

High noon for the Union?

John Curtice

The 2021 Scottish election

In May 2021, the Scottish National Party (SNP) will be defending a 14-year record in office in Edinburgh. Typically, governments find it difficult to secure electoral success in such circumstances. The ‘costs of government’ – the almost inevitable gap between a party’s initial promises and voters’ perceptions of what has actually been achieved – usually take their toll at the ballot box.¹ Yet, even though the SNP administration has had its fair share of difficulties and disappointments during its now lengthy time in office, just how well it has met the challenges of the past 14 years may come to matter little in voters’ minds when they decide how to cast their ballot.

“The ‘costs of government’ – the almost inevitable gap between a party’s initial promises and voters’ perceptions of what has actually been achieved – usually take their toll at the ballot box”

This perhaps should not come as a surprise. British politics as a whole has not been ‘normal’ over the past four years. The fallout from the Brexit referendum has, inter alia, reshaped the character of support for the country’s two main parties, as Leave voters have moved towards the Conservatives, while those who backed Remain have increasingly focused their support on Labour and the Liberal Democrats.² As a result, the class division that was once the bedrock of the country’s partisan politics has almost disappeared.³ Now, more recently, a Conservative administration

1 Green J and Jennings W (2017) *The Politics of Competence: Parties, public opinion and voters*, Cambridge University Press

2 Prosser C (2020) ‘The end of the EU affair: the UK general election of 2019’, *West European Politics*, 44(2): 450–461

3 Curtice J (2020) ‘Brave new world: understanding the 2019 general election’, *Political Insight*, 11(1): 8–12

that appealed to its new-found electoral base in last year's election with promises to 'level up' has found itself having to struggle with a major public health crisis that has exposed some of the inequalities in our society and forced it to intervene in the economy and social life to an extent that makes many Conservatives feel uncomfortable.

But if Brexit and coronavirus have rattled the traditional foundations of politics in England, they both have a particular resonance north of the border. In the European Union (EU) referendum in June 2016, Scotland voted decisively (by 62 per cent to 38 per cent) to stay in the EU. Nevertheless, the country found itself heading for the exit door as a result of a narrow pro-Leave majority in England and Wales. The contrast between what Scotland apparently wanted and what was to happen breathed new life into the country's constitutional debate – even though just two years earlier, voters had voted by 55 per cent to 45 per cent to stay in the UK. The long-term ramifications of this development now look set to have a significant bearing on the outcome of next year's Holyrood contest.

Health, including public health, is a devolved responsibility north of the border. The decisions that have affected how people in Scotland live their lives during the pandemic – and the risk that it poses to their health – have therefore been made in Edinburgh, not London. As a result, the Scottish Government has been dealing with what has been by far and away the most significant public policy challenge with which it has had to deal since the advent of devolution in 1999, putting other key issues such as the effectiveness of the country's education system or how best to deal with sectarianism into the shade. The question of how well the Scottish Government is thought to have handled the pandemic is likely to feature prominently in voters' minds in May – and provides not only a key yardstick by which the competence of the SNP will be judged, but also evidence that might be thought relevant to the debate about Scotland's ability to govern itself.

PERCEPTIONS OF DEVOLUTION

In its early days, devolution had something of a shaky start in the court of public opinion, a mood that was symbolised by a major cost and time overrun in the construction of a new parliament building at the bottom of Edinburgh's Royal Mile. A gap seemed rapidly to emerge between what people had hoped devolution would bring and what it was thought to deliver. For example, at the end of the first parliamentary term in 2003, most people (66 per cent) believed that the devolved institutions should

have most influence over how Scotland is run, yet in practice as many as 64 per cent still felt that the UK government was the more powerful institution north of the border. Meanwhile, whereas back in 1999 as many as 64 per cent anticipated that the new parliament would mean that ordinary people would have more say in how Scotland is governed, three years later only 31 per cent felt that was what had actually happened.⁴

“whereas back in 1999 as many as 64 per cent anticipated that the new parliament would mean that ordinary people would have more say in how Scotland is governed, three years later only 31 per cent felt that was what had actually happened”

Yet over time, the public have become much more likely to feel that devolution is making a difference. By 2011, as many people (38 per cent) believed that the government in Edinburgh had most influence over what happened in Scotland as reckoned that the UK government did, and the picture has remained much the same since. In the most recent Scottish Social Attitudes survey undertaken in late 2019 and early 2020, 42 per cent said that the UK government had most influence, while 40 per cent reckoned that the Scottish Government did. Over half (56 per cent) now believe that devolution has given people more say in how they are governed, while 61 per cent believe that it has given Scotland a stronger voice in the UK. In many respects devolution has come of age.⁵

