

Devolution and Democracy:

What's Next for the Scottish Independence Movement?

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On May 6, 2021 the “most important elections in Scottish history” took place. Campaigns were run on issues such as Covid-19 recovery, tax plans, child poverty and assistance for the elderly. However, the subject on everyone’s mind — both in and outside of the country — was independence. The 2014 national referendum on independence delivered a 55 to 44 per cent [decision](#) for Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom. However, the Brexit referendum —in which the Scottish population decidedly [opposed](#) leaving the EU—rekindled the conversation on independence and amplified calls for a departure from the 314-year-old Union. This policy outlook examines the impact of the 2021 elections on the prospect of Scottish independence. It analyses the likelihood of independence, plausible timelines, and what an independent Scotland could look like.

Background

May 6, 2021, in the United Kingdom was popularly entitled “Super Thursday”, as millions of people across the country voted in select English local elections, the Welsh Senedd Cymru elections, the London Assembly elections, and the London mayoral race. However, the elections that dominated the headlines took place in Scotland. Much of the [media](#) touted the race for the Scottish Parliament’s 129 seats as the “most important elections in Scottish history”. Campaigns were run on issues such as Covid-19 recovery, tax plans, child poverty and assistance for the elderly. However, the subject on everyone’s mind — both in and outside of the country — was independence. The 2014 national referendum on independence delivered a 55 to 44 per cent [decision](#) to remain part of the United Kingdom. However, the Brexit referendum —in which the Scottish population decidedly [opposed](#) leaving the EU—rekindled the conversation on independence and amplified calls for a departure from the 314-year-old Union.

The interest in the recent elections was not only felt by the press. Scotland experienced the [highest](#) voter turnout for parliamentary elections in its history. Despite the magnitude of the media build-up, the results were largely predicted accurately by the polls, with the Scottish National Party coming up one seat short of an overall majority — an impressive feat given that the Scottish parliament is explicitly [designed](#) to produce coalition governments. First Minister Nicola Sturgeon retained her leadership of the government, the Green Party secured 8 seats in parliament, and first-time parties Alba Party, Reform UK, and All for Unity failed to win any seats. Despite concluding similarly to the previous election, the results saw new faces in leadership for two key parties: Douglas Ross saw his first election as head of the Scottish Conservatives and Anas Sarwar led Scottish Labour, having been head of the party for only two months.



First Minister of Scotland Nicola Sturgeon answers questions of press members during a press conference, held by Foreign Press Association (FPA), on a probable independence referendum. London, United Kingdom on February 11, 2020. (Ilyas Tayfacı - Anadolu Agency)

With the elections now behind her, First Minister Sturgeon is now reshuffling the cabinet and outlining plans for the first 100 days of her government. As she does so, SNP supporters and others in the pro-independence camp view the results of the election — with the SNP and Scottish Greens collectively representing an overall pro-independence majority in Holyrood —as a resounding call to relaunch the independence campaign. Unionists, as well as the significant [demographic](#) voters undecided on Scottish independence, interpret the results differently, with the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic influencing any timeline for pro-independence or unionist campaigns. However, despite the buzz of the recent elections fading and international attention drifting elsewhere, Scotland is arguably just beginning the most important chapter in its modern political history. This policy outlook examines the impact of the 2021 elections on the prospect of Scottish independence. It analyses the likelihood of independence, plausible timelines, and the impact of an independent Scotland on its residents and the United Kingdom it may choose to leave.

The State of the Union

The 1707 Acts of Union united the Scottish and English parliaments in the form of a singular British government and subsequent nation of Great Britain. Following the birth of Britain, all decisions about Scottish governance were made through the centralised power of a single parliament and the Prime Minister’s government, both housed in London. Over the years, concerns about a political power imbalance between Scotland and England arose, in response to which many argued that Scotland’s interests were viewed as secondary to the interests of the Union and England. Calls for increased representation and autonomy grew. This sentiment culminated in 1997 with devolution. The 1998 Scotland Act established the Scottish government and parliament with a series of devolved powers within their mandate. Today, the Scottish [government](#) has control over a range of sectors including, but not limited, to justice, health, education, transport, and some areas of the economy. Foreign policy, military and defence, and macroeconomic areas including financial markets and fiscal policy, however, remain under the jurisdiction of Westminster. While devolution has proven successful and popular across the Scottish political spectrum, many of those who consider it an insufficient response to the power imbalance in Westminster now advocate for national independence.

