

# **ALL YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT A PROGRESSIVE ALLIANCE**

**How we change the political  
system to change society**

**Neal Lawson**

**Foreword by Caroline Lucas,  
Clive Lewis and Layla Moran**

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By Neal Lawson

**About the author:**

Neal Lawson is Executive Director of Compass.

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### **About Compass and this project**

Compass is a platform for a good society, a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build networks of ideas, parties and organisations to help make systemic change happen. Our strategic focus is to understand, build, support and accelerate new forms of democratic practice and collaborative action that are taking place in civil society and the economy, and to link that up with state reforms and policy. The meeting point of emerging horizontal participation and vertical resources and policy we call [45° Change](#). Our practical focus is a Progressive Alliance, the coalition of values, policies, parties, activists and voters which can form a new government to break the log jam of old politics and usher in a new politics for a new society.

# Foreword

Politics needs to change so we can change our society – to make it much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We are convinced that can only happen if parties of the left and centre start to work together, or at the very least stop fighting one another. There are two reasons for this. The first is the sheer scale of the challenges we face – not least the climate emergency, which will take all of our traditions, insights and energies to overcome. The second is that the voting system is now skewed strongly in the Conservatives’ favour – this is abetted by the right bloc working effectively together, meaning we have to do the same.

There has been much welcome talk about progressive alliances, and it has been encouraging to see parties forming alliances locally at council level. But it is at Westminster where we need seismic political change, and progressives forming a one-off alliance for democracy and change at a national level is a clear way this could happen.

This report from Compass shows how this might work. We are not endorsing every aspect of it but strongly commend the direction of travel – towards greater collaboration and the trust-building across parties that such cooperation demands. There is no one size fits all model. Whether it results in standing aside for one another, local or national ceasefires, or efforts towards tactical voting, it is clear that the foundations for success have to be built now. Our concern is that without such concerted effort, even the most basic efforts will crack in the heat of a general election. This report shows us how we can bring about this trust-building process and start the journey together towards a better, more progressive future for the country. With Compass and many others, we are committed to making it happen.

**Clive Lewis**  
**Caroline Lucas**  
**Layla Moran**

## Contents

### Introduction 7

### Why We Need a Progressive Alliance 9

- The political case for a progressive alliance 9
- The electoral case for a progressive alliance 9

### The Politics of a Progressive Alliance 16

### A Progressive Alliance in Practice 18

- Case Study 1: Tactical campaigning – how it works in Lewes 20
- Case Study 2: South West Surrey 21
- What about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland? 22

### Progressive Alliances – They're Happening 23

### Next Steps to Build a Progressive Alliance 24

‘Labour must start work now on a progressive alliance that openly embraces ideas from outside, with proportional representation to prove it is no longer trapped in a self-defeating tribalism.’

–**Polly Toynbee**, *Guardian*, 11th May 2021

‘The progressive alliance councils – as much through force majeure as insight – are showing the way.’

–**Paul Mason**, *New Statesman*, 19th May 2021

‘The logical conclusion is that Labour, the Liberal Democrats and the Greens should cooperate in the parts of England where they compete.’

–**Henry Mance**, *Financial Times*, 7th May 2021

‘Although we are in different boats, you in your boat and we in our canoe, we share the same river of life.’

–**Chief Oren Lyons**

# Introduction

A progressive alliance for democratic change is the best way to build a new politics for a new society. Indeed, it may be the only way.

Its objective is to unlock the potential of a progressive majority in the country, which poll after poll shows lies dormant, waiting to be shaped and activated by an ambitious and collaborative political intervention. If this nascent progressive majority of those who want a change of government can be mobilised, then we face the prospect of a government committed to developing a much more equal, sustainable and democratic society.

Integral to the desire to create a more democratic society is a commitment to introduce proportional representation (PR) in place of our 'first past the post' (FPTP) voting system. This kick-starts the process of building a deeper democracy for this good society.

Over the last few months there has been a huge amount of interest in the idea of progressive alliances, or alliances for democracy, from columnists to hundreds if not thousands on social media and on the ground in constituencies across the country.

But what is a progressive alliance or set of alliances? Different people have different views. A healthy debate is developing. But as well as a debate we need a better sense of the direction of travel.

As an organisation dedicated to the creation of a progressive alliance it is high time for Compass to set out our thinking.

A progressive alliance is not a shortcut to winning. All the progressive parties have to 'put their own house in order'. But for the reasons set out below, that isn't enough. They need to cooperate as well. And a progressive alliance isn't all about standing aside in seats for others or demanding they do so for you. It isn't about top down deals imposed from behind central closed doors. It's not even all about proportional representation – although PR does really matter.

Instead, for Compass, it is a deep commitment to changing the culture and structure of our political and democratic system that is built from the grassroots up but aided by national leaders. It is about the limits of old politics and the limitlessness of the new, in which people can collectively shape their lives and society in their communities. It is the belief that only through people working together can we make a good society. A progressive alliance is first and foremost an alliance of minds and hearts. Only then is it about seats and electoral tactics, which are negotiated locally in an agile and open way.

This report does three key things:

1. Rehearses the arguments for a progressive alliance – both political and electoral – though much of the argument was set out in our previous publication [\*We Divide, They Conquer\*](#)
2. Describes the political nature of a progressive alliance – the vision, values and policies that need to underpin it
3. Sets out the structure of a progressive alliance – how it can best be formed and put into practice.



