

Scottish Parliament elections 2026: boundaries and voting system

The DeHavilland Guide

Scottish Parliament elections 2026: boundaries and voting system

The DeHavilland Guide

Contents

Key takeaways 2

New boundaries 4

Voting 8

Authors

Manon Henderson
Senior Policy Analyst

Olivia Boyce
Lead Policy Analyst

Editorial team

Steve Tolley
Group Political Content Editor

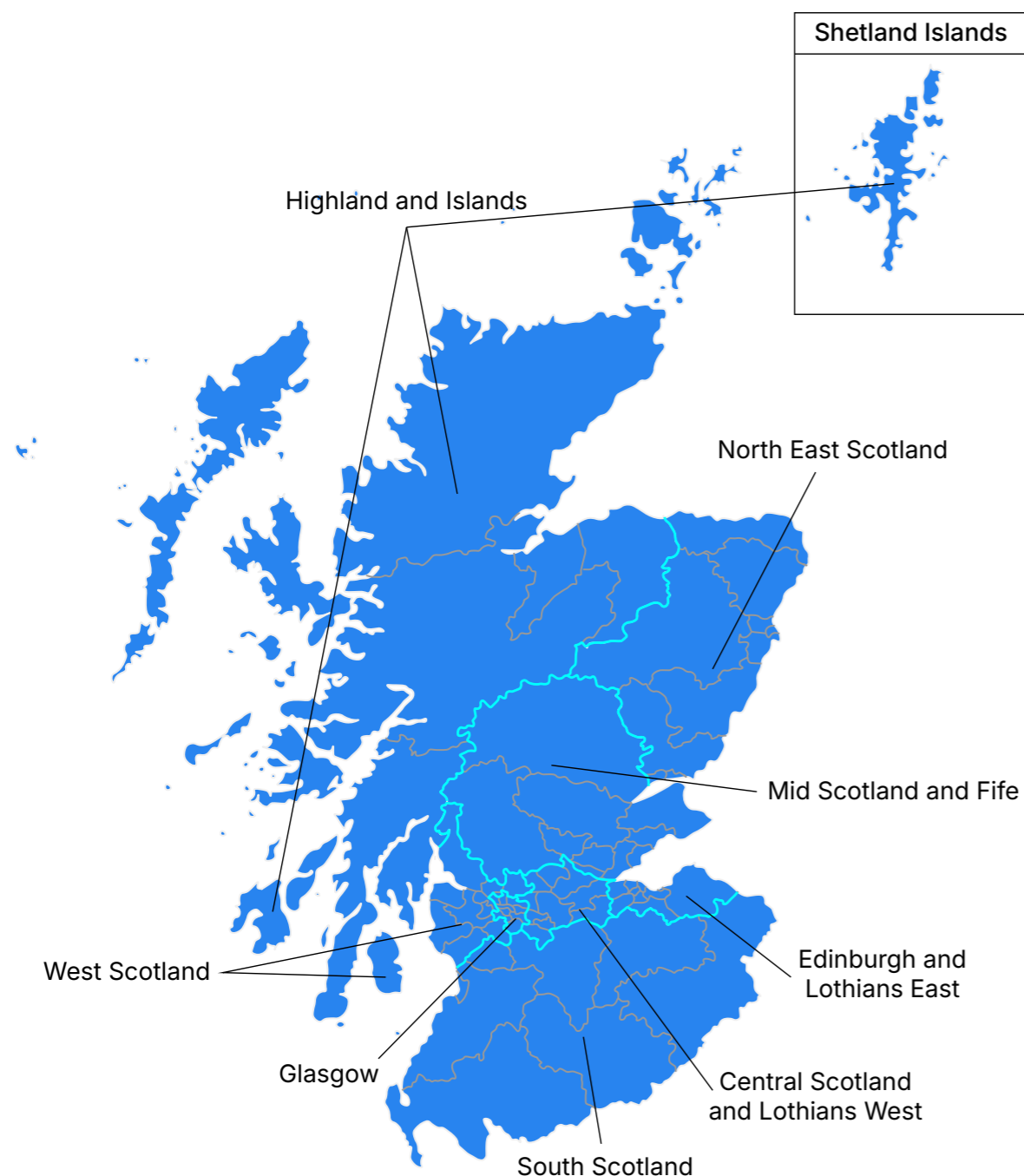
/ Key takeaways

- The 2026 Scottish Parliament election will be shaped by the interlocking dynamics of newly redrawn constituency boundaries and the strategic implications of the Additional Member System (AMS).
- While the number of MSPs remains unchanged, the redraw alters constituency composition and may increase competitiveness in key urban and commuter-belt seats.
- The electoral system's dual-ballot structure means that the pathway to government depends not only on constituency dominance but also on regional list efficiency. The SNP's ability to convert constituency strength into an outright majority – 65 seats – could be key to both governance stability and the party's constitutional strategy of achieving the necessary mandate to pursue negotiations for a second independence referendum.
- Opposition parties are increasingly focusing on efficiency in the regional ballots as a way to gain seats.
- The election is likely to be determined not only by headline vote share but by how efficiently parties translate votes into seats across both ballots.
- As an outright majority is not guaranteed, post-election policymaking could rely on cross-party deals. For public affairs teams, this means that stakeholder mapping should prioritise marginal seats and multiple government formation scenarios.
- Despite the system being designed to avoid an overall majority and to encourage consensus politics, the latest MRP poll indicates an SNP majority, its first since 2011. In addition, whether constituency or regional, the Scottish Parliament is likely to see a significant increase in Reform UK Scotland MSPs.
- Labour and the Conservatives are set to be the biggest losers of the election, which could leave substantial room for the Greens and Liberal Democrats to gain more influence.



Regions changes

