Understanding the 2015 General Election in Scotland

Jan Eichhorn, Mor Kandlik Eltanani and Daniel Kenealy

Understanding the 2015 General Election in Scotland

Jan Eichhorn, Mor Kandlik Eltanani and Daniel Kenealy[1]

1. Introduction

The 2015 General Election was remarkable for many reasons. The overall result, with David Cameron's Conservative party securing an overall majority, surprised many after opinion polls had pointed to a hung parliament.[2] In Scotland, the most noteworthy development was the shift of support from Labour to the Scottish National Party (SNP). Across Scotland there was a swing of 26.1 per cent from Labour to the SNP, with swings as high as 39.3 per cent (in Glasgow North East). Labour lost 40 of the 41 Scottish seats it had won at the 2010 general election, every one of them to the SNP who also picked up 10 of the 11 seats won by the Liberal Democrats in 2010. Overall, the SNP won 56 of Scotland's 59 Westminster constituencies and 50 per cent of the vote – the highest share of the vote won in Scotland since the combination of the Scottish Unionist Party and the National Liberal and Conservatives recorded 50.1 per cent in 1955. The party had turned defeat in Scotland's independence referendum eight months earlier into a landslide electoral triumph.

Table 1: The 2015 and 2010 UK General Election result in Scotland, vote share % and seats

	Vote share		Seats	
	2015	**2010**	**2015**	**2010**
SNP	50.0	19.9	56	6
Labour	24.3	42.0	1	41
Conservatives	14.9	16.7	1	1
Liberal Democrat	7.5	18.9	1	11
Others	3.3	2.5	0	0

Labour's 24.3 per cent share of the vote was sharply down on the 42 per cent the party recorded in the 2010 general election. Not since the 1918 General election, when Labour secured just 22.9 per cent of the vote, had the party won a lower vote share in Scotland. Although the Conservatives retained their sole Scottish seat the election saw the party's lowest ever share of the vote, at 14.9 per cent (see *table 1*).

In this paper we focus on the shift from Labour to the SNP, which was the most prominent dynamic of the election. The structure of the paper is as follows. Section 2 sets out some of the key narratives that have developed about the shift in support

[2] For an overview see P. Cowley and D. Kavanagh, *The British General Election of 2015* (London: AIAA, 2015) and the special issue of *Parliamentary Affairs*, 'Britain Votes 2015', 68 supplement 1 (2015).

from Labour to the SNP. This is done through readings of key opinion formers and political commentators, and is complemented by insights from interviews with Scottish Labour MSPs and officials.[3] In attempting to capture these key narratives it is not our intention to judge them, but rather to establish a sense of how mainstream thinking was developing in the months leading to the 2015 general election. The subsequent sections, in which we present the results of our survey, are our effort to analyse the strength of these narratives and arguments insofar as the data allows us to do that. In section 3 we first investigate the dynamics of people who changed their party affinity recently and in particular from before the independence referendum to after the general election. In section 4 we then place this analysis in the context of longer-term changes since the advent of devolution.

2. Explanations for the shift from Labour to the SNP

Looking back to opinion polls of Westminster voting intensions in Scotland, it is interesting to note that very quickly after the Scottish independence referendum, the SNP moved upwards sharply and Labour began to haemorrhage support. Two polls conducted in September 2014, before the independence referendum, saw Labour with a lead over the SNP of 17 and 21 per cent. A third September poll, the fieldwork for which was done the day after the referendum, was much tighter, with SNP support at 35 per cent to Labour's 39 per cent. As of October 2014 every poll of Westminster voting intentions put the SNP ahead, often by as much as 25 to 30 per cent (the final gap between the two parties in the May vote being 25.7 per cent).[4]

Although many commentators focused of what the polls might mean in terms of Labour seats lost and SNP seats gained, narratives about the causes of this dramatic shift in support began to emerge in the months following September 2014. Those narratives can be summarised as follows:

1. Outflanked on the Left
2. Scotland First
3. Leadership and Competence
4. A Referendum Effect

The arguments are, of course, interrelated and that is reflected in the observations of most political commentators. None subscribe exclusively to one or the other although, for analytical purposes, we examine them separately below.

Argument 1. Outflanked on the left?
One of the most common theories about the switch is that the SNP have succeeded in out-flanking Labour on the left of Scottish politics. Owen Jones, for example, wrote in March 2015, 'Under Sturgeon's formidable leadership, the SNP are carving out the

---

[3] Interviews were carried out at various points throughout 2015 in connection with work on Scottish Labour's 2014 leadership election and on the General Election.
[4] A breakdown of all polls conducted can be found at http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/how-would-you-be-likely-to-vote-in-a-uk-general-election#table [accessed 13 February 2016].

clear progressive message that should really belong to Labour'.[5] This was a line that Jones had been advancing since October 2014.[6]

The argument narrates a history that often goes back to the mid-1990s and the arrival of Tony Blair of New Labour. It proceeds through the Iraq war, Blair's centrist and often market-based social policies, and arrives at an end point where Labour's brand had become 'Tory light'. This sequence of events, with Scottish Labour guilty by association and failing to forge a distinct political message north of the border, created an opportunity for the SNP, an opportunity that they spotted and began to respond to from about 2004.[7] For MacWhirther, the period of the referendum was critical because the 'Yes' campaign was able to capture activist groups across the left who set aside 'the traditional Marxist view of it [independence] as divisive and bourgeois'.[8] In other words, for many on the left in Scotland, the independence campaign entrenched a view that the SNP's overarching goal was a goal that ought to be shared by the left.

But there is a subtlety to this argument as many commentators advance it. Rather than adopting policies that might be defined as 'left-wing', the SNP have articulated a message that is leftist, concerned with social justice and progressive politics. Whether the SNP's actual record in government – on which we make no judgment in this report – is accurately described as 'left' or not thus becomes less relevant to the discourses shaping Scottish politics and the narratives that have been developed by or have attached to the political parties. *The Guardian*, in an end of 2014 editorial, remarked that although Labour's 'former voters in the west of Scotland and other onetime heartlands believe that Labour has abandoned them and their interests, while believing the SNP's converse claim to have embraced them. Neither of these claims stands up to forensic examination'.[9]

Within Scottish Labour, there are MSPs and party officials who are sympathetic to this argument, arguing that the way back for the party cannot be to try and position themselves to the right of the SNP. One MSP, in a discussion about how the SNP had managed to capture so much of what was previously Labour's vote, said

> 'I've got to be honest I couldn't understand it. I knocked on so many doors in the [2015 general election] campaign and it just didn't matter what I said about SNP policy, or the record they've got up here, it just didn't, you know, connect. I don't think it's actually that the SNP *are* particularly left. The way I see it they talk left and walk right, you know, and I hate it but I have to say they talk a good game. But perceptions are really important and they're hard to change quickly. I think

---

[5] O. Jones, 'If the UK falls apart, the Tories must take the blame', *The Guardian*, 18 March 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/18/uk-tories-labour-snp-scottish-independence [accessed 13 February 2016].

[6] O. Jones, 'Scottish Labour face existential crisis: they can stand up for working people or die', *The Daily Record*, 19 October 2014, at http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/owen-jones-scottish-labour-face-4463712#YoCERz77KqiLSvKT.97 [accessed 13 February 2016].

[7] This development is traced in more detail in D. Torrance, 'Long read: The reinvention of the SNP', *The Guardian*, 21 May 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/21/how-alex-salmond-nicola-sturgeon-pulled-off-political-triumph-lifetime [accessed 15 February 2016].

[8] I. MacWhirther, 'Disunited Kingdom: how Westminster won a referendum but lost Scotland', 8 December 2014, at https://iainmacwhirter.wordpress.com/2014/12/08/disunited-kingdom-how-westminster-won-a-referendum-but-lost-scotland-out-now/ [accessed 16 February 2016]. See also I. MacWhirther, *Disunited Kingdom* (Edinburgh: Cargo Publishing, 2014).

[9] 'Labour on the edge', *The Guardian*, 26 December 2014, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/dec/26/guardian-view-scottish-public-opinion-labour-edge [accessed 13 February 2016].

we're just, unfortunately, in a period where the SNP are riding high. Remember Teflon Tony [Blair]? It's the same thing. But this time we're on the receiving end. But it goes in cycles, right? [*Pause*] ... I hope it does'.

A former MP broadly agreed:

'I heard it all the time on the doorstep. People would tell you, again and again, they didn't know what we stood for, they didn't think we were on their side, and this is communities that, you know, we know, that we've represented for years. So we've got to start listening again, but not just that, we've got to be clearer about what we stand for and what we've gotten done over the years ... We've got to go back to party traditions and political education. Never again do I want to be campaigning in working class communities in Scotland and be told that I'm not on the side of ordinary people, that I support wars, that I want to privatise public services'.

During the 2015 General election campaign Scottish Labour made efforts to respond to this argument. Many headline policy announcements by then leader Jim Murphy signalled this. Scottish Labour's 'pledge card' – a device used by Blair ahead of the 1997 General election – detailed a series of policy commitments that were all designed to help the party recapture space on the left of the political terrain. It included a proposal to fund new nurses by taxing people with mansions, guaranteeing a job of training for young people, a £1600 grant for every Scottish young person without a job, training or college place, a higher minimum wage, a poor-student bursary, banning zero-hours contracts, and £175m to help end food bank usage in Scotland.[10] A Scottish Labour party official put it like this:

'I think there was an effort [in the campaign] to set out policies that would, you know, send a clear progressive signal. If you remember it was zero hours contracts, it was taxing people with expensive houses to pay for nurses, getting rid of food banks, stuff like that. I mean, look, this was an election at the end of the day and we knew we had a problem. The SNP had sort of stolen our clothes. But the policies were costed and we'd have delivered them'.

The Outflanked on the Left argument has retained its potency since the election. In his snap verdict, McKenna argued that Scottish Labour's 'territory has been annexed by the SNP and the electorate has decided that, for the time being, social justice, fairness and equality sound better from the mouths of the SNP'.[11] This raises an interesting question about the impact of the election of Jeremy Corbyn as UK Labour leader. Brian Taylor observed: 'The thinking – OK, the flickering hope – in Scottish Labour circles is that, at the very minimum, Mr Corbyn's elevation allows the party in Scotland to posit itself as distinctly to the left of the SNP'. But, Taylor goes on, 'the

---

[10] S. Carrell, 'Jim Murphy pledges £1bn to win Scottish Labour voters back from SNP', *The Guardian*, 25 March 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/mar/25/jim-murphy-scottish-labour-1bn-pledge-jobs-snp-election [accessed 13 February 2016]; 'Brown: Labour will spend an extra £800m in Scotland', *The Herald*, 30 March 2015, at http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13207960.display/ [accessed 13 February 2016]; S. Carrell, 'Labour asks Scotland not to turn to SNP out of anger', *The Guardian*, 6 April 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/apr/06/labour--scotland-snp-jim-murphy-pledge-card [accessed 13 February 2016].

[11] K. McKenna, 'Scottish Labour has only itself to blame for its crucifixion', *The Guardian*, 10 May 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/may/10/scottish-labour-jim-murphy-resign [accessed 13 February 2016].

swing to the Nationalists was as much prompted, in my view, by a sense that they stood for Scotland, ineluctably'.[12] That brings us neatly to a second argument.

