The Changing Role of Identity and Values in Scotland's Politics

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Introduction

The Scottish Parliament election in May could arguably be considered the most important since the devolved Parliament was created in Scotland in 1999. Recent polls have shown that we can expect the Scottish National Party to win the largest number of seats in Parliament and they could even win an overall majority under an electoral system purposely designed to prevent this from happening (WhatScotlandThinks, 2021). The SNP have indicated that, should there be a pro-independence majority in the election in May, a second referendum on independence 'should be held in the first half of the next Scottish Parliament' (Stando, 2021). So, if the SNP are as successful as the polls anticipate, this could have major constitutional implications that might in turn lead to the end of the Union as it is currently constituted.

Much of the recent coverage of politics in Scotland has focussed on two things: (i) polls that have appeared to show majority support for independence, and (ii) the Salmond Affair and allegations about the First Minister's role in its handling. The former is of course seen as having a potentially positive effect on the SNP's chances in the upcoming election – part of the increase in support for independence (which has since abated slightly) seemingly came from the Scottish public's view that the First Minister had handled the coronavirus pandemic more effectively than the Prime Minister (Curtice, 2021a). On the other hand, the latest twist in the Salmond Affair - the creation of the new 'Alba Party'- could potentially scupper the SNP's chances of winning an overall majority (Curtice, 2021b).

While these more immediate developments will no doubt be important in the run up to this election, to obtain a deeper understanding of Scottish politics at this important juncture we need to take a longer-term view. Research undertaken across Britain as a whole has revealed that Brexit has reshaped the character of electoral support for the Conservatives and Labour. No longer is the electoral battle between them simply shaped by whether people are on the 'left' or on the 'right' but also by whether they are socially conservative or socially liberal (Curtice, 2020a; Surridge, 2021). However, thanks to the independence debate and the presence of the SNP as a major electoral force, the political battle in Scotland has long seemed to be about more than 'left' and 'right'. Rather, it is also about identity and how people think it should be reflected in Scotland's constitutional arrangements. Yet at the same time, Brexit has also witnessed a reshaping of the character of support for independence and the SNP as both have become linked to opposition to Britain's exit from the EU (Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Curtice, 2020b). This suggests that the ideological basis of party support in Scotland may have changed during the course of the last decade. This paper examines the extent to which this is the case.

It does so in two halves. First, we examine the pattern of support for independence. To what extent is support for independence rooted in people's sense of identity – and has this changed at all during the course of the last decade? At the same time does the fact that independence is now more popular among Remainers than Leavers mean that it is now

also more popular among social liberals than their counterparts – such that perhaps this divide now matters more when it comes to support for independence than the left-right divide? Second, we chart how the pattern of support for the main political parties in Scotland has changed during the last decade, and consider whether, as a result, the differences between the parties in the kind of voters to whom they appeal have been sharpened by political developments that have been as momentous as those in any previous decade of Scottish politics.

The data used throughout this paper are taken from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA) which has run almost every year since the advent of devolution in Scotland in 1999. The survey is a high-quality exercise conducted face-to-face with a random sample of those aged 16 and living anywhere in Scotland. Further details are to be found at (NatCen, 2019a).

Scottish Identity and the Independence debate

The question of whether Scotland should be an independent country might be thought to be inextricably linked with notions of identity and nationalism. It is certainly unsurprising that SSA has consistently found that those who have a greater sense of Scottish rather than British identity are more likely than those of the opposite view to think Scotland should be an independent country. However, if we examine attitudes towards the constitutional settlement in Scotland over the past decade, we discover that the relationship between attitudes towards independence and national identity has grown stronger, a trend seemingly galvanised by both the independence referendum in 2014 and the Brexit vote in 2016.

The following question is asked on SSA of all respondents regarding their sense of national identity:

> *Which, if any, of the following best describes how you see yourself?*
>
> 1. *Scottish not British*
>
> 2. *More Scottish than British*
>
> 3. *Equally Scottish and British*
>
> 4. *More British than Scottish*
>
> 5. *British not Scottish*
>
> 7. *Other description (WRITE IN)*

To assess attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed, respondents are asked to choose which of five different constitutional settlements they would prefer:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

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*

5. *Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament*

Table 1 shows how attitudes towards the merits of independence and devolution have changed since 2010. Those answering either 1 or 2 to the question above are grouped under 'independent', those answering 3 or 4 are grouped under 'part of UK with devolution' while those answering 5 are shown under 'part of UK without devolution'.