# Why We Need a Progressive Alliance

For sceptics of a progressive alliance, it is never the right time. Labour in particular is either too weak to admit it needs to work with others or too strong to need them. At the same moment the Liberal Democrats and the Greens are either too weak to matter or start to believe their own hype and can eschew collaboration. There will never be a sweet spot in which all three parties are neither too weak nor too strong to work together. That is why a progressive alliance can only be built on two shared assumptions.

## **The political case for a progressive alliance**

The context of politics has changed so much that no single party can meet the challenges and opportunities of the twenty-first century. A much more equal, democratic and sustainable society is not going to happen through the actions of any one party. No single party has a monopoly on wisdom in a world facing the complexities of the pandemic, Brexit, climate change, technological revolutions, and fundamental changes in political and cultural allegiances. Socialists, social democrats, liberals, greens, democrats and progressives need each other. Shaping a better future will take not just an electoral alliance but an alliance of minds, cultures, values and thinking based on trust and mutual recognition. This must come long before any electoral collaboration.

As such the very creation of a progressive alliance dramatically symbolises the scale of the environmental, egalitarian and democratic challenges we face, and the necessity of people working together to meet those challenges. It is about putting into action what we believe – that collaboration is better than competition, that means always shape ends, and that we must be the change we want to see in the world. That in turn means that we start with our own behaviours, treating others with compassion, generosity and respect.

This deeper sense of democracy, a politics of trust, participation and collaboration, is the one place the Conservatives, as a party, will never go. They can spend more and at the very least greenwash their policies, but they won't extend democracy. This is the terrain where progressives can and must triumph.

## **The electoral case for a progressive alliance**

There is no shortcut to the hard political challenge of each progressive party making itself popular based on its values. But equally there is no escaping from the truth that the voting system is now skewed heavily in favour of the Tories.

FPTP gives them a huge advantage as their vote spread is incredibly efficient – meaning it takes only 38,000 votes to elect each Tory MP.

Labour votes are now piled up in the cities and university towns – so they win there by big margins but waste many votes. That means it takes 51,000 votes for each Labour MP. It’s much worse for the Lib Dems, who need 334,000. And, scandalously, it took 846,000 votes to elect the only Green MP. There is a deep democratic injustice at work that means few votes count and the Conservatives start every election with an inbuilt, unfair advantage.

Furthermore, in seat after seat, progressive votes are divided and fatally weakened. It looks almost impossible for Labour to win the 125 seats it now needs for a majority of just one. Add in boundary changes and that figure is likely to jump to 148. The Tories’ plans for voter ID/ suppression make the mountain even steeper.

To get some idea of the electoral mountain Labour has to climb given the way the electoral system works against it, Table 1 shows that even with a big poll lead – i.e., swapping Labour’s and the Tories’ 2019 vote shares – the party still doesn't get a majority.

### National Prediction: Labour short 3 of majority

Party	2019 Votes	2019 Seats	Pred Votes	Gains	Losses	Net Change	Pred Seats
CON	44.7%	365	33.0%	0	138	-138	227
LAB	33.0%	203	44.7%	120	0	+120	323
LIB	11.8%	11	11.8%	14	4	+10	21
Reform	2.1%	0	2.1%	0	0	+0	0
Green	2.8%	1	2.8%	0	0	+0	1
SNP	4.0%	48	4.2%	7	0	+7	55
PlaidC	0.5%	4	0.5%	0	0	+0	4
Other	1.1%	0	0.9%	1	0	+1	1
N.Ire		18		0	0	+0	18

Table 1 If the Conservatives’ and Labour’s vote shares for the 2019 General Election were to be swapped, Labour would still be three seats short of a majority. Source: [Electoral Calculus](#)

Given the progressive side is so divided, there is no point in the parties going up and down in terms of their share of the progressive vote. It's only the total against the Conservatives that matters if it can be united.

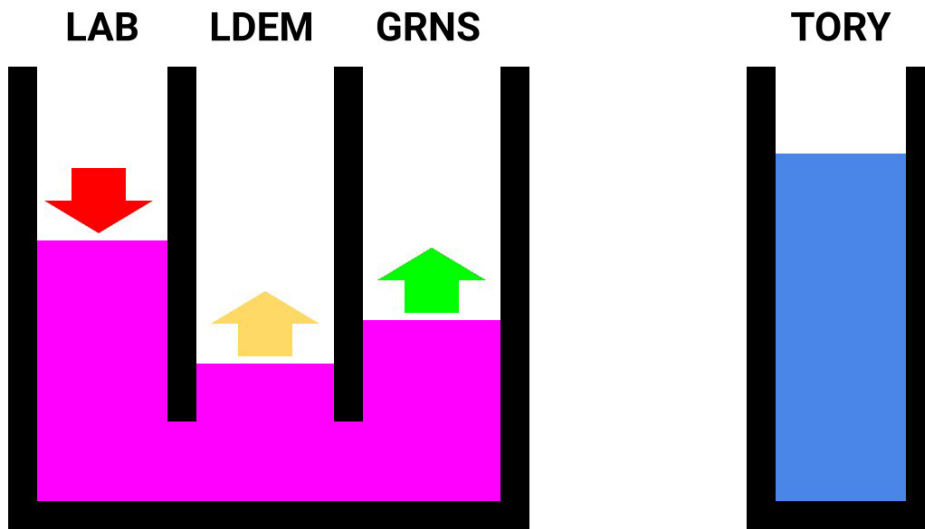


Figure 1 We divide, they conquer. Source: [@cnapan](#)

This is especially the case when there is a clear progressive majority in the UK.