However, these perceptions never fully quelled the independence debate. True, the early years of SNP government from 2007 onwards were marked by relatively low levels of support for independence. Regular annual readings by the Scottish Social Attitudes survey between 1999 and 2006 suggested that support was hovering around the 30 per cent mark. However, between 2007 and 2013 the figure appeared to be little more than a quarter. The sight of an SNP government that was willing to promote Scotland’s case without appearing to be constrained by whatever difficulties this might create for party colleagues at Westminster seemed to

⁴ Curtice J, McCrone D, McEwen N, Marsh M and Ormston R (2009) *Revolution or Evolution: The 2007 Scottish elections*, Edinburgh University Press

⁵ Reid S, Montagu I and Scholes A (2020) *Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: Attitudes to government, the economy, and the health service, and political engagement in Scotland*, Scottish Government. <https://www.gov.scot/publications/scottish-social-attitudes-2019-attitudes-government-political-engagement>

persuade some voters that perhaps Scotland did not need independence after all. Yet there was still a gap between the proportion who felt that the devolved institutions did have most influence (in 2011, 38 per cent) and the proportion who believed that they should (73 per cent). There was still a question mark in some voters' eyes about whether the current settlement gave the devolved institutions enough power and influence.⁶

It was in this atmosphere that, as a result of the SNP's success in winning an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament election of 2011, the independence referendum of 2014 was held. As we have already suggested, at the outset of what was a lengthy campaign, those who were backing Yes to independence were very much in the minority. Twelve months before polling day, the polls on average reported only 38 per cent support.⁷ A year later, they were still in the minority, but nothing like as much – 45 per cent voted Yes in the independence referendum. Although the unionist camp had won the war, the long-term consequence of holding the referendum was to increase support for independence. Even on the relatively conservative measure administered by the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, support for independence stood at 39 per cent a year after the referendum – a far cry from the figure of around a quarter or so that we have seen pertained prior to the independence ballot taking place.⁸

“Although the unionist camp had won the war, the long-term consequence of holding the referendum was to increase support for independence”

BREXIT AND SCOTTISH POLITICS

As such, by the time the Brexit referendum came around, support for Scotland becoming an independent country had moved on to a higher plateau. Meanwhile, in the view of those who were still arguing the case for independence, the outcome of the EU referendum provided the clearest possible illustration of their longstanding argument that, for so long as Scotland is part of the UK, it is always at risk of having its ‘democratic’

⁶ Curtice J and Ormston R (2011) ‘So who is winning the debate? Constitutional preferences in Scotland after four years of nationalist government’, *Scottish Affairs*, 74(winter): 24–44

⁷ Curtice J (2014) ‘Poll of Polls: 17 September FINAL’. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/2014/09/poll-polls-17-september-final>

⁸ Curtice J (2017) *From Indyref1 to Indyref2? The state of nationalism in Scotland*, ScotCen Social Research. <http://www.ssa.natcen.ac.uk/media/38917/ssa-2016-state-of-nationalism.pdf>

wishes overturned by the less ‘progressive’ views of those living south of the border. Yet, in practice, those who backed independence and the SNP were far from united in their views on Brexit. According to the British Election Study, no less than 38 per cent of those who had voted Yes in 2014 voted Leave in 2016, little different from the 40 per cent of No voters who did so. That reflected the fact that one of the ironies of the 2014 independence referendum was that, despite many hours of wrangling between the protagonists about whether an independent Scotland could (as the SNP contended) be a continuing member of the EU, voters’ attitudes towards the EU appeared to make little difference to whether they voted Yes or No.⁹ Consequently, there was no guarantee that Brexit would prove to be the SNP’s calling card after all – a judgement that appeared to be vindicated by a 13-point drop in the party’s share of the vote in the 2017 UK general election.

