

# Holyrood 2026

## Public opinion and the Scottish Parliament elections

Lord Ashcroft KCMG PC | March 2026



Lord Ashcroft Polls

X @LordAshcroft

## Contents

Methodological note .....	2
Issues and priorities .....	3
Parties, leaders and politicians .....	8
Independence .....	14
The Holyrood elections .....	16
About Lord Ashcroft .....	19

## Methodological note

2,089 adults in Scotland aged 16+ were interviewed online between 20 February and 6 March 2026. Data have been weighted to represent all adults in Scotland. Full data tables are available at [LordAshcroftPolls.com](https://LordAshcroftPolls.com)

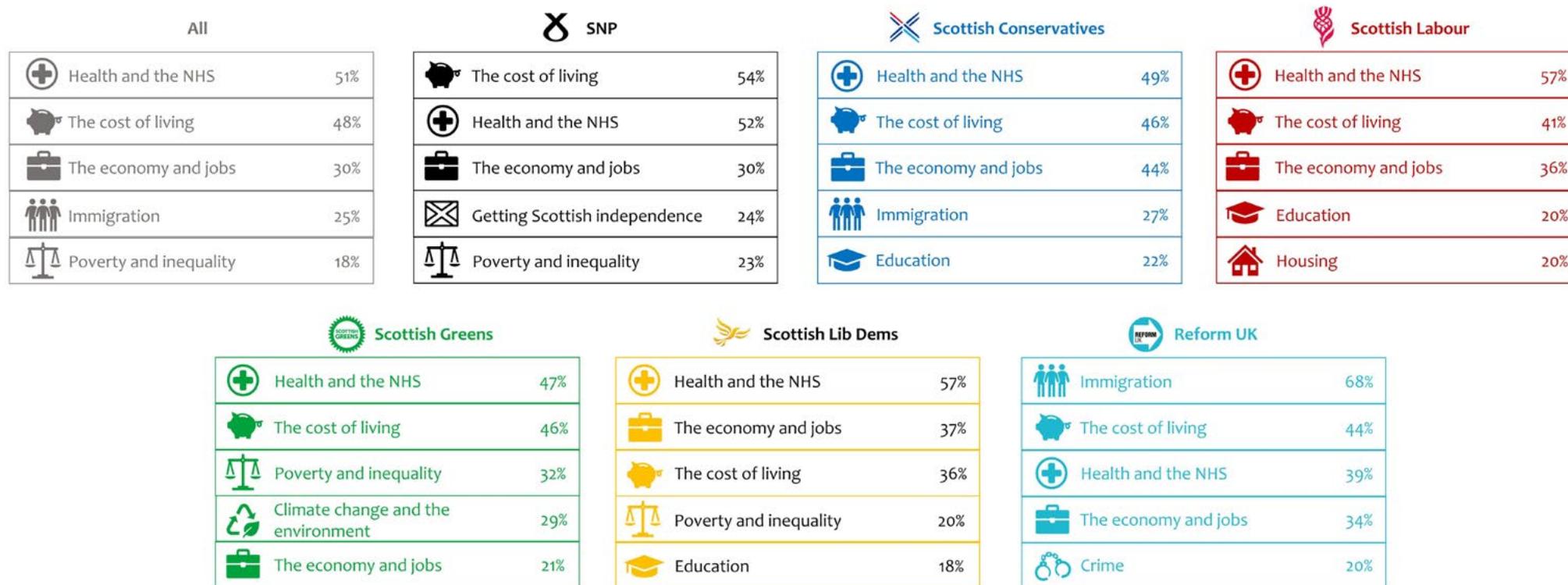
Six focus groups were held between 2 and 4 March 2026 in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Aberdeen. Participants were drawn from a range of political and social backgrounds and the groups comprised equal numbers of men and women overall. In the text of the report, quotes in **yellow** are from 2021 SNP voters, those in **blue** from 2021 Conservative voters, and those in **red** from 2024 Labour voters.



## Issues and priorities

What do you think are the most important issues facing Scotland at the moment?

[Showing top 5 issues by 2026 regional list voting intention]



