

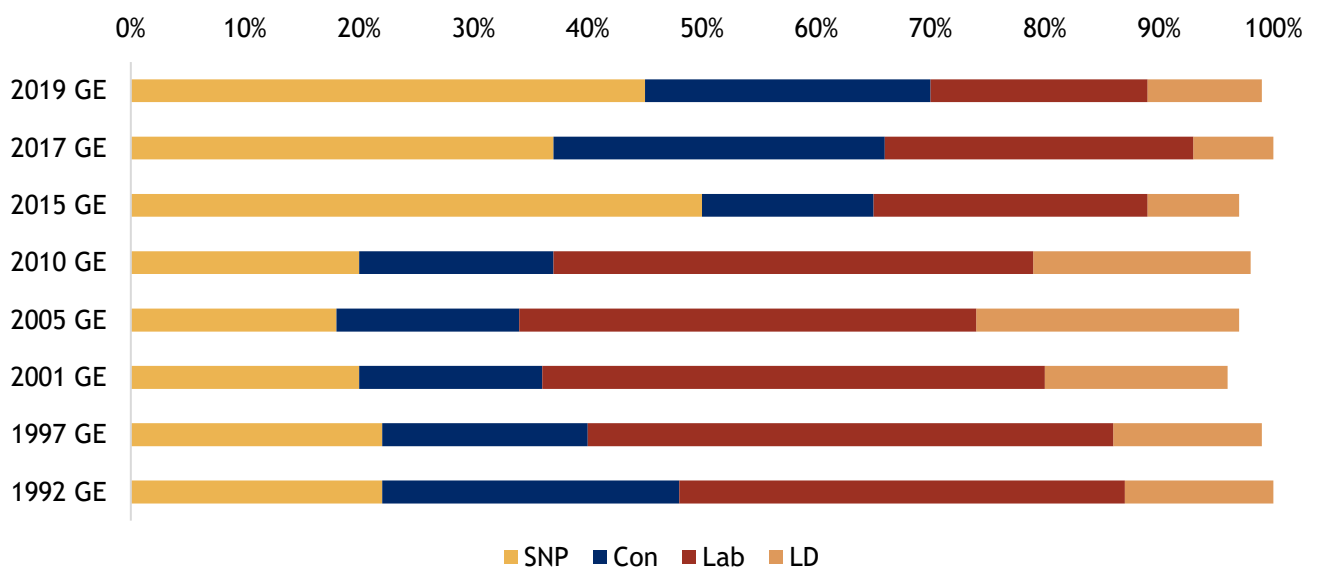
Is Starmer breaking through the tartan ceiling?

Blog post by Managing Director Benjamin Wegg-Prosser, 10 October 2022

It's the simplest of one-fact stories: Labour cannot secure a majority in Westminster without a significant number of parliamentary seats in Scotland.

In 2010 Labour slumped to 29% of the vote in the UK and lost 91 seats nationwide, but still picked up 41 Scottish seats out of the 59 contested, and 42% of the vote. Fast forward five years and Labour were left with one solitary seat in Scotland and 24% of the vote. Things deteriorated further in 2019, with Corbyn's Labour party dropping to 19% nationwide, and keeping that single seat in Scotland.

Labour's shrinking general election vote share



Source: YouGov

Despite the positive energy flowing from Labour's annual conference in Liverpool last month, expectations remain that Labour will be the largest party at the next general election but not win a majority. Labour's position in Scotland has presented a tartan ceiling which, it has been assumed, cannot not be broken through. This is a major impediment to the party's ability to secure a majority and re-enter government for the first time since 2010.