Of course, the relationship between the two entities extends far beyond formal powers. Scotland is deeply politically, economically, and culturally intertwined with the UK. [60%](#) of all Scottish exports go to the rest of the UK. Westminster also supports the Scottish parliament through [block grants](#), which the Scottish government then manages and

includes within its budgetary and tax policies. Scotland raises less tax and spends more per capita than the rest of the UK. The Economist [reported](#) that in 2019 Scotland spent 8.6% more than it earned, compared to 2.6% more for the rest of the UK, a statistic Unionists are swift to raise when questioning the feasibility of a successful independent Scottish economy. In short, the deep connection between Scotland and the UK and the distinct Scottish identity must be equally emphasised in the analysis of the current Scottish independence movement. Scottish politics today reflects the divergent opinions on what this balance should be, and the corresponding competing visions for the future of Scotland based on them.

Furthermore, it should be noted that while independence is the focus of this policy outlook, the results of the 2021 elections naturally both reflect and will shape all domestic political issues. These issues are relevant to the scope of this piece because as independence — if it does occur at all — is unlikely to take place in the immediate future, how the current government and opposition form their political platforms is incredibly important not only for the state of the country in the short term future but also for the impact of these platforms on any future independence campaigns.

Predictably, one of the dominant political issues over the course of the campaign was the ongoing pandemic. Per devolved powers, Scotland had a high level of control over its Covid-19 policies. In contrast to ongoing concerns about Prime Minister Boris Johnson's handling of the virus, [particularly](#) in the early stages of the pandemic, First Minister Sturgeon's response to Covid-19 has largely been viewed in a positive light. As it relates to the pandemic and beyond, Sturgeon, who has served as First Minister since 2014, has consistently been perceived as a strong and authoritative leader with [high levels](#) of public trust. Today, Sturgeon is viewed synonymously with the SNP, and as the incumbent leader of the party with the most seats in parliament, opposition parties' stances are usually framed in response to the SNP government. In terms of policy, party manifestos have showcased that while there is certainly variety across among the five major political parties in Scotland — SNP, Conservative, Labour, Green, and Liberal Democrats — these differences are often largely a question of degree. This, of course, is not the case for independence. For example, in the matter of public services and benefits, as the [Institute for Fiscal Studies](#) puts it, the SNP and Scottish Labour hold policy positions similar to those in Scandinavia, with a "smorgasbord of new entitlements for residents". Scottish Conservatives also plan to increase benefits but in a less extensive manner. Put simply, in many areas, the political parties have a lot in common. This lack of extreme polarity is insightful as it offers a somewhat more cohesive, predictable depiction of what the general political leanings of an independent Scotland could look like.

In contrast to the well-known, long-serving leadership of Nicola Sturgeon, the leaders of the Scottish Conservatives and Scottish Labour — Douglas Ross and Anas Sarwar, respectively — are new to the political spotlight. Scottish conservatives had a solid performance in the most recent election and represent the second most popular party in the country. Douglas Ross appears ready to capitalise on this status as leader of the most prominent Unionist party in order to spearhead the fight against independence in the upcoming months. Anas Sarwar, the newest party leader, is a dynamic and particularly articulate politician with youthful energy and an almost presidential-like presence. His contributions to Scottish Labour are yet to be seen, but along with Ross, his new role ensures that future independence campaigns would not simply reflect a repeat of the build-up to the 2014 referendum. The leaders of Scotland's political parties are particularly and personally involved in referendum campaigns — whether that be knocking on residents' doors or attending large public events. Ross, therefore, is not simply a new party leader, but the presumed new head campaigner for the Unionists in Scotland. Sarwar will also hold a crucial position, particularly as Labour's specific role — both in referendum campaign strategy and actual policy suggestions for the future Scotland-UK relationship — is not yet fully clear. With new party leadership and the fallout of both Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic proving to be ongoing factors for consideration, the domestic political backdrop will also continue to prove influential in any future independence campaign.