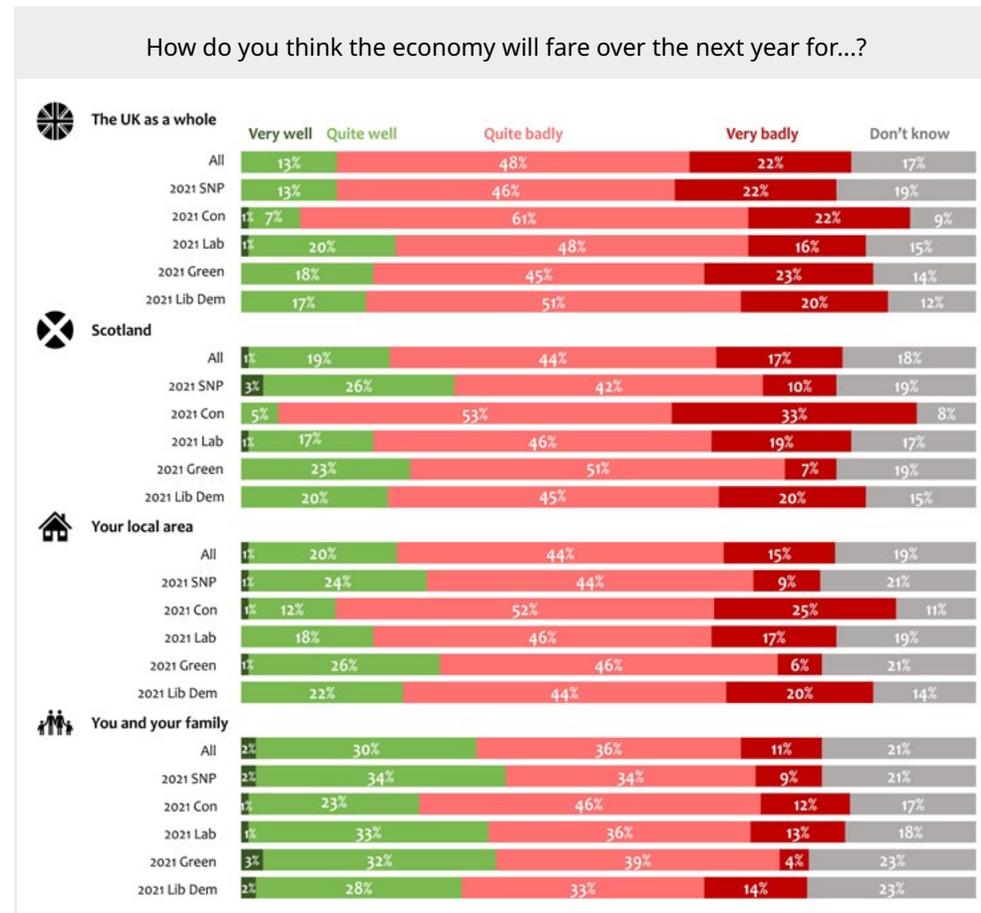
Asked to name the **three most important issues facing Scotland** at the moment, Scots as a whole chose health and the NHS, the cost of living, and the economy and jobs as their top three priorities. These were followed by immigration, poverty and inequality, housing, education and climate change.

However, there were notable differences between political groups. Health and the cost of living topped the list for those intending to vote SNP, Labour, Conservative and Green in the regional list vote. For the first three of these the economy was in third place, but for Greens this spot went to poverty and inequality.

Getting Scottish independence was the fourth biggest priority for those intending to vote SNP, and was named by just under a quarter (24%) of likely SNP voters.

For Greens, getting independence ranked equal eighth. It was named by 12% of them, on a par with Brexit and welfare, and after health, the cost of living, poverty, climate change, the economy and jobs, housing and immigration.