Argument 2: Scotland First?

In the same end of year editorial cited above, *The Guardian* embraced this argument remarking, 'the SNP is deemed to speak for Scotland while Labour is deemed to have sold its soul to Westminster ... In Scotland the lack of confidence in "London-based" politics trumps everything'.[13] Developments within Scottish Labour during the closing months of 2014 were not helpful in this regard. Johann Lamont's resignation as Scottish Labour leader – in which she publicly declared that Labour's UK leadership had thwarted her efforts to reform the party in Scotland, treating it as if it were a 'branch office' – furthered the impression that Scottish Labour were a party that did not, and indeed could not, put Scotland's interests first.[14]

For Brian Taylor, writing a snap verdict after the General election, the 'biggest factor of all' was that 'for years, but especially in the aftermath of the referendum, people in Scotland have been looking for Scottish champions ... They have sought politicians who owed their allegiance, primarily if not solely, to Scottish concerns'.[15] Similarly, Gerry Hassan saw the election as a 'watershed ... about who is best placed to represent Scotland's interests in Westminster and our place in an evolving Union'.[16]

Throughout the period October 2014 to May 2015, Scottish Labour made various attempts to 'project itself as representing the Scottish "patriotic choice"'.[17] Perhaps the most obvious example of this was the move by Jim Murphy to change the constitution of the Scottish Labour to state that the party would act in the national interest of Scotland.[18] Gordon Brown's intervention in February 2015, announcing what he called the 'Vow-plus' that would offer even more powers to Scotland than those agreed in the Smith Commission just months earlier (and which Labour had been a participant in), was another example.[19] The aim, as Hassan described it, was to 'create a genuine,

---

[12] B. Taylor, 'Looking back, looking forward', *BBC*, 14 September 2015, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-34246018 [accessed 10 February 2016]. For a similar argument see G. Eaton, 'Why Jeremy Corbyn will find winning back Scotland so hard', *The New Statesman*, 1 October 2015, at http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/uk/2015/10/why-jeremy-corbyn-will-find-winning-back-scotland-so-hard [accessed 10 February 2016].

[13] 'Labour on the edge', *Guardian*.

[14] M. Foote, 'Johann Lamont quits as Scottish Labour leader: Some of my colleagues are dinosaurs, and they don't see that things have changed', *The Daily Record*, 24 October 2014, at http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/johann-lamont-resigns-scottish-labour-4502765#481eAPfojzbX4IIc.97 [accessed 10 February 2016]; and J. Merrick, 'Johann Lamont resigns: Party has "no clue" on Scotland, says former Labour first minister', *The Independent*, 25 October 2014, at http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/johann-lamont-resigns-party-has-no-clue-on-scotland-says-former-labour-first-minister-9818656.html [accessed 11 February 2016].

[15] B. Taylor, 'Apocalypse now ... what next?', *BBC*, 8 May 2015, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-32660111 [accessed 15 February 2016].

[16] G. Hassan, 'The bitterness between Labour and the SNP is epic – why don't they realise how alike they are?', *The Daily Record*, 26 April 2015, at http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/gerry-hassan-bitterness-between-labour-5583650#kiSARGC8qwATpspx.97 [accessed 13 February 2016].

[17] B. Taylor, 'Brown spells out "Vow-plus" plan', *BBC*, 2 February 2015, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-31100071 [accessed 11 February 2016]; B. Taylor, 'FMQs and the elephant in the room', *BBC*, 5 March 2015, at http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-31751986 [accessed 11 February 2016].

[18] S. Carrell, 'Murphy seeks clause four rewrite to stop Labour decline in Scotland', *The Guardian*, 15 December 2014, at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/dec/15/jim-murphy-labour-decline-in-scotland [accessed 13 February 2016].

[19] Taylor, '"Vow-plus" plan'.

distinct, fully autonomous Scottish Labour party'.[20] Only through doing that, the argument went, could Scottish Labour begin to make the case they were free to put Scotland's interests before the interests of the UK Labour party.

It is interesting that, within Scottish Labour, several figures on the left publicly raised the possibility of an independent party in Scotland, or at the very least a significantly more autonomous party.[21] As a former MP, on the left of the party, put it to me,

> 'I think, so long as we have [UK Labour party] leadership contenders who are committed to some form of austerity, want to renew Trident, want to cut welfare and social security ... [*pause*] ... As long as that's the case then we have to think long and hard about it [a separate party in Scotland]. There's lots of models we could look at, like the German conservatives in Bavaria, or some of the party structures in Spain ... Look, let's be honest, devolution is asymmetric so why shouldn't party structures mirror that? The aim, surely, has to be to get a Labour majority across Britain. All I'm saying is that we should look seriously at anything that might help us get that'.

An MSP, closer to the party's centre, remarked,

> 'We had a review [of Scottish Labour] after the last [Scottish Parliament] election. And it came up with some good proposals. But there's lots of unfinished business from that period. We have a chance to raise those issues and go back and do the job properly now ... The party [in Scotland] isn't resourced sufficiently and so policy development isn't funded as well as it should be. I mean, we're devolved as a party, but we're not resourced to meet the challenges we face. So, more autonomy yes, we need that and we've been saying it for years. But separation? Independence? I don't think it's seriously being considered to be honest'.

The same MP, when asked how Scottish Labour could walk the tightrope between autonomy and communicating a Scotland First message, responded,

> 'I don't think the two are mutually exclusive. They can't be, otherwise we're just handing it to the SNP. We're going to have to work to change what defending Scotland's interests means aren't we? If you look at an awful lot of SNP policy, I wouldn't say that's putting Scotland's interests first. I get that's what people might think. But we've got to be stronger at making our case that it's not'.

We should pause briefly to note, once again, the interconnectedness of these different arguments. Greater autonomy for Scottish Labour might, for example, make the party

---

[20] G. Hassan, 'Jim Murphy's biggest task will be ridding Scottish Labour of amateurish officials, London meddlers and deadwood candidates', *The Daily Record*, 14 December 2014, at http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/gerry-hassan-jim-murphys-biggest-4807975#7BFMqCb7xs5ayGDP.97 [accessed 16 February 2016]; see also G. Hassan, 'Jim Murphy's mansion tax wheeze has caused ripples and exposed schisms ... now he needs policies of substance', *The Daily Record*, 11 January 2015, at http://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/gerry-hassan-jim-murphys-mansion-4956976#8ZzPP9XoOJXKbovM.97 [accessed 16 February 2016].

[21] 'Neil Findlay says Scottish Labour could become independent of UK party', *Labour List*, 12 May 2015, at http://labourlist.org/2015/05/neil-findlay-says-scottish-labour-could-become-independent-of-uk-party/ [accessed 16 February 2016]; T. Gordon, 'Labour split over whether to have separate Scottish party', *The Herald*, 14 June 2015, at http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13412814.Labour_split_over_whether_to_have_separate_Scottish_party/ [accessed 16 February 2016].

more credible when it argues that it puts Scotland first. But the question that follows is more autonomy to do what? For those who also subscribe to the Outflanked on the Left argument the answer is simple: autonomy to adopt more left wing policies.[22] McKenna argued, for example, 'if UK Labour can't or won't carry out the task [of coming up with a model for a socially progressive UK] then the Scottish party must uncouple from Westminster, take up the standard and dare to be radical once more'.[23] But many within Scottish Labour, who do not subscribe as strongly to the Outflanked on the Left argument, would use greater autonomy in a very different way.

Argument 3: Leadership?

The leadership and competence argument can be divided into the short-term and the longer-term, and also into a weak leadership (or competence) versus unsuitable leadership argument. The longer-term issue concerns the oft-repeated perception that the best Scottish talent within the Labour party has migrated to Westminster, with what remains at Holyrood a 'B-team'. Even within the Labour party this can be an issue. As McKenna observed, 'many of its Scottish MPs … only with great difficulty, concealed their contempt for those who represented Labour at Holyrood'.[24] Further exacerbating this was the leadership churn at the top of Scottish Labour that saw four leaders in a little over seven years.

More specific to the 2015 General election, and thus in the shorter-term, was the issue of perceived weak Labour leadership at the UK level. Some commentators saw this as causing problems for Labour's campaign in Scotland. Not only was Miliband seen as weak, but his refusal to work with the SNP – designed to secure support amongst a certain segment of the electorate in England but potentially seen in Scotland as rejecting a working relationship with a party who, in policy terms, they were arguably rather close to – was seen by some Scottish political commentators as a weakness in the campaign.[25]

Also in the more immediate term, some commentators identified the replacement of Lamont as Scottish Labour leader with Jim Murphy in December 2014 as problematic. Murphy was viewed by some as possessing a political experience and reputation that many MSPs were seen as lacking. As a result some saw him as the remedy to any argument about 'weak' leadership. After all, he had been a UK cabinet minister under Gordon Brown and was a prominent frontbencher in Ed Miliband's shadow cabinet in opposition from 2010.

Yet others viewed him as too closely associated with New Labour and 'Blairism', and as a creature of Westminster. This simply opened up a new problem of leadership, but one less about 'strength/competence' and more about 'suitability'. Once again the interconnectedness of these arguments becomes apparent. If you subscribe to the Scotland First argument then parachuting a Westminster MP in to lead a Scottish party

---

[22] It is interesting to note that those voices on the left of Scottish Labour that raised the possibility of significant autonomy for Scottish Labour, in a federal party structure, or even a total separation, have been hushed since Jeremy Corbyn's election as UK Labour leader.

[23] K. McKenna, 'The union is once again at risk – thanks to Labour', *The Guardian*, 7 March 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/mar/07/scottish-labour-party-need-to-get-act-together-union-general-election [accessed 15 February 2016].

[24] McKenna, 'Scottish Labour has only itself to blame'.

[25] S. Carrell and R. Mason, 'Ed Miliband summons up ghosts of Labour's past to try to avoid SNP rout', *The Guardian*, 1 May 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2015/may/01/ed-miliband-summons-up-ghosts-of-labours-past-in-bid-to-avoid-rout-by-snp [accessed 16 February 2016].

may be deemed unwise. Similarly, if you subscribe to the Outflanked on the Left argument then an MP seen by many as 'Blairite' may end up accentuating existing problems. The issue of leadership, it would seem, could thus not be resolved simply by bringing in someone seen as a 'big hitter'.

Within Scottish Labour it comes as no surprise that those on the left of the party endorse the 'leadership argument' as an extension of their critique of Jim Murphy and his perceived Blairite past. As an MSP put it,

> 'We'd sided with the Tories in the Better Together campaign; we'd lost our leader in a really, frankly, embarrassing way; we were sinking like a stone in the polls. And what did we do? We turned to Jim Murphy which sort of put is in the worst of all worlds. Not only did we look indulgent, talking to ourselves about our next leader when there was a f***ing election around the corner. But we then picked a leader who was a poster boy for so many of the attack lines we were getting'.

Another MSP remarked similarly,

> '[Jim] was a lifeboat strategy. People think the ship's sinking so let's rush to the nearest lifeboat. The only problem with a lifeboat is it can end up taking you into even deeper, unknown waters'.