Referendum redo

For Sturgeon and the SNP, a combination of electoral legitimacy and advantageous timing is proving to be the most influential factors in the campaign for a second independence referendum. For background (as the name might suggest) the SNP today is defined by its goal to guide Scotland to total sovereignty. The party rose to prominence in the 1970s, heavily aided by a campaign to promote Scottish control over offshore oil assets. In 2011, the SNP became the only party to secure an overall majority in Holyrood. Within the scope of the outlook, it is not possible to unpack the nuance of SNP policies over the decades. Nevertheless, it is important to convey that first through devolution, and then through its drive for independence, the SNP is fundamentally grounded in nationalism. This understanding of "nationalism", however, varies. For example, the older demographic of voters are more likely to view the SNP as a protest party mainly focused on a nationalism that leads to independence. In contrast, Scottish Labour was historically considered the dominant party and representative of the working class and semi-socialists that both parties would aim to attract. The younger population who have grown up in the era of SNP dominance, on the other hand, view the party's nationalism both within the scope of the



A view of banners of parties and candidates is seen as people arrive at polling stations to cast their votes for Scottish Parliament election in Edinburgh, Scotland, United Kingdom on May 06, 2021.

(Hasan Esen - Anadolu Agency)

independence campaign and an overarching governance platform. This distinction is crucial; it also shows that the [popularity](#) of the SNP among young people indicates a successful expansion of its political platform. The SNP has maintained independence as a priority while successfully catering to a demographic on a wide range of governing policies as well. The SNP's popularity with young voters — which, in Scotland, includes 16- and 17-year olds — also highlights that independence has been put on the public political table for long enough that an entire generation of voters consider it a genuine possibility, not simply a dream as proposed by a single-issue party. While outside observers may follow the years of substantive debate and unsuccessful referendum on independence and be lulled into believing that the independence movement has missed its time, for Scots, the duration of the independence debate in mainstream political discourse may also mean that it is steadily becoming less of a scary uncertainty and more of a feasible future.

However, this growth in platform goes both ways: voting for the SNP is not necessarily the same thing as voting for independence. For Sturgeon and her government, therefore, this translates into the current goal: taking advantage of her overall electoral success to fast-track holding another referendum, or [following](#) “the will of the country”, as the First Minister phrased it herself. Of course, Sturgeon's words do not qualify as a referendum mandate. The battle to hold another referendum will take place in Westminster. Prime Minister Johnson and his government have publicly opposed both the breaking up of the Union and the holding of a second referendum. While Holyrood is within its rights to hold an advisory referendum without Westminster's approval, a legally binding referendum — such as the 2014 vote — must be ordered by Westminster. The political push for the SNP now, therefore, is to show a publicly supported mandate for a second referendum strong and fast-moving enough to convince Westminster that it would be politically challenging to oppose it. Moreover, Conservative MP and member of Johnson's Cabinet Michael Gove has already publicly pushed back on the narrative that the most recent elections signal an

increased mandate for independence, suggesting that the majority of people voted for parties that oppose a second referendum, and has refused to answer whether the government would block any push for the referendum. For now, this epic political stalemate is stalled, as the SNP aim to navigate the waters at home and in London to secure a clear public mandate and strategy to bend Westminster to their will.

Prior to the elections, discussion on the referendum also focused on the prospect of the SNP taking their right to hold an independence referendum to court in the event of Westminster's refusal to grant the request. Additionally, there were active and highly charged discussions on whether the SNP, as a final option, would hold an illegal, or “wildcat” referendum. These routes to a second referendum have been heavily analysed, especially in pre-election coverage, and so this policy outlook will not focus on them. It should be mentioned, however, that these conversations — particularly on the wildcat referendum— were especially prompted by opposition parties during the campaign to suggest that the SNP was willing to hold a second referendum no matter the political or legal costs to the country. And while the fight over a potential referendum will undoubtedly be tough, the SNP are unlikely to pursue these routes to a second national independence vote unless provided with no other option. Sturgeon and the SNP must be incredibly careful about ensuring a resolute mandate for the referendum and working to coerce Westminster into cooperating. This is because it would be disastrous for the SNP to squander their electoral success, political capital, and popular momentum on a loss in the courts or a miscalculated challenge of Boris Johnson and Westminster. A bitter struggle between Scotland and Westminster over a referendum could worry and dissuade nervous residents from voting for independence. In a way, it is reminiscent of the conversation regarding Brexit. Would as many people have voted for Brexit if they had seen the divorce-like battle between the EU and UK that would take place for years after — something that Scottish voters would undoubtedly see if the push for the referendum goes to the courts prior to the actual vote. A second, hostilely acquired referendum followed by a decision to stay in the Union, moreover, would have the potential to leave Sturgeon without voters or a future direction for the party, ending the era of SNP dominance.