The conventional wisdom has been that a partnership in some form with the SNP is a necessary pre-requisite for a Labour prime minister to assume control of the reins of government. The internal debate in the Labour party has reflected this in recent years with various ideas on how to lean into

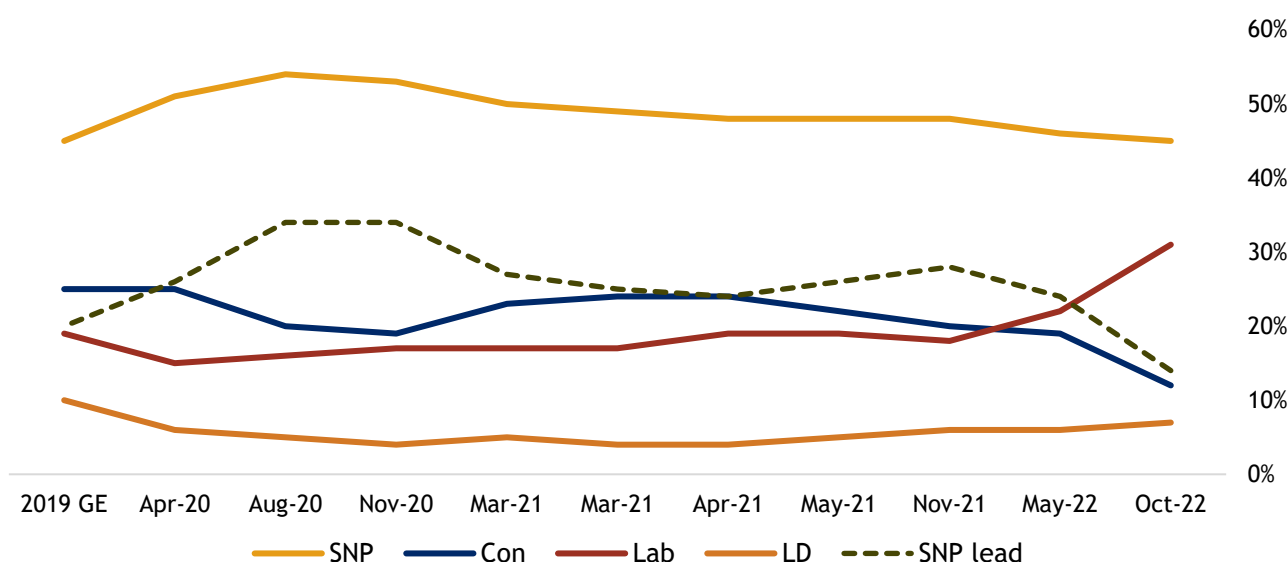
nationalism and reclaim SNP voters who left Labour in the aftermath of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum.

Yet Keir Starmer’s attitude to working with the SNP could not have been clearer at Labour’s conference. In his speech he stated that *“We can’t work with them. We won’t work with them. No deal under any circumstances”*. He surprised some delegates with the starkness of his position given the almighty mountain the party has to climb to win a majority of its own.

Starmer has clearly been convinced by the argument that Labour’s strength in Scotland will be determined not by how it accommodates Scottish nationalism but rather by its strength in England. The argument is that the more competitive Labour looks nationally the more likely Scottish voters are to back it in an effort to remove the Conservatives from office in Westminster. This is akin to an Anglo-Scottish version of split-ticket voting, with SNP voters lending their support to Labour nationally.

This argument could begin to bear fruit given that beneath Labour’s recent headline-grabbing national poll leads, the party has seen a stark improvement in its polling position amongst Scottish voters. The SNP’s lead over Labour peaked in August 2020 at 34%; it is now down to 14%. If Labour can keep this momentum going and cut that lead in half to 7% this could equate into Labour gaining 12 seats and the SNP losing 8. Labour is never going to return to the new Labour era of 56 seats north of the border, but if it can re-claim a good proportion of these it makes the path to Number 10 on its own steam much easier.

Recent general election opinion polling



Source: YouGov

Not only does Labour’s improved position in Scotland get it closer to the winning post but it also significantly undermines one of the Conservative party’s strongest arguments in the last three general election campaigns, namely that Labour’s leader would be in the pocket of the SNP party

and be forced to agree to an additional Scottish independence referendum to form a government. The more Labour's polling improves in Scotland, the less impact that argument will have.

Scotland holds the key to Labour winning a majority in Westminster. Thanks to re-connecting with English voters, Labour is a more credible option to the electorate North of the border.