Table 1 Attitudes towards the preferred constitutional settlement in Scotland (2010-2019)

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independent	23	32	23	29	33	40	46	46	51
Part of UK with devolution	61	58	61	55	50	49	42	41	36
Part of UK without devolution	10	6	11	9	7	6	8	8	7

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2019). The survey was not conducted in 2018.

As can be seen, support for a form of devolution was consistently higher than support for Scottish independence between 2010 and 2014, the year of the independence referendum. However, independence has been backed by more than four in ten people in Scotland since 2015 and has been higher than support for devolution since 2016. The independence referendum clearly had a galvanising effect on support for independence (Curtice, 2017a) - but how, if at all, was this increase related to people's sense of national identity?

Table 2 helps us to answer this question. It shows that those who identify as being 'Scottish not British' have consistently been more likely than those who identify as either 'More British than Scottish' or 'British not Scottish' to support Scottish independence. However, the difference between these two groups in their level of support for independence is markedly greater now than it was prior to the independence referendum. Although support for leaving the UK increased among those identifying as 'More British than Scottish' or 'British not Scottish' from just 7% in 2010 to 23% in 2019 - an increase of 16 percentage points - the equivalent increase among those identifying as 'Scottish, not British' has been 33 percentage points - from 44% in 2010 to 77% in 2019.

Table 2 *Support for Scottish independence by national identity (2010-2019)*

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scottish Not British	44	53	46	51	59	66	69	72	77
More British than Scottish/British not Scottish	7	10	8	7	15	13	13	12	23
Difference	+37	+43	+38	+44	+44	+53	+56	+60	+54

Note: The 2014 survey was undertaken before the independence referendum, while the 2016 one was conducted after the EU referendum. Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2019).

We have already seen from Table 1 that support for independence increased in the wake of the 2014 independence referendum. Now we can see that the increase was also accompanied by a strengthening of the relationship between constitutional preference and national identity. Since the 2014 referendum, there has consistently been a gap of over 50 percentage points in support for independence between those identifying as 'Scottish not British' and those identifying as 'More British than Scottish/British not Scottish'. The independence referendum appears to have increased the extent that those with a strong, exclusive sense of Scottish identity expect that identity to be reflected in how Scotland should be governed.

Values and Scottish Independence

But is this the only change that has occurred in the character of support for independence? As we noted earlier, those who voted Remain in the 2016 EU referendum have become more likely to support independence, while they have also previously been shown to have a relatively liberal outlook (Curtice and Montagu, 2019; Surridge, 2019). This suggests that perhaps support for independence has increased most among liberals -

a pattern that might be thought relatively unusual given that nationalist movements in Europe are commonly associated with a more authoritarian outlook (BBC, 2019, Osborne et al., 2017).

In most years SSA has included a suite of questions that are designed to assess where someone stands on a liberal-authoritarian spectrum (see the Appendix to this paper and NatCen, 2019b). While liberals tend to value social diversity and the right of individuals to personal freedom and autonomy within society, authoritarians tend to place a higher value on social and cultural homogeneity across society as a way of preserving social order (Curtice, 2020a). In Table 3 we have used the data collected by SSA since 2010 to identify the one-third who are most liberal on the survey's measure and the one-third who are most authoritarian. It then shows separately for each of these two groups how their attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed as measured by the question we introduced at Table 1 have evolved over time.

Table 3 *Support for Scottish Independence by liberal-authoritarian position (2010-2019)*

	2010	2011	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Liberal voters							
Independence	25	28	39	49	60	57	65
Part of UK with devo	68	62	47	43	34	36	29
Part of UK without devo	6	4	4	3	4	4	2
Authoritarian voters							
Independence	25	35	28	38	38	41	41
Part of UK with devo	56	55	52	47	45	40	40
Part of UK without devo	13	6	12	9	13	13	11

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2019). The liberal-authoritarian scale was not included on the 2012 or 2013 surveys.

Before the 2014 independence referendum there was relatively little difference between liberals and authoritarians in their constitutional preferences, and certainly no consistent evidence of liberals being more likely to support independence. However, since the EU referendum a considerable gap has emerged. In 2016, three in five liberals (60%) supported Scottish independence compared with somewhat less than two in five (38%) of authoritarians. By 2019, there was a 24 percentage-point gap between the two, with 65% of liberals supporting Scottish independence compared with 41% of authoritarians. It appears that the fallout from the Brexit referendum has resulted in a pattern of support for independence that might be thought to be more consistent with the claim that is often made that the nationalist movement in Scotland has a 'civic, open, inclusive view of the world…it's about being outward looking and

internationalist, not inward looking and insular.' (Sturgeon as reported at BBC, 2017).