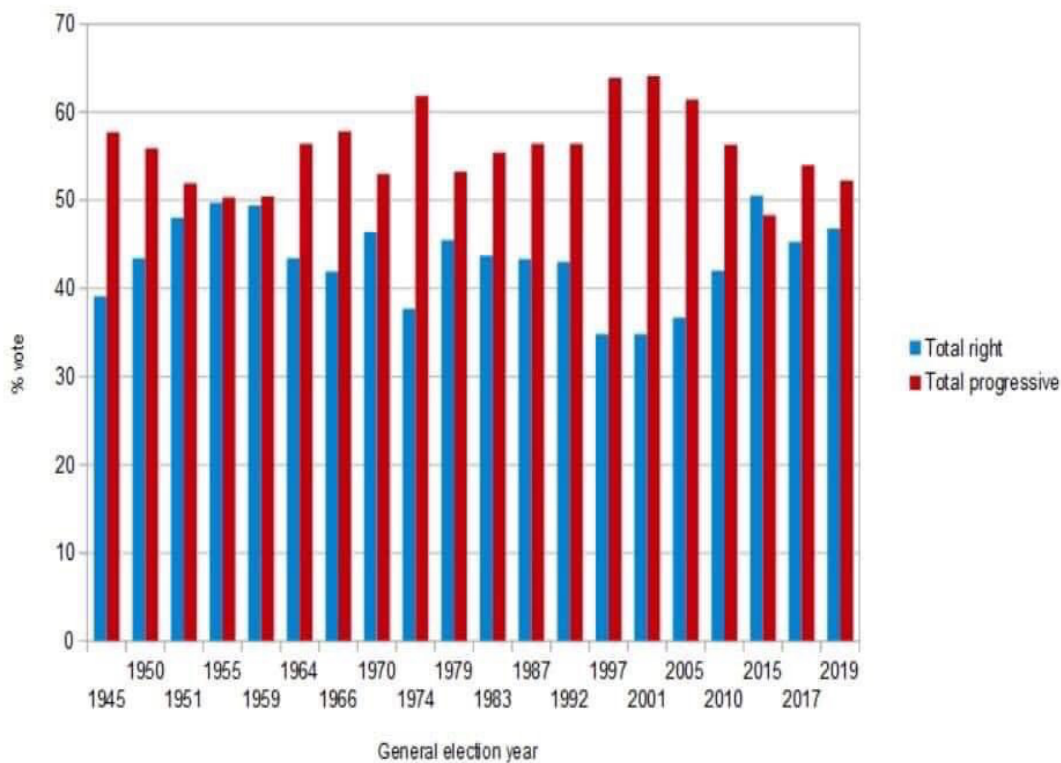


Figure 2 The total progressive vote has been greater than the total regressive vote at all but one general election since 1945.

Under FPTP, the conservative parties will continue to prevail over the divided progressive opposition. The split in parties that largely agree is made clear in Figure 3. But voters want to see a more collaborative politics and are way ahead of the politicians on this (Figure 4).

UK Party Competition (www.GlobalPartySurvey.org, 2019)

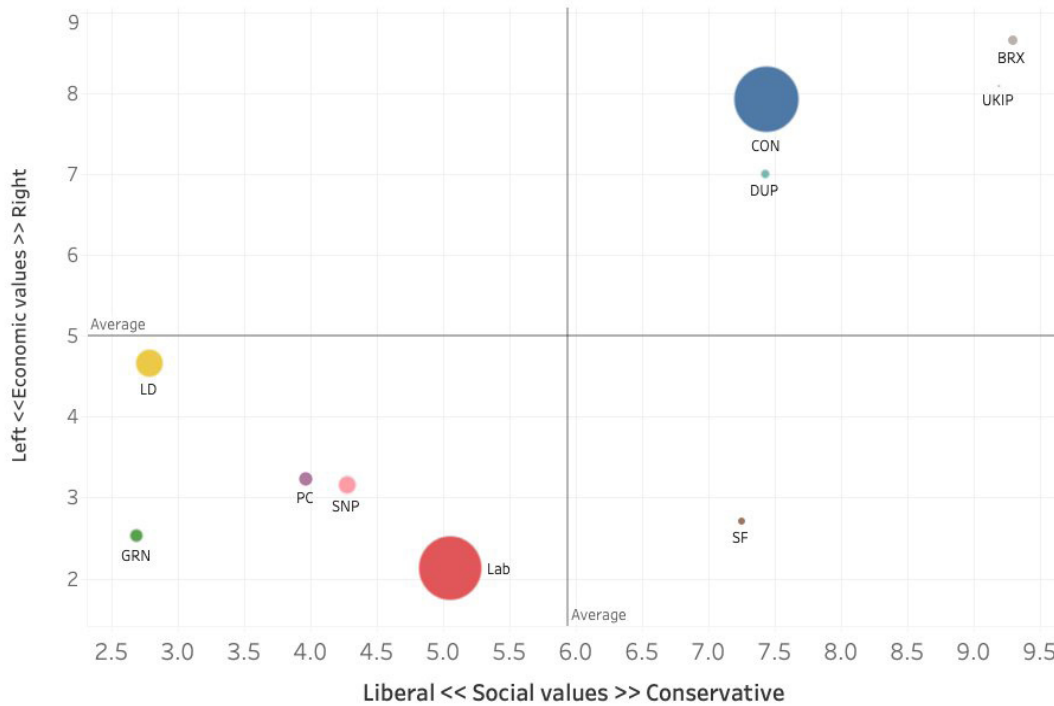
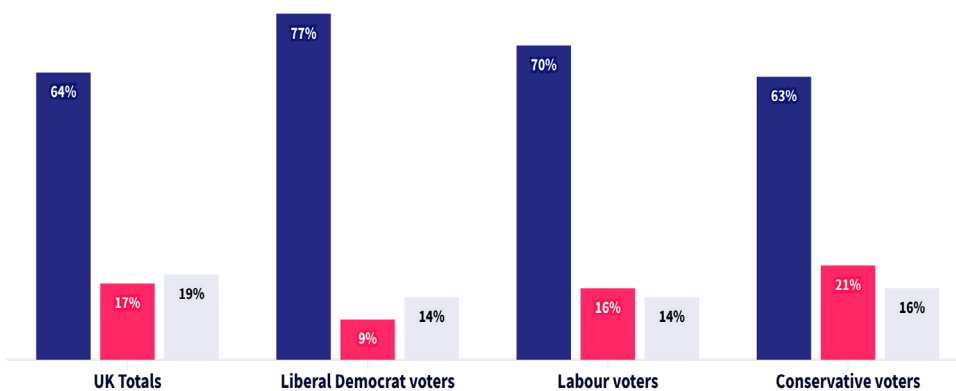


