



University
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Centre for
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Does Independence Still Matter?

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Summary

Scottish electoral politics has seen a series of polarisations and realignments since devolution. The SNP's historic 2011 Scottish Parliament majority ushered in the independence era, with elections dominated first by independence in 2015 and 2016, then by independence combined with Brexit in 2017, 2019, and 2021.

Over the 2021-26 Scottish Parliament, the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic, economic shocks caused by the wars in Ukraine and now Iran, and events within Scotland like the UK Supreme Court's judgment on the competence to legislate for an independence referendum in 2022 and the resignation of Nicola Sturgeon as First Minister have reshaped the political landscape.

As issues like healthcare, education, and the cost of living have risen on the political agenda, the salience of the constitutional question has declined. A top issue for voters in Scottish elections for the past decade, as of early 2026 it barely ranked in voters' top five issues. This decline in the salience of independence has prompted speculation that it is no longer the main determinant of how Scots vote, and that traditional left-right and libertarian-authoritarian politics are reasserting themselves.

To what extent is this true? And what does it mean for the changing landscape of Scottish politics as support for Reform UK and the Scottish Greens grows at the expense of the Conservatives, Labour, and SNP? Analysis of voting intention patterns across Great Britain¹ suggests that voters are switching between parties within the same left-liberal and right-conservative blocs, rather than from left-liberal parties – like Labour – to right-conservative parties, like Reform UK. To what extent does this hold true in Scotland?

This report explores the questions around the drivers of voting behaviour in Scotland, and the nature of voter blocs in the upcoming Scottish Parliament election. Our key findings are that:

- **Constitutional preferences are the strongest determinant of voting intention among Scottish voters.** While left-right and libertarian-authoritarian positioning also matter, they matter *within* constitutional blocs, not *between* constitutional blocs, and voters are highly unlikely to switch from one constitutional bloc to another.

¹Source: <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/uncategorized/looking-for-labours-lost-voters/>

- **While the overall size of the left-liberal bloc in Scotland is similar to the last election, there are fewer left-liberal voters among those who support the Union.** A fifth of total left-liberal and pro-union voters currently intend to switch to a right-conservative party, driven principally by Labour voters switching to Reform UK. Ipsos' latest polling suggests a quarter of 2021 Labour voters now intend to vote for Nigel Farage's party.
- **The strength of constitutional preference as a driver of voting intention is helping prop up the cohesion of the left-liberal party bloc in Scotland.** 28% of SNP, 'left-liberal' voters actually lean towards the authoritarian end of the libertarian-authoritarian scale, but lack a viable, pro-independence, right-conservative party to switch to.

Background

Why do Scottish voters vote the way they do? In elections to the Scottish Parliament over the last decade, a large part of the answer has been their constitutional preference: independence supporters aligned with the SNP and the Scottish Greens, and those in favour of Scotland remaining in the United Kingdom generally opted to vote for one of the three pro-union parties.

This alignment of constitutional preference and vote choice in Holyrood elections was not as prominent a feature of elections held during the first 15 years of devolution. But in the wake of the 2014 independence referendum, Scotland's constitutional future dominated political and partisan debate as well as the choices voters made at the ballot box.

In the 2026 election, while the issue of independence remains a feature of Scottish politics, and Scots remain divided on whether they want Scotland to be an independent country, it is less prominent and voters attach less salience to it when considering what matters in the election. In this report, we explore whether this drop in salience has a knock-on effect on how the electorate intends to cast their vote. Does independence continue to drive vote choice, or do other 'bread and butter' issues, like the NHS and cost of living, matter more?

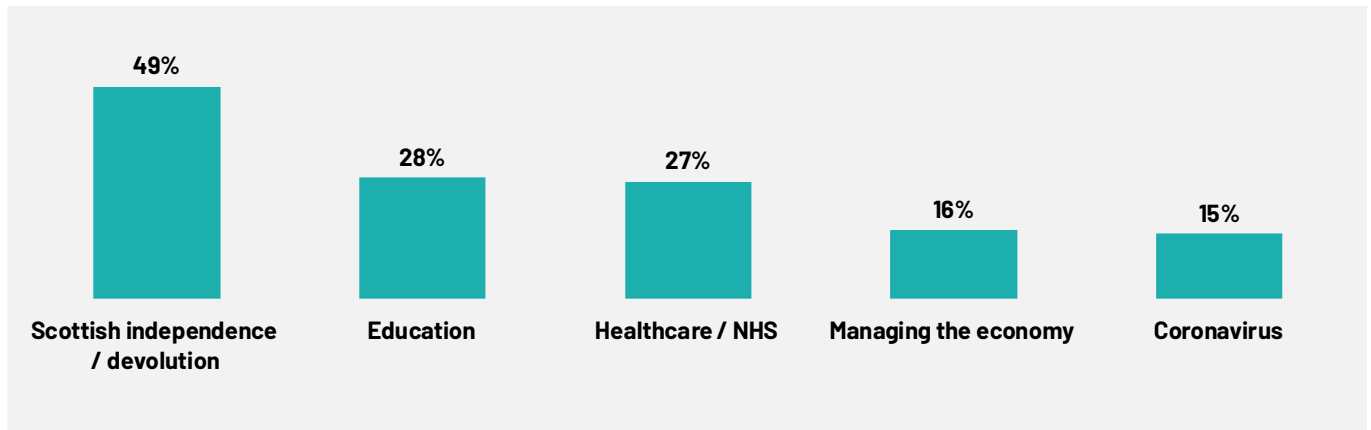
The 2021 Scottish Parliament Election

The 2021 Scottish Parliament election was the sixth since the Scottish Parliament was convened in 1999, the fourth in which the SNP won the most seats, and the second since the 2014 independence referendum.