However, this line of argument is perhaps the least detectable within the party – perhaps reflecting Ronald Reagan's famed eleventh commandment to not speak ill of fellow party members – although the leadership churn is generally recognised as damaging and creating a perception of weakness.

Argument 4: A Referendum Effect?

There was also discussion of a 'Referendum Effect'.[26] Although the SNP lost the independence referendum the 'Yes' campaign achieved a historic shift in support for independence. In spite of the fact that the 'Yes' campaign comprised the SNP, the Scottish Greens, the Scottish Socialists, and many who had no party affiliation at all, it was the SNP that benefited the most from this shift, picking up the support of the vast majority these newly pro-independence voters. MacWhirter wrote that, 'Somehow in the crucible of the referendum campaign, a fundamental shift has taken place in Scottish attitudes towards independence'.[27] And Tom Clark similarly observed,

> 'Forty-five is a losing score in a referendum, but as a percentage in a general election, it would provide a crushing victory. That is, in essence, why the Scottish nationalists look increasingly likely to move from the despondent of defeat in September to an historic win ... they currently seem to be reliably speaking for close to 45% of Scots'.[28]

Clark went on:

---

[26] For a further discussion of the referendum effect see John Curtice's paper for this project; "Did Yes win the referendum campaign?" Available at https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/Understanding2015GEresults

[27] I. MacWhirter, 'The losers take it all', 8 November 2014, at https://iainmacwhirter.wordpress.com/2014/11/08/the-losers-take-it-all/ [accessed 11 February 2016].

[28] T. Clark, 'After independence defeat, SNP looks set for general election victory in 2015', *The Guardian*, 26 December 2014, at http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/dec/26/scottish-independence-nationalists-victory-2015-icm-poll [accessed 11 February 2016].

"There is little doubt that it is the independence referendum that has catalysed this change ... it was former Labour voters who did the most to boost the SNP loyalists and secure the cities of Dundee and Glasgow for the pro-independence vote. Now, these voters appear almost entirely lost to Labour ...".

Generally, commentators who observed a 'Referendum Effect' see it as a catalyst rather than a direct cause. In other words, they argue that Scottish Labour had allowed their support to weaken over many years; failing to build a compelling narrative for the devolved Scotland they had been largely responsible for creating. When the independence referendum came along it was thus that much easier for Labour identifiers to switch. But it was not the referendum itself that caused the switch, instead the referendum simply provided for the moment for the switch. This view is detectable amongst the MSP group at Holyrood. As one MSP put it,

'I've been reading a lot of the polling on this and it seems [to be] the case that the referendum did something. I mean it was the moment where a lot of people who maybe we're so involved in politics got involved. But it was also, I think, a moment where people took stock and really re-evaluated a lot of the beliefs and the views that they had. In that sense it was a moment that forced a lot of change that had been building up over time. That's how I'm making sense of it at least. And for a lot of people, I'm afraid to say, the lasting memory is of us [Labour] lined up with the Tories'.

The final words in the above quote bears further comment, for they reveal a further argument often heard as part of an explanation for the switch from Labour to the SNP. The argument is that Scottish Labour was punished for campaigning alongside the Conservatives, under the banner of Better Together, during the independence referendum. Let's call it the Unholy Alliance argument. It has featured prominently in the analysis of leading political commentators.

Consider Owen Jones who remarked, 'Labour are tarnished precisely because they are seen to have joined forces with the Tories, and for failing to present a viable or coherent alternative to them'. [29] Kevin McKenna provocatively wrote that Gordon Brown, Jim Murphy, and Alistair Darling – whom he labelled 'conservative, middle-class members of the Westminster elite' – had done 'more damage to the Labour party in Scotland that any lack of leadership by Johann Lamont' through their active campaigning with Better Together. [30] In their end of 2014 review of Scotland, *The Guardian*'s editorial embraced the Unholy Alliance argument, stating 'Labour is being punished by Scottish voters for having campaigned with the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats against independence'. [31]

Within Scottish Labour many leading figures on the left of the party bristle when asked about the decision to join the Better Together campaign. As one MSP put it,

---

[29] Jones, 'If the UK falls apart', *Guardian*.

[30] K. McKenna, 'Leaderless Scottish Labour is a now a party bereft of ideas', *The Guardian*, 25 October 2014, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/oct/25/leaderless-scottish-labour-party-bereft-of-ideas [accessed 13 February 2016]; K. McKenna, 'Jim Murphy gets Labour's problem, albeit it too late in the day', *The Guardian*, 12 April 2015, at http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2015/apr/12/jim-murphy-scotland-labour-problem-nicola-sturgeon [accessed 13 February 2016]; see also McKenna, 'Union once again at risk'.

[31] 'Labour on the edge', *Guardian*.

'I never stood on a Better Together platform. I stood on a platform of solidarity, of redistribution ... some of the best cases I heard against independence were in villages, in old miners clubs on a Sunday afternoon ... We spent decades telling everyone the Tories are toxic, and then we decide to campaign with them!

[Break]

Do me a favour, you're researching this, right?

[Interviewer nods]

If you ever find out who made the decision to go with Better Together, and how they made it, let me know. Because I've never met anyone who knows'.

For that MSP, and others, the Unholy Alliance and the Left Argument are almost inextricably linked and reviving the fortunes of Scottish Labour will, in their view, require a clear shift to the left to help wash away the memories of that joint campaign. They see the Better Together campaign as an example of Labour siding with 'the Tories' as opposed to a failure by Scottish Labour to put Scotland's interests first. However, the Unholy Alliance argument is clearly a crosscutting one.

The Official Reports

Having explored above some of the attempts to understand the movement of support from Labour to the SNP within the Scottish political commentariat, and within Scottish Labour itself, we briefly consider the understanding within the UK Labour establishment. Since Labour's loss in May 2015 many reports and analyses have appeared trying to explain why the party suffered such a surprising and heavy defeat across the UK and what the party needs to do to recover. The official party report, coordinated by the former cabinet minister Margaret Beckett, appeared in January 2016.[32] A broad inquiry, it identified a combination of factors that contributed to Labour's UK-wide loss, including: a lack of trust in Labour's economic policy; a lack of support for, and trust in, Labour's approach to immigration and welfare; negative perceptions of Ed Miliband as a leader; and fears about potential SNP influence over a Labour minority government. The report has been criticised, since publication, for remaining vague about the relative importance of the various factors and for failing to devote sufficient attention to the loss in Scotland.[33]

The report did acknowledge that Labour's losses in Scotland 'had been waiting to happen, perhaps for many years'.[34] It suggests, as a remedy, 'a long-term strategy for Scotland. The Scottish Labour party, while remaining a key part of the UK party and movement, should have significant autonomy in policy areas relevant to Scotland its own campaigning strategy'.[35] The Report thus clearly embraced a remedy that would see Scottish Labour, in principle, better able to make the case that can and do put Scotland First.

---

[32] Margaret Beckett, *Learning the Lessons of Defeat: Taskforce Report*, January 2016. London: The Labour Party.
[33] D. Mattinson, 'Beyond Beckett', *Progress*, 24 January 2016, at http://www.progressonline.org.uk/2016/01/24/beyond-beckett/ [accessed 24 January 2016].
[34] Beckett, *Learning*, 13.
[35] Beckett, *Learning*, 34.

The Beckett Report was just the latest in a long line of post mortems. Many had a focus on England, or considered the UK-wide loss, paying little specific attention to Scotland.[36] In addition to those factors identified in the Beckett Report, the other reports made reference to: Labour's failure to have an 'offer' for those aspiring to get on in life; a general toxicity of the Labour brand; and a belief that Labour was responsible for the economic crisis. They have little specifically to say about the Labour to SNP switch that occurred in Scotland.

Jon Cruddas, in his post-mortem, echoed the Beckett Report's call for Scottish Labour to have more autonomy, linking it to the need for a more distinctly English Labour to speak to the English Question.[37] Patrick Diamond and Giles Radice, in their analysis[38], called for Scottish Labour to adopt a new campaigning style that is more participatory and open, to develop a national vision/project for Scotland, and to make it clear that they stand up resolutely for Scottish interests. They also argue that the SNP now occupy the left/social justice space in political discourse and that Labour need to make a stronger and more focused effort to take that back. Morris also acknowledges that 'Holyrood is the preeminent institution' and that Scottish Labour need to act accordingly.[39]

Overall, in these post-mortems, one can detect most support for the Scotland First and the Outflanked on the Left arguments. But one also detects no systematic appreciation of what has happened and how it might be fixed. Understanding what has happened to Scottish politics remains, at least within the Labour party it seems, a work in progress.

3. Analysing party affiliation switcher dynamics in the short-term

As outlined earlier, the changes in voting patterns from 2010 to 2015 saw a substantial increase in SNP support and a large decline in Labour's vote share. In this section we will analyse this change in more detail. We focus on recent dynamics to engage with claims about developments in the Scottish political landscape over the past two years. We see Scotland's September 2014 independence referendum as a key point and we want to analyse the changes that have occurred in public opinion, comparing opinion before the referendum with opinion after the 2015 General election.

To do this we use data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey. In the surveys conducted in 2013 and 2014 (preceding the referendum), respondents were asked

[36] See, for example, the reports by D. Jarvis, *Reconnecting Labour: Initial Findings*, at https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/ab/pages/477/attachments/original/1440871372/Reconnecting_Labour-1.pdf?1440871372 [accessed 11 February 2016]; and L. Byrne, *Looking for a New England: The Ten Shifts Labour Needs to Make to Win a Majority in England*, at http://liambyrne.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/Red-Shift-Looking-For-A-New-England-FINAL-VERSION.pdf [accessed 11 February 2016].
[37] J. Cruddas, 'Labour lost because voters believed it was anti-austerity', *Labour List*, 5 August 2015, at http://labourlist.org/2015/08/labour-lost-because-voters-believed-it-was-anti-austerity/ [accessed 11 February 2016].
[38] P. Diamond and G. Radice, *Can Labour Win?*, available at http://www.policy-network.net/publications/4963/Can-Labour-Win [accessed 11 February 2016].
[39] J.Morris, *Feeling Blue: Why Labour Lost and How it Can Win Again*, 18 August 2015, at https://gqrr.app.box.com/s/ro3k2ep7ao1px0hq8dnpkty9y16kfxdr [accessed 11 February 2016].

whether they would be willing to be re-contacted at a later point. We did precisely this following the 2015 general election with a survey conducted during June and July, allowing us to investigate changes from the immediate pre-referendum period to the post-general election period.[40]

We know that asking people about their voting behaviour in the 2010 general election retrospectively is prone to substantial bias[41], partially because people do not remember generally, and partially because people sometimes confuse their voting choice in the 2010 general election with their choice in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election. Furthermore, for this analysis we are interested specifically in the changes that occurred more recently comparing the immediate pre- to the post-referendum period.

We therefore compare people's party identification between these two periods in a broader framework. To understand what has changed more recently with regards to people's party orientation we cannot only rely on voting, but need a measure of party affiliation that can be obtained at any given point regardless of whether elections take place or not. Therefore, the focus of this section is not to find the factors directly correlated to the formation of voting preferences in 2015 (which has been examined elsewhere[42]). Instead our focus is on understanding the underlying dynamics and changes in Scotland comparing the pre- to the post-referendum period.