Figure 3 Divisions between parties that share similar values. Source: [Global Party Survey](#)

### Do you think that political parties that broadly agree with one another should work together at election time, or stand against each other?

■ Should work together ■ Should stand against each other ■ Don't know



Commissioned by Best for Britain, Number Cruncher Politics polled 3,004 UK adults between 8th and 18th March 2021. Responses are weighted to the profile of the population. Question asked "Do you think that political parties that broadly agree with one another should work together at election time, or stand against each other?" Respondents were asked to choose: Should work together; Should stand against each other; Don't know. Responses grouped by respondents self declared vote in the 2019 UK Parliamentary General Election.

Figure 4 A significant majority believes that parties that broadly agree should work together during elections. Source: [Best for Britain](#)

And when it comes to voting, they know what to do. Here is snapshot of second-preference voting for the metro mayor in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough in May 2021 by Liberal Democrats – who overwhelmingly pick Labour second (Figure 5). The Labour candidate went on to defeat the Tory candidate thanks to these vote transfers.

The same was the case in the recent Chesham and Amersham by-election, with evidence of huge tactical voting to defeat the Conservatives in what was formerly one of their safest seats.

This is not to assume that voters will automatically switch to the best-placed progressive candidate. They will make up their own minds. We are making the case that, with the right political leadership, signals and organisation on the ground, progressive cooperation can make a huge difference.

A future in which progressive politics dominates is within our grasp, as Figure 6 shows when votes are translated into seats proportionately.

## Second round transfers

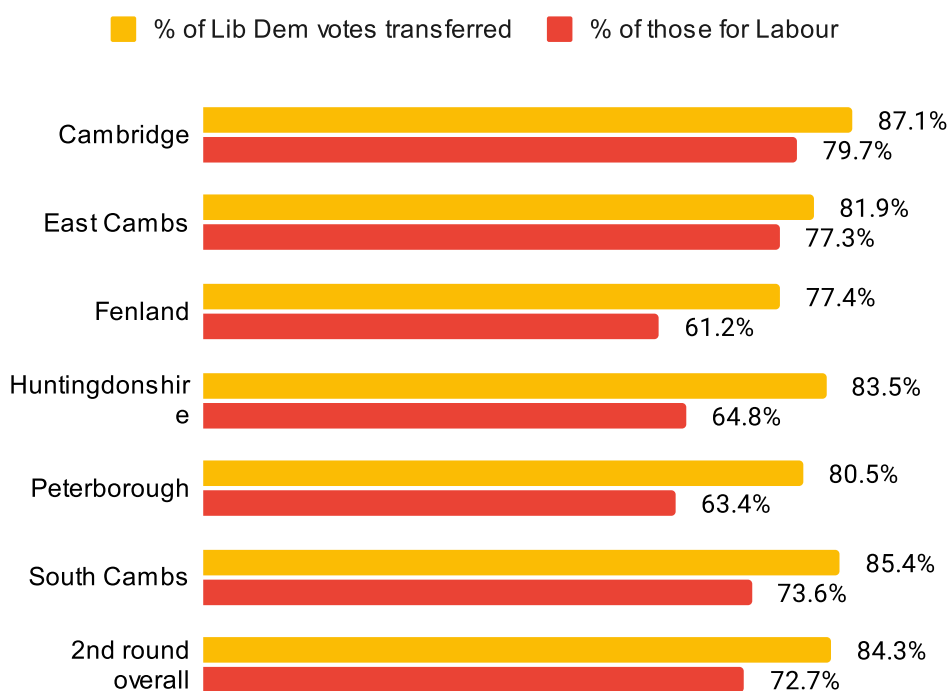


Figure 5 Transfers of Lib Dem voters to Labour in the second round meant that Labour won the Cambridgeshire and Peterborough metro mayoralty. Source: [Phil Rodgers](#)

## Deltapoll - 21-22nd January

[NB: Doesn't account for changes in voter behaviour under alternative voting systems]