Of the eight regions, Mid Scotland and Fife remains unchanged, and Highlands and Islands and North East Scotland have had minimal changes to their boundaries, with the names remaining the same. Glasgow, South Scotland, and West Scotland's boundaries have changed but they keep their existing names. Central Scotland, Lothians West and Edinburgh, and Lothians East had boundary changes and were renamed during the review. As mentioned above, the Highlands and Islands region received special geographical consideration, as the electorate is 32.4% smaller than the average electorate for other regions.



The impact

Urban vs rural representation

Overall, core urban seats are mostly unchanged by the boundary changes, but there could be more uncertainty in Glasgow's east end and southside, and in commuter-belt constituencies.

A significant change in the review is the inclusion of East Lothian communities within Edinburgh constituencies. Midlothian has also been split north to south, owing to the significant population growth in this area. West Lothian seats also sit in a redefined boundary. These changes reflect population expansion along commuter belts to Edinburgh.

Where population growth has been slower, constituencies often expand geographically across larger distances and can combine previously separate rural communities. Island constituencies remain protected and unchanged, and are allowed to have smaller electorates, reflecting a conscious choice to prioritise community representation and ensure rural representation is valued in Scotland. However, larger rural constituencies mean increased travel time for candidates and the potential for media fragmentation across dispersed communities.

From Lothian to Lanarkshire: the areas most affected by the redraw

Edinburgh and Lothians

The area most significantly affected by the redraw is Edinburgh and the Lothians, which is split and replaced by two regions: Edinburgh

and Lothians East, and Central Scotland and Lothians West. This means Edinburgh is no longer grouped in a single region, and West Lothian-facing seats are more aligned with Central Scotland. Midlothian has also been split across different regional list groupings, with Midlothian North becoming part of the Edinburgh and Lothians East region, and the Midlothian South, Tweeddale, and Lauderdale constituency becoming part of the South Scotland region. East Lothian has been split, with Musselburgh and Tranent now being tied into an Edinburgh constituency. These new seats combine city voters, commuter-belt homeowners, and some rural voters – a new mix that could well mean closer contests and fewer predictable seats.

