



United Kingdom

Big Picture series – Scotland the brave? Towards a new independence referendum

POLITICAL POLITICAL STABILITY

BIG PICTURE, COVID-19

Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic have both contributed to increasing support for Scottish independence. Elections for the Scottish parliament in May will see the issue return to the political foreground.

The incumbent Scottish National Party (SNP) is highly likely to win the Scottish elections on a platform of holding a new independence referendum.

However, the Scottish government does not have the power to call a referendum and disputes between Edinburgh and the UK parliament in Westminster over holding a vote are likely to dominate in the coming year.

While a vote is unlikely to take place in the next year, a new referendum on Scottish independence is likely in the next two-to-three years.

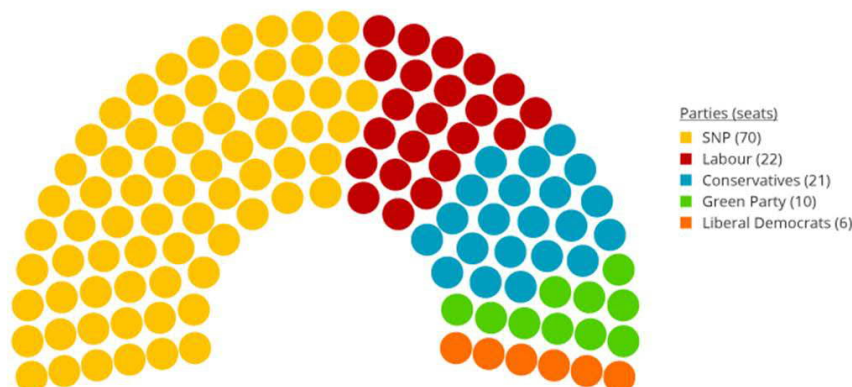
Meanwhile, internal divisions within the SNP could be a major stumbling block and, if they worsen, will damage support for independence.

Pushing for a new referendum

Media reports on 15 February indicated that the SNP would by the end of March announce plans for a new referendum on Scottish independence. The plans are likely to form the basis of the SNP's campaign for the May Scottish elections, which it is likely to win. None of the opposition parties in Scotland comes anywhere close to the current popularity of the SNP, which is forecast to win a majority of seats.

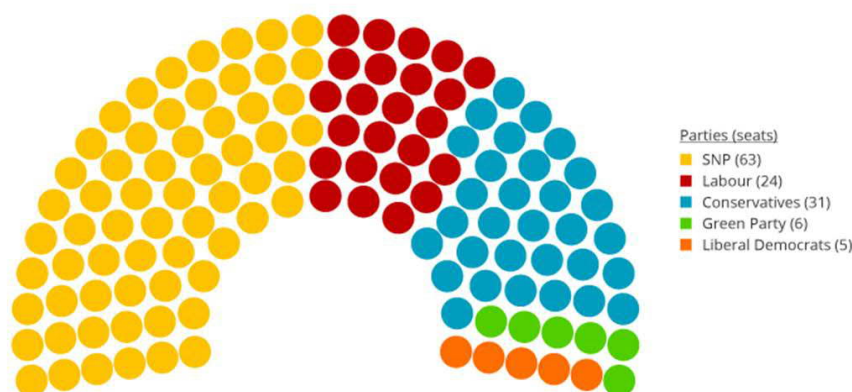
Projected outcome of 2021 Scottish elections

The SNP is projected to win 70 of 129 seats



Source: Britain Elects

Scottish election results 2016 (of 129 seats)



Source: BBC News

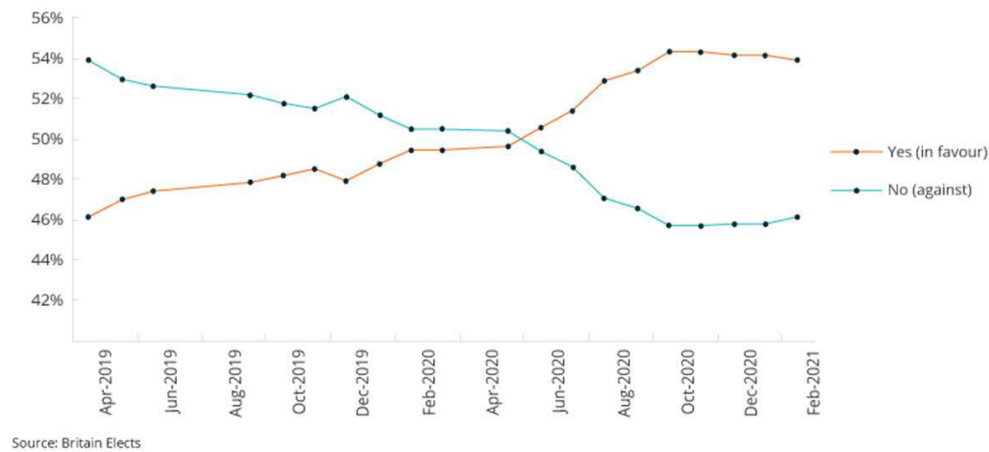
Assuming that the election goes ahead despite the COVID-19 pandemic and the campaign throws up no surprises, the SNP will return to power with a reinforced majority and will claim to have the backing of the Scottish public for a new referendum on independence.

