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GUIDE TO SCOTLAND'S 2017 COUNCIL ELECTIONS

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INTRODUCTION

Scotland goes to the polls on 4 May to elect a new set of councillors for each of the country's 32 local councils. A total of 1,227 seats are at stake. The election will be conducted using the single transferable vote (STV) system in wards that will all elect either three or four members. This will be the third time that the STV system has been used to elect Scotland's local councillors; previous elections under the system were held in 2007 and 2012.

In this briefing, we begin with a brief explanation of the single transferable voting system. We then consider how well the parties did on the occasion of the last elections in 2012 and the political backdrop to the elections this time around, before examining changes to ward boundaries and the pattern of candidatures. Finally, we consider the prospects for the parties.

THE SINGLE TRANSFERABLE VOTE

STV is a preferential voting system which produces results that are approximately proportional to votes cast. It is also used in all elections in Northern Ireland other than in those for the province's MPs. Outside the UK it is used in all elections in the Irish Republic, Malta, the Australian Senate, in some state and local elections in Australia, and in local elections in New Zealand. It might be noted that these are all countries with strong links to the UK where the system was first widely promoted in the middle of the 19th century by Thomas Hare.

Under the system, voters are invited to place the candidates whose names appear on the ballot paper in order of preference, 1,2,3 etc. They may rank as many or as few candidates as they wish. Candidates may stand under a party label, while parties are at liberty to nominate more than one candidate if they so wish. However, voters are not any obligation to take cognisance of the party labels. Thus, for example, a voter might give their first preference to one of two candidates standing for party A, but then give their second preference to a candidate for party B, their third preference to a candidate for party C, while only giving the second of the two candidates representing party A their fourth preference. Equally, however, a voter can if they so wish give their first preference to one of the candidates for party A, their second preference for the other candidate nominated by party A, and not express a preference for any other candidates at all. The order on which such voters place the candidates may be influenced by the order in which they appear on the ballot paper (Curtice, 2012; Curtice and Marsh, 2014).

The counting process is rather more complicated. First of all, the total number of first preference votes given to each candidate is tallied. At this point the quota of votes a candidate needs to win in order to secure election is calculated. This figure is the number obtained after adding one to the result of dividing the number of votes cast by one more than the total number of candidates to be elected. The logic behind this calculation is that it represents the smallest number of votes that only the number of candidates to be elected can secure. As in Scotland all wards elect either three or four members, the quota is in effect either ¼, i.e. 25% of the vote (plus 1) or 1/5, i.e. 20% of the vote (plus 1).

Any candidate whose tally of first preference votes equals or exceeds the quota is automatically elected. However, typically, fewer than the total number of candidates to be elected will secure that many first preferences. As a result, a process then begins whereby votes are transferred between candidates in accordance with voters' second and subsequent preferences until the required number of candidates has been duly elected.

The first stage in that process is the redistribution of the surplus, that is the votes above the quota needed for election, obtained by any candidate(s) elected via first preferences alone. This is done by examining the second preferences expressed by all that candidate's first preference voters and transferring them accordingly – but at a diminished value. So, if, for example, a candidate won 5,000 first preferences but the quota was only 4,000, each vote would be transferred at a value of just .20. Any subsequent transfers of these votes at later stages of the count would also be at the value of .20.

If after this redistribution has taken place the number of candidates that have reached the quota is still less than the number of candidates to be elected, the candidate with the fewest preferences (at that stage in the count) is eliminated and all their votes redistributed in accordance with the next preference expressed on the relevant ballot papers. This process of gradual elimination (and, when appropriate, the redistribution of surplus votes) then continues until the requisite number of candidates have reached the quota. However, during the course of this process some votes are likely to become non-transferable because the voter has not expressed any further preferences. As a result, it may be the case that even though only two candidates are left in the count, neither has reached the quota. In that event, the candidate with the more votes is allocated the last seat.