Indeed, we can undertake further analysis that demonstrates the role that Brexit has played in bringing about this change. We conduct a binary logistic regression analysis of support for independence in which the independent variables are (a) where someone stands on the liberal-authoritarian scale and (b) whether someone is a Eurosceptic or a Europhile as measured by their response to this question:

> ***Leaving aside the result of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union, what do you think Britain's policy should be...***
>
> > *1. ...should it leave the European Union,*
> >
> > *2. stay in the EU and try to **reduce** the EU's powers,*
> >
> > *3. stay in the EU and keep the EU's powers as they are,*
> >
> > *4. stay in the EU and try to **increase** the EU's powers,*
> >
> > *5. or, work for the formation of a single European government?*

Someone selecting either options 1 or 2 is classed as a 'Eurosceptic' while anyone selecting options 3 through 5 is classed as a 'Europhile'.

If the increased alignment between attitudes towards the EU and support for independence is responsible for the widening of the gap between liberals and authoritarians in their attitude towards the constitutional question, we should find that once we take account of people's attitude towards the EU the relationship between support for independence and position on the liberal-authoritarian scale was much the same in 2019 as it was in 2015.

This indeed is what we largely find. The odds of a liberal supporting Scottish independence in 2019 compared to an authoritarian are only slightly higher in 2019 than in 2015. In contrast, the odds of a Europhile supporting independence compared with a Eurosceptic are significantly higher in 2019 than in 2015. In 2019 a Europhile was over two times more likely to support Scottish independence than a Eurosceptic – whereas in 2015 a Eurosceptic was as likely to support independence as a Europhile. In short, we have strong evidence that the increase in support among liberals for Scottish independence in recent years is being driven by attitudes towards the European Union.

The SNP promotes itself as a social democratic party, while the vision of independence that it presented at the 2014 independence referendum emphasised its wish to create a more equal country (Scottish Government, 2013). We thus might anticipate that those for whom achieving greater equality is a priority would be more likely to support independence than

would those who place greater emphasis on the need to create incentives to help business and the wider economy to flourish.

Where people stand on this debate, which is central to the division between those on the 'left' and those on the 'right', is also measured on a regular basis by SSA via a suite of questions on inequality and the role of government in tackling it (see the Appendix to this paper and NatCen, 2019b). In similar vein to the liberal-authoritarian divide, we can use these data to divide respondents into the one-third most left-wing and the one-third most right wing. Table 4 compares the constitutional preferences of these two groups during the course of the last decade.

Table 4 *Attitudes towards independence by position on left-right scale (2010-2019)*

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Left-wing									
Independence	34	45	28	40	49	55	58	58	62
Part of UK with devo	54	47	59	47	41	38	34	32	26
Part of UK without devo	10	4	8	6	5	4	4	5	6
Right-wing									
Independence	18	19	18	21	21	24	36	38	40
Part of UK with devo	65	71	63	58	57	60	50	45	46
Part of UK without devo	13	6	13	14	10	9	9	12	9

In 2010 support for independence was already higher among those on the left than on the right. Whereas 34% of those on the left supported independence, only 18% of those on the right did so (a 16 percentage-point difference). By 2019 this gap had widened only slightly to 22 percentage-points – over six in ten of those on the left supported some form of Scottish independence (62%) compared with four in ten (40%) of those on the right who did so. The relative stability of the relationship between attitudes towards independence and position on the left/right spectrum should not some as a surprise. While attitudes towards Brexit tend to be related to a person's position on the liberal-authoritarian scale they are largely unrelated to where they stand on the left-right scale (Curtice, 2017b; 2019). Consequently, the fact that attitudes towards Brexit and independence have become intertwined would not be expected to have had much impact on the relationship between the left-right scale and attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed.

We have learnt two important lessons. First, rather than being wholly unique, distinctive dimension of Scottish politics, the independence debate has in part at least long been related to the division between left and right that has been a feature of politics throughout Britain. Second, however, the debate about independence now appears to be more polarised. People's

views have become more likely to reflect their sense of identity and where they stand on the liberal-authoritarian scale, while also still reflecting their views on the division between left and right.