People were asked to say at both time points whether they supported a particular political party.[43] If they said no, they were asked whether they thought of themselves as a little closer to one particular political party.[44] If they said no in both cases they were asked whether they were able to say which political party they would most likely support if there were a general election tomorrow.[45] This way we were able to capture both people with some deeper party allegiance, but also people who were at least likely to lend their vote to a particular party even in the absence of any strong connection or allegiance.

For the following analyses we compare what party people suggested an affiliation to at any of these three levels when they were initially surveyed prior to the referendum and following the 2015 general election. Table 2 shows the changes between the two periods. The three parties with the largest vote share – Labour, the Scottish National Party and the Conservatives – made up the majority in the 2015 general election in Scotland (89.2% of the popular vote). The Liberal Democrats lost substantially from 2010, from 18.9% to 7.5%. In terms of party affinity there was a substantial shift from before the referendum in particular to Labour and the SNP in about equal proportion. However, as the sample size of identifiers is relatively low, we do not engage in any further analysis of those who shifted their support from the Liberal Democrats.

---

[40] Please refer to the detailed methods note for this project for an in-depth discussion of the methodological issues, including sampling and weighting. Available at https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/Understanding2015GEresults

[41] C. Durand, M. Deslauriers, and I. Valois, 'Should Recall of Previous Votes Be Used to Adjust Estimates of Voting Intention?', *Survey Insights: Methods from the Field, Weighting: Practical Issues and 'How to' Approach* (2015), at http://surveyinsights.org/?p=3543 [accessed 14 February 2016].

[42] See for example: J. Green and C. Posser, 'Learning the right lessons from Labour's 2015 defeat', *Juncture* 22:2 (2015), 131-141.

[43] "Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?"

[44] "Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?"

[45] If there were a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support? (with the option to say "none")

Table A clearly shows that the biggest switch (in absolute terms) was from Labour to the SNP. While Labour identifiers were the largest group ahead of the referendum, 37 per cent[46] of them changed their affinity and identified with the SNP when re-surveyed following the 2015 general election. Labour only retained 57 per cent of its pre-referendum identifiers, while 78 per cent of Conservative identifiers maintained their affiliation and 94 per cent of SNP identifiers did.

Notably, those who reported an affinity for the SNP post-general election, but who did not feel that affinity pre-referendum, came not just from those who previously had an affinity with Labour and the Liberal Democrats, but also from other parties and particularly those who had no affinity at all. 40 per cent of those who said they did not feel close to any party before the referendum now indicated an identification with the SNP. This mobilisation effect, which is also associated with the increase in SNP membership, is often referred to as one of the most beneficial outcomes of the referendum for the SNP. However, the number of respondents to our survey who switched from no affiliation to the SNP is relatively small (27) and does not allow for a further detailed breakdown.

Table 2: Changes in Party Affinity 2013/2014 – 2015
(excludes don't know/refused responses)

		Pre-referendum (2013/2014)				
		Labour	**SNP**	**Con**	**Lib Dem**	**Other/ None**
Post-General Election (2015)	**Labour**	57	1	1	30	8
	SNP	37	94	3	24	32
	Conservative	1	2	78	3	7
	Liberal Democrat	1	1	4	42	5
	Other (incl. none)	4	2	14	1	48
	Total N (100%)	217	196	110	47	105

The shift from Labour to the SNP is the largest and most significant. Our analysis will explore what characterises those people who, as recently as summer 2014 still identified with Labour, changed their affiliation to the SNP. By contrasting them to those who maintained their affiliation with Labour, and those who already were SNP identifiers, we will be able to evaluate the validity of the variety of claims made regarding the short-term reasons for the electoral outcome in the 2015 general election in Scotland.

Explanation 1: The SNP outflanked Labour on the left
We can look at the importance of the position within the left-right spectrum in two ways. First, we can assess the policy preferences of different groups of respondents to see whether they differ in their views on core questions that can help identify where someone sits the left-right spectrum. Second, we can also look at the perception

---

[46] All percentages reported in this report are weighted, sample size figures are unweighted

different groups of respondents have regarding the position of political parties on the left-right spectrum. Often these two are conflated, though they assess different claims. Therefore we will analyse them separately.

Position on policy issues (in 2015)[47]
Tables 3-6 summarise the results for four specific policy options that reflect different issues on the left-right spectrum. The results for all four suggest that there is very little difference between those who identified with Labour throughout, those who switched from Labour to the SNP, and those who identified with the SNP throughout.

When asked about whether incomes should be redistributed from the better off to the less well off, we found hardly any difference between the three groups (table 3). There was clear majority support in all three groups for redistributions, slightly higher for consistent SNP supporters (73 per cent) than for switchers (68 per cent) and for consistent Labour supporters (66 per cent). Overall, there was no substantial difference.

Table 3: Redistribution Preferences by Party Affiliation Change

"Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Agree strongly/Agree	66	68	73
Neither agree nor disagree	15	14	13
Disagree strongly/Disagree	17	12	13
Don't know/unanswered	2	6	1
Total (100%)	130	66	180

When looking at the role of benefits, in particular for the unemployed, we only find small differences between the three groups (table 4). While consistent Labour supporters were most likely to say that unemployment benefits were too high (50 per cent), consistent SNP supporters had very similar views (45 per cent) as well as those who switched from Labour to the SNP (43 per cent).

Finally, we asked respondents for their views about deficit reduction, an issue that played a prominent role in the 2015 general election (table 5). Again, there is very little difference between respondents. While about one third of both consistent Labour identifiers and consistent SNP identifiers said reducing the deficit was 'very important', consistent Labour identifiers were slightly more likely to say that is was 'quite important' (54 per cent compared to 44 per cent). Switchers were less likely than non-switchers to say it was 'very important' (25 per cent) and switchers were closer to consistent Labour identifiers when seeing it as 'quite important' (51 per cent). The differences are not very substantial however – over three quarters in each group consider deficit reduction very or quite important. The number for switchers is slightly

---

[47] The positions for all policy orientations were taken from the second survey conducted following the 2015 General Election.

lower than for the other two groups, because a larger percentage of switchers said they didn't know (13 per cent compared to 2 per cent).

Table 4: Views on Unemployment benefits by Party Affiliation Change

"Which of these two statements comes closest to your own view?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Benefits for unemployed people are too **low** and cause hardship	39	46	43
Benefits for unemployed people are too **high** and discourage them from finding jobs	50	43	45
Don't know/unanswered	11	11	12
Total (100%)	130	66	180

Table 5: Views on Deficit Reduction by Party Affiliation Change

"At the moment, the UK government spends more money on public services than it raises in taxes. This is often referred to as 'the deficit'. How important, if at all, do you think it is that the UK government should try to reduce the deficit?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Very important	34	25	35
Quite important	54	51	44
Not very important	9	12	13
Not at all important	1	0	6
Don't know/unanswered	2	13	2
Total (100%)	130	66	180

We posed a follow-up question to all respondents who said that reducing the deficit was 'not very important', 'quite important', or 'very important'. The follow-up question was about _how_ the deficit should be reduced and here we do find some differences (table 6). Consistent Labour identifiers are most likely to favour an increase in taxation (56 per cent), though that is also the most popular option with switchers (43 per cent) and with consistent SNP identifiers (46 per cent). The latter group is more likely to support reductions in spending (26 per cent compared to 13 per cent and 16 per cent for consistent Labour and SNP identifiers respectively). Switchers are more likely than the other two groups to support a combination of both measures (33 per cent compared to 22-24 per cent).

Table 6: Preferred Mode of Deficit Reduction by Party Affiliation Change (excludes those who indicated that deficit reduction was not at all important or did not know)

"Which of the following do you think the Government should MAINLY do to try and reduce the deficit?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Spend less on public services	13	16	26
Increase taxes	56	43	46
BOTH, spend less on public services AND increase taxes	24	33	22
Don't know/unanswered	7	8	6
Total (100%)	126	62	168

Overall, we find some differences between the three groups regarding these left-right issues, but the extent of the differences is limited. While Labour supporters display positions that, on average, are a bit closer to economic right positions (mainly regarding greater priority for deficit reduction and negative views of unemployment benefits and) the overall differences between the three groups are rather modest and cannot be seen as strong differentiators.

Evaluations of the political parties (in 2015)[48]
Next we turn to people's perceptions of political parties. We compare where our three groups place Labour and the SNP on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means most left and 10 most right (figure 1). While we see some differences in the mean scores for our three different groups, most differences are not statistically significant. In their self-positioning consistent Labour supporters appear to be slightly to the left (5.09) of the switchers (5.40), but the difference is only marginally significant and ought not be overstated. In terms of evaluations of parties, some descriptive differences exist. For example, consistent SNP supporters place the SNP slightly more to the left than consistent Labour supporters, however, the differences are not statistically significant in this sample.

So far most of the analysis seems to suggest that the differences between consistent Labour and consistent SNP supporters, as well as recent switchers, with regards to left-right orientations were rather modest. However, it would be premature to conclude that they are not important to understanding the change in party identifications in Scotland.

---

[48] The evaluations of the political parties stem from the 2015 follow-up survey after the General Election.

Figure 1: Perceptions of Position of Political Parties and Self on Left-Right Scale by Party Affiliation Change
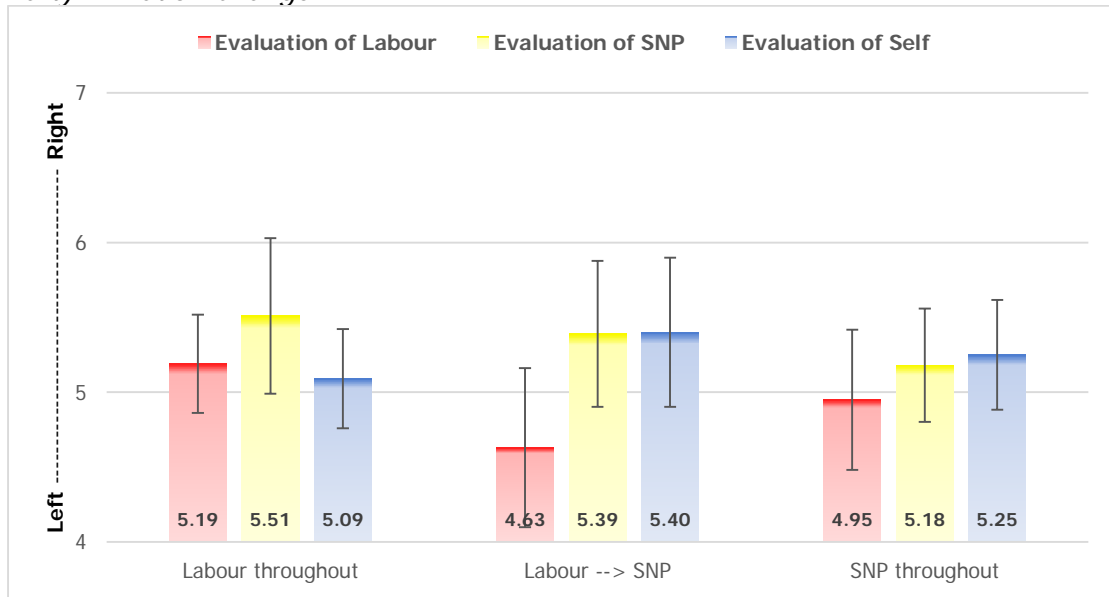
Displayed are mean scores with 95% confidence intervals

Mean scores only provide an average of a group position and do not allow us to take into account the degree of variation within each group. Looking at variation within each group (figure 2) reveals that left-right orientations matter, but in a more complex way. We break down our respondents according to their self-positioning on the left-right scale grouping everyone who scored themselves as 0 to 4 as more "left" and everyone who scored themselves as 5 or above as more "right". This allows us to distinguish between respondents at different positions on the spectrum within each of our three groups.

