

Why it has to be #BothVotesSNP in 2021

The 2021 Holyrood election is well over a year away, but already social media is awash with plans for getting a pro-independence majority in the Scottish Parliament, other than simply voting SNP. The various permutations of “if we can convince X% of the electorate to vote for party Y, we can get Z% of seats” people present can be enticing but are inconsistent with how voters really behave. Here’s why 2021 has to be #BothVotesSNP.

A little bit of history repeating

The current arguments are really just a rerun of those that happened in 2016, with smaller parties telling SNP voters that the SNP was guaranteed to win a majority on constituency seats alone, so they could – and should – vote for other parties on the list. Various calculations and spreadsheets were used to try and back this up, just as people are doing now. But here are the only numbers that truly matter:

Party	Seats (2011)	Seats (2016)	List Vote (2011)	List Vote (2016)
SNP	69	63	44%	41.7%
Green	2	6	4.4%	6.6%
SSP/RISE/Whatever	0	0	0.6%	1.1%
Total pro-independence	71	69	49%	49.4%

So how do *more* pro-independence voters translate into *fewer* seats? The answer is simple: in 2011, almost all SNP constituency voters (45.4%) also voted SNP on the list (44%); but in 2016, the difference rose to 4.8% (46.5% vs 41.7%) as some people were swayed by spreadsheets claiming vote-splitting would increase the overall number of pro-independence MSPs. It didn’t work in 2016, so it won’t work in 2021 either.

The overall number of pro-independence voters was slightly higher in 2016, yet splitting the vote meant the overall number of seats won by pro-independence parties was lower – and we lost our SNP majority.

“But people say the SNP can’t win on the list because of the voting system”

We’ve elected list MSPs in **every** election, and we would never have entered government without them, never mind had a majority allowing us to have a referendum. In 2011, when people were following the advice to cast both votes for the SNP, we elected 16 list MSPs – including one in North East Scotland, where we won **all 10 constituencies**. In 2016, when people spread their votes across multiple parties, we only elected 4 list MSPs. This wasn’t because SNP list votes were “wasted” – it was because people thought an SNP majority was in the bag and gave their list votes to other parties – parties who simply weren’t established enough to get elected.

The problem is not the voting system – the problem is people not voting SNP on the list!

“Okay, that’s all very well for Regions X, Y and Z but what about the rest?”

When it’s pointed out that the SNP has **always** required list seats to form a government, people try to suggest that perhaps we could embark on a campaign of only promoting #BothVotesSNP in some regions (e.g. South of Scotland and Highlands & Islands). But this is a complete non-starter in terms of how campaigns work.

Even if we could predict how many constituencies the SNP will win in each region (and 2016 *proved* that we can’t – people spent months declaring that we would win at least half a dozen of the 14 constituencies we ended up not winning), the realities of an election to the Scottish Parliament mean you can’t have separate campaign messages. SNP representatives can’t go on TV debates saying, “Both Votes SNP... Except for viewers in regions X, Y and Z, where you should vote for other parties on the list.” People across Scotland are getting their information from the same sources, so our messaging needs to be **absolutely consistent across the board**.

“Both Votes SNP” is simple and clear. “Both Votes SNP in regions X, Y and Z only” is neither simple nor clear – for a start, how many voters actually know what their parliamentary region is?

If recent events have told us anything, it’s that simple, clear messaging is paramount to electoral success – and nothing could be simpler than “Both Votes SNP”.

"But I still really like the look of those spreadsheets suggesting 80 pro-independence MSPs..."

Okay, here are a few final points:

1. Voters punish parties that take them for granted

All of these models are based on an assumption that we can predict in advance how many seats the SNP will win next May. Nothing says "we're taking you for granted" like telling people they don't have to vote for us on the list because we've decided we're going to win their constituency and all the surrounding ones. It's not a good look.

2. We don't know what could happen during the last weeks of the campaign

Remember the lessons of the 2017 UK Election, when the Tories thought they simply had to call an election and a majority would be theirs. Politics is in complete state of flux at the moment, and we have no idea what might happen during the short campaign, so we need to be campaigning for every possible vote right from the get-go, because we might – and in fact will – need them.

3. List votes are an insurance policy against unexpected losses in constituency seats

No one expected us to lose Aberdeenshire West in 2016, but we did, and because our North East list vote hadn't held up, we couldn't make up for it by electing a list MSP in their place. Ironically, if the same situation had happened in 2011, we would actually have elected TWO list MSPs, keeping our total number of MSPs in the North East region at 11 – because that is literally the reason the Additional Member System exists!

4. We have never formed a government without list MSPs, even in 2011 – List MSPs are vital

Giving up on the list means giving up on an SNP majority, and that means having to rely on other parties in parliament. Why put an SNP majority at risk in order to help opposition parties elect more MSPs?

5. SNP voters have already proven they're not really interested in splitting their votes

Greens, RISE etc spent the whole of the 2016 campaign trying to convince SNP voters to split their vote. The numbers that did so were just enough to lose us our majority, but not enough to increase the number of pro-independence seats. Had they stuck with #BothVotesSNP, we'd have elected more MSPs!

6. List seats can't be predicted because they depend on the results of ALL parties, not just the SNP

The allocation of list seats depends on several factors, not just how many votes the SNP get. The D'Hondt method, which is used to calculate seat allocations, is known to favour larger parties, so it really does make more sense for voters to coalesce around one big party instead of multiple smaller parties. At each stage, a party's votes are compared against those of the other parties, so it's genuinely impossible to predict in advance how many votes a party will need to get list seats. It really is safer to simply get people to vote SNP.

#BothVotesSNP – it's the only way

Our challenge as SNP activists in 2021 will be to get as many SNP MSPs elected as possible and return a majority SNP Scottish Government. If we focus on that, then we'll succeed. If we get distracted by spreadsheets modelling scenarios that ignore the realities of real-world voter behaviour, then we risk tripping ourselves up and, more importantly, setting the cause of independence back years.

When the SNP is at our strongest, the case for independence and Scotland's interests are advanced. The only way to make absolutely sure of this is to campaign for #BothVotesSNP next year.

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March 2020