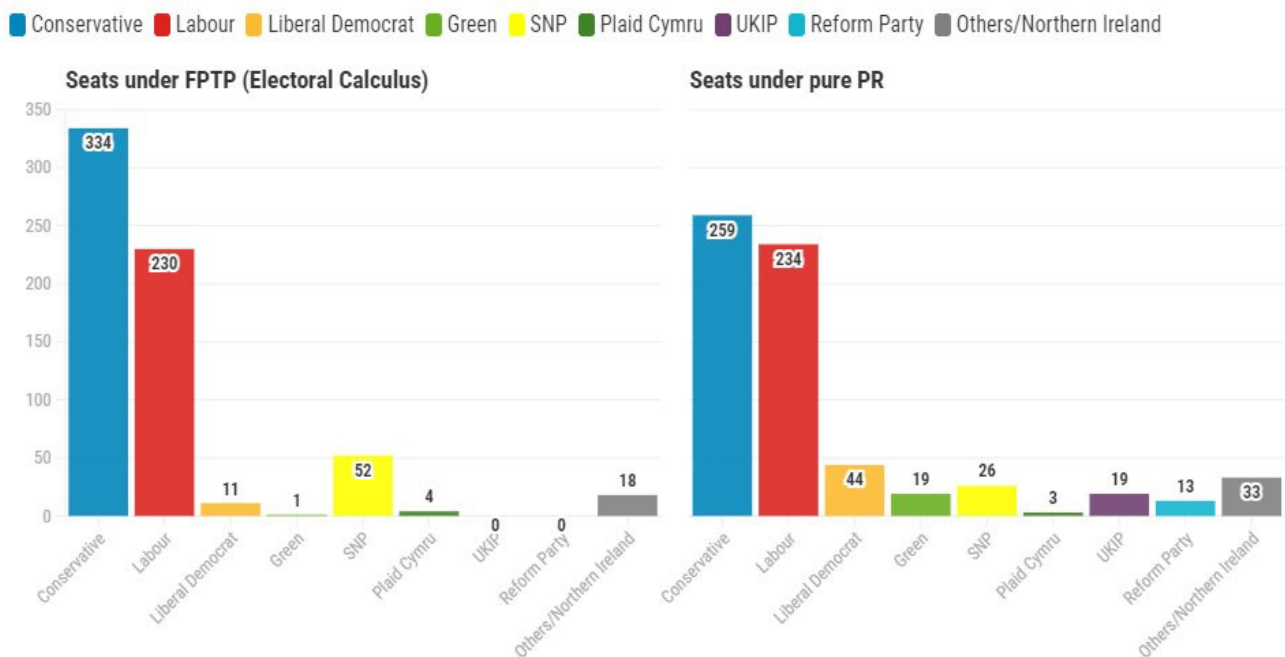


Figure 6 Under PR, progressive parties would have the opportunity to form a government. Source: Deltapoll

But of course, progressives first have to win under FPTP. A progressive alliance enables this to happen. The Constitution Society's report [Electoral Pacts and the Constitution](#) by Dr Andrew Blick uses detailed polling to show what would happen in seats in England and Wales where a single Labour, Lib Dem or Green candidate had an uncontested run against the Tories, with the other two parties standing aside.

Party	2019 seats	Seats predicted with pact	Change
CON	365	307	-58
LAB	203	239	+36
SNP	48	48	0
LIB	11	25	+14
Green	1	9	+8
Plaid	4	4	0

Table 2 Seat changes under a Labour–Lib Dem–Green electoral pact in England and Wales. Source: [The Constitution Society](#)

Under the formalised national pact model explored in the paper, the Conservatives would lose their majority. Dr Blick writes that ‘an electoral Pact would see the Conservatives losing 58 seats, enough to deprive them of their majority. All three of the Pact parties stand to gain from the arrangement. Labour would win back several of the so-called “Red Wall” seats it lost in 2019, including Blyth Valley, Heywood and Middleton, and Leigh. The Liberal Democrats would also manage to take seats which were targeted in 2019 without success, such as Guildford, Cheltenham and Winchester. It would also see the Greens making significant gains, moving from one to nine seats.’

To be clear, we are not advocating such a national agreement but using these numbers as an indication of what is possible with the right levels of cooperation nationally and locally.

# The Politics of a Progressive Alliance

The foundations of a progressive alliance are not top down deals but vision, values and bottom-up collaboration. An alliance of progressive parties and voters has to be about what kind of society we want to create and why. For Compass, the heart of progressive politics is a belief in people and their incredible ability to work together, lead amazing lives and build a brilliant society.

Of course, people debate what ‘progressive’ means. We don’t pretend it’s easy, and have written more about what we think the word means to us elsewhere. But it is no different from using any other term, be it social democrat, socialist, liberal or green – all have wide and differing interpretations. A determination to build a society of much greater equality, sustainability and democracy is enough to make a start.

But what matters most is not policy or definitions but behaviours – what sets progressive alliance politics apart is the culture of tolerance and respect for others regardless of what party, if any, they are in. It is the willingness to work together and share victories that matters most.

Any progressive alliance worth its name must work hard to include voters in the so-called ‘Red Wall’ seats, and especially those who voted for Brexit. If ever there was a demand for democratic change, that was it: a desire, however misconceived in the eyes of some, to take back control, placing the demand for sovereignty higher than economics.

There is a moral imperative to a broad-based progressive alliance, but also an electoral one. Tom Clark [has written](#) in *Prospect*:

‘Despite the close 52–48% headline referendum vote, what matters for Westminster is the spread of votes across seats. Remain votes piled up in the cities, and the best estimate is that 409 constituencies went for Leave in 2016, against 241 where a majority wanted to stay in Europe. So this realignment is to the disadvantage of the left. Moreover, just as the Conservatives have consolidated on the right, by mopping up virtually all of the old Ukip votes, [Steve Fisher of Oxford University] found this spring’s results witnessed increasing splintering among the social liberals, for example with a rise in Green support denting Labour.’

Instead of seeing binaries – town or city, communitarian or cosmopolitan – our progressive alliance starts with a belief in the best in everyone, without being naive about what we can always achieve. Differences are real but politics is the art of transcending them. There has always been a ‘progressive dilemma’ – how the centre-left can and has united the interests of the middle and working classes. It is a dilemma that can and must be resolved again. In this we see a future we negotiate together, not one that is imposed on any one section of society.