Like the 2016 election before it, the 2021 election was dominated by the issue of Scottish independence. Pre-election polling conducted by Ipsos² found that 49% of likely voters said independence would be very important in their decision on who to vote for, followed by education and healthcare on 28% and 27% respectively.

² Source: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/snp-retains-strong-lead-independence-dominates-voters-concerns>

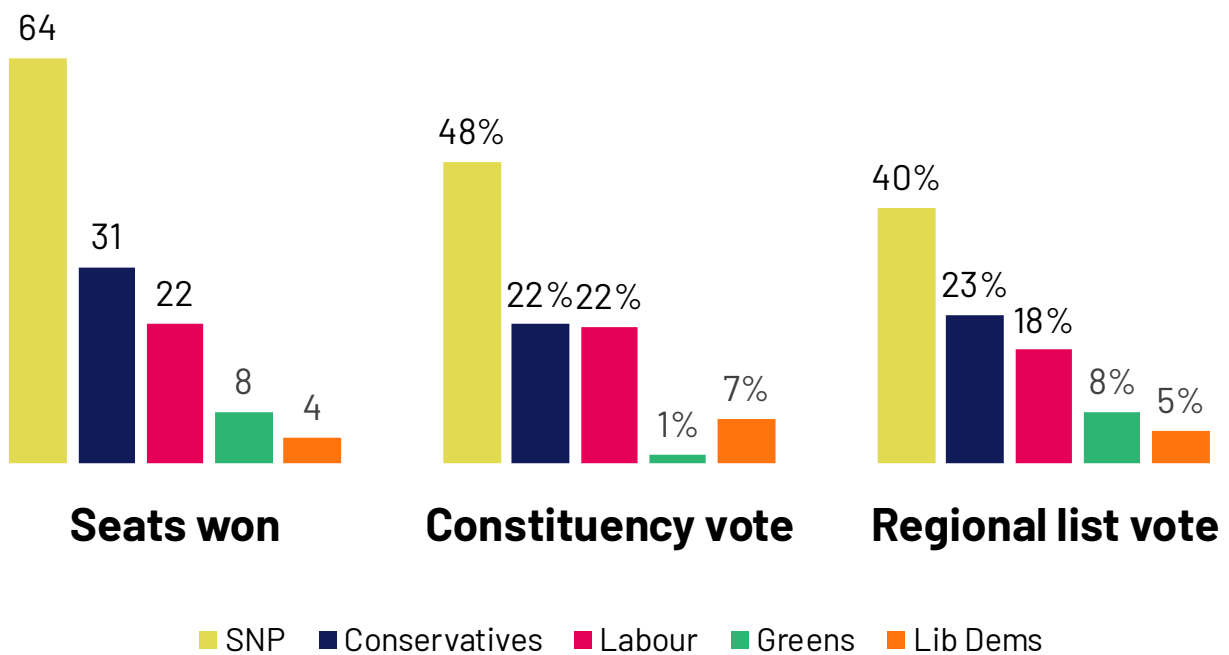
Figure 1. 2021 Issue Salience (Looking ahead to the Scottish Parliamentary election, which, if any, issues do you think will be very important to you in helping you decide which party to vote for?)



Base: 825 16+ likely voters, 29 March – 4 April 2021

In the end, pro-independence parties – dominated by the SNP, on 48% of the constituency and 40% of the regional list votes – won 49% of the constituency vote, 50% of the regional list vote, and 72 of the Parliament’s 129 seats, delivering a pro-independence majority of 15. The results were interpreted by the Scottish National Party and the Scottish Greens as a mandate for a second independence referendum, though this was disputed by the opposition parties who support Scotland remaining in the United Kingdom. As things stand, the Scottish Parliament is not empowered to deliver such a referendum, as constitutional matters are reserved to the UK Parliament.

Figure 2. 2021 Scottish Parliament Election Results



What's changed since the 2021 election?

The 2021-26 Parliament has seen several events that have reshaped Scottish politics. While the 2021 Scottish Parliament election took place amid the COVID-19 vaccine rollout and towards the end of the pandemic, it was left to the 2021-26 Parliament to address the fallout, particularly the impact on Scotland's NHS, with rising waiting lists and declining capacity for both inpatient and outpatient procedures and appointments. Despite the Scottish Government's five-year recovery plan, none of these have returned to pre-pandemic levels³, and as a result, the NHS and healthcare in Scotland has shot up to the top of voters' concerns.

Shortly into the 2021-26 Parliament, in 2022, the Scottish Government was defeated at the UK Supreme Court⁴, which ruled that the Scottish Parliament did not have the competence to pass the Scottish Government's Scottish Independence Referendum Bill⁵, making a Section 30 order necessary to transfer such powers to the Scottish Parliament. As the UK Government at the time was opposed to such a Section 30 order, a position retained by the current UK Government, the Supreme Court's decision was widely seen as putting a second independence referendum beyond reach.

