

Can the SNP win a majority in 2026? Experts give their verdict

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GAINING a majority in the Scottish Parliament is a feat which has been achieved only once.

[Alex Salmond](#) took the [SNP](#) to an outright win in 2011. [John Swinney hopes to do the same next year.](#)

Veterans of the 2011 campaign have told The National that while there are similarities between the two campaigns, Swinney and his troops face an entirely different battlefield from the one Salmond surveyed 14 years ago.

Stephen Gethins, [who is seeking to swap his Westminster seat for one in the Scottish Parliament](#), said it would be a “mistake to fight the last battle”.

That being said, the similarities are worth sketching out: The ruling party is the SNP, their primary challengers are [Scottish Labour](#), the promise of an independence referendum is on the table, the [UK Government](#) is deeply unpopular north of the Border.

The differences, however, are stark: There are new challengers [in the form of Reform UK](#), the LibDems have won back many voters after getting into bed with the [Tories](#), the SNP are defending an almost 20-year record in government as opposed to just four years.

There is one point of similarity which will be keeping SNP strategists awake at night: Throughout the 2011 campaign, their party lagged behind in the polls, only overtaking Scottish Labour at virtually the last minute.



For Kirk Tarrant, the party's media strategist in the run-up to the 2011 vote, the key ingredients to success were "record, team and vision".

While he said he had been "impressed" with Swinney so far, he warned that the First Minister must select candidates who appear as "nation builders".

If indyref2 is on the ballot, Tarrant argued, voters must believe the SNP's candidates are up to the task of building a new nation.

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Gethins, who served as a special adviser to Salmond from 2009 to 2012, said that the [SNP winning a majority](#) was crucial to delivering a second independence referendum.

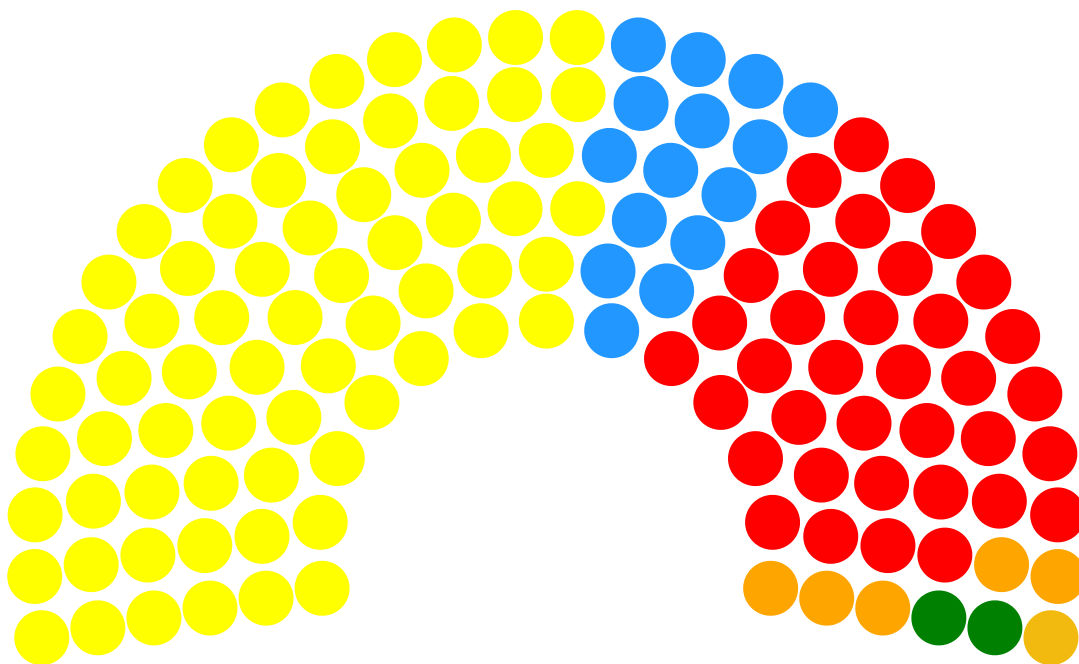
"Unfairly, in my opinion and I suspect, the Green party's opinion, [Westminster](#) did not count their votes as pro-independence votes," he said.

But Tarrant said this strategy is not without its own risks. [Keir Starmer](#) has repeatedly refused to entertain the notion of granting a second independence referendum.

2011

2016

2021



Party	2011	2016	2021	Seat change
SNP	69	63	64	1 1
Scottish Tories	15	31	31	0 0
Scottish Labour	37	24	22	-2 2
LibDem	5	5	4	-1 1
Scottish Greens	2	6	8	2 2

Party	2011	2016	2021	Seat change
Independent	1	0	0	0 0

Torrance said: “If you keep promising things but don’t deliver, you become the boy who cried wolf.”

The pair are agreed that what really won it for the SNP back in 2011 was conquering both the constituency and list votes.

The numbers tell their own story. Since 2011, the SNP’s share of the constituency vote has only gone up. They gained 45.4% of the constituency vote in 2011, rising to 46.5% and coming in at 47.7% in the last election.

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But the regional share has moved in the opposite direction. From a commanding start of 44% in 2011, the SNP’s portion of the list vote fell to 41% in 2016 and to 40.3% in 2021.

For both Torrance and Gethins (below), the success of Swinney’s plan will be measured in how much of the electorate he manages to convince to make “both votes SNP”, as the party’s traditional [Holyrood](#) slogan goes.



(Image: BBC)

There are of course new challenges facing the SNP. Torrance said that the shadow of the criminal charges against former party chief executive Peter Murrell will be “bloody ugly” for the SNP’s campaign.

He also fears that candidacy within the party has become a “reward” for “career managers”.

And the mix of parties that stand to make gains next year could make 2003’s famous “rainbow parliament” look a touch dull.

“If 2011 was a one-colour landslide, 2026 could be a stained glass parliament; beautiful but brittle,” said Torrance.

Perhaps most significantly, and the decisive factor suggested by the SNP’s declining fortunes in the list vote, is that independence is no longer tied to the party. In fact, independence is now more popular than the SNP.

But time in power has also given the SNP new things to boast about, Gethins argues.

He said that he hoped the party would be bigging up its efforts to “eradicate” child poverty through policies such as the Scottish Child Payment and its plans to effectively abolish the two-child [benefits](#) cap.

Another point of agreement between the two 2011 veterans: winning a majority is possible for the SNP.

The pollsters say this is a long shot, but they said the same 14 years ago. It was only through an exit poll that the SNP started to grasp the enormity of what they’d achieved.