The complexity of this system of transfers, and especially the fact that votes may be transferred at fractional values, means that

conducting a STV count by hand can be a long and difficult process. However, in Scotland the task of tallying and transferring votes is undertaken by scanning all ballot papers and deploying appropriate computer software to undertake the necessary transfers. Thus, once all the ballot papers have been scanned the outcome of the election can be determined relatively quickly thereafter.

STV produces results that are approximately proportional to votes cast because each voter only has one (albeit transferable) vote while multiple seats are being allocated in relation to success in achieving a quota that is less than half the vote. For example, if in a four seat ward candidates standing for party A win 45% of the first preference vote, those representing party B 25%, and party C 30%, then it is almost bound to be the case that party A will win 2 seats (or 50%), and parties B and C 1 seat (25%) each. Of course, the more seats there are to be allocated, the closer the match between votes and seats is likely to be, and the fact that wards only elect three or four members acts as a constraint on the proportionality of the system as implemented in Scotland's local council elections.

THE 2012 ELECTIONS

At first glance, the 2012 local elections were a success story for the SNP. As Table 1 shows, the party won more first preference votes and seats across Scotland as a whole than any other party, narrowly pushing Labour into second place. It was the first time that the party had topped the nationwide tally of votes in a local election.

TABLE 1: SUMMARY OF RESULT OF 2012 SCOTTISH LOCAL ELECTIONS

	1st Prefereences	%	Seats	Majority Control Councils
Conservative	206,599	13.3	115	0
Labour	488,703	31.4	394	4
Liberal Democrat	103,087	6.6	71	0
SNP	503,233	32.3	425	2
Scottish Green	36,000	2.3	14	0
Independent	188,701	12.1	200	3
Others	30,150	1.9	4	0

Source: Curtice (2012). Note: One extra seat was added to a ward in West Lothian, and thus the tally of gains and losses in the final column does not sum to zero.

However, as compared with the outcome of other recent elections the SNP performed relatively poorly. The party won a little under a third of the first preference votes, whereas, as Table 2

shows, at the last two Scottish Parliament elections together with the most recent UK general election the party won between 45% and 50% of the nationwide vote. The difference cannot simply be accounted for by the fact that around one in eight votes were cast for independent candidates. Moreover, when it came to councils where a party secured majority control (limited in number as they were thanks to the use of proportional representation) Labour emerged with four councils as opposed the SNP's two. In particular, the Labour tally included retention of majority control of Glasgow, a prize that the SNP had fought earnestly to deny their opponents.

TABLE 2: VOTES WON AT ELECTIONS IN SCOTLAND 2011-2016

	2011	2012	2015	2016
Conservative	13.9	13.3	14.9	22.0
Labour	31.7	31.4	24.3	22.6
Liberal Democrat	7.9	6.6	7.5	7.8
SNP	45.4	32.3	50.0	46.5
Others	1.1	14.4	3.3	1.1

Note: Figures for 2011 and 2016 are for the Scottish Parliament constituency vote.

Thus, relatively speaking at least, the SNP are defending a relatively low baseline of support in this year's elections. In contrast, Labour have not done so well in any subsequent election as they did in 2012. This would seem to suggest that unless the SNP 'flop' again in the local elections the party could well make gains, while Labour would be on the back foot. Meanwhile, we should also note that the Conservatives performed markedly more strongly in the most recent Scottish Parliament election than they have done at any other ballot for the last twenty years.

What also distinguished the 2012 election from the other contests in Table 2 is the much lower level of turnout. As noted in Table 1, just 39% cast a valid vote, in what was the first round

of local elections since 1995 not to be held on the same day as a parliamentary election. The figure represented the lowest level of turnout in a local government election since the reorganisation of Scottish local government in 1974. This doubtless reflected the wider trend towards lower turnouts that has been evident across the UK, and cast doubt on the proposition that the abolition of safe wards instigated by the move to STV would help bring significantly more voters to the polls. It remains to be seen whether the intensification of the political atmosphere caused by the announcement that a UK general election will now take place a few weeks hence on June 8 will bring more voters to the local polls, or whether the prospect of another election in four weeks' time discourages voters from bothering with the local elections.