Simultaneously, in late 2022 UK inflation hit a 41-year high of 11.1%, driven by rising energy and food prices in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, raising the salience of economic issues and the cost of living. While inflation has fallen since, it remains above the Bank of England's 2% target, and the fallout of the Iran war and closing of the Strait of Hormuz has kept the cost of living high on the agenda throughout the 2026 campaign.

In March 2023, Nicola Sturgeon resigned as both First Minister of Scotland and leader of the SNP. She was succeeded by Humza Yousaf, who won the SNP leadership. Mr Yousaf's leadership of the SNP was short-lived. He resigned in May 2024, shortly after ending the Bute House Agreement with the Scottish Greens, which had given the Scottish Government a parliamentary majority on within-scope issues following the 2021 election, and was succeeded by John Swinney, the current First Minister.

³ Source:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c86y81z2d61o#:~:text=In%202018%2D19%2C%20the%20last,back%20to%20pre%2DCovid%20levels.>

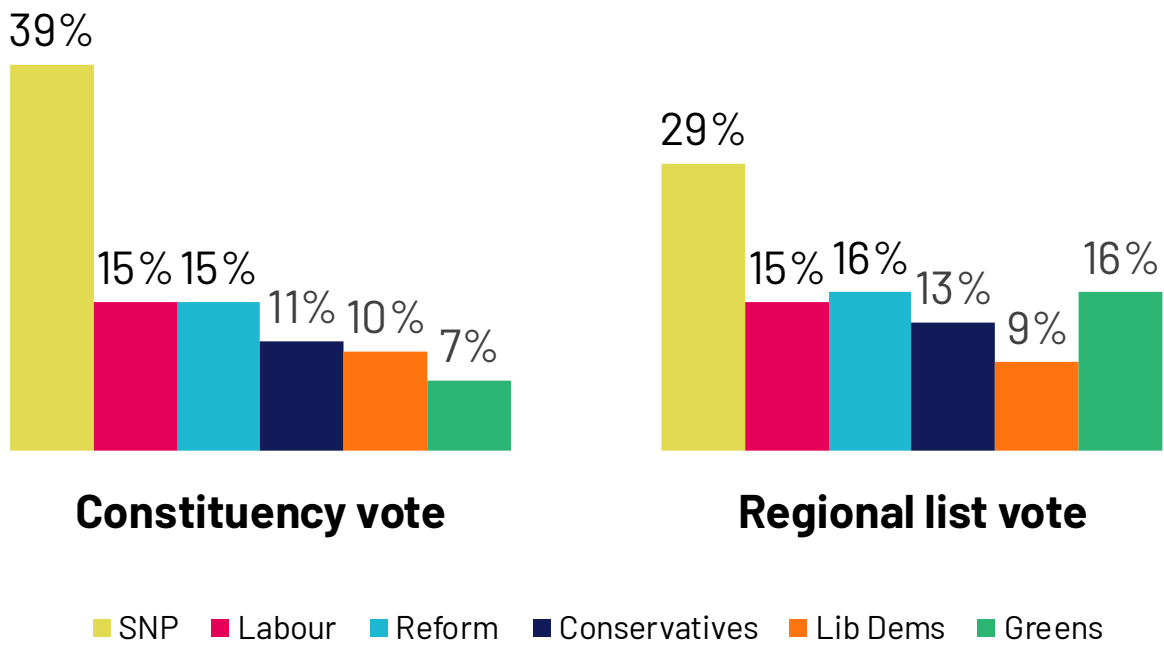
⁴ Source: <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/supreme-court-judgment-on-scottish-independence-referendum/>

⁵ See: <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/strategy-plan/2022/06/scottish-independence-referendum-bill/documents/scottish-independence-referendum-bill/scottish-independence-referendum-bill/govscot%3Adocument/Draft%2BBill%2B-%2B27%2BJune%2B2022.pdf>

The 2024 UK General Election saw the SNP experience their worst election results since 2010, winning just six seats of 57 Scottish seats as Labour surged to 37 seats from just one in 2019. The SNP’s share of the vote declined from 45% in 2019 to 30% in 2024, as Labour’s share grew from 19% to 35%. The scale of Labour’s victory was a consequence of their vote being efficiently focused across the Central Belt and urban Scotland, turning a 5-point popular vote lead over the SNP into a 31-seat advantage – possibly overstating the extent of their recovery and the SNP’s decline. That election also saw the emergence of Reform UK as a viable party in Scottish politics, winning 7% of the vote.

Since then, the SNP’s polling has stabilised. According to Ipsos polling taken in the first week of the 2026 Scottish Parliament election campaign⁶, they sat on 39% of the constituency vote and 29% of the regional list vote. Labour’s support, however, has slumped, both in comparison to their result in 2024 and their Holyrood polling at that point in time. They sat on 15% on both the constituency and regional list votes, and had a similar level of support to the Scottish Greens and Reform UK on the regional list vote.