Figure 2: Evaluation of Parties' Position on the Left-Right Scale by Self-Positioning on Left-Right Scale and Party Affiliation Change
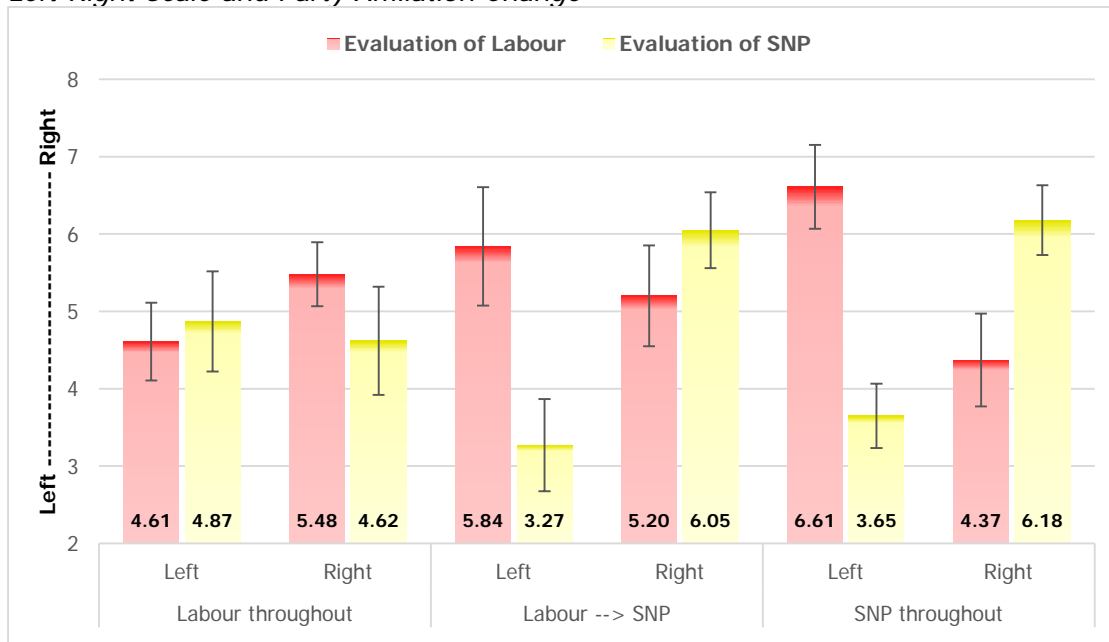
Displayed are mean scores with 95% confidence intervals; Respondents who gave themselves a score of 0-4 on the left-right scale were labelled as more "left" and respondents giving themselves a score of 5-10 were labelled as more "right"

Consistent Labour identifiers appear to be much more consistent in their evaluation of their own party. Within the consistent Labour identifiers there is a small, marginally significant difference, between how those positioning themselves on the left, and how those positioning themselves on the right evaluate the position of the Labour party. Those on the right evaluate Labour as more to the right (5.48 compared to 4.61).

The difference amongst SNP identifiers, both consistent and recent switchers, however is much more pronounced. Those who position themselves more to the right see the SNP as much more right (6.18 and 6.05 respectively) compared to those who position themselves more to the left (3.65 and 3.27 respectively). Conversely, amongst consistent SNP identifiers, those who position themselves to the left evaluate Labour as more to the right (6.61) than those who position themselves to the right (4.37). This difference also exists for recent switchers, but is much less pronounced. Crucially though, there is no significant difference amongst consistent Labour identifiers in their evaluation of the ideological position of the SNP.

These findings explain why earlier we found rather little average difference between consistent Labour identifiers, consistent SNP identifiers and recent switchers on several left-right measures. SNP identifiers possess a much broader spectrum of evaluations of their party's positioning that they are able to align with their own ideological position. In other words, the SNP manages to allow people to project a much broader range of ideological positions onto the party, enabling them to feel that there is a match between their political positioning and that of the SNP. In contrast, Labour is seemingly evaluated in a much more homogenous way. This is true for both consistent SNP supporters as well as recent switchers. However, evaluations of the Labour party by recent switchers are not as polarised as the evaluations of consistent SNP supporters. Indeed, consistent SNP supporters evaluate Labour's ideological position as quite extremely opposite of how they evaluate the SNP's ideological position, irrespective of whether they are themselves on the left or the right.

Explanation 2: Scotland first!
Although not appearing quite so prominently in the commentary pieces we reviewed for this analysis – although it was often implicitly present in analyses that stressed the impact of the referendum – a rise in votes for the SNP has been attributed to a rise in national identity, or nationalism, in a more emotive sense. However, as shown on several occasions, there was no overall rise in Scottish national identity orientations in recent periods or in fact over the past 15 years.[49] If anything, there has been a slight decline in overall emphasis of Scottish over British national identity amongst the population of Scotland.

However, at the same time, it is clear that national identity has become more closely related to political orientations in Scotland. As Bond[50] shows, the correlation between national identity and views on Scottish independence increased in strength. While it

---

[49] J. Eichhorn, 'There was no rise in Scottish nationalism: Understanding the SNP victory', *LSE British Politics and Policy Blog*, 14 May 2015, at http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/there-was-no-rise-in-scottish-nationalism-understanding-the-snp-victory/ [accessed 15 February 2016].
[50] R. Bond 'National Identities and the 2014 Independence Referendum in Scotland', *Sociological Research Online* 20:4 (2015), 11.

has not come anywhere close to the importance that other factors – in particular the economy[51] - have, its importance has increased.

Given the above, it is not surprising to find that there is indeed a relationship between national identity orientations and party affiliation (table 7). It is clear that consistent SNP supporters are the most likely to emphasise a sole Scottish identity (54 per cent), while recent switchers to the SNP are substantially more likely (33 per cent) than consistent Labour supporters (6 per cent) to emphasise a sole Scottish identity. Note however, that in all three groups there is only a minority that considers their British identity to be stronger than their Scottish one (it is highest, at 16 per cent, for consistent Labour identifiers).

Table 7: National Identity (Moreno Question) by Party Affiliation Change (Results in parentheses indicate pre-referendum values for Labour and SNP identifiers at the time for the same sample)

| | Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015 | | | |
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout	All
Scottish, not British	6 (12)	33 (--)	54 (46)	33 (29)
More Scottish than British	15 (21)	25 (--)	27 (33)	27 (34)
Equally Scottish and British	59 (52)	32 (--)	12 (14)	29 (27)
More British than Scottish	7 (4)	5 (--)	0 (0)	3 (2)
British, not Scottish	9 (9)	1 (--)	2 (1)	6 (5)
Some other description	4 (4)	4 (--)	4 (6)	3 (3)
Total (100%)	130	66	180	376

We should be cautious in attributing causality. The result could partially be a function of the increased correlation, mentioned above, between national identity and constitutional attitudes. The result is, however, a stronger polarisation now compared to the pre-referendum period. SNP identifiers emphasised their Scottishness somewhat less in the pre-referendum period, while Labour identifiers emphasised it more.

Scottish national identity did not rise overall in the population. Neither did it for only the sub-group of respondents looked at here as shown by the final column of table H. Considering the increased correlation between national identity and party identification, this may suggest that the main issues of political debate in Scotland are becoming primarily viewed through a Scottish lens. In other words, perhaps it is the case that people are increasingly identifying with Scotland as a distinct political community. While in the past decision making by voters in Scotland was often seen as a proxy of evaluations of Westminster politics, some have suggested that this general election has seen the culmination of a process in which any political contest is primarily viewed from a Scottish perspective.

---

[51] J. Curtice, 'Has the referendum campaign made a difference?', *Scottish Social Attitudes Briefing Papers* (2014), at http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading [accessed 15 February 2016].

Indeed, those who switched from Labour to the SNP seem to believe that Scotland's interests – whatever they may be – will be more likely to be taken into account at Westminster with more SNP MPs (table 8). 62 per cent of switchers said that more SNP members of parliament would mean that it would be a lot or at least a bit more likely that Scottish interests were taken into account in Westminster, compared to 36 per cent amongst consistent Labour supporters (58 per cent amongst consistent SNP supporters).

Table 8: Expectations of Increase in SNP MPs for Representation of Scottish Interests in Westminster by Party Affiliation Change

"As a result of having more SNP MPs, do you think it is more likely that Scotland's interests will be taken into account at Westminster, less likely, or will it make no difference?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
A lot/A bit more likely	36	62	58
Will make no difference	48	24	31
A bit less/a lot less likely	13	5	4
Don't know/unanswered	6	9	7
Total (100%)	130	66	180

So the emphasis on Scotland may be driven less by affective orientations and more by pragmatic evaluations. We can see a clear difference between consistent Labour supporters and the other two groups in the evaluation of Scotland's current situation within the UK (table 9). While most consistent Labour supporters think Scotland gets its fair share (58 per cent) or even more than its fair share (21 per cent) of government spending compared the rest of the UK, the other groups are a lot less satisfied. 48 per cent of switchers think Scotland gets less than its fair share and 63 per cent of consistent SNP identifiers think so. This suggests that indeed, substantial differences between our groups can be found in their evaluation of the current situation of Scotland within the Union.

Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that we also see some substantial differences between these groups with regards to whether their voting decision in May 2015 was based mainly on what was going on in Scotland, or on what was going on in Britain as a whole (table 10). What happened in Britain as a whole mattered for all groups. But it mattered considerably more for consistent Labour supporters (75 per cent) compared to both switchers (46 per cent) and to consistent SNP supporters (51 per cent). So those who changed their party identification from Labour to the SNP were more likely to focus more on what was going on in Scotland compared to those who stuck with Labour.

Table 9: Evaluation of Scottish Share of UK Government Spending by Party Affiliation Change

"Would you say that compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland gets pretty much its fair share of government spending, more than its fair share, or less than its fair share of government spending?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Much more/A little more than its fair share	21	12	3
Pretty much its fair share	58	32	33
Much less/A little less than its fair share	16	48	63
Don't know/unanswered	5	8	1
Total (100%)	130	66	180

Table 10: Whether Scotland or Britain was Focus of Election Decision by Party Affiliation Change (excluding respondents who did not vote)

"When you were deciding how to vote in the general election, did you vote…"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
… mostly according to what was going on in Scotland	24	52	48
… mostly according to what was going on in Britain as a whole	75	46	51
Don't know	1	1	1
Total (100%)	121	62	172

This difference between consistent Labour supporters and those who switched is well illustrated in table 11. Consistent Labour supporters were slightly more likely to say that they have more in common with English people of the same social class (43 per cent) than with someone of the opposite social class in Scotland (38 per cent). Those who switched found it most difficult to make a judgment with 30 per cent not able to choose. However, those switchers who did make a judgment had a clear affinity: 57 per cent identified their commonalities with those in Scotland of the opposite class compared to just 13 per cent who identified their commonalities with those in England of the same class. This was similar to the pattern amongst consistent SNP supporters (61 per cent and 22 per cent respectively).