The SNP are deeply aware of both the stakes and the reality. Sturgeon is in no rush to hold a referendum any time soon. Part of the reasoning is the aforementioned political battle that she must prepare her party for, but part is also out of her hands. Any independence timeline has been indefinitely paused until the UK recovers from the Covid-19 pandemic. The public is not ready for another election; the economy needs to bounce back and life must return to normal long before Scots will be willing to seriously consider a second referendum. Effective referendum campaigns also require

significant in-person campaigning, an unachievable prospect for the country given the current reality. Knowing that a second referendum will be won in public opinion, not in Holyrood, Sturgeon must wait.

Once the SNP feels that it is appropriate to launch its campaign, it will then begin efforts to both test public support and generate enough momentum — hopefully capitalising on the lingering capital of the electoral success — to pressure Westminster for a referendum. This strategy depends on Sturgeon's party having the confidence that their political calculations will be backed up with public support. This support would have to come from polling that endorses efforts for a referendum and the successful crafting of perception of mass public support through the media to force Boris Johnson to allow the vote instead of risking a battle in the courts. Johnson and the Unionists would hope to avoid going to the courts given the legal uncertainty of any ruling on the matter, and the reality that a loss in either the courts or the court of public perception would be a major blow to his political strength — one that would only be compounded by the devastating impact of a successful Scottish independence vote.

The court of public opinion

Undoubtedly, Sturgeon and the SNP parliamentarians are closely tracking polls on independence. According to one of the most recent [results](#), support for a second independence referendum sits at approximately 50%, with 42% supporting a referendum at some point within the next five years. However, there was a reported shift in desired timelines for the referendum. In their 2021 manifesto, the SNP outlined that they hoped to hold the referendum within the next two years. In contrast to this timeline, there was a recorded increase in favouring a longer timeline for the vote. According to this same poll, those in favour of a further delay largely represent Labour voters, a reflection of Sarwar's campaign to delay the referendum indefinitely.

Furthermore, polls suggesting that the public supports holding an independence referendum if approved by Westminster drastically outweighed support for legal challenges or a wildcat referendum. While this is an expected and consistent result — one that is also in line with the SNP's own plans — the poll still conveys the importance of both ensuring legal clarity in the vote and avoiding an overly antagonistic break from the UK.

Additionally, polls and politicians' timelines aside, there is a significant percentage of Scots who are simply undecided in both their support of holding a second referendum and how they would vote in it. "[Middle Scotland](#)", as former Prime Minister Gordon Brown describes it, is comprised of the members of the public who do not fall into enthusiastic

nationalist or Unionist camps. Brown, as one of the few Scottish Prime Minister in UK history, offers a unique perspective on the independence campaign. In an opinion essay, Brown makes the argument that 'middle Scotland' represents the millions of residents who seek a more cooperative and compromising relationship between Johnson and Sturgeon and ultimately between the UK and Scotland. However, in the absence of this possibility, they make up undecided voters in the independence referendum. This voice is given less airtime in the press than either the ardently pro-independence or Unionist camps, nor is it as apparent on the political stage. However, as it represents the undecided demographic, it will soon become the focus of both camps. It is by watching the success of these efforts that analysts will attempt to predict the ultimate outcome of the second independence referendum.

Westminster responds

Conversations on Scottish independence naturally have been taking place south of the country's border. The British government's conservative base, spearheaded by Johnson, have enacted "muscular unionism" — another term borrowed from Brown — to promote the permanence and sanctity of the union. Conservative commentators were swift to publicly ponder if the era of SNP control over Holyrood was over, a question that was loudly answered on election day. Of course, the efforts to promote the union make sense, even apolitically, as there is no easily determined upside of Scottish independence for the UK. What is interesting is that Johnson's approach to the impending political reckoning does not reflect the level to which the UK wants — and in the eyes of some, needs — to keep Scotland in the union. Instead, Johnson's strategy opts for operationally impeding independence efforts and disqualifying Scottish voices instead of seeking a new political dynamic between the two governments.