Figure 3. Ipsos headline estimates of 2026 voting intention



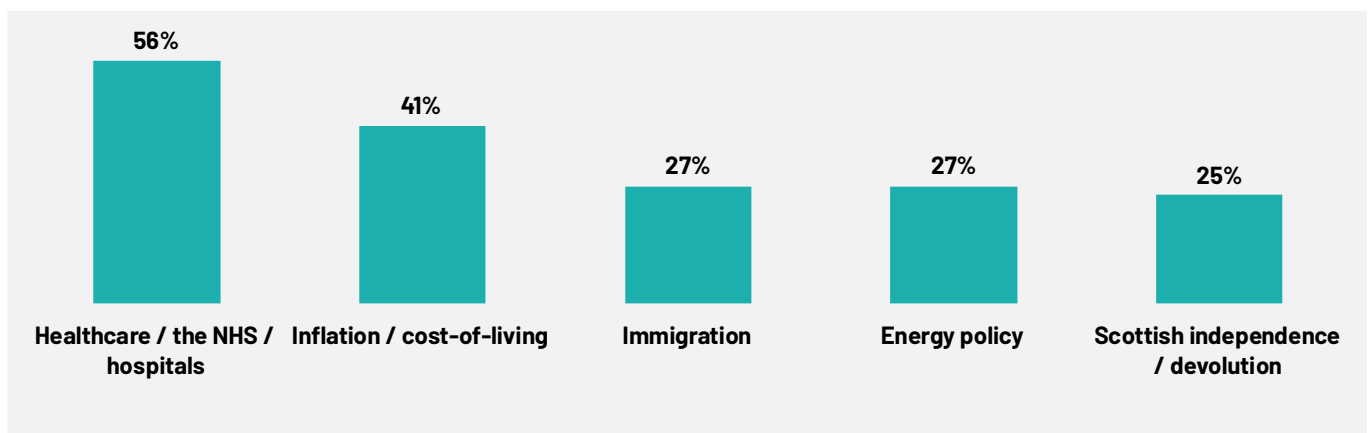
Base: 893 16+ likely voters expressing a voting intention, 26 March – 31 March 2026

⁶ Source: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/snp-extend-their-lead-while-scottish-labour-support-slumps>

Issue salience in 2026

Events since the 2021 Scottish Parliament election have pushed independence down the political agenda and raised the salience of other issues. Far from dominating voters' concerns ahead of this latest Holyrood election, just a quarter now say that independence is a very important issue in helping them decide which party to vote for. In comparison, more than half say healthcare and two-fifths say inflation and the cost of living are the issues that will help them decide how to vote. While still in the top five issues for the Scottish public, independence is now roughly as salient as immigration or energy policy.

Figure 4. 2026 Issue Salience (Which of the following issues do you think will be very important to you in helping you decide which party to vote for at the next Scottish Parliament election? Please select up to five⁷).



Base: 1,038 16+ Scottish adults, 26 March – 31 March 2026

The replacement of independence as the leading top-of-mind issue for Scottish voters has driven narratives, particularly on the pro-union side of Scottish politics, that independence now matters far less than economic and social issues in driving Scottish voting intention. However, other opinion polling evidence casts doubt on that narrative.

Scottish voter blocs

Ipsos voting intention polling conducted in March 2026 suggested that 84% of Scots who would vote Yes in a second independence referendum planned to vote for either the SNP or the Scottish Greens with their constituency vote, and 79% intended to do so with their regional list vote. Among those who would vote No, combined SNP-Green support falls to 6% on the constituency ballot and 8% on the regional list. Clearly, whether it is top-of-mind or not, independence continues to play a key role in shaping the voting behaviour of Scots.

⁷ Source: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/snp-extend-their-lead-while-scottish-labour-support-slumps>

Devolution-era Scottish politics is no stranger to realignments of voter blocs and the party system. In the wake of the 2014 independence referendum, Scottish voters polarised between pro-independence and pro-union parties, forming two blocs based on the constitutional question that cut across existing left-right and libertarian-authoritarian politics. In practice, this meant a significant number of voters switching from having voted Labour at the 2010 General Election to voting SNP at the 2015 General Election⁸.

This initial realignment of voters along constitutional lines was then reshaped by the outcome of the 2016 Brexit referendum. As analyses carried out by the Scottish Election Study team in 2019 demonstrated⁹, post-Brexit referendum Scottish voters sorted into 'tribes' based on their positions on independence and Brexit: Yes-Remain, No-Remain, Yes-Leave, and No-Leave. Before the Brexit referendum, the No-Remain 'tribe' was the largest, accounting for 35% of voters, followed by Yes-Remain (28%), No-Leave (20%), and Yes-Leave (16%).

Following the Brexit referendum, the Yes-Remain 'tribe' became the largest, accounting for 42% of voters, followed by No-Leave (26%), No-Remain (25%), and Yes-Leave (7%). The two blocs that grew aligned Yes support with Remain support, largely attracting 2014 No voters who had voted Remain in 2016, and No support with Leave support, largely attracting 2014 Yes voters who voted Leave in 2016. The blocs running against these alignments shrank. With independence and Brexit two of the top three issues for Scottish voters in the 2019 General Election¹⁰, the strength of the Yes-Remain tribe resulting from this realignment underpinned the SNP's recovery from an underwhelming result in the 2017 General Election.