THE POLITICAL BACKDROP

The 2017 Scottish local elections are taking place in a very different political environment from that which was in place in 2012. The 2014 independence referendum has had a transformative effect on the country's electoral battleground. That ballot resulted both in a substantial long-term increase in support for independence and increased the strength of the link between how people vote and their views about how Scotland should be governed (Curtice, 2017). As a result, the SNP vote now seems to rest much more clearly on voters' wish to express support for independence, and does so irrespective of the nature of the election in question.

Never was this more evident than in the 2015 UK general election. Hitherto the SNP had always performed less well in elections to the UK House of Commons than in those to the Scottish Parliament. In the four Westminster elections held between 1997 and 2010 the party had won on average just a fifth of the vote. In contrast, in the four Holyrood elections held between 1999 and 2011 the party on average won a third of the vote on the constituency ballot – and even if we leave aside the party's remarkable success in 2011, the figure still stands at 29%. But in the 2015 general election the party won almost exactly half of all votes cast, a performance that it did not quite manage to emulate last year when it won 47% in the Holyrood contest.

It thus seems less likely that the party's performance in this year's local elections will be markedly adrift of its support in other recent elections – at least so long as its overall national popularity remains more or less undiminished (on which more below). Meanwhile the debate about independence has been given a new fillip from the fallout from the EU referendum held in June of last year. In that referendum, the UK as a whole voted to leave the EU by 52% to 48%, but in Scotland as many as 62% voted to remain while only 38% backed leaving. In the wake of that outcome the Scottish Government, which backed a Remain vote, indicated that the prospect of holding a second referendum on independence was back 'on the table'.

As a result, political discourse in recent months has focussed on the merits or otherwise of holding a second independence referendum, an issue on which the attitudes of both politicians and voters are closely aligned with their views on the merits of independence in the first place. In December2016 the Scottish Government published a white paper outlining the kind of Brexit deal that it thought that the UK in general and certainly Scotland in particular should be aiming to seek (Scottish Government, 2016). Inter alia, it proposed continued membership of the EU single market and the continued application of the EU rules on freedom of movement. It also stated that it would drop the possibility of holding a second referendum if Scotland at least continued to enjoy a close relationship with the EU following the UK's withdrawal.

However, the following month it became clear from a speech given by the Prime Minister (May, 2017) that the Scottish Government's vision for Brexit was sharply at odds with the negotiating stance proposed by the UK government, viz. that the UK should end freedom of movement and thus not seek continued membership of the single market. By March the Scottish Government decided that the difference between them and the UK government appeared to be unbridgeable and that a second independence referendum should be held once the Brexit negotiations had been concluded. The UK government's response was 'not now', and that any such referendum should only be held once the UK's withdrawal from the EU had been well and truly completed. Given that the UK Parliament would have to sanction any independence referendum of the kind that was held in September 2014, the result is currently a constitutional impasse. Consequently, the Conservatives in particular are appealing to voters to use the local elections to express their opposition to holding a second independence referendum, while the more recent decision of the Prime Minister to call a general election on 8 June means that the intertwined issues of what of Brexit the UK should seek and whether there should be a second independence referendum are securing a good airing in the media in the run-up to the election.

BOUNDARY CHANGES

In most, though not all councils, the elections will be fought on new ward boundaries, following proposals for rewarding made by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland. The commission itself suggested that the ward boundaries of all but two councils, Orkney and West Lothian, should be changed. However, because of the local controversy that they raised, the Scottish Government rejected the Commission's proposals for new wards in Argyll & Bute, Dundee and the Scottish Borders, while at the same time it decided that the rewarding of Comhairlie nan Eilean Siar and Shetland should not proceed because an Islands Bill that, inter alia, would permit the introduction of one and two member wards for these councils, was currently going through the parliamentary process. Thus, all in all, new ward boundaries are being used on 25 of Scotland's 32 councils.