The changing nature of party support in Scotland

It will come as little surprise to learn that those who support independence are more likely to vote for the SNP. However, as Table 5 shows, the extent to which this is the case has varied over time. In particular, since the independence referendum of 2014 the difference between the level of support for the SNP among those who currently back independence and those who are opposed has widened considerably. In 2011, when the party won an overall majority in that year's Scottish Parliament election there was a 41 percentage-point difference between supporters and opponents of independence in their level of support for the SNP. However, in 2015 that figure increased to 60 percentage points, and it remained close to that level in both 2016 and 2017. Coupled with the increase in support for independence shown in Table 1, this change means that the proportion of SNP support that comes from supporters rather than opponents of independence has increased markedly, from just over half (55%) in 2010 to around four in five (81%) in 2017.

Table 5 Voting behaviour in Scotland by attitudes towards independence (2010-17)

	2010	2011	2015	2016	2017
	%	%	%	%	%
Support Independence					
Conservative	2	2	1	4	4
Labour	28	15	12	8	19
Lib Dem	14	2	5	3	2
SNP	55	79	85	81	72
Oppose Independence					
Conservative	20	13	23	31	37
Labour	44	38	36	32	36
Lib Dem	23	10	12	9	10
SNP	12	38	25	24	15

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2017). Figures in 2011 and 2016 are for Scottish Parliament election, remainder for UK general election. Data for 2019 are unavailable as the election was held after the 2019 survey went into the field, when the 2020 SSA survey was postponed because of the pandemic.

But does this mean that, given the post-Brexit link between attitudes towards independence and where people stand on the liberal-authoritarian dimension, support for the SNP has grown more markedly among liberals than authoritarians? Equally, given that the Conservatives have increasingly focused their appeal on Leave supporters (Cooper & Cooper, 2020; Curtice, 2020a), does this mean that their support has become more focused on authoritarian voters?

Table 6 indicates that both expectations are fulfilled. Between 2010 and 2015 support for the SNP differed little between liberals and authoritarians – and the substantial increase in support for the SNP over this period was equally in evidence in both groups. Even though the 2016 Scottish Parliament election was held seven weeks before the EU referendum, there were already signs a year later of the SNP being somewhat more popular among liberals than authoritarians, and by 2017 this was clearly the case – the party was backed by around half of liberals (51%) but by only three in ten authoritarians (30%).

Table 6 *Voting behaviour in Scotland by liberal-authoritarian scale (2010-2017)*

	2010	2011	2015	2016	2017
	%	%	%	%	%
Liberal					
Conservative	12	9	7	8	11
Labour	37	21	25	19	32
Lib Dem	29	11	10	6	5
SNP	20	53	54	60	51
Authoritarian					
Conservative	17	10	16	22	34
Labour	44	29	24	21	32
Lib Dem	17	5	5	6	3
SNP	20	56	50	48	30

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2017). Figures in 2011 and 2016 are for Scottish Parliament election, remainder for UK general election

Meanwhile, the opposite trend is in evidence in support for the Conservatives. At 11%, support for the party in 2017 among liberals was still much the same as it had been in 2010 (12%). In contrast, over the same period the level of backing for the party had doubled (from 17% to 34%) among authoritarians. In short, whereas in the years prior to the EU referendum where people stood on the liberal-authoritarian dimension was largely unrelated to which party they supported, in the post-Brexit era it has become a new divide in Scottish party politics, much as it has done south of the border.

What, however, of the role played by the division between left and right in shaping the pattern of party support? We would, of course, anticipate that support for the Conservatives would be concentrated among those on the right while backing for Labour would be more common among those on the left. However, perhaps this has become less clear since Brexit, just as it has done in England and Wales (Curtice, 2020a). Meanwhile, does the fact that independence is more popular among those on the left mean that the SNP performs better among those on the left too – and indeed, possibly increasingly so given that the party has become more reliant on supporters of independence?

Table 7 Voting behaviour in Scotland by left-right scale (2010-2017)

	2010	2011	2015	2016	2017
	%	%	%	%	%
Left-wing					
Conservative	7	3	3	6	11
Labour	47	33	25	22	38
Lib Dem	18	4	5	4	3
SNP	27	60	59	62	47
Right-wing					
Conservative	27	20	23	35	41
Labour	31	28	24	15	20
Lib Dem	23	11	11	8	10
SNP	16	42	40	38	29

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (2010-2017). Figures in 2011 and 2016 are for Scottish Parliament election, remainder for UK general election

Table 7 shows the changing nature of voting behaviour among left- and right-wing voters in Scotland between 2010 and 2017. It shows that the Conservative Party has consistently performed better among those on the right than it has done among those on the left. Indeed, far from narrowing in the wake of Brexit the gap widened in 2016 and 2017, as the party proved more successful at picking up support among voters on the right than it did among those on the left. In contrast, the pattern of Labour support has been more volatile – the party's position in 2010 as the most popular party among those on the left was soon usurped and five years later the party found itself scoring no more highly among this group than among those on the right. However, the party's partial recovery in 2017 occurred primarily among those on the left. As a result, the left-right divide still appears capable of playing an important role in shaping Conservative and Labour support.