Since 2019, the salience of Brexit and the UK's relationship with Europe has declined significantly as an electoral issue for most voters – Ipsos polling conducted in March 2026 found that just 16% of voters thought Brexit/Europe was an important issue in deciding who to vote for, down from 56% in equivalent polling conducted in November 2019. In addition to the events and shifts in Scottish politics noted above, has this led to a further realignment in Scottish electoral politics that mirrors the changes in the party system across Great Britain?

The British Election Study team¹¹ analysed trends in Westminster voting intention across Great Britain, in the wake of the decline in Labour support since its 2024 General Election victory and the rise of Reform UK and the Green Party of England and Wales. This suggests that rather than voters moving directly from Labour to Reform UK following the 2024 General Election, they are moving within two major blocs: a left-liberal bloc (Labour, the Liberal Democrats, the Greens, and nationalist parties) and a right-conservative bloc (Conservatives and Reform).

⁸ Source: <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/bes-impact/the-ongoing-independence-referendum-in-scotland-implications-for-7th-may-2015/>

⁹ Source: [The Referendum that Changed a Nation, 2022](#)

¹⁰ Source: <https://www.ipsos.com/en-uk/scotland-voting-intention-snp-pole-position-run-election>

¹¹ Source: <https://www.britishelectionstudy.com/uncategorized/looking-for-labours-lost-voters/>

In Scotland, there appear to be some similar shifts in the decline of SNP, Labour, and Conservative voting intention since 2021 and a rise in support for the Scottish Greens and Reform UK. The latter, in particular, was a practical non-entity in 2021 (winning just 0.21% of the regional list vote) but now sits on between 15% and 20% of the vote in polls conducted in the run-up to the 2026 Scottish Parliament election.

But, do these shifts in Scotland mirror the pattern across Great Britain, with vote switching largely confined to left-liberal and right-conservative blocs? And what role do constitutional preferences play in these dynamics, if any?

Findings

Methodology

We have used data collected by Ipsos between the 19th and 25th of February 2026, with an achieved sample of 1,096 Scottish adults aged 16+ via the online random probability panel Ipsos KnowledgePanel¹².

To measure the effect of different drivers of voting intention, we have developed multinomial logistic regression models for both the constituency and regional list votes. This regression model helps us to estimate how changes in independent variables affect the likelihood of voters deciding to vote for a party other than the SNP, whether these relationships are statistically significant, and how likely a voter is to vote for each party based on their characteristics.

To reach the models included in this report, we started with a broad range of demographic and attitudinal variables that may be expected to correlate with voting intention: age, gender, education, income, social grade, 2016 Brexit vote, left-right positioning, libertarian-authoritarian positioning, and, of course, independence support. We did not include views of party leaders, competence, or party favourability. While we have strong a priori justifications, or justifications based on previous research, to believe that the relationships between, for example, education and voting intention, or political beliefs and voting intention, are causal in the direction of voting intention, the relationships between voting intention and voters' evaluations of parties and leaders are not clearly unidirectional relationships we need to control for.

Having included this broader range of variables, we used a stepwise search method to select which variables to include in the published models based on Akaike Information Criterion (AIC). AIC is a model selection tool that estimates the relative quality of statistical models, balancing goodness-of-fit against model complexity. The lower the AIC score for a model, the more parsimonious the model, the lower the degree of information loss, and the better the model fit in terms of balancing explanatory power with the risk of overfitting¹³.

The pair of models with the lowest AIC scores included seven variables. The dependent variables for each model are constituency voting intention and regional list voting intention, respectively. The models share the same independent variables:

- Gender
- Age bracket

¹² For more information, please see the technical note at the end of this report.

¹³ All modelling was conducted in R. If you have questions about the methods used, please contact the author at: mark.mcgeoghegan@ipsos.com.

- Social grade
- Independence support
- Left-right positioning
- Libertarian-authoritarian positioning.

The last two of these variables are composites of six statements relevant to the respondents' positioning on a left-right axis, and six statements relevant to their positioning on a libertarian-authoritarian axis. Each respondent was asked on a five-point scale whether they agreed or disagreed with each statement, and their positioning is calculated as an average of the six statements (excluding statements that they refused to answer or responded 'don't know' to). Therefore, each respondent has a left-right and libertarian-authoritarian position between 1 and 5, where 1 is the most left-leaning / libertarian position, and 5 is the most right-leaning / authoritarian position.

Overall, Scots tend to lean left on economic issues, most strongly on believing that strong trade unions are necessary, but much more weakly on whether the government should provide jobs to all who need one, where they broadly fall in the centre of the left-right axis.

The picture on the libertarian-authoritarian axis is more complex. Scots fall on the libertarian side of the axis when it comes to freedom to protest, freedom from censorship, and being tolerant of "unconventional" lifestyles, but on average agree that lawbreaking should be met with stiffer sentences and that young people lack respect for "traditional British values".