Shifting opinion

The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence saw Scotland's electorate reject independence by 55% to 45% on a turnout of nearly 85%. For many in Westminster, that was the end of the issue "for a generation". However, the past six years have seen as much political drama in the UK as is often seen in a generation and opinion polls indicate that this has led to a shift

in public opinion. Between the 2014 referendum and early 2020 opinion polls showed opposition to independence almost always ahead of support for it, albeit with a narrowing lead. However, since March 2020, those in favour of independence have been ahead in almost every poll and the gap appears to be widening.

Polling on Scottish independence (% , April 2019–February 2021)



The UK's vote to leave the EU in 2016 and the subsequent application of almost the hardest possible form of Brexit have undoubtedly driven much of this shift. A large majority (62%) in Scotland – and every county within Scotland – voted to remain in the EU. However, on top of Brexit, the pandemic is likely to have sealed support for independence for many of those wavering on the issue, by underlining the differences between the UK and Scottish governments. While UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson has struggled during the pandemic to present himself as a competent leader, Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon has come across as capable and more assertive in her decision-making. Sturgeon has used Scotland's devolved powers to impose restrictions ahead of the UK government. Even if outcomes in Scotland in terms of the pandemic have not been clearly better than the rest of the UK, she has won the battle of public perceptions and reassures many of those with concerns about Scotland's ability to go it alone.

Johnson weighing up options

A big win for the SNP in May will see it argue that it has a mandate for a new referendum. However, the power to call such a referendum rests with the UK government. Johnson has indicated that he will refuse a referendum and this is likely to be his initial course in the hope that the issue will fade away. "Saving the union" is a stated aim of the Johnson government and it has formed a policy unit tasked with this aim. However, recent attempts to win round Scottish voters are showing little sign of success. Johnson has faced public opprobrium for a visit to Scotland during the current COVID-19 lockdown and his personal style appears to be unpopular with many Scottish voters.

Meanwhile, the SNP has indicated that it would be prepared to hold a referendum without the consent of the UK government, though Sturgeon's preference is certainly for London to agree to a referendum and so avoid questions about the legitimacy of a vote. She will have closely watched Catalonia's wildcat referendum in 2017 and will have no desire to repeat it, given its failure to achieve its aim. A likely boycott of an unofficial referendum by those opposed to independence would leave turnout low and make it very difficult for the SNP to claim a legitimate and democratic victory. In the first instance, she is likely to bide her time to see how Westminster responds.

The SNP – its own worst enemy

In the meantime, the greatest barrier to a vote in favour of Scottish independence is likely to come from within the SNP. While Scotland is increasingly united in its backing for the SNP and for independence, the SNP itself is becoming more disunited. Internal party divisions could damage its image of competence and sow doubts in voters' minds about independence itself.

The party is embroiled in an inquiry into its former leader Alex Salmond and the SNP finds itself divided between those backing Salmond and those backing Sturgeon. Salmond has accused Sturgeon of lying to the Scottish parliament about what she knew about charges made against him. While Sturgeon remains popular in Scotland and is a key asset in the fight for independence, her position as first minister is in peril. Should the party fail to get past these issues and, especially if Sturgeon is forced out, this could see a decrease in the likelihood of a new referendum over the coming year.

What happens next

Nevertheless, assuming that the SNP is likely to win the upcoming elections without internal divisions getting in the way, four broad outcomes are possible:

- Westminster agrees to a referendum on the same terms as the previous one.
- Westminster agrees to a referendum on different terms.
- Westminster does not agree to a vote and Scotland holds a wildcat referendum.
- Westminster does not agree to a vote and the Scottish government decides against a wildcat referendum.

The Johnson government is highly unlikely to agree to a referendum immediately. However, Johnson clearly realises that there may come a point in the coming years when not holding a referendum becomes more politically obstructive and dangerous than holding one on his own terms. Despite the government refusing to waver from public statements that it will not grant a referendum, Control Risks' sources indicate that the government has tasked the civil service with drawing up plans for such a vote.

The most likely scenario is that, after putting up a fight against a referendum through most of 2021, Johnson bows to pressure, but does not make it easy for the SNP. He might agree to a two-stage referendum to drag the process out and hope that it gives him time to convince Scots of the importance of the union. Johnson's Conservative government could also disrupt Sturgeon's plans by changing the terms of who can vote: the UK government could make an argument that, as the issue has constitutional repercussions for the whole UK, the whole UK should get a say or perhaps the vote could be extended to adults born in Scotland but living elsewhere in the UK. A change in the terms of a referendum would be highly controversial, but, in practice, there would be little that the SNP could do given the choice between a referendum on these terms or no referendum at all.

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