In many instances these ward boundary changes also result in changes in the total number of councillors to be elected. Details of these changes are shown for each council in Table 3. It will be noted that the biggest increases in numbers of councillors to be elected are in some of the larger urban authorities, most notably Edinburgh, Glasgow and North Lanarkshire, while some more rural councils, most notably Dumfries & Galloway and Highland, will experience a reduction in the number of councillors. This reflects a decision by the Local Government Boundary Commission for Scotland that the level of social deprivation in a council area should be one of the criteria used in determining how many councillors an area should have, with more councillors being allocated to councils with relatively large pockets of social deprivation. The net effect on the total number of seats, however, has been minimal; at 1,227, the total is just four more than in 2012.

TABLE 3: CHANGES IN NUMBER OF WARDS & COUNCILLORS IN COUNCILS WITH WARD BOUNDARY CHANGES

Council	Change in number of wards	Councillor
Aberdeen	0	+2
Aberdeenshire	0	+2
Angus	0	-1
Clackmannan	0	n/c
Dumfries & Galloway	-1	-4
East Ayrshire	0	0
East Dunbartonshire	-1	-2
East Lothian	-1	-1
East Renfrewshire	-1	-2
Edinburgh	0	+5
Falkirk	0	-2
Fife	-1	-3
Glasgow	+2	+6
Highland	-1	-6
Inverclyde	+1	+2
Midlothianl	0	0
Moray	0	0
North Ayrshire	+2	+3
North Lanarkshire	+1	+7
Perth & Kinross	0	-1
Renfrewshire	+1	+3
South Ayrshire	0	-2
South Lanarkshire	0	-3
Stirling	0	+1
West Dunbartonshire	0	0
TOTAL	+1	+4

According to estimates made by Prof. David Denver of Lancaster University, the net effect of these boundary changes is slightly beneficial to the SNP. He estimates that if the 2012 election had been run on the new ward boundaries, the party would have won 438 seats, 16 more than they actually won. In contrast, the other three main parties are thought to be relatively little affected; the changes are reckoned to 'cost' the Conservatives three seats, and the Liberal Democrats one, while Labour would be one seat better off. The changes are also thought to have no net effect on the tally of the Greens or Other parties.

The biggest losers are Independents who are estimated to be down seven seats. Such councillors are more common on rural councils, and thus the fall in independents reflects the decision of the Boundary Commission to shift seats towards more social deprived parts of Scotland.

For the most part the estimated impact of the boundary changes does not result in radical changes in the tallies of the parties within individual councils. It is reckoned that the SNP would still have had a majority in Angus, though it would have been a majority of two rather than one. Labour's majority in Glasgow would still have been nine, and while its majority would have been 11 rather than 12 in North Lanarkshire, it would have been five rather than four in Renfrewshire. However, Denver estimates that Labour would not have won a majority in West Dunbartonshire; instead of having a majority of two it would have had just half of all the seats.

There are no councils where a party that failed to secure a majority in 2012, but would have done so on the new boundaries. There are though a number of instances where Labour would no longer have been the largest party, and thus would have had less bargaining power in post-election talks about forming a new administration, including not necessarily being best placed to claim the leadership of the council. In Dumfries & Galloway, where the party runs a minority administration, the largest party would have been the Conservatives. In East Lothian, run by Labour in tandem with the Conservatives, the SNP would have been the largest party. Meanwhile in Falkirk, which Labour have been governing in coalition with the Conservatives and Independents, in East Renfrewshire, run by Labour in tandem with tandem with the SNP and Independents, and in Edinburgh, where the party formed a coalition with the SNP, Labour would have had only the same

number of seats as the SNP. On the other hand, Denver estimates that in South Lanarkshire, where in 2012 Labour won 33 of the 67 seats, leaving them one short of an overall majority but where three gains from the SNP in subsequent by-elections have enabled the party to secure overall control, Labour would have won exactly half of the reduced tally of 64 seats. Still, on balance the ward boundary changes have seemingly not done Labour any favours in its attempt to retain its position in Scottish local government.

5 CANDIDATES

One indication of how the parties themselves view their prospects is the number of candidates that they decide to nominate. Under STV it rarely makes sense for a party to nominate as many candidates as there are vacancies to be filled as the proportional nature of the system means that it is highly unlikely that they will win all the seats, while, by nominating too many candidates a party can run the risk that it loses out because its candidates are eliminated too early from the count to pick up transfers from other eliminated candidates. On the other hand, nominating too few candidates can mean a party loses out too. Thus, between them these two considerations require parties to make a considered judgement of their chances.