The SNP has responded to this strategy with its own form of grandstanding. From Sturgeon's perspective, it would surely serve the SNP's platform to frame independence narratives around a hostile and agitative Westminster. Sturgeon likely plans to attempt to balance converting Scots' anger with Westminster into support for the independence referendum without seeming overly polarised or confrontational, a challenging feat. If successful, however, the newly found support may be key to garnering enough political pressure to prompt a second referendum.

Yet, Johnson and the Unionists will not do down without a fight, nor are they new to the game of public perception with regards to referendums. If Sturgeon aims to depict Johnson as a proud embodiment of the political power



Counting staff are seen counting ballots at Highland Centre as voting concluded in the Scottish Parliament election, in Edinburgh, Scotland on May 8, 2021. (Hasan Esen- Anadolu Agency)

imbalance in Westminster, there are certainly those who hope to depict the First Minister as a power-hungry figure that represents a minoritarian and uncompromising perspective on independence. Evidence of this is particularly tied to the aforementioned conversations around a wildcat referendum, in which opposition politicians have suggested that the First Minister would hold an illegal referendum if unable to secure Westminster's approval. In the build-up to the recent election, the Scottish Conservatives put on a prominent show of making Sturgeon commit to not holding a wildcat referendum on the televised leadership debates. While the First Minister had already addressed this issue in the past, the repeated focus on the idea that she could instigate a wildcat referendum represents an intentional effort to take the strong leadership qualities [perceived](#) in the polls and transform them — in the matter of independence — into a propensity for overly-authoritarian actions.

Interestingly, the term "wildcat referendum" originates from wildcat strikes, unauthorised strikes held by unionised workers, particularly prominent in British worker politics during the Margaret Thatcher era. Thatcher was famously [hated](#) in Scotland across the political board. An interesting comparison of Sturgeon to Thatcher was made recently in an op-ed recently [published](#) in The Scotsman in which the author publicly wondered if Nicola Sturgeon's political trajectory mirrored that of the late Prime Minister. In many ways, the piece felt like a somewhat lazy comparison between two government leaders who happen to be women. However, the comparison does offer another example of the promoted narrative that Sturgeon is a controversial figure who will unknowingly lose support within her own party. While this comparison is primarily anecdotal, it does prompt the question of what other narratives Unionists — both in Scotland and in Westminster — may seek to advance in any future independence campaigns to oppose the First Minister.

The impact of independence

As previously discussed, no parties in Scottish politics hope for a road to national independence defined by bitter legal action and irreparable political severances. However, if any lessons from Brexit have been learned, it may be that the untangling of two historically tied bodies — with Scotland's place in the Union surpassing the UK's in the EU by centuries — will be a long process shaped by unforeseen challenges. Unlike Brexit, and due to the SNP's pro-independence history, discussions on the key issues surrounding Scottish independence have already begun to be debated. This section will briefly touch on some of these issues.

At the core of these points of debate is the EU. Calls for a second independence referendum were jumpstarted by Scotland's divergence from the rest of Britain in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Furthermore, several senior pro-independence politicians have expressed the intent to re-join the EU as an independent country should independence be achieved. Scotland's likelihood of re-entering the European bloc is a scenario without a precedent and a path not entirely in Scottish hands. However, the prospect of re-joining the EU has been consistently included in debates about overarching political, economic, and security matters. For example, in the build-up to a second referendum, both nationalists and Unionists will focus on what currency Scotland will choose to use. While Scotland has a national bank and prints its own banknotes, monetary policy is chiefly controlled by Westminster. Some proponents of independence have suggested that Scotland would likely stick with the pound sterling upon initial separation from Britain until the country can develop plans for either its own currency or membership in the Eurozone. However, given Scotland's present reliance on the UK for tax revenue, and the uniquely close trade relationship between Scotland and England, it seems unlikely that Scotland would opt to sacrifice the pound for the euro. However, at the same time,

the continued use of the pound would maintain certain levels of reliance on the British economy and financial institutions. Given that Westminster currently controls almost all fiscal policy barring some taxation, this would mean Scotland could set its monetary policy for certain issues but would still rely on England for international exchange and interest rates. This could either result in a unique and permanent [currency union](#) of sorts or serve as a temporary arrangement until Scotland launches its own currency. Especially considering the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, Scotland would require a detailed and definitive plan for its currency that would allow the country to circumvent potentially major economic fallout from independence.