Beyond values we get to the issue of policy. Here a difficult line has to be walked. The progressive alliance has to be about more than beating the Conservative Party – otherwise it will rightly fail as simply a technocratic electoral fix. Detailed policy agreements can come after a general election, as they do in every country with coalition governments. What we need now is a clear and compelling narrative with an outline of core policy objectives, so that voters understand the direction of travel of a future progressive alliance government.

So, to be clear here: Compass does not expect the progressive parties to sign up to the same manifesto. Rather, we see a debate in which values and broadly shared policies are developed and promoted. Diversity is a strength: each party would remain free to defend other policies and, most importantly, to focus on voters the other alliance parties have little chance of winning. There was, after all, [a huge policy overlap](#) in 2019. We need a more explicit version of that next time to address the big issues of climate, inequality, good jobs, care and democracy.

A crucial issue is whether Labour backs the move to PR. Over 220 local Labour parties have already passed supportive motions which should be put to the party's annual conference in September. If that conference backs PR then we need to ensure the policy plays a significant and prominent part in an election campaign and the Labour manifesto. Given that all the other progressive parties back PR, if successful there will be a clear mandate for reform.

Some campaigners want a progressive alliance to be solely about PR. We can see the case for this, as it's simple and straightforward – but in our judgement it would be a huge mistake. Some fought the last general election on a single constitutional issue – a second Brexit referendum – and they were heavily defeated. PR has nowhere near the salience of that issue. You cannot turn a general election into a single-issue referendum of your choice – especially on the seemingly procedural issue of how votes are counted.

People vote for a government that will deal with the issues that matter to them, such as jobs, the NHS and climate. Talking about voting systems alone simply won't withstand the heat of a general election. Even worse, it will be a message that says we will have another election in six months under PR. The Tories and the right-wing media will have a field day with such an approach. What's needed instead is a broad and popular narrative about what a progressive alliance government will do for the country beyond the necessary but insufficient issue of PR.

Compass, working with many others, will help guide a national conversation about the basis for this minimum viable progressive platform.

If that is what we want, how do we get there?

## A Progressive Alliance in Practice

If a progressive alliance is all about collaborating for the greater good, there is not one size that fits all. Some people think a progressive alliance is only about parties standing aside for each other, but that is just one way of collaborating – there are more popular and even more effective forms of collaboration, such as targeted campaigning and cooperation on policies and issues.

What really matters is building trust across progressive parties and people so that the most appropriate forms of collaboration can take place when it matters – well before the next general election. A progressive alliance cannot be left to the last minute. Trust and a shared desire for change have to be built on firm foundations, starting now.

Electoral cooperation can then take a number of forms.

At the national level there should be a Non-Aggression Pact (NAP) between the three parties and as much cooperation as their values will allow. They should work together on issues to attack the government and promote a common agenda. Such work sends out the signal to voters to vote tactically and for local progressive parties to cooperate and not compete.

Of course, where parties do disagree, they should say so, but in a respectful way. However, especially since there is [only one Labour-Lib Dem two-way marginal](#), attacking each other is just doing the Conservatives' work for them.

This NAP should then be extended to seats – so that each party focuses on where it can win and not undermine each other's chances. This is tactical campaigning.

For this to work, we will need one agreed tactical voting website so there is no doubt about where to campaign and vote tactically. This list of target seats need to be agreed pre- and post- any boundary changes, depending on when the election is called. Progressives need to be ready at any stage from autumn 2022.

The issue of stand-asides is complicated but has to be addressed. If local parties want to negotiate stand-aside deals, then that should be up to them. Ideally, they would use open primaries to determine who the shared candidate might be.

Stand-asides are much better negotiated on a county- or region-wide basis, because with more seats in play fairer deals can be struck. This is especially important to Greens, because FPTP hurts them most and because they aren't second in any seat. If stand-asides are going to work, and if Greens are to be encouraged to vote and campaign

tactically, then there has to be as much as possible in it for their party.

Stand-asides can really help in some places but not always. In the complex web of dysfunctional FPTP politics, other parties standing can usefully draw support that would otherwise go to Tory opponents. Labour won Canterbury in a tight race with the Tories in 2019 after the Greens stood down – and after the Lib Dems stood a candidate, soaking up some soft-Tory votes. Equally, in places such as St Albans having Labour on the ballot helped the Lib Dems. Detailed polling, local knowledge and pragmatic data crunching must determine the best route to success. This is why local parties need the freedom to talk and work together.

Labour–Lib Dem cooperation at the 1997 election shows what’s possible. Then, collaboration on issues and seats created a widespread mood that it was ‘time for change’ and signalled how people should vote to deliver that sentiment electorally. John Curtice and Michael Steed [estimate](#) that tactical voting won Labour an extra 15 to 21 seats, and the Lib Dems 10 to 14. The differences now are that no huge Labour win is likely and that in England there are three progressive parties, not two. The goal today is a three-way version of 1997 with the rock-solid promise of PR, negotiated from the bottom-up and not imposed from the top down.

Finally, more detailed work needs to be done on how a progressive alliance government would actually work effectively, for the benefit of the whole country and all the parties. Whether there is a formal coalition, shared departments of state, or less formal confidence-and-supply backing and a vote-by-vote agreement, Westminster and Whitehall have to be reshaped to make collaborative politics work effectively, because by then it will be here to stay.