Glasgow

Glasgow boundaries have also been adjusted, with some Lanarkshire-facing and Renfrewshire-facing seats being reconfigured. Former standalone seats have been merged or split. For example, Glasgow Baillieston and Glasgow Shettleston have combined to become Glasgow Baillieston and Shettleston, with the same being true for the new constituency of Glasgow Easterhouse and Springburn, with Glasgow Provan disappearing as a standalone constituency. Maryhill and Kelvin have also combined to create the new constituency of Glasgow Kelvin and Maryhill. Labour enters the election with a strong base in Glasgow, and the boundary changes will likely not undermine this. The SNP remains competitive across Glasgow but may be more exposed to the redraw in areas where the contests are sensitive and counts are expected to be close, such as in the east-end or the commuter-belt constituencies.

/ Voting

The Scottish Parliament is comprised of 129 MSPs, with a working majority requiring at least 65 seats. Holyrood elections use the Additional Member System (AMS), under which voters cast two votes: 73 constituency seats are elected by First Past the Post, and 56 seats across eight regions are allocated on the D'Hondt proportional system – seven per region.

D'Hondt

The party with the highest vote total in a regional count wins the first seat. After a party wins a seat, its total starting vote is divided by the number of seats it has won in the region so far (so, one, as this is the first round of counting), plus one. The adjusted totals are then compared again to allocate the next seat: the party with the most votes gets a seat, and their starting total is divided by the number of seats it has won in the region, plus one; so, two. If it is the same party that won the first seat, its initial vote count would be divided by three.

For example, imagine four parties and one independent candidate receive the following votes:

- Party A: 300
- Party B: 210
- Party C: 120
- Party D: 30
- Independent: 10

In the first round, Party A has the highest total and wins the first seat. For the next round, Party A's vote is divided by two (the seat it won, plus one), giving it 150.

In round two, Party B now has the highest adjusted total (210), so it wins a seat. Its vote is then divided by two (the seat it won, plus one), giving it 105.

In round three, Party A's adjusted total of 150 is again the highest, so it wins a second seat. Its original 300 votes are now divided by three (because it has won two seats, plus the added one), giving it 100.

This process continues until all six seats are allocated. In this example, the final result would be:

- Party A: 3 seats
- Party B: 2 seats
- Party C: 1 seat

A more visual explainer, courtesy of the BBC's Jeremy Vine, is available [here](#).

What it means

Under this system, parties which don't win many or any constituencies can convert the regional vote share into seats more efficiently.

As an example, Table 1 shows how AMS translated votes into seats in 2021. Despite the SNP winning an overwhelming amount of the constituency seats, its votes were concentrated in those areas, and therefore, its regional list gains were limited. Whereas the Conservatives' representation was more spread out, meaning it saw gains from the regional lists.

Both Labour and the Greens were heavily dependent on regional allocation, and the Liberal Democrats won exclusively via constituencies and failed to convert national list support into seats. The table underlines a key feature of AMS: regional ballots often determine the balance of representation, particularly for parties outside the largest bloc.

Table 1: 2021 election results

Party	Constituency Seats	Regional List Seats	Total Seats	% of Seats from List
SNP	62	2	64	3%
Scottish Conservative	5	26	31	84%
Scottish Labour	2	20	22	91%
Scottish Greens	0	8	8	100%
Scottish Lib Dems	4	0	4	0%



Constituency over regional

For any party, the most direct path to a majority remains winning constituencies. Additional seats account for fewer than half of the seats in all regions. Therefore, if a party has been particularly successful in winning constituency seats, it may not be possible for smaller parties to fully correct the disproportionality via the additional seats. Recent MRP polling supports this, with suggestions that tactical voting could reinforce this pathway. The latest polling suggests a significant proportion of Labour voters may be willing to back the SNP in certain constituencies to block Reform UK, potentially allowing the SNP to dominate FPTP contests and approach or surpass the 65-seat majority threshold. In AMS terms, tactical voting on the constituency ballot can materially alter the parliamentary arithmetic even if overall list vote shares remain fragmented.

The system, however, is designed to ensure a link between constituency and regional seats in the Scottish Parliament through the Additional Member System. Regional seat allocation is designed to ensure the total number of seats a party wins, both constituency and regional, closely matches its percentage of the regional vote, using the D'Hondt formula to calculate results.