TABLE 4: NUMBER OF CANDIDATES NOMINATED BY PARTY AND CHANGE SINCE 2012

	Total Candidates	Change since 2012
Conservative	380	+18
Labour	453	-44
Liberal Democrat	247	n/c
SNP	627	+14
Scottish Greens	218	+132
Independent	499	n/c
Others	148	-78
TOTAL	2572	+76

Table 4 shows that overall 76 more candidates are standing this time than did in 2012. That said, for the first time since the introduction of STV, there are three wards in which the number of candidates nominated does not exceed the number, of seats, and in these instances there will therefore be no election. Two of the wards in question are in the Northern Isles, one on Orkney, one on Shetland, where between them five Independent and one SNP candidate have consequently been elected. The other instance is the relatively remote South Kintyre ward in Argyll & Bute where one Conservative, one Liberal Democrat, and one SNP candidate have found themselves elected without a contest.

The overall increase in the number of candidates is primarily accounted for by the decision of the Greens to more than double the number of their candidates, a decision doubtless influenced by the party's progress in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, in which it narrowly overtook the Liberal Democrats as the fourth largest party at Holyrood. As a result, that party is fighting at least some wards in all but four of Scotland's 32 councils, in stark contrast to the position in 2012 when it nominated candidates in only just over half (17) of Scotland's councils. Meanwhile, whereas five years ago the party only contested all the wards in Edinburgh and Glasgow, this time it is doing so in nine councils. In four cases, Clackmannan, Falkirk, Renfrewshire and West Lothian, the party is fighting all of the wards having not fought any in 2012.

Amongst the remaining parties the biggest change is a drop of 44 in the number of Labour candidates. Particularly notable is the fact that the party is fighting no less than eight fewer seats in South Lanarkshire than it did in 2012. As a result, the party is only contesting half of the 64 seats at stake, and thus it has in effect already ceded its current control of the council. Otherwise the fall in the number of Labour candidates is reflected in small falls in many councils, including two fewer in Glasgow despite the fact that there are six more seats to be won. As a result, every single one of the 43 candidates that it has nominated in the city must be elected if the party is to retain control of what now will be an 85-seat body. This is also true of both Renfrewshire (unchanged number of Labour candidates, but three more seats to be elected) and West Dunbartonshire (where the position is unchanged from 2012).

Nearly all the modest rise in the number of SNP candidates is accounted for by an increase of 13 in Glasgow. As a result, with

56 candidates the party is running as many as 13 more candidates than Labour, suggesting that the SNP is relatively optimistic about its prospects in the city. Elsewhere there are notable increases in a number of central belt councils, in many cases reflecting the increased number of seats to be elected in many of these councils. However, the decision of the party to nominate four more candidates in East Dunbartonshire cannot be accounted for by any increase in the number of seats to be won, and is taking place in an area where historically the party has not been particularly popular. In contrast, the party is actually putting up three fewer candidates in each of Aberdeenshire, Falkirk and Moray, even though these are all councils which might have been thought to be potentially within the party's grasp if it were to emulate its Scotland-wide performance at other recent elections.

The modest increase in the number of Conservative candidates would also seem to suggest a degree of optimism on its part about its prospects. Against that backdrop, it is somewhat surprising that party has nominated candidates for only 14 of the 28 seats in South Ayrshire, the council in which it had the highest share of the vote in 2012. That means the party has no chance of winning an overall majority. The party is contesting ten of the 18 seats in the council where it secured its second highest vote last time, East Renfrewshire (where in 2012 it fought ten out of 20) and so has at least given itself a theoretical chance of winning there. However, this is the only council where this is the case.