Table 1. Sample mean scores for statements used to calculate left-right and libertarian-authoritarian positioning.

| Mean Score by Statement (all answering) | |
|---|------|
| Left-Right Position¹⁴ | |
| Ordinary working people get their fair share of the nation's wealth | 2.03 |
| There is one law for the rich and one for the poor | 2.02 |
| There is no need for strong trade unions to protect employees' working conditions and wages | 1.97 |
| Private enterprise is the best way to solve Britain's economic problems | 2.79 |
| Major public services and industries ought to be in state ownership | 2.40 |
| It is the government's responsibility to provide a job for everyone who wants one | 2.98 |
| Libertarian-Authoritarian Position¹⁵ | |
| Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values | 3.30 |
| Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards | 2.81 |
| People should be allowed to organise public meetings to protest against the government | 1.90 |
| People in Britain should be more tolerant of those who lead unconventional lives | 2.45 |
| For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence | 2.86 |
| People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences | 3.64 |

¹⁴ 1 = the most left-leaning position, and 5 = the most right-leaning position, with a mid-point of 3.

¹⁵ 1 = the most libertarian position, and 5 = the most authoritarian position, with a mid-point of 3.

Drivers of voting intention for the 2026 Scottish Parliament election

Both the constituency voting intention and regional list voting intention models find that independence support remains the strongest driver of voting intention among Scottish voters when measured alongside our key demographic characteristics and ideological leanings. Controlling for gender, age, social grade, and other political positions, independence supporters are roughly 100 times more likely to vote for the SNP than the Conservatives or Reform on the constituency vote, 50 times more likely to vote for the SNP than Labour, and 20 times more likely to vote for the SNP than the Liberal Democrats.

Likewise, on the regional list vote, independence supporters are roughly 100 times more likely to vote for the SNP than the Conservatives, 50 times more likely to vote for the SNP than for Labour, around 32 times more likely to vote for the SNP than Reform UK, and 25 times more likely to vote for the SNP than the Liberal Democrats.

However, other variables continue to matter even when we take support for, or opposition to, independence into account. The younger a respondent is, the more likely they are to vote for the Scottish Greens over the SNP, on both constituency and regional list ballots. Men are roughly two times more likely to vote for Reform UK over the SNP than women are, and the lower a respondent's social grade, the more likely they are to vote for Reform UK over the SNP – at least on the constituency vote.

Tables 2 and 3 show the relative probabilities that a voter will vote a party other than the SNP in terms of relative risk ratios, based on the given characteristic, such as being a man¹⁶. As relative risk ratios, the figures in these tables cannot be read like normal regression coefficients. Instead, a relative risk ratio of one suggests that respondents with that characteristic are equally likely to vote SNP as for the alternative party. So we can conclude that identifying as a man rather than a woman, which comes with a relative risk ratio of voting Labour rather than the SNP on the constituency vote of 1.03, has practically no effect on vote choice between those two parties – but it does for Reform versus the SNP, where the relative risk ratio of 1.93 suggests men are twice as likely as women to vote for Reform UK instead of the SNP.

In contrast, a relative risk ratio of voting Conservative rather than SNP of 0.01 for independence supporters means that if a respondent supports independence, they are 100 times less likely to vote Conservative than SNP. And a relative risk ratio of voting Conservative rather than SNP of 11.21 on left-right positioning means that right-leaning voters are eleven times more likely to vote Conservative than SNP.

¹⁶ Why in reference to the SNP? Multinomial logistic regression always works by comparing outcomes – in this case, voting intention – that a respondent might choose some specific alternative outcome, known as a reference level. Standard practice is to use the most popular outcome as the reference level. As the SNP has the greatest amount of support in Scotland, they have been used as the reference level for these models.

Table 2. Constituency Voting Intention Multinomial Logistic Regression Model

| | Relative Risk Ratio for Voting for Each Party Instead of the SNP | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|
| | Scottish Greens | Conservatives | Labour | Liberal Democrats | Reform UK |
| Gender: Male | 0.77 | 0.64 | 1.03 | 0.83 | 1.93 |
| Age Bracket | 0.7 | 1.18 | 0.92 | 1.18 | 0.87 |
| Social Grade | 0.82 | 0.86 | 1.22 | 1.21 | 0.72 |
| Supports independence | 0.41 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.05 | 0.01 |
| Left-right positioning | 0.88 | 11.21 | 1.2 | 2.05 | 3.83 |
| Libertarian-authoritarian positioning | 0.29 | 3.26 | 1.16 | 1.1 | 10.3 |

Bold = statistically significant relationship

Table 3. Regional List Voting Intention Multinomial Logistic Regression Model

| | Relative Risk Ratio for Voting for Each Party Instead of the SNP | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|---------------|-------------|-------------------|-------------|
| | Scottish Greens | Conservatives | Labour | Liberal Democrats | Reform UK |
| Gender: Male | 1.24 | 0.99 | 1.13 | 1.19 | 1.84 |
| Age Bracket | 0.83 | 1.10 | 1.04 | 1.18 | 0.92 |
| Social Grade | 1.17 | 0.95 | 1.30 | 1.33 | 0.93 |
| Supports independence | 0.38 | 0.01 | 0.02 | 0.04 | 0.03 |
| Left-right positioning | 0.48 | 6.68 | 0.66 | 1.23 | 2.38 |
| Libertarian-authoritarian positioning | 0.39 | 2.77 | 1.01 | 1.13 | 6.90 |

Bold = statistically significant relationship

Left-right and libertarian-authoritarian positionings, therefore, matter in the choices voters make. The more right-leaning a voter is, the more likely they are to vote for the Conservatives or Reform UK over the SNP. And for every one point more left-leaning a respondent is on that five-point scale, their probability of voting for the Scottish Greens on the list instead of the SNP doubles.