As previous results have shown, this does not always work in practice. In 2011 in the Lothians, the SNP won eight of the nine constituency seats, and therefore half of the seats in the region, despite only winning just over 39% of the vote. Proportionally, the party should have won seven seats – with the 'extra' seat technically deserving to go to the Liberal Democrats, who failed to secure any representation in the region.

Scottish Conservatives

The Scottish Conservatives' Holyrood representation is structurally dependent on the regional list.

In 2021, only five Conservative MSPs were elected via constituencies; the remaining 26 came through the regional ballot. This makes list performance central to the party's survival and growth, with the party seeking to avoid fragmentation of the right-wing vote, which could reduce seat efficiency under D'Hondt. Russell Findlay made the party's strategy clear at its spring conference, when he said it would be targeting the regional vote – although the MRP poll would suggest the party will receive its lowest share of the vote and seats since devolution began.

Scottish Liberal Democrats

Another party that has set its sights on the peach regional ballot is the Scottish Liberal Democrats. This marks a step change from 2021, when all Lib Dem MSPs were elected through constituencies, despite securing over 5% of the regional vote nationally. The party's inability to win any list seats in 2021 reflects a potential issue: a moderate but thinly spread regional vote often fails to convert into seats unless concentrated in specific regions.

However, despite the party announcing its desire for voters to use the regional system to bring electoral success, Alex Cole-Hamilton [set out](#) the party's 10 target seats (Orkney; Shetland; Caithness, Sutherland and Ross; Skye, Lochaber and Badenoch; Inverness and Nairn; Argyle and Bute; Edinburgh Western; Edinburgh Northern; North East Fife; and Strathkelvin and Bearsden) during the Scottish Liberal Democrats' spring conference. Whether constituency or regional, polling currently suggests the Lib Dems will increase their current representation, as they did with the party's success down south at the 2024 general election.

Scottish Greens

The Scottish Greens' electoral history is one that most closely aligns with the logic of AMS. In 2021, the party won all eight of its seats through the regional list. In recent weeks, the Scottish Greens announced it would limit the number of constituency contests it fights, concentrating effort on maximising regional returns. This reduced competition in selected constituency contests may limit vote-splitting while maintaining independent list campaigns, and could aid the conditions needed for the SNP's independence referendum strategy.

Reform

The latest MRP poll indicates that Reform is unlikely to win a constituency seat but would still gain substantial representation. If it manages to secure a meaningful regional vote share, it can enter the D'Hondt allocation rounds competitively, potentially displacing Conservative or Labour list seats.

Stepping back

The interaction of tactical constituency voting, regional list competition, and party differentiation means that it is the constituency outcome that is likely to determine whether the largest party approaches or crosses the majority threshold.

The constituency outcome will likely determine whether the largest party approaches or crosses the majority threshold, with regional ballots likely determining the scale of opposition. The 2021 results demonstrate that AMS does not simply mirror national vote share. It rewards vote efficiency across two ballots. For 2026, the strategic focus of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats on regional seats, alongside the Greens' continued list-first approach, reflects a recognition that the second ballot may ultimately shape the composition and stability of the next Scottish Parliament as much as, if not more than, constituency contests.

Despite the system being designed to avoid an overall majority and to encourage consensus politics, the latest MRP poll indicates an SNP majority, their first since 2011. In addition, whether constituency or regional, the Scottish Parliament is likely to experience a significant increase in Reform UK Scotland MSPs. Labour and the Conservatives are set to be the biggest losers of the election, which could leave substantial room for the Greens and Liberal Democrats to take more influence in driving the political agenda.



he/io /DeHavilland

We hope you found this briefing helpful.

This briefing is an example of the in-depth political information we provide to public affairs and policy clients every day.

Our analysts gather vital political content from a range of sources to bring our customers live coverage tailored to their strategic needs.

DeHavilland is part of Helio, the leading political intelligence group in Europe. To find out how our political monitoring, analysis and research can help your organisation, and to request a free trial of our services, visit our website: dehavilland.co.uk