The Liberal Democrats, meanwhile, have nominated the same number of candidates as in 2012, while the number of Independent candidates is also unchanged. Willie Rennie's party appears to be relatively pessimistic about its chances in the Scottish Borders, an area that used to elect Liberal Democrat MPs as well as many a councillor. The party is contesting just nine of the 34 seats there this time, down three on 2012. In contrast, the party has doubled the number of candidates, from 10 to 20, in South Lanarkshire, an area that contains some pockets of Liberal Democrat strength, but not otherwise one where a greater local effort would necessarily be expected.

The fact that almost 500 Independent candidates have once again been nominated is testimony to the continued strength of the tradition of non-partisan councillors. One of the arguments for introducing STV in Scottish local government elections was that it would allow that tradition to continue while also ensuring a

closer relationship between votes and seats in areas where partisan politics predominates. Independents continue to dominate the nominations to the three island councils, accounting for 29 out of 32 candidates on Shetland, 34 out of 38 on Orkney and 48 out of 60 on Comhairlie Nan Eilean Siar. Independents also continue to be relatively more common in more rural parts of the mainland. They account for just over a third of the nominations for Highland Council, much as they did in 2012, and for 30% in Dumfries & Galloway, well up on the 17% in 2012, though the number has fallen slightly, from 33 to 29, in Argyll & Bute.

Finally, the decline in candidates standing for other smaller parties is further evidence of how Scottish politics has come to be more or less monopolised by just five parties (Curtice, 2017). Although with 45 candidates, UKIP have slightly increased the number of seats it is contesting, the party is evidently not anticipating the kind of breakthrough that it has made at previous elections on some councils south of the border. There has clearly been a fall-off in candidatures amongst some parts of the left. Only 14 Scottish Socialist Party candidates are standing, down from 31 in 2012, the number of Socialist Labour candidates has fallen from seven to two, while the Glasgow First group that broke away from Labour has disappeared. On the other hand, there are 19 Trade Union and Socialist Coalition candidates (one in 2012) while Solidarity still has four candidates (five in 2012). Meanwhile, the Scottish Christian Party, which fought 26 seats in 2012 has nominated just one candidate this time, while the Pensioners Party (12 candidates in 2012) is notable by its entire absence.

PROSPECTS

Two polls of voting intentions in the local elections have been conducted and published. One was undertaken by Panelbase for the nationalist website, Wings Over Scotland, in February, the other by Ipsos MORI for Scottish Television in late February and early March. Unfortunately, neither poll offered Independent as an option, while it should be borne in mind that respondents would not have been aware at that time of which parties were actually standing in their ward. The polls were, of course, also taken before the First Minister's announcement that she wanted to hold a second independence referendum once the Brexit negotiations were concluded and the Prime Minister's successful call for a snap general election. Still, the two polls suggest that at that time, at least, the SNP could look forward to a substantial advance on its position in 2012, the Conservatives too were also likely to do better, while the Greens might also do relatively well. In contrast, Labour looked set to fall back heavily, while the Liberal Democrats might do no more than hold their own. These expectations are all in in line with the outcome of the most recent Scottish Parliament election (see Table 2).

Another source to which we can turn is an examination of the results of recent local government by-elections, at least so far as the larger parties that fight most such contests are concerned. These, after all, are also occasions when turnout tends to be low and when voters are being invited to vote on local rather than national issues. Table 6 summarises the results of all local by-elections that have been held since the May 2015 general election in which the Conservatives, Labour and the SNP all fought the ward in question both in 2012 and in the local by-election. It indicates that the pattern of change in party support in these contests has again largely been in line with what one would expect given the outcome of the 2015 UK general election and the 2016 Scottish Parliament election. Labour's vote has fallen away heavily, while both the Conservatives

and the SNP have been advancing. The Conservative advance has been particularly strong since the party narrowly won second place in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, while the SNP advance has been noticeably weaker.