Plans for the broader economic vision of the country are less uncertain. Through the function of existing devolved powers and future plans outlined in party manifestos, one can envision Scotland as a small almost-Scandinavian style system in its overarching economic and services structure. The question now —and the one Unionists, in particular, will be asking — is how the SNP plans to get to this scenario given the current tax and block grant system that significantly aids Scottish finances. Similarly to the currency question, this conversation will also revolve around the future economic relationship with the UK. One cannot state enough the extent and complexity of the two bodies' interconnection, and the gargantuan task it would be to separate the two. However, this prospect must be viewed within the reality that no one, including the SNP, is denying that an independent Scotland would still be deeply tied to the UK. Rather, Scotland would be chiefly tasked with shifting from dependence to cooperation in a manner that is politically feasible and publicly beneficial.

At this point, it is almost ironic that the governmental structure of an independent Scotland appears to be the least uncertain part of independence, largely due to devolution and the subsequent advancement of Scotland's political autonomy. Of course, as an independent state, Scotland would have to immediately develop security, military, and foreign policy apparatuses. This scenario raises some important questions, particularly as the British military currently houses much of its nuclear [apparatus](#) in Scottish territory. The SNP, with the support of many in Scotland, has historically opposed the UK's nuclear-armed status, and so while Scotland would not be vying for control of these arms, there is significant operational uncertainty concerning the outcome of not only the removal of nuclear weaponry but also the general British military structure. Part of this uncertainty may be remedied with future independent NATO membership, and with it, the hope of defence support from the organisation. This uncertainty also translates to concerns over the lucrative natural resources off of Scotland's shores. While these resources have not been a focus of debate thus far, they will also likely become a point of politicised attention, especially given the SNP's historical promotion of Scottish control over the oil.

However, overshadowing these uncertainties is the ultimate question of the border. An independent Scotland — particularly an independent Scotland with close ties to or membership in the EU — would require a hard border of some kind. The prospect of a regulated barrier between Scotland and England will likely symbolise the relative importance of the UK and EU to the new country. Based on the parameters of Brexit and subsequent border debates in Northern Ireland, the closer Scotland hope to be with the EU, the greater the need for a border with the rest of the UK. It is because of this that, in many ways, Scotland will likely have to choose the UK or the EU as its closest partner — a decision that at the end of the day looks to favour the UK.

Conclusion

In the short term, and in the wake of growing conflict between Holyrood and Westminster concerning a second independence referendum, it appears that the hardest facets of an independent Scotland to achieve may be the current subjects of this political tension. In the long term, however, the greater uncertainty may come from Scotland's ability to carve out a place for itself as an independent nation with a uniquely intimate connection to the UK.

Scotland will also have to navigate its separation from historical membership in the international institutions that have helped shape its position, albeit without always centring Scotland's interests. These bodies include the UN Security Council, NATO, and formerly, the EU. In other words, Sturgeon and the SNP now face a fierce battle for the referendum, but the issues that are currently causing the most political tension may not be the same as the issues that will pose the greatest challenges to the model of an independent Scotland. The nature of the referendum — as Brexit showed —dichotomises Scotland's independence in a way that hampers the development of nuanced policy on key complex issues, including the England-Scotland border. It also keeps focus on the most politically contentious issues, damaging efforts to predict and tackle other unforeseen challenges prior to independence.

The dichotomy of independence versus normalcy also concerns voters, as it limits understandings of the future of the two parties' relationship to extremes, instead of allowing for exploration of different political relationships — an alternative that should be embraced given the fact the Union is already a unique historical and political entity. Oversimplifying the Union or the development of Scotland's political autonomy will overly politicise singular issues, such as currency, and prevent growth in the relationship between the two that accurately reflects the desires of the Scottish people over the goals of either nationalists or Unionists. Perhaps, this gap may even be filled by other parties and leaders in the British political sphere. For now, however, the focus is on dichotomy.