Table 11: Closeness to Scots or Class [52] *by Party Affiliation Change (excludes respondents without information on social class)*

"Would you say that you had more in common with (same class) class English people or with (opposite class) Scottish people?	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
… (same class) English	43	13	22
… (opposite class) Scottish	38	57	61
Don't know/unanswered	18	30	17
Total (100%)	126	65	172

In summary, we find that the "Scotland first" explanation seems be a very important. Those who switched from Labour to the SNP were, on average: substantially less satisfied with the current situation for Scotland; they were more likely to think that SNP MPs would mean better representation for Scottish interests; they based their voting decision more strongly on what was going on in Scotland; and are more likely to emphasise their commonalities with other Scots, even if they are of an opposite class, than their commonalities with people of the same class in England.

Explanation 3: Competence of the political parties and their leadership

In light of the above findings it becomes clear that many people based their choices on their expectations of what impact the electoral outcome would have for Scotland. We now analyse our different groups perspectives on how Labour and the SNP would work in the best interest of Scotland respectively. Table 12 summarises these results.

Given the importance of Scotland as a distinct political entity in the minds of many voters (discussed above) these results reveal a major problem for Labour. Nearly all consistent SNP supporters (97 per cent) and most recent switchers (82 per cent) have a positive view regarding the SNP representing Scottish interests. Indeed even 37 per cent of consistent Labour identifiers think that the SNP always/most of the time works in Scotland's interests. Conversely only about one in ten consistent SNP supporters or switchers think that the Scottish Labour Party mostly represents Scottish interests. But crucially, even within Labour's consistent supporter group views of Scottish Labour are mixed. Only slightly more of that group (54 per cent) think that Scottish Labour represents Scottish interests always or most of the time than think it does so only some of the time or almost never (45 per cent).

---

[52] Class was ascertained from previous questions

Table 12: Trust in Parties to Represent Scottish Interests by Party Affiliation Change

"How much do you trust the **Scottish Labour Party** to work in Scotland's interests?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Just about always/Most of the time	54	12	11
Only some of the time/Almost never	45	88	88
Don't know/unanswered	1	0	1
"How much do you trust the **Scottish National Party** to work in Scotland's interests?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Just about always/Most of the time	37	82	97
Only some of the time/Almost never	61	18	3
Don't know/unanswered	2	0	0
Total (100%)	130	66	180

Problems in the evaluation of the Labour Party were not restricted to how well (or not well) the party represents Scottish interests. As table 13 demonstrates the leadership of the Labour Party around the 2015 general election was evaluated rather negatively too. Even consistent Labour identifiers evaluated Labour leadership (4.27) slightly worse than leadership of the SNP (4.45). Switchers rated the SNP leadership more than twice as highly (6.76) as Labour's leadership (2.68) and consistent SNP supporters, unsurprisingly, showed an even greater difference. This difference makes some sense of course in hindsight, given that the Labour leadership was associated with a loss and the SNP with a victory. However, the stark differences do suggest that the negative evaluation of Labour leadership played a role in this process.

Table 13: Evaluations of Party Leadership in Election by Party Affiliation Change (mean scores with standard deviation in parentheses)

"Thinking of the people who were leading the (insert party) at the time of the general election in May this year, how would you rate them on a scale from 0 to 10, where 0 means very bad and 10 very good?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Labour	4.27 (3.56)	2.68 (3.78)	2.17 (2.43)
SNP	4.45 (3.98)	6.76 (4.00)	8.32 (2.33)
N	130	66	180

To summarise, evaluations of the parties in terms of leadership competence more generally, and in terms of standing up for Scotland in particular, appeared to matter in differentiating consistent Labour supporters and switchers. This does not mean however that people do not see Labour as a relevant political actor (table 14).

Table 14: Views on Cooperation between Labour and SNP by Party Affiliation Change

"Are you in favour or against the Labour Party and the SNP working together at Westminster to oppose the Conservative government?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Strongly in favour/In favour	62	58	61
Neither in favour nor against	15	27	20
Strong against/Against	21	9	15
Don't know/unanswered	2	6	4
Total (100%)	130	66	180

In each of the three groups a clear majority of people (58 per cent amongst switchers, 62 per cent amongst consistent Labour supporters and 61 per cent amongst consistent SNP supporters) said that it would be desirable for Labour and the SNP to work together, while less than one in five in each group opposed this. It suggests that the differences discussed above are, for most people, based on pragmatic views and evaluations rather than on a dogmatic rejection of the party one does not support. It suggests that for Labour cooperating with the SNP in Westminster may not be as negative an idea as some have claimed.

Explanation 4 (or the elephant in the room): the referendum

There is little doubt that the referendum on Scottish independence had a lasting impact on politics in Scotland. The relationship between attitudes towards independence and party choice has become very strong following the referendum. It is all too easy to forget that pre-referendum many SNP voters did not favour independence.[53] Table 15 shows this clearly. While hardly any consistent SNP supporters voted "No" (5 per cent) and only one in ten consistent Labour supporters voted "Yes", 77 per cent of switchers also supported independence for Scotland.

Table 15: Referendum Vote by Party Affiliation Change (those who did not vote or did not reveal their vote were excluded)

	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
I voted Yes	10	77	95
I voted No	90	23	5
Total (100%)	122	62	176

---

[53] In the 2011 Scottish Parliament election only 50 per cent of people who chose the SNP in their constituency vote also wanted Scotland to become an independence country according to the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2011. See http://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/ [accessed 15 February 2016].

However, we should be careful in taking this finding to conclude that therefore the entire 2015 general election was exclusively about independence and questions regarding another referendum. As table 16 shows minorities in each group said that the issue of whether another referendum would be called influenced their vote quite a lot or a great deal. Although a lot of discussion focussed on this, only 23 and 24 per cent respectively said that it mattered quite a lot or a great deal amongst consistent SNP supporters and recent switchers. Even amongst consistent Labour supporters only 29 per cent said that this was an important issue.

Table 16: Did Second Referendum Discussions Matter by Party Affiliation Change (excludes non-voters)

"There was a lot of discussion during the general election campaign about whether or not the SNP would hold another referendum on Scottish independence if it won a lot of votes in the general election. How much, if at all, did the issue of whether or not there might be another referendum influence how you voted in the general election?"	Party Affiliation 2013/2014 → 2015		
	Labour throughout	Labour → SNP	SNP throughout
Not at all	43	45	52
Not very much	28	26	25
Quite a lot	19	20	11
A great deal	10	4	12
Don't know/unanswered	0	5	0
Total (100%)	121	62	172

This analysis presented an insight into the dynamics related to the switch of many supporters from Labour to the SNP in the recent 2015 general election. It showed that elements of the "Scotland First" explanation play an important role in understanding this as well as evaluations of party leadership. In addition we found that the SNP managed to capture a broader range of people in terms of their positioning on the left-right scale. Put simply, the SNP is a party on to which people seem able to project a variety of political preferences, both left and right, making them a broad-based, catchall party.

While some of these changes occurred recently, and in particular in the context of the 2014 independence referendum, these processes were embedded in the longer process of devolution in Scotland and the changes to Scotland's political community. The following section adopts a longitudinal perspective to explore what long-term changes may have provided the context for the more recent processes discussed earlier.

4. The Long Run, or What Changed in 2015?

Since 1999 the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey has been fielded 16 times (including the follow-up questionnaire in 2015), helpfully repeating several questions that are key to understanding Scottish politics as well as public opinion. This section uses four key variables that were explored in the same way in 2015 and in previous years:

1. National Identity (the Moreno question) asking respondents to choose if they are British and not Scottish, more British than Scottish, Equally British and Scottish, More Scottish than British, or Scottish and not British.
2. A left-right scale, which is a mean of five questions asking respondents to what degree they agree or disagree: that Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well-off; that big business benefits owners at the expense of workers; that ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth; that there is one law for the rich and one for the poor; and that management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance.
3. A question asking respondents to choose if they feel closer to someone of the same class as them from England, or to the opposite class from Scotland.
4. Constitutional preference for how Scotland should be governed, summarised in three options: Scotland independent from the UK; Scotland in the UK with its own parliament; and Scotland in the UK without its own parliament.[54]

As this briefing aims to develop insights about the changes in support between Labour and SNP, it uses each of these four variables to assess how the effect on the likelihood of respondents to identify with the SNP rather than Labour changes over time, and particularly if it differs in 2015 compared to other years. We use a set of logistic regressions for these assessments, at all times controlling for gender, age, and educational level.

Before examining possible causes for the changes in party identity figure 3 shows the way party identification changed in Scotland from 1999 to 2015. As can be seen (particularly in 2007, 2011, and 2015) party identification and electoral performance are closely related though they are not perfectly equivalent. Figure 3 clearly shows that Labour was the party with the most identifiers until 2010. It then had a similar level of affiliation as the SNP in 2011, the year of the Scottish Parliament election, and returned to its position as the dominant party until 2015 when the percentage of people identifying with the SNP shot upwards, outstripping even the levels recorded in 2011.

---

[54] The original categories are (1) Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union (2) Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union (3) Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **some** taxation powers (4) Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **no** taxation powers, and (5) Scotland should remain part of the UK **without** an elected parliament.

Figure 3: Party Identification in Scotland between 1999 and 2015
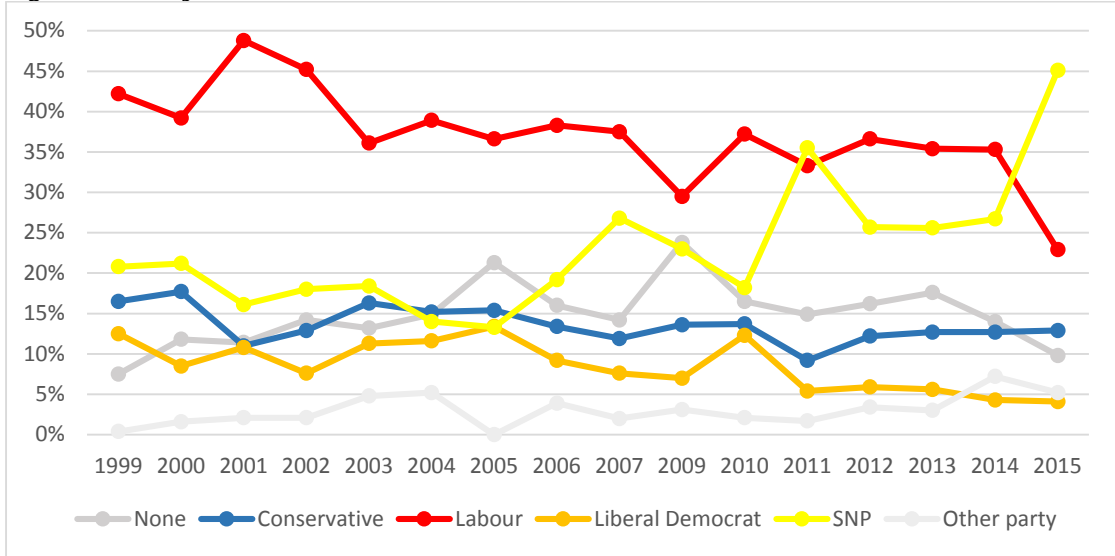
The following analysis will, therefore, focus on the comparison between the SNP and Labour, and particularly will look at different factors that could explain the likelihood of respondents to identify with the SNP rather than with Labour. We focus on the questions that were asked in 2015 as well as in previous years, apart from the left-right scale which is covered in this chapter until 2013, complementing the analysis of current trends previously presented.