Of course, it cannot be assumed all the national parties will collaborate. Tribalism at the top might be too entrenched that they try to block it. If that is the case, then it must become a Rebel Alliance as the best way to end Conservative hegemony. Think about football fans invading a pitch – the stewards can stop a few but they can’t stop us all as we storm our political system . As Robert Colvile [writes](#) in the *Sunday Times*:

‘We are indeed back to an age of two-party politics. But the two parties are the Tories and the anti-Tories, with opposition coalescing, seat by seat, issue by issue, around the Greens, the Lib Dems, Labour and the SNP.

This process is being driven not by some “progressive alliance” cooked up in Westminster but by the voters themselves.’

The foundations of any progressive alliance have to be based on this agile formation of voters and activists because that is where enduring strength comes from.

## Case Study 1: Tactical campaigning – how it works in Lewes

What do Labour Party members do in a seat like Lewes, in Sussex, that Labour has never won or come close to winning?

This is no true-blue stronghold, though Labour hasn't been better than third since 1970: first the Liberals, then the SDP–Liberal Alliance and latterly the Liberal Democrats overtook it.

Then in 1997, as part of the Lib Dems' mini landslide, overlooked in the shadow of the much bigger Blair landslide, a Lib Dem took the seat. An outspoken critic of the Iraq War, the new MP, Norman Baker, increased his majority through the Blair–Brown years, only to lose it in 2015.

For Labour members like me, party rules make it hard to take a decision not to stand a candidate, while publicly supporting another party's candidate invites the instant newspeak act of 'auto-expulsion'. Of course what Labour members get up to in the privacy of the polling booth is out of sight of even the party's compliance unit, but such acts of individual, private, secret rebellion are no kind of basis for building an anti-Tory majority.

In the 2017 and 2019 General Elections, Lewes Constituency Labour Party (CLP) sought to build a positive alternative. We called it 'tactical campaigning'. Every Saturday for the duration of the election, 'charabancs' were organised, taking tens of activists away from the Lewes electoral battleground where we knew we couldn't win to other Sussex seats where Labour was the main contender.

A positive initiative, appealing both to those sympathetic to tactical voting and others vehemently opposed, but united by the intent to help Labour win rather than finish, at best, a decent third. And non-sectarian too: seats were chosen because of the likelihood our efforts might help rather than the particular politics of the Labour candidate. The help also included substantial financial donations from our own CLP to those CLPs who most needed funds to sustain the scale of campaign to win but didn't have the finances to do so. The charabancs garnered real enthusiasm and were sociable and fun. We travelled together and got a real sense that we were making a difference, while picking up invaluable campaign skills from those with a proven record in electoral work. Those connections have remained and grown ever since.

Of course numbers are not enough. In 2017 we played our part, winning the Hove and Portslade seat and Kemptown as well. In 2019 we spread ourselves across the three Sussex target seats but without the vital voter intelligence a professionally run national campaign should provide.

And back in Lewes? A spirited non-party progressive alliance campaign in 2017 led to the Greens standing aside, which together with the Corbyn bounce served to increase the Labour vote, although the Tories

held the seat. In 2019, with no Corbyn bounce, the Lib Dems did better but the Tories still won the seat, despite the combined progressive vote being over 2000 more than theirs – what Compass calls a [Progressive Tragedy](#).

In marginal seats like Lewes no single tactic can guarantee an anti-Tory majority. But if tactical campaigning can be combined with coalition building across parties at a community level, and alliances built in local government (Lewes District Council has a co-operative alliance majority of Lib Dems, Greens, Labour and Independents), then this is not only our best tactical option but our best political one too.

*Mark Perryman describes himself as a ‘coalition-builder’ by trade. In 2017 and 2019 he organised Lewes Labour’s Tactical Campaigning Charabancs and through the coronavirus crisis he has helped pioneer in Lewes a civic, public and visual coalition to collect food for the town’s food banks.*

## **Case Study 2: South West Surrey**

In the South West Surrey constituency in the 2019 General Election, the local Compass group held a progressive forum in advance of candidate nomination day, with participation by the Liberal Democrat prospective candidate, the Green Party prospective candidate and a Labour Party representative. No vote was taken but there was strong agreement that there should be a single progressive candidate.

In practice, Labour fielded a candidate in line with the Labour Party rulebook, but Liberal Democrats and Greens expressed the desire that South West Surrey should be included in the list of negotiated stand-asides. In this constituency, the Green Party did not just stand aside for the Liberal Democrat candidate, Paul Follows, but actively campaigned for him, while he recognised that, should he be elected, he would hold himself to account to the local Green Party as well as the Liberal Democrats in the constituency.

The strong level of collaboration in South West Surrey was only possible because of the history of progressive collaboration in local elections and in general elections since 2015.

In the 2015 General Election, South West Surrey was the seventh-safest Conservative seat in the country. Following a progressive alliance campaign to unseat sitting MP and then Conservative Secretary of State for Health Jeremy Hunt with Dr Louise Irvine, a GP and National Health Action Party candidate, the constituency fell to 151st in the rankings of ‘safe’ Conservative seats in 2017.

Further gains were made in 2019, when progressives threw their weight behind the Unite to Remain progressive alliance candidate, the Liberal Democrat Paul Follows. It is now one of the key target seats

for the Liberal Democrats and is by no means a 'safe' Conservative constituency – forcing the Tories to divert resources to defend the seat.

*Steve Williams is a key Compass organiser who was expelled from Labour after decades of service to the party for backing the National Health Action Party against Jeremy Hunt in South West Surrey. They came close. He is now a Green Councillor.*

### **What about Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland?**

A progressive alliance is clearly complicated by support for independence. Ultimately, it is up to people to decide whether they want to be part of the Union or not. You can be progressive and want the Union to continue or be progressive and want greater independence. But like any relationship it has to be sensitively negotiated. Five nations on two small islands are always going to have to work together. Whatever the eventual legal settlement we will always be interdependent.

