Labour vote share significantly beyond that predicted. The recent surge of new electoral registrations amongst young people^[6] suggests that this could be occurring.

Where will people vote? Differential turnout across constituencies is particularly hard to model, so if the predicted gains in vote share largely fall in seats already won by the Tories (e.g., Stoke-on-Trent South, Walsall North, Dudley South, Nuneaton) then that would nullify a gain in vote share translating to an increase in seats.

Additionally, getting hold of a representative sample is hard, and people who choose to answer questions are often more politically motivated than most.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, people do change their minds! The different parties have different strengths and we don't know how that will play out.

There is lots of money on the "Leave" side, and considerable technical expertise in terms of targeting via social media etc. (potent in part because of a willingness to cut corners in terms of factual accuracy).

Labour, in contrast, have a very strong grassroots campaign, with vastly more members willing to be "boots on the ground", and the ability to bus a number of passionate supporters quickly into key seats. This considerable organising ability, as shown in 2017, could make a difference.

So, with Leader debates and another month of campaigning, there is much for all Parties to play for. The show-down at the West Midlands Corral is well and truly on.

[1] <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2019/nov/11/brexit-party-will-not-contest-317-tory-seats-nigel-farage-says>

[2] <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/boris-johnson-news-live-brexit-latest-today-general-election-farage-a9197931.html>

[3] <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2019/11/08/regional-voting-intentions-show-both-main-parties->

[4] <https://www.electoralcalculus.co.uk/homepage.html>

[5] <https://researchbriefings.parliament.uk/ResearchBriefing/Summary/CBP-7979>

[6] <https://www.gov.uk/performance/register-to-vote>