National Identity

As suggested earlier, there was no marked increase in Scottish national identity for our respondent groups of interest between the pre- to the post-referendum period. However, we should examine whether there have been any longer term changes. As Figure 4 demonstrates, over time we see a rise in the proportion of respondents who feel equally Scottish and British and a drop in the proportion of respondents who feel solely Scottish. This shows that in addition to not finding a rise in Scottish identity in the short run, we could also not observe such a change in the longer term.

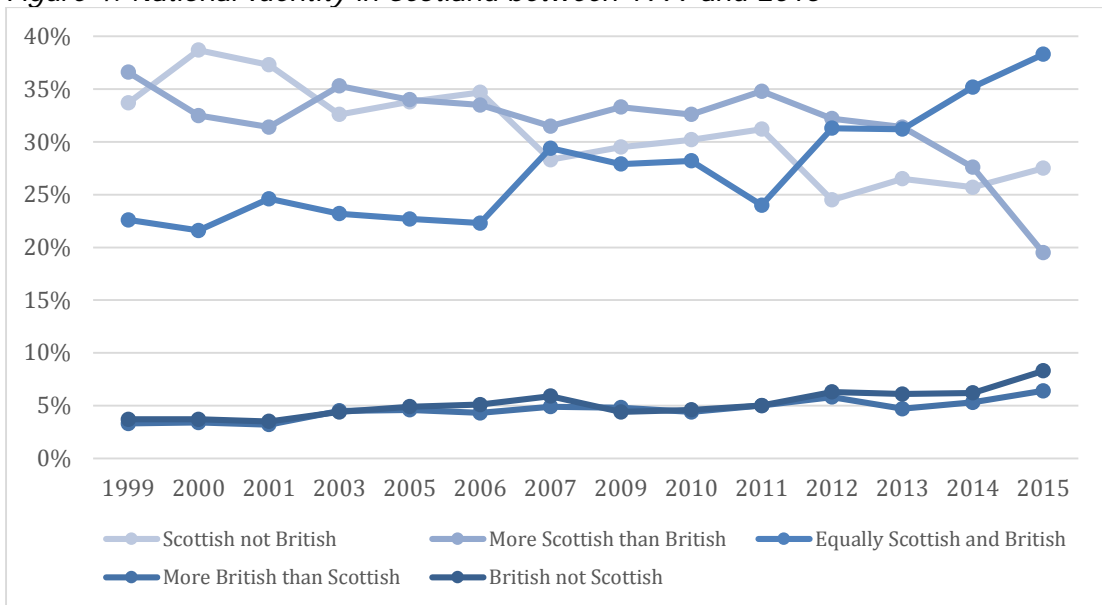*Figure 4: National Identity in Scotland between 1999 and 2015*

Figure 5 shows differences between national identity groups regarding their likelihood to support the SNP rather than Labour. As those who feel the most Scottish had the highest chance of being affiliated with the SNP rather than with Labour they represent the zero line and the other national identity groups are below them. Due to the low proportions of those who were more British than Scottish or British and not Scottish, and in the interest of simpler interpretation, figure 5 does not include these two groups.[55]

This analysis supports the findings of the previous section, suggesting that 2015 does seem to be more polarised than other years. Those who consider themselves to be more Scottish than British are about four times less likely as those who see themselves as only Scottish to support the SNP rather than Labour. This suggests that the effect of national identity was particularly prominent in the 2015 general election results in Scotland. The difference between Labour and SNP identifiers in terms of national identity had not been greater at any previous point.

Figure 5: The effect of National Identity on the Likelihood of Identifying with the SNP rather than Labour between 1999 and 2015, controlling for gender, age and education
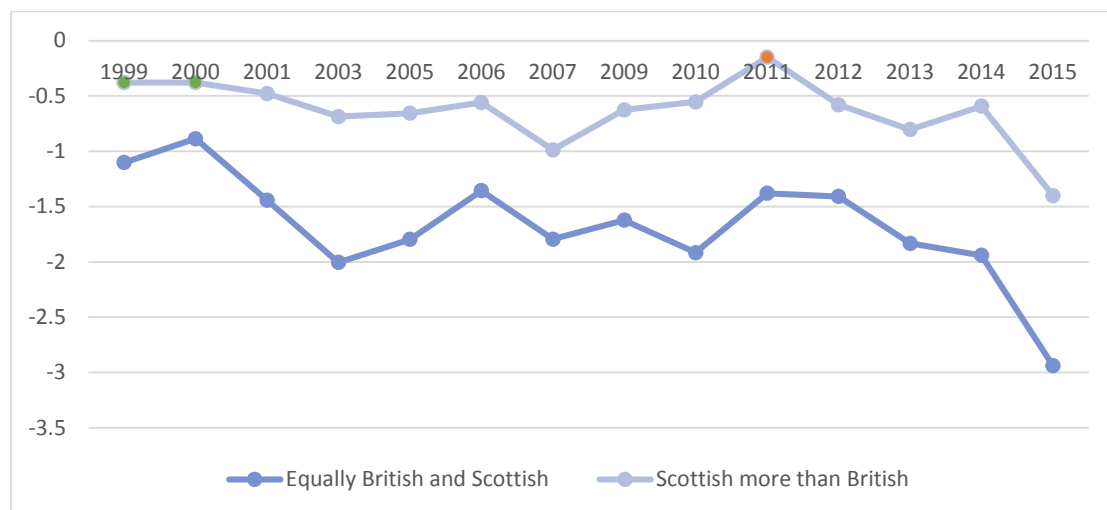
Log odds ratios of identifying with the SNP rather than Labour.
Base category: Scottish not British.
All the differences between only Scottish and the plotted categories are significant above the 95% confidence level, apart from green points which are only significant above the 90% level, and the orange point which is not significant.

Left-Right Position
Following our discussion of the effect of left-right position on party affiliation recently we now examine longer-term trends in that area. Figure 6 shows the mean position on the left-right scale from 2000 to 2013, suggesting a move to the right from 2000 (2.35) to 2005 (2.67), relative stability between 2005 and 2009 (2.63), and a trend towards the left since then, with 2011 showing a particularly low mean score of 2.24, and 2013 a relatively low score of 2.37.

---

[55] Log-odds ratios are presented in all the figures representing results from logistic regressions rather than odds ratios, since negative odds can look counter-intuitive.

Figure 6: Position on a Left-Right scale in Scotland between 2000 and 2013
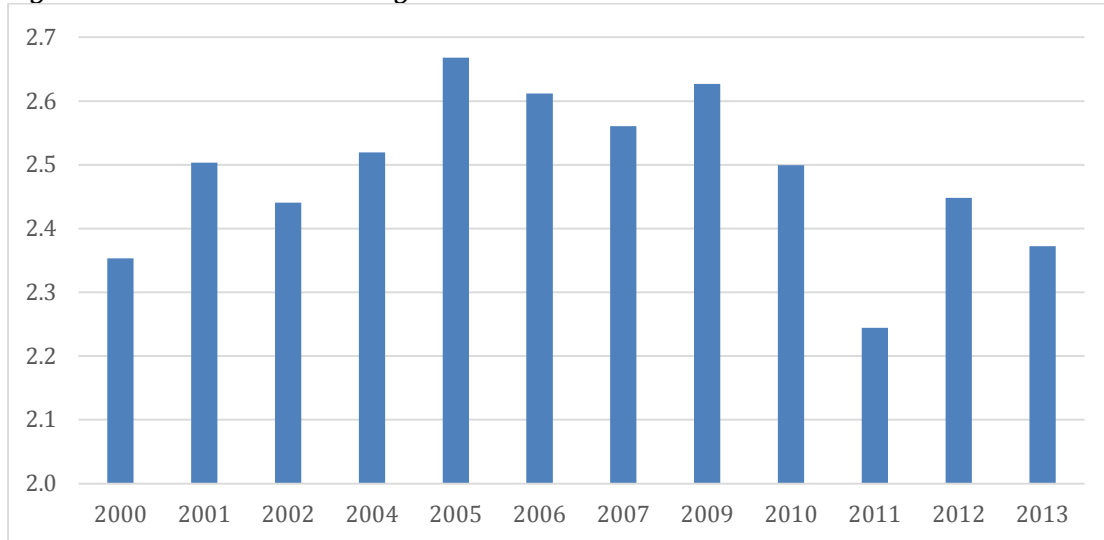
This mean ranges from 1-left to 5-right.
Standard deviation ranges between 0.73 and 0.79.

However, Figure 7 suggests that in most years there was no significant difference between SNP and Labour identifiers with regards to their left-right position. The exceptions were the election years 2005 (UK), 2007 and 2011 (Scotland). It becomes clear that there has not been a consistent change in the relationship between left-right orientations and party identification, though there is some volatility. As shown earlier, this is likely to be partially a result of the heterogeneity of people identifying with the respective parties.

Figure 7: The effect of Left-Right scale position on the Likelihood of Identifying with SNP rather than Labour between 2000 and 2013, controlling for gender, age and education
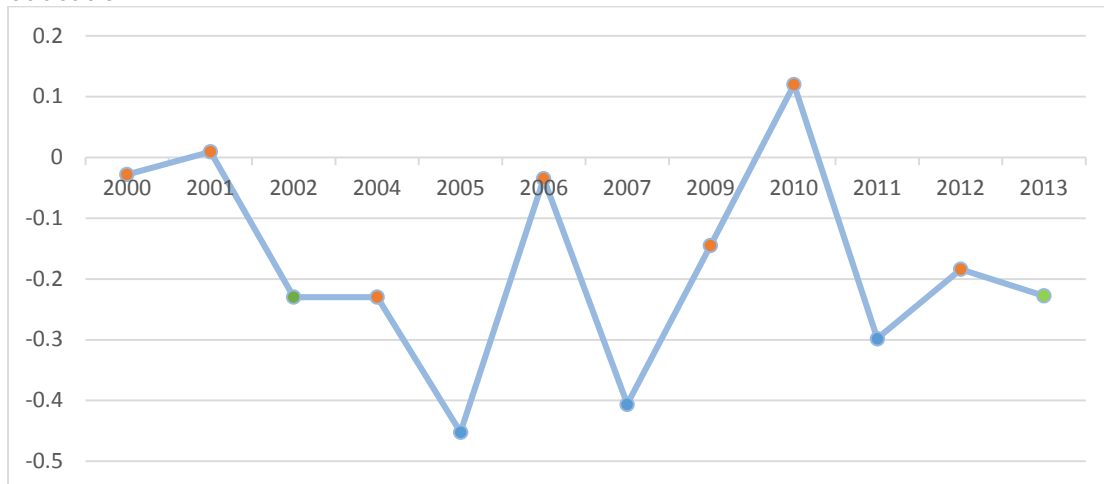
Log odds ratios of identifying with the SNP rather than Labour.
Blue data points indicate differences that are significant above the 95% confidence level, green points differences that are significant above the 90% level and orange points insignificant differences.