All progressive parties, including the SNP and Plaid Cymru, have an interest in a non-Conservative government forming and a new democratic settlement. As things stand, it is almost certainly the case that any non-Tory government is going to rely on the votes of the SNP. Equally, the SNP may be unlikely to get a legally binding referendum under the Tories.

It is not envisaged that the SNP or Plaid Cymru will be part of any progressive alliance conversations, not least because of obvious electoral competition. But the leaders of all the progressive parties need to talk, in part because they share so many policy goals but also because the Tories will accuse them of collaborating anyway at the next election so they can try and peddle a message of a 'coalition of chaos' or SNP control. This can only be countered through open debate and clearly communicating points of mutual interest. This will not be easy, but there is no alternative if there is to be a change of government.



## Progressive Alliances – They're Happening

No matter how convinced anyone is of the arguments in this paper, out there in the real world progressive alliances are being formed.

Parties of the left and centre have been working together in government in Wales and in many councils, from North Somerset to Cumbria, Broxtowe to Brighton. But the local elections in May 2021 saw an explosion of cross-party collaboration. Under-the-radar, parties were talking before the vote to focus campaign activity and, where they could and it would work locally, to stand aside for each other. This activity saw the Tories rocked back on their heels in Blue Wall heartlands such as Kent, Surrey and Sussex.

But the real electoral breakthrough saw progressive-alliance-type relationships take power in Cambridgeshire and Oxfordshire, in towns such as Burnley and Milton Keynes and cities such as Sheffield. In Bristol the Greens won as many seats as Labour and there have been talks about long-term collaboration.

## People Above Politics – New Progressive Alliance to Run MK Council

14th May, 2021

**Labour and the Lib Dems have united in a Progressive Alliance to make sure Milton Keynes has a prosperous, green and fair recovery from the pandemic.**

At last week's elections, the combined Groups had the majority of the vote, and together have the most seats on the Council. They will run a majority administration with a Labour Leader and Liberal Democrat Deputy Leader – a Council that represents the majority of voters in Milton Keynes.

Labour Group Leader, Councillor Pete Marland said: *"We've listened to people on the doorstep and know that residents want a fresh start as we come out of the pandemic. The Progressive Alliance will change the way we do things. It is putting people above politics and providing hope for the future."*

In each case these relationships were agreed after the vote happened. In future it would be better if voters had a sense before they cast their ballot about what likely agreements might be reached – which again emphasises the need to talk now. Openness and transparency are key to making these alliances democratic and therefore popular. Here voters could really be won over to a new grown-up and pragmatic form of politics in which parties are as honest as they can be about who they will work with and for what ends.

In 2022 all the London boroughs are up for election. Three-seat wards are ripe for cooperation to maximise the progressive alliance wins and could be the dry run for a general election that could come as soon as spring 2023.

## Next Steps to Build a Progressive Alliance

Win together or lose apart? The electoral maths and the challenges we face as a society demand that progressives collaborate.

But there is a huge amount to do:

- Building trust between party leaders, MPs and activists. Caroline Lucas, Layla Moran and Clive Lewis are showing the way
- Building trust at the local and regional levels
- Identifying what a fair and effective set of targets are and securing the best means to win them
- Working up a broad policy agenda for a progressive alliance and building public backing for it
- Helping councils form and develop progressive alliance administrations, not least in London next year
- Establishing the benefits of collaborative politics in the minds of the media and the hearts and hopes of the country.

Compass is working to establish local groups for a progressive alliance in every county and covering every target seat. We are also looking to build a national movement of over a million citizens to build pressure for change.

You can help – indeed you must – because the progressive alliance won't happen without you:

- [Join Compass](#) to support our work and get involved in the national effort to build a progressive alliance and win
- If you are in a party, make the case for a progressive alliance. We've set up [Compass Party Groups](#) to help Compass members do just that
- Make the case for a #ProgressiveAlliance on social media
- Campaign on progressive cross-party issues like PR, the Green New Deal and [universal basic income](#)
- Get involved in a [Compass local group](#) where you live so local cooperation can take off – if there isn't a local group, we can help you start one.

All this demands being more ambitious, open, honest, flexible, smart, kind and determined. Through the creation of a progressive alliance, we will show what politics and the country can be like.

The stakes are incredibly high. This is not just about the outcome of a single election but about whether we start to build a deeper democracy as we face the climate emergency and sink further towards authoritarian populism. The Conservatives, as Sir John Curtice said on a recent Compass podcast, are 'uncoalitionable', as having ditched the DUP they have no partners left to work with. For progressives the potential is huge. But we must grasp it.



A progressive alliance is a vital foothold, a beachhead for this deeper democracy. Regress or progress: there is no in-between.

It is time to be brave, to believe in and trust ourselves and each other.

For more information, get in touch with us as at [info@compassonline.org.uk](mailto:info@compassonline.org.uk) or visit <http://www.compassonline.org.uk>

# COMPASS IS THE PRESSURE GROUP FOR A GOOD SOCIETY

We believe in a world that is much more equal, sustainable and democratic. We build alliances of ideas, parties and movements to help make systemic change happen.

**JOIN COMPASS TODAY**

[action.compassonline.org.uk](https://action.compassonline.org.uk)

The logo for Compass, featuring a stylized '@' symbol followed by the word 'compass' in a lowercase, sans-serif font.

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