Meanwhile, as we anticipated even in 2010 the SNP were somewhat more popular among those on the left (where the party enjoyed 27% support) than they were among those on the right (16%). But, as the party's

support came increasingly from supporters of independence, so the party increasingly performed more strongly among those on the left. By 2016, there was no less than a 24 percentage point difference between the party's level of support in the two groups, a difference that only slipped back slightly in 2017 to 18 points.

The differences between the parties in Scotland in terms of the character of their electoral support have widened during the last decade. First, independence has come to matter more in determining who is most likely to vote SNP. Second, whereas ten years ago whether someone was a liberal or an authoritarian made little difference to how they voted, now it is an important part of the divide between SNP and Conservative supporters. Meanwhile (and third), in contrast to the pattern in the rest of the UK, there is little sign that the debate between left and right has become any less important – indeed there are signs here too of a sharper division in the country's party politics.

Conclusion

Scottish politics and society have changed markedly in the preceding decade, and many of these changes will influence the outcome of the upcoming Scottish Parliament in May. Scotland's political parties are addressing an electorate whose sense of Scottish identity has become more entwined with support for Scottish independence, a link that has seemingly been galvanised by both the 2014 independence referendum and the outcome of the 2016 EU referendum. Meanwhile, Brexit has ensured that support for independence is now more common among those with a liberal outlook. Between them these two developments have resulted in a sharper division between those who support independence and those who do not in terms of both identity and ideology.

At the same time, bigger differences have opened up in the character of party support. The link between support for independence and voting SNP became much stronger in the wake of the 2014 independence referendum, while the EU referendum saw the parties' supporters become more distinctive in their stance on the liberal-authoritarian dimension. At the same time, the left-right divide does not appear to have become any less important.

Applying a longer lens to the pattern of party support in Scotland has demonstrated that the competition for votes at the election on May 6 is taking place in a very different electoral environment than the one that pertained when a pro-independence majority of MSPs was first elected in 2011. The battle lines between the parties are now more sharply drawn – making it less likely perhaps that other considerations that have previously seemed to have mattered, such as the perceived competence of the parties and the personal popularity of the leaders, are likely to prove

as influential as they have done previously in shaping how people voted (Curtice: 2011, Johns et al.: 2013). Perhaps it also means that irrespective of the eventual result, developing any kind of consensus about the country's future is going to prove a considerable challenge for all of its politicians.

Acknowledgement

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Appendix[1]

Additional information on the liberal-authoritarian and left-right scales

Both the liberal-authoritarian and left-right scales are 'additive indexes' consisting of a variety of statements to which a respondent is asked to either 'agree strongly', 'agree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'disagree' or 'disagree strongly'. The construction of the index lies on the assumption that there is a latent, underlying attitudinal dimension which characterises each of the answers to the questions that constitute the scale.

The individual question items that are used to construct each of the scales are as follows:

Left-right scale

- *Government should redistribute income from the better off to those who are less well off*

- *Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers*

- *Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth*

- *There is one law for the rich and one for the poor*

- *Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance*

Liberal-authoritarian scale

- *Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values*

- *People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences*

- *For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence*

- *Schools should teach children to obey authority*

- *The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong*

- *Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards*

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1 Note the description in this section borrows from that found in NatCen (2019b), 'Technical Details', in Curtice, J., Clery, E., Perry, J., Phillips, M. and Rahim, N. (eds) 2019), British Social Attitudes: the 36th report, London: NatCen Social Research. Available at https://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-36/technical-details.aspx

The indices for the three scales are formed by scoring the leftmost, most libertarian or most pro-welfare position, as 1 and the rightmost, most authoritarian or most anti-welfarist position, as 5. The "neither agree nor disagree" option is scored as 3. The scores to all the questions in each scale are added and then divided by the number of items in the scale, giving indices ranging from 1 (leftmost, most libertarian, most pro-welfare) to 5 (rightmost, most authoritarian, most anti-welfare).