“there was no guarantee that Brexit would prove to be the SNP’s calling card after all”

Yet, in practice, Brexit was reshaping the character of support for independence. Whereas back in 2014, people’s views about Europe seemed to make little difference to their preference for how Scotland should be governed, by 2017 a gap was beginning to emerge. According to the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, support for independence among those who could be classified as ‘Europhiles’ stood in 2015 at 39 per cent, while at 41 per cent the level of backing among those of a more ‘Eurosceptic’ frame of mind was much the same. In contrast, by 2017, support for independence among Europhiles was standing at 56 per cent, whereas among Eurosceptics it was only 40 per cent.¹⁰ Meanwhile, evidence from the polls suggested that while, as the nationalists had anticipated, some people who had voted No in 2014 and Leave in 2016 had indeed switched in favour of Yes, they were being counterbalanced by a switch towards No by some of those who had voted Yes in 2014 but Leave in 2016.¹¹

⁹ Curtice J and Montagu I (2018) ‘Has Brexit changed attitudes towards Scottish independence?’, in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf

¹⁰ Curtice J and Montagu I (2018) ‘Has Brexit changed attitudes towards Scottish independence?’, in Phillips D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf

¹¹ Curtice J (2016) ‘How Brexit has – and has not – made a difference’, What Scotland Thinks blog, 18 September 2016. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/2016/09/how-brexit-has-and-has-not-made-a-difference>

One consequence of this process was that the SNP lost ground especially heavily at the 2017 election among those who had voted Leave in 2016 – a pattern that was a much more important explanation of the reverse that it suffered than the apparent unpopularity at the time of the formal request that had been made by the Scottish Government earlier in the year for Westminster to grant it the authority to hold another independence ballot, a request that was rapidly rejected.^{12,13} However, although initially, Brexit had disrupted the SNP's electoral coalition, given that nearly twice as many people had voted Remain rather than Leave, in the longer term there was clearly a prospect that any tendency for voters to align their views on independence with their perspective on Brexit would result in more voters switching in favour of Yes than doing so in the opposite direction.

That prospect began to be realised in the polls during the course of 2019, as the Brexit debate intensified in the wake of the refusal of the House of Commons to back the deal that the government had negotiated with the EU, while proving unable to come to any majority view about what alternative course of action should be pursued. During 2019, the average level of support for Yes registered by the polls increased from the 45 per cent mark at which it had hitherto been stuck, to 49 per cent, a figure that crept up a little further in the new year to 50 per cent as the UK formally left the EU following the success of the Conservatives at the general election held in December 2019.¹⁴ All of this increase in support for independence occurred among those who had voted Remain in 2016 – a pattern that was subsequently affirmed by the Scottish Social Attitudes survey.¹⁵ As many as 56 per cent of those who had voted Remain now said they would vote Yes (up six points on the position in the second half of 2018), compared with just 30 per cent of those who backed Leave (down four points). At the same time, it had become apparent that on a number of key criteria, including not least the economic implications, voters were more pessimistic about the consequences of Brexit than they were about

¹² Curtice J and Montagu I (2018) 'Has Brexit changed attitudes towards Scottish independence?', in Phillips, D, Curtice J, Phillips M and Perry J (eds) *British Social Attitudes: The 35th report*, NatCen Social Research. https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/media/39284/bsa35_full-report.pdf

¹³ Fieldhouse E, Green J, Evans G, Mellon J, Prosser C, Schmitt H and van der Eijk C (2019) *Electoral Shocks: The volatile voter in a turbulent world*, Oxford University Press

¹⁴ Curtice J (2020) 'Brexit Day polls show increased support for Yes', What Scotland Thinks blog, 7 February 2020. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/2020/02/brexit-day-polls-show-increased-support-for-yes/>

¹⁵ Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) *Is Brexit Fuelling Support for Independence?*, ScotCen Social Research. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SSA-2019-Scotland-paper-v5.pdf>

the implications of independence.¹⁶ It was now very difficult to avoid the conclusion that although it may not have been either the intention or the wish of those who advocated the UK's withdrawal from the EU, in practice the pursuit of Brexit was undermining support for the Union. As a result, for the first time it was far from clear what would happen if another independence ballot were to be held any time soon.

“although it may not have been either the intention or the wish of those who advocated the UK's withdrawal from the EU, in practice the pursuit of Brexit was undermining support for the Union”

THE IMPACT OF CORONAVIRUS

However, the debate about Brexit and its implications for independence came to a juddering halt just a few weeks after the UK left the EU, when Scotland along with the rest of Britain found itself caught in the midst of a public health crisis occasioned by the spread of a new, potentially deadly coronavirus. In practice, the disease has taken almost as great a toll in Scotland as in England. By the end of October 2020, around 13 per 1,000 people in Scotland had tested positive for the disease, compared with 17 per 1,000 in England.¹⁷ In both parts of the UK, around 4 per cent of those who had tested positive died within a month of having done so. In truth, neither country had seemingly been especially effective in minimising the spread and impact of the virus.¹⁸