Libertarian-authoritarian positioning has a greater impact on the likelihood of voting for Reform UK, which grows the more authoritarian a respondent’s politics are. Conversely, as respondents become more libertarian, they are significantly more likely to vote for the Scottish Greens rather than the SNP.

The only party that is not differentiated from the SNP by gender, age, social grade, left-right position or libertarian-authoritarian position is Labour. The only differentiator in these models between the SNP and Labour is support for independence, which drives voters to the SNP.

Voter blocs in Scotland

The vast majority of Scottish voters in 2021 voted for parties belonging to the left-liberal bloc identified by the British Election Study (SNP, Labour, Liberal Democrats, and Greens). 77.5% of Scottish voters voted for a left-liberal party in 2021, with the bulk of the remainder voting for the Conservatives – the only major right-conservative party in Scotland at the time. The pro-independence and pro-union blocs were more balanced, roughly fifty-fifty.

For clarity, while above we discussed the political positions of voters themselves, voter bloc analysis is based on the party they voted for or intend to vote for – so, for example, a “pro-independence voter” in this context is a voter who voted or intends to vote for the SNP or Scottish Greens, rather than one who told Ipsos that they would vote Yes in an independence referendum.

As in the UK as a whole, our analysis indicates that the left-liberal and right-conservative blocs are largely holding up, with few voters in our dataset switching between them. The majority of voters who voted for a left-liberal party in 2021 intend to do so again, and the majority of voters who voted for a right-conservative party in 2021 intend to do so again. Where voters do switch between parties, they are largely doing so within these blocs.

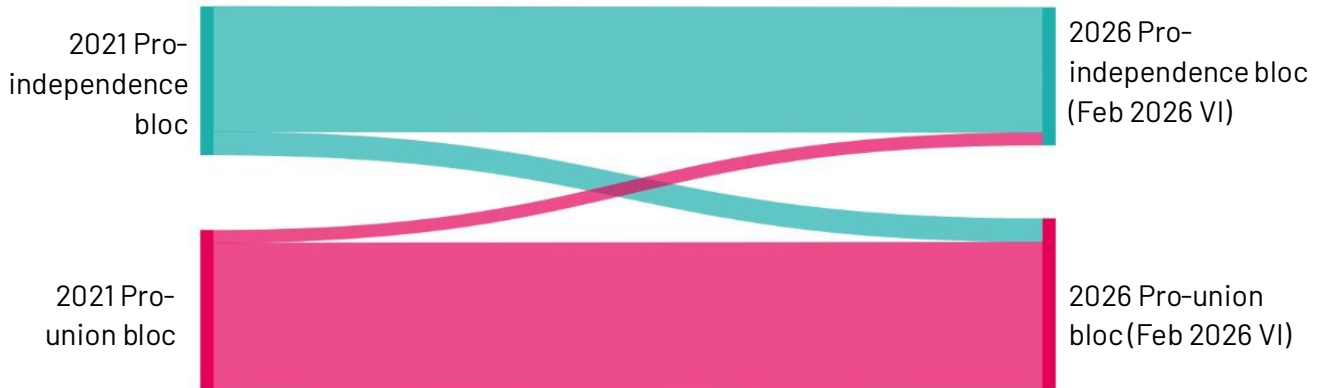
Figure 5. Voter flow from 2021 party-ideological blocs to February 2026 voting intention (constituency vote)



Base: 526 2021 left-liberal voters, 140 2021 right-conservative voters

We see the same pattern of voter bloc consistency with the pro-independence and pro-union blocs. Again, the vast majority of 2021 pro-independence voters intend to vote for a pro-independence party this time around, and the vast majority of 2021 pro-union voters intend to vote for a pro-union party in May.

Figure 6. Voter flow from 2021 party-constitutional blocs to February 2026 voting intention (constituency vote)



Base: 320 2021 pro-independence voters, 346 2021 pro-union voters

These two sets of blocs overlap with each other. While there are no major pro-independence *and* right-conservative parties, there are both pro-independence (the SNP and Scottish Greens) and pro-union (Labour and the Liberal Democrats) left-liberal parties. How, then, do these ideological and constitutional blocs interact, and which is most influential in driving voter preferences?

When we separate these two overlapping pools of voters, we do not see the same pattern of consistency across elections. The pool of pro-independence left-liberal voters accounted for 47% of Scottish voters in 2021, and pro-union left-liberal voters accounted for 30%. The majority of pro-independence left-liberal voters currently intend to vote for a pro-independence, left-liberal party – either the SNP or the Scottish Greens. However, a significant minority of pro-union, left-liberal voters in 2021 now intend to vote for a party outwith this grouping – one in five now intend to vote for a pro-union right-conservative party, like the Conservatives or Reform.