Class or Nationality?

Tables 17 and 18 continue the exploration of national identity from another angle, namely whether people in Scotland identify more with those of the same class in England or those of the opposite class in Scotland. In other words, this is an exploration of the choice between national and class identities. Table 17 does not

suggest a particular change in 2015: the percentage of those who felt closer to the opposite class in Scotland than to the same class in England (58 per cent) fell between the percentage recorded in 2013 (54 per cent) and in 2006 (65 per cent). Interestingly, this means that over the period of SNP government (2007-present) the percentage of those identifying more with the same class in England than the opposite class in Scotland has increased from 35 per cent to 42 per cent.

Despite the lack of clear descriptive trend between 2006 and 2015, table 18 does suggest that this issue might help us to understand party identification. While there was no significant difference between the two groups in their likelihood to be affiliated with the SNP rather than Labour in 2006, those who felt closer to the opposite class in Scotland were about 1.6 times as likely to be affiliated with the SNP rather than Labour in 2013, and over 3.5 times as likely in 2015. In other words, whether you identify more with the same class in England or the opposite class in Scotland has changed, from being effectively irrelevant to party affinity in 2006, to being a factor that distinguishes SNP and Labour identifiers in 2015. This analysis suggests that one of the explanations for the SNP's success in the 2015 general election identified earlier – the prevalence of a "Scotland first" mentality – had grown in importance prior to the referendum. As this question directly compares the respondents' feelings towards class and national identification it suggests that a shift in importance has taken place from class to national orientation in relation to people's party identification.

Table 17: Class and Nationality Comparison in Scotland between 1999 and 2015

	Same class English	Opposite class Scottish	Total
2006	35%	65%	1062
2013	46%	53%	916
2015	42%	58%	749

Table 18: The effect of Feeling Closer to the same class in England rather than to the Opposite Class in Scotland on the Likelihood of Identifying with SNP rather than Labour between 1999 and 2015, controlling for gender, age and education

	Odds ratios	Logged odds ratios	Sig.
2006	1.015	0.015	
2013	0.633	-0.457	p<0.01
2015	0.279	-1.276	p<0.005

Constitutional Preference

Finally, we look at the effect of respondents' constitutional preferences. As with the three previous variables, we first consider whether the preferences themselves have changed over time and then examine whether the effect of constitutional preferences on party identification has changed. Figure 86 shows no clear difference in 2014 and 2015 compared to previous years. Although the support for different constitutional options varies, these percentages do not suggest anything unique about the 2014 to 2015 period. In these years, support for Scottish independence and for devolution was relatively high – in 2014 independence was supported by 36 per cent and devolution by 55.7 per cent, and in 2015 independence was supported by 34 per cent and

devolution by 58 per cent. However, both constitutional options received higher levels of support in other years.

Figure 8: Constitutional Preferences in Scotland between 1999 and 2015
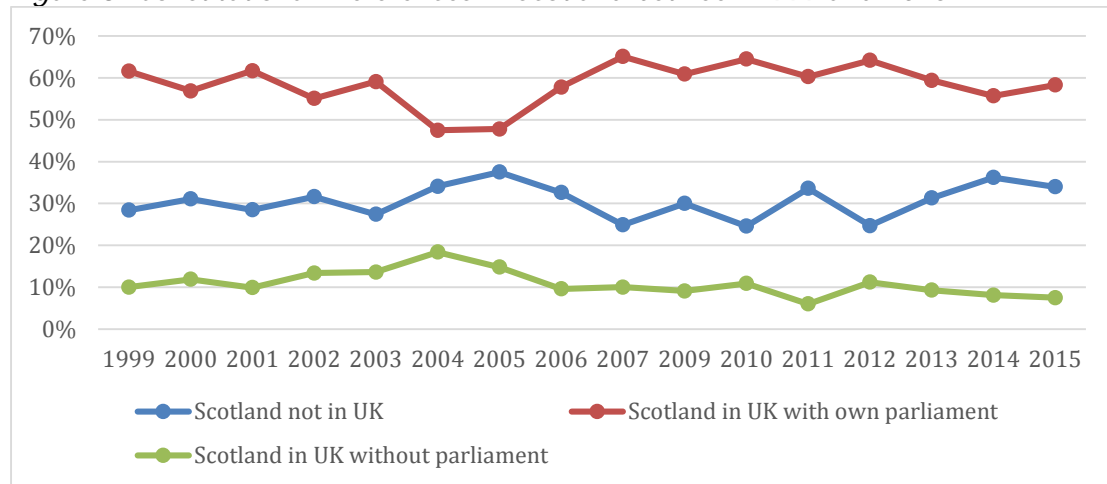
Despite not seeing a substantial difference in the distribution of constitutional preferences in 2014-2015, figure 9 shows that the effect of constitutional preferences has been remarkably different in 2015. Unsurprisingly, since the beginning of the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey in 1999, people who favoured independence were most likely to support the SNP rather than Labour. However, in 2015 the extent of the correlation between constitutional preference and party identification was greater than in any previous year. Compared to those who would prefer Scotland to be part of the UK without its own parliament, those who support Scottish independence were much more likely to support the SNP rather than Labour. Yet, the effect of support for devolution on party affiliation does not stand out in the same way as support for independence. Supporters of devolution were more likely than those opposed to any form of devolution to identify with the SNP rather than Labour in 2015but the differences was greater in previous years (for example 2010).

Figure 9: The effect of Constitutional Preference on the Likelihood of Identifying with the SNP rather than Labour between 1999 and 2015, controlling for gender, age and education
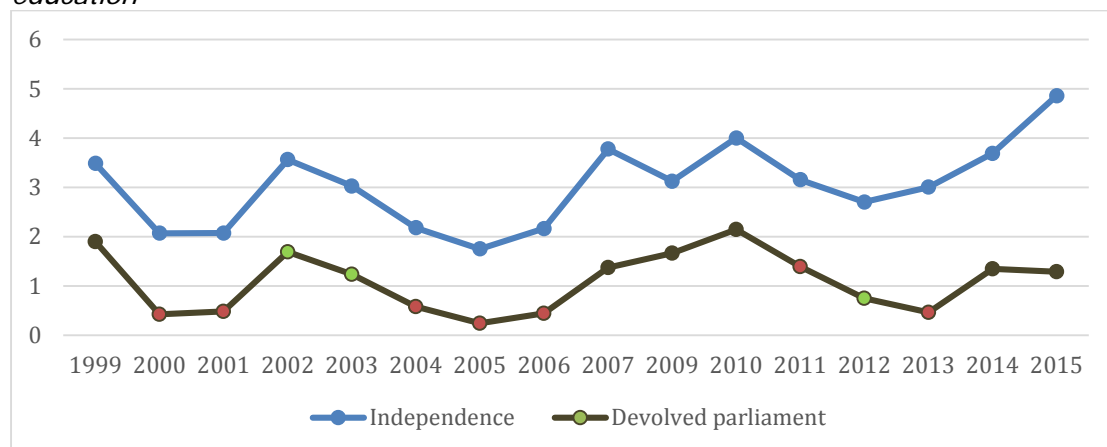
Base category: In the UK without parliament
Log odds of identifying with the SNP rather than to Labour.
All the differences between the base category and the plotted categories are significant above the 95% confidence level, apart from green points which are only significant above the 90% level, and the orange points which are not significant.

5. Conclusion

Our analysis showed that there is not one single explanation for the election outcome in Scotland, but rather that a combination of different explanations seems to be relevant to understanding what has happened. We have also shown that it is necessary to think about the election in the context of the 2014 independence referendum, and to analyse the dynamics of changing party allegiances, in order to properly appraise how the political landscape in Scotland was altered. While a substantial number of shifts have occurred recently, we also note that some of the patterns are embedded in longer-run changes. This suggests that it is necessary to consider the current situation in the context of developments in Scottish politics and public attitudes since the beginnings of devolution.

Cutting across several issues we find a strong prevalence of the "Scotland first" narrative. While there has not been an increase in Scottish national identity in absolute terms, the identification with Scotland has become more strongly related to party identification and constitutional preferences than ever before. People are now more likely to identify with other Scots irrespective of class differences than people of the same class in England than previously. The political community has been redefined for many people in Scotland in that way and this is particularly prevalent for those who identify with the SNP (whether recent switchers from Labour or consistent supporters). Compared to those who continue to identify with Labour, SNP identifiers are less satisfied with Scotland's current situation in the UK and more likely to base their decision making, even in general elections, on what goes on in Scotland.

Given these insights Scottish Labour finds itself in a difficult situation. Hardly any recent or consistent SNP identifiers think that Scottish Labour works in the interests of Scotland (and only about half of their own identifiers do), while the SNP is evaluated much more favourably. Combined with the findings that Labour's leadership in the 2015 general election as a whole was evaluated poorly, in contrast to the people who led the SNP, we find that Labour faces substantial challenges in re-positioning itself as a force in Scottish politics.

That negative appraisal is not simply a reflection of a left-wing positioning issue for Labour. We found that on specific policy positions differences between consistent Labour identifiers, recent switchers and consistent SNP identifiers were rather small. However, perceptions of where the parties stand does matter when we distinguish people who classify themselves as more left compared to those who classify themselves as more right. While the remaining Labour identifiers in both groups evaluate their party's position rather similarly, there are big differences in the evaluation of the SNP when we split their supporters. Left SNP identifiers think the SNP is a lot more left than do right SNP identifiers, who consider the SNP clearly to the right. In other words, the SNP is a party that both people who are more left and people who are more right can project their preferences on to, seemingly becoming a 'catch-all' party. Scottish Labour, at present, is unable to adopt such a role. Whereas the SNP has managed to become attractive for a broader group of ideological positions, Labour has become narrow.

The challenge ahead for Scottish Labour is not simply to shift to the left, or shift to the centre (a debate that is in full-force within the party). Rather, a far more difficult and dual challenge faces to the party. First, they must work to redefine what it means to

put 'Scotland First'. Second, they must find a way to expand their bandwidth, allowing people who are more left and people who are more right to identify with the party.

Finally, of course the independence referendum itself mattered in the election. People supporting the SNP are much more likely to also support independence than they were in previous elections. However, that does not mean that any issue relating to the process of constitutional politics has to be a vote winner. Only a minority of people said that the issue of whether a victory for the SNP would mean another independence referendum was of importance to them in deciding how to vote. That is not surprising when we look at the briefing by John Curtice for this project, which shows that the way people think about the issues relating to constitutional options for Scotland are still driven by pragmatic expectations and not by the political process per se.[56]

---

[56] J. Curtice, *AQMeN report* (2016), 'Did Yes Win the Referendum Campaign?' Available at https://www.aqmen.ac.uk/Understanding2015GEresults