Yet voters' perceptions of how the Scottish and UK governments have handled the pandemic have become far apart. For example, by September, JL Partners found that just 17 per cent reckoned that Boris Johnson and the UK government had handled the coronavirus well, down from 47 per cent when YouGov had asked much the same question in April. In contrast, as many as 77 per cent told JL Partners that Nicola Sturgeon and the Scottish Government had handled things well, similar to the 74 per

¹⁶ Curtice J and Montagu I (2020) *Is Brexit Fuelling Support for Independence?*, ScotCen Social Research. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/SSA-2019-Scotland-paper-v5.pdf>

¹⁷ HM Government (2020) 'Coronavirus (COVID-19) in the UK', GOV.UK website. <https://coronavirus.data.gov.uk/>

¹⁸ Dong E, Du H and Gardner L (2020) 'An interactive web-based dashboard to track COVID-19 in real time', *The Lancet*, 20(5): 533–534

cent who had held that view six months earlier. At around the same time, as many as 72 per cent said in an Ipsos MORI poll that they were satisfied with Nicola Sturgeon's performance as first minister, while only 19 per cent said the same about how Boris Johnson was doing his job as prime minister.

Of course, in part, the difference between voters' evaluations of the role being played by the governments in London and Edinburgh reflected a tendency for people to view them through a partisan lens – whatever happened in the pandemic, the numerically dominant SNP supporters north of the border would be likely to regard Ms Sturgeon more favourably than Mr Johnson. Yet this is an inadequate explanation for the gap. For even those who had voted Conservative in 2019 were little more likely (44 per cent) to say that Boris Johnson was handling the pandemic well than they were Nicola Sturgeon (42 per cent). The less flamboyant, more down to earth style of the First Minister has appeared to secure a measure of respect and confidence from across the partisan divide.

“The less flamboyant, more down to earth style of the first minister has appeared to secure a measure of respect and confidence from across the partisan divide”

This might be expected to augur well for the SNP's electoral chances next May, irrespective of the debate about independence. The party was already riding high in the polls even before the pandemic, as attested by its success in winning 45 per cent of the Scotland-wide vote in the December 2019 UK general election. Indeed, that performance matched the party's score in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, a result that paved the way for the 2014 independence referendum. Yet the party is now in an even stronger position. Between August and October 2020, the SNP stood on average at 54 per cent in voting intentions for the constituency ballot that forms one half of the mixed member proportional electoral system that is used in Scottish Parliament elections, and at 45 per cent on the list vote (on which the pro-independence Greens were on 9 per cent). Such a tally would be more than enough to enable the party to secure a parliamentary majority, just as it did in 2011.

However, perceptions of the coronavirus pandemic have done more than simply provide an electoral boost for the SNP. The pandemic has also seemingly been responsible for a further increase in support for independence

beyond what had been in evidence at the turn of the year. A sequence of no less than 11 polls conducted between June and October all put support for Yes to independence ahead of that for No, on average by 54 per cent to 46 per cent respectively. In contrast to the pattern in evidence in the polls last year, this increase in support for independence was in evidence among both Remain and Leave supporters. The proportion of 2016 Remain voters who now said they would vote Yes stood at 60 per cent, a rise of four percentage points, while that among Leave voters was 37 per cent, an increase of seven percentage points.

“The pandemic has also seemingly been responsible for a further increase in support for independence beyond what had been in evidence at the turn of the year”

Why might perceptions of the handling of coronavirus have had an impact on people’s views about independence? Another of the central claims made by nationalists in Scotland’s constitutional debate is that the country would be able to govern itself more effectively as an independent country. The major divergence that we have seen exists in the perceived competence of the Scottish and UK governments in dealing with such a major public health challenge potentially feeds into that nationalist claim. Certainly, when in August, YouGov asked its respondents, “Do you think Scotland would have responded to coronavirus better or worse as an independent country?”, as many as 43 per cent said that it would have handled it better while just 16 per cent said it would have done worse. Most importantly, just 4 per cent of those who voted Yes in 2014 said that the pandemic would have been handled worse, while as many as 20 per cent of those who had backed No said that it would have been dealt with better. These figures strongly suggest that some voters have had their views about independence influenced by how they feel the pandemic has been handled.