Figure 7. Left-liberal voter flow by constitutional preference (constituency vote)



Base: 320 2021 pro-independence + left-liberal voters, 206 2021 pro-union left-liberal voters

This dynamic is underpinned by 2021 Labour voters defecting to Reform – Ipsos’ latest polling suggests that 24% of 2021 Labour constituency voters now intend to vote for Reform UK. While the pro-independence left-liberal voter group that underpins support for the SNP and the Scottish Greens is holding relatively strong, the pro-union left-liberal voter group that underpins support for Labour is not.

The dynamic here boils down to the grip that constitutional preferences continue to have over Scottish voting behaviour. Voters are relatively unlikely to transfer across constitutional blocs, but appear more willing to transfer across left-liberal / right-conservative blocs within those constitutional blocs. They have options to do so within the unionist bloc – Labour to Reform – but not within the pro-independence bloc, as there is no credible, pro-independence, right-conservative party for them to switch to. While very few SNP supporters, for example, lean right on the left-right scale, 28% of those who would vote for the SNP on the constituency vote lean towards the authoritarian side of the libertarian-authoritarian scale, indicating some space for a pro-independence, right-conservative party focused on social issues.

On the whole, this finding suggests that, as well as insulating the SNP from the rise of Reform UK, the continued dominance of constitutional preferences as drivers of voting intention means that the resilience of the left-liberal bloc against the rise of Reform UK in the rest of Great Britain is less evident in Scotland, with Labour paying the biggest price.

Conclusions

Does independence still matter?

Unequivocally, yes. Despite the Scottish Government's defeat at the UK Supreme Court, the decline of the salience of independence in issue polling, and voters' rising levels of concern about issues like healthcare and the cost of living, support for or opposition to independence is the strongest driver of voting intention for the upcoming Scottish Parliament elections of any of the drivers included in our analysis.

What role do left-right and libertarian-authoritarian politics play?

The traditional political axes still play a role in determining how Scottish voters intend to vote in May, but are secondary to constitutional preferences. They play a significant role in pushing right- and authoritarian-leaning voters towards the Conservatives and Reform UK, and in pushing left- and libertarian-leaning voters towards the Greens, but play little role in differentiating the SNP from Labour or the Liberal Democrats.

Are Scotland's voter blocs shifting?

Generally speaking, no. 2021 pro-independence voters are largely likely to vote for a pro-independence party in May, and likewise for 2021 pro-union voters, 2021 left-liberal voters, and 2021 right-conservative voters within their isolated blocs.

This breaks down, however, among pro-union and left-liberal voters. A fifth intend to switch from the left-liberal bloc to the right-conservative bloc, and a tenth from the pro-union bloc to the pro-independence bloc.

That pro-independence, left-liberal voters are not shifting in a similar pattern to pro-union, left-liberal voters is ultimately down to the strength of the grip that constitutional preferences appear to still have over voter behaviour. The constitutional question is then, in a sense, propping up the cohesion of Scotland's left-liberal bloc.

What does this mean for the parties?

The SNP are, by and large, currently insulated from switching across the left-liberal / right-conservative divide by the constitutional question. It would take the emergence of a major pro-independence, right-conservative party or the weakening of the effect independence support has on voting intention for this to change.

Labour, on the flip side, are the victims of this dynamic. Enough of their own voters are willing to switch between the left-liberal and right-conservative voter blocs to significantly lower their support, but they cannot replace those left-liberal voters from those who might be dissatisfied with the SNP because they hold a pro-union position.

Technical Note

The multinomial logistic regression models and voter bloc analyses in this report were conducted using data from a representative probability sample of 1,096 adults aged 16+ across Scotland, interviewed via the Ipsos UK KnowledgePanel. Data was collected online between 19 February and 25 February 2026. A sample of 2,128 panellists aged 16+ in Scotland were invited to take part in the survey. The sample was stratified by age, qualifications and vote at the 2024 general election.

The achieved sample was weighted in two stages:

- Design weights were applied to correct for unequal probabilities of a person being selected for a survey.
- Calibration weights were applied to correct for differential non-response. Data was weighted to the adult population profile on age and gender, Scottish Parliament region, ethnicity, qualifications, work status and work sector (public sector/other), social grade, area deprivation, number of cars in household, and newspaper readership (print and digital). Population targets were obtained from the 2022 Census, ONS population estimates and other large-scale probability surveys.

For Scottish Parliament voting intention, we prompt for major parties (the list of parties prompted for differs for constituency and regional list, as not all parties stand candidates on both) and ask a follow-up “squeeze” question of those who were undecided or refused to answer the first question. A turnout filter is used based on two questions: current stated likelihood to vote (at least 9 out of 10 certain to vote) and previous voting behaviour (if they say they “always” or “usually” vote in general elections or that “it depends”).

This is the methodology Ipsos has used for its Scottish Political Monitors since June 2025. It involves data collection through our online random probability panel instead of a quota telephone survey, an updated voting intention question (prompting for Reform UK), and an updated weighting scheme. This is based on our learnings during and since the 2024 General Election.

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About the Centre for Public Policy

The University of Glasgow Centre for Public Policy is where evidence meets practice. Its convening power brings together experts across disciplines, sectors and communities to help policymakers deal with the many challenges they face. It creates solutions through evaluation and research, connecting policy, practice and research, and developing skills through education and training.

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