TABLE 5: POLLS OF VOTING INTENTIONS IN SCOTTISH LOCAL ELECTIONS

	Panelbase	Ipsos MORI
	%	%
Conservative	26	19
Labour	14	17
Liberal Democrats	5	6
SNP	47	46
Greens	4	8
Others	4	4

Sources: Panelbase/Wings over Scotland 8-13.2.17; Ipsos MORI/STV 24.2-6.3.17

It should though, perhaps, be borne in mind that there have been far fewer local by-elections in recent months than in the year immediately following the 2015 UK general election, and thus there is a greater risk that the figures are affected by the idiosyncrasies of where local by-elections happen to have taken place. In particular, five of the more recent local by-elections have taken place in the North East where the Conservatives advanced relatively strongly in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election, while another was in a Conservative stronghold in Dumfries & Galloway. Even so, these more recent results may be a sign that the SNP advance could now be rather weaker (and the Conservative advance stronger) than it might have been if the local elections had been held twelve months ago. This impression has been further underlined by the results of two polls, one by Panelbase and one by Survation, of vote intentions for the forthcoming UK election taken since that election was

announced These on average put the Conservatives on 30%, well above its vote in both 2015 and 2016, while the SNP are on 43.5%, rather below their vote in both contests.

TABLE 6: SUMMARY OF RESULTS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT BY-ELECTIONS SINCE MAY 2015

Mean change in % first preference vote since 2012			
Conservative	Labour	SNP	No of Elections
May 2015-May 2016 +3.8	-12.9	+13.0	27
May 2016-Jan 2017 +10.8	-10.1	+3.1	13
ALL +6.1	-12.0	+9.8	40

Table based on all wards contested by Conservative, Labour and the SNP both in 2012 and in the by-election.

Rather less can be said from local by-elections about the prospects of the Liberal Democrats and the Greens as these two parties have fought fewer local by-elections than their competitors. However, we can note that in the subset of the wards included in Table 6 which the Liberal Democrats did fight in 2012 and in the by-election the party has on average seen its vote fall by 0.7 of a point, though since May 16 in particular the party's record has been rather better with an average increase in support of 1.3 points. Still once again the evidence points to the party performing at much the same level as in 2012. Meanwhile, a similar analysis of the performance of the Greens points to an average increase of 1.5 points in the party's support, again much as one would anticipate from the party's performance in the 2016 Scottish Parliament election.

Given these various portents, it would appear that Labour is headed for heavy losses and, as a result, seems unlikely to retain control of any of the four councils where it won an overall majority in 2012. Conversely, the SNP should retain control of the two councils that they won five years ago, Angus and Dundee. More difficult is to identify where the party might win overall control anew, especially given the apparent uncertainty over just how much

better it will do than it did in 2012. If the party were to increase its share of first preference votes by the average of ten points that it has enjoyed in local by-elections throughout the last two years, then taking into account the limitations on the proportionality of the system thanks to the use of three- and four-member wards, the following seven councils would appear to possible SNP targets:

- Clackmannanshire
- East Ayrshire
- Midlothian
- North Ayrshire
- Renfrewshire
- Stirling
- West Lothian

To which one might add Perth & Kinross, though a strong performance by the Conservatives there would doubtless significantly reduce the nationalists' chances, while on a good day and with a measure of luck the party might just win South Lanarkshire. However, if the SNP advance were to be a more modest five points, then perhaps it would gain control of no more than a couple of councils, most likely Clackmannanshire and West Lothian. Doubtless such a modest outcome would be regarded as a considerable disappointment by the nationalists.

In truth, even the list of possible gains of council control as a result of a substantial SNP advance might be thought to comprise a relatively small group of mostly small councils. However, it should be borne in mind that such an advance could well be enough to see the SNP emerge as the largest party at least in another ten councils, including the three key cities of Aberdeen, Edinburgh and Glasgow. Such an outcome would mean the SNP would at least be the largest party (and sometimes in control) in 23 of Scotland's 32 councils, and thus most likely be the senior partner in the running of well over half of the country's 22 councils. Indeed, even if the party's advance were to be more modest, including perhaps as a result failing to become the largest party in Edinburgh and Glasgow, the party could still be the largest group on up to 18 councils. Either way, it seems quite possible that the nationalists will become the principal party of Scottish local government, the one level of the country's politics that it does not currently dominate, an outcome that would boost further the party's grip on the governance of Scotland.

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