IMPLICATIONS

Thus, between them, Brexit and coronavirus have had profound implications for the character and level of support for independence in Scotland. Brexit has ensured that attitudes towards the EU have become a significant fault line in the constitutional debate, whereas hitherto, despite the SNP’s vision of ‘independence in Europe’, they had not played a significant role in shaping people’s views. And in a country that voted by nearly two in one in favour of Remain, such a development was in the

longer term at least more of a problem for unionists than for nationalists – as has eventually proven to be the case. Now more recently a dramatic divergence between voters’ perceptions of the effectiveness of government in London and that in Edinburgh has seemingly ensured that, for the first time in polling history, independence is now a more popular option than remaining in the Union.

Moreover, it looks as though next May’s election could itself prove to be a mini-referendum on independence. When the SNP won an overall majority in 2011, it did so in part by winning the support of a significant body of voters who were opposed to independence. According to the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, the party secured as much as 38 per cent of the votes cast by opponents of independence.¹⁹ There is little sign that this is what is likely to happen this time. Rather, the polls suggest that nearly everyone – no less than 91 per cent of the constituency vote – who would currently vote Yes to independence intends to support the SNP next May, whereas just 9 per cent of those who currently back No intend to do so.²⁰ Of course, now that independence is relatively popular, such a pattern potentially provides the SNP with the foundation it needs to win an overall majority in a way that was not true a decade ago. And it certainly means that there appears to be little space for considerations other than the now seemingly interrelated ones of Brexit, coronavirus and independence to have much influence on how people vote.

“it looks as though next May’s election could itself prove to be a mini-referendum on independence”

This does not make the task facing Labour – whose average standing between August and October in polls of Scottish Parliament voting intentions has been just 16 per cent (on both ballots) – any easier. The party is not at ease in discussing either Brexit or independence, and rather prefers the bread and butter issues of public services, welfare and inequality. Neither Brexit nor independence fits into the left–right paradigm and they potentially split its electoral coalition. Indeed, on Brexit, the party in Scotland does not enjoy the cushion of substantial support from those who voted Remain that it has south of the border –

¹⁹ Curtice J (2019) ‘The electorate and elections’, in Hassan G (ed) *The Story of the Scottish Parliament: The first two decades explained*, Edinburgh University Press

²⁰ These figures are the average of the figures in two polls by JL Partners and Ipsos MORI for which the relevant crossbreak is available

according to the British Election Study, in the December 2019 election, Scottish Labour polled only 21 per cent among those who voted Remain, only modestly above the 14 per cent it secured among Leave voters, and well below the 53 per cent who did so in England and Wales. As our earlier analysis implies, for most Remain voters in Scotland (52 per cent in December 2019), the SNP is the most popular port of call.²¹ Meanwhile, around 30 per cent of those who voted for Labour in December 2019 voted for independence in 2014, but according to polls conducted between August and October, that proportion has now fallen to a quarter. So far at least, the party's attempt to straddle the constitutional divide with promises of federalism²² do not seem to be having much success in winning over independence-inclined voters from the SNP.

The fact that next year's election could well prove to be a quasi-referendum on independence not only makes Labour's task – and indeed that of the pro-Union parties generally – more difficult, but it also has implications for the debate about what should happen thereafter. The Conservatives are insistent that another independence referendum should not be held any time soon, while Labour is indicating that it thinks it would be undesirable. Both are keen to remind us that, back in 2014, an SNP majority would be a “once in a generation opportunity”.²³ Yet while it is not unreasonable to argue that your political opponents should keep their promises, it is much more difficult to argue that the electorate should be bound by them. Voters are allowed to change their minds, and if the SNP does win a majority next May, it is likely to be a strong signal – and a much stronger one than in 2011 – that this is indeed what has happened so far as Scotland's constitutional status is concerned. Simply saying ‘No’ might then no longer be enough.

John Curtice is professor of politics at Strathclyde University and senior research fellow at NatCen Social Research and The UK in a Changing Europe.

²¹ Curtice J (2020) ‘The 2019 election: a constitutional cry or a Brexit ballot?’, What Scotland Thinks blog, 22 May 2020. <https://whatscotlandthinks.org/2020/05/the-2019-election-a-constitutional-cry-or-a-brexit-ballot/>

²² Gallagher J (2019) *Progressive Federalism: A different way of looking at the UK*, Fabian Society

²³ BBC News (2014) ‘Salmond: “referendum is a once in a generation opportunity”’, BBC News website, 14 September. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/uk-scotland-29196661>