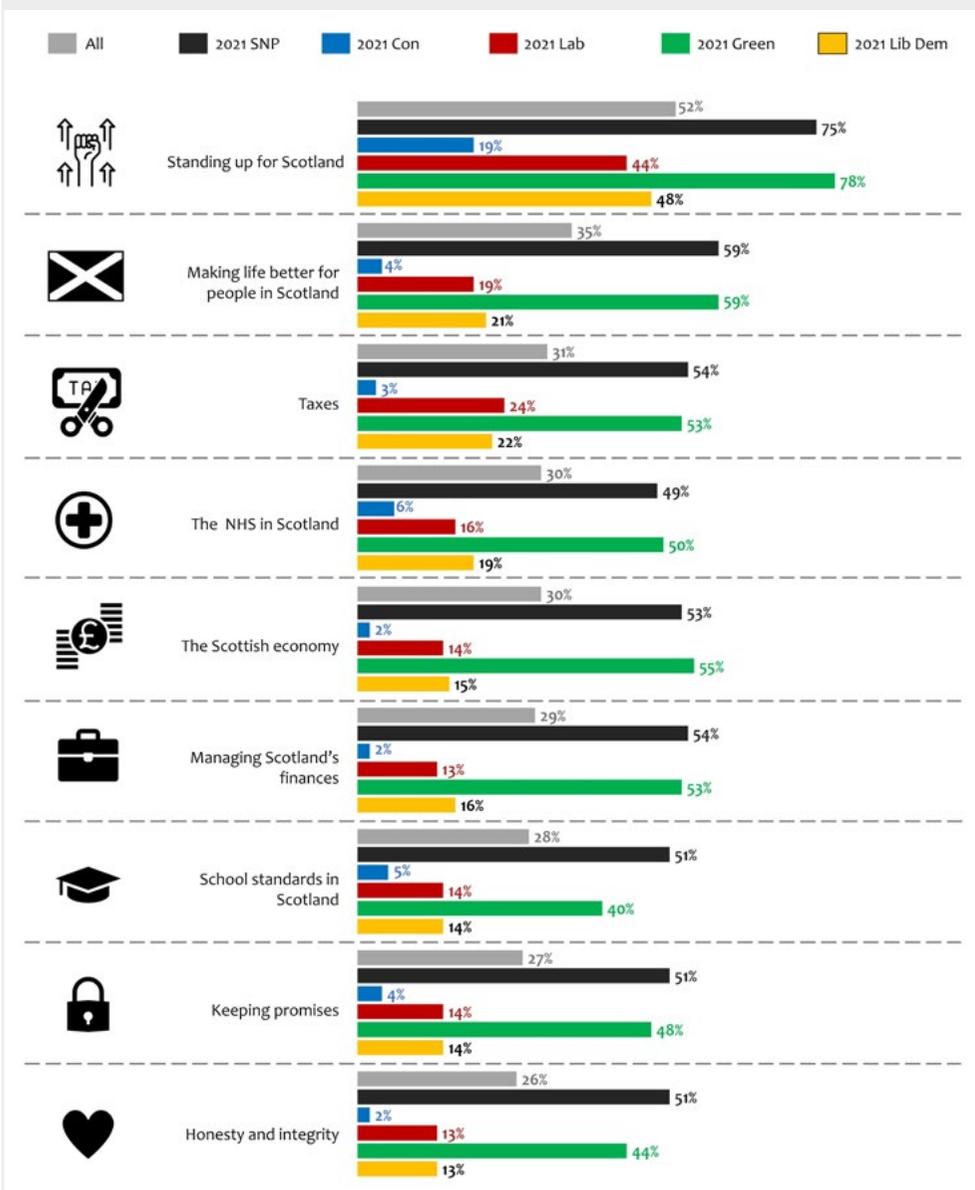
Our focus group participants talked about a number of issues that had been on their minds or caught their attention. These included asylum protests and a more heated debate around migration, especially in recent months; energy costs; stagnating quality of life; the Murrell trial; the Epstein files; shipbuilding; the Glasgow hospital infections scandal; crime, including a stabbing in Edinburgh the week the groups took place; NHS waiting lists and ambulance waiting times.



On balance, Scots were generally pessimistic about prospects for the economy over the next year. However, they were more optimistic (or less pessimistic) for themselves and their families than their local area, Scotland, and (most pessimistically of all) the UK as a whole.

## How would you describe the SNP government's record when it comes to...?

[Showing very good/fairly good]



Looking in more detail at the **SNP government's record**, its best marks overall were for "standing up for Scotland" – a majority (52%) of all voters say it has done a good job on this score, including three quarters of 2021 SNP list voters and nearly 9 in 10 of those intending to vote for the party this year. On other things, the proportion saying the SNP government had done a good job did not exceed 35% ("making life better for people in Scotland") and fell to as low as 26% for "honesty and integrity" – though majorities of both 2021 and likely 2026 SNP voters said the Scottish government had performed well on this score.

Asked what they considered the SNP government's biggest achievements since 2007, focus group participants usually mentioned free school meals, free prescriptions, free university tuition, free bus passes, baby boxes, Nicola Sturgeon's approach during the covid pandemic, and maintaining a distinctly Scottish political culture.

“ There's something quite safe in having the SNP. Even though there's some things that they've not introduced, I worry that if we had a unionist party we would start to mimic elsewhere in the UK.”

However, even previous SNP voters wondered if they should not have more to show for 19 years in office. Some felt that the money spent on universal free provision could not have been used more effectively elsewhere, that the SNP government was too ready to blame Westminster for its own failings, and that it had too often prioritised independence at the expense of more immediate needs. Some also complained about higher taxes in Scotland and bad decisions, such as the alleged premature opening of the Queen Elizabeth University Hospital. Other complaints included the ferry fiasco, transgender policies, and the feeling that the SNP had become a “broken record” incapable of bringing real progress or change.

“ I think for too long the SNP have sat there and not had the biggest of impacts and they’ve been in what, 18, 19 years? That’s a long time to not have achieved a lot of things.”

“ You have all these things that are free now, but that is at the expense of other things – local issues, supporting schools, the NHS. Is it taking from Peter to pay Paul? There are lots of people who don’t need these things. I’ve got two friends who are consultants, and they were boasting about their baby box. Why do they need that? The money could be used in a much more beneficial way for people who really are counting the pennies.”

“ Sometimes you’re like, come on, you do have a wee bit of control over stuff. You can’t just blame Westminster all the time. The SNP blame Labour, Labour blame the Tories. I think most people want to see the person they vote for taking accountability.”

“ It’s a mixed bag. Tuition fees, prescriptions, great. But then they shoot themselves in the foot, like forcing that hospital open when they shouldn’t have. Sometimes you just think, ‘oh, what are you doing?’”

“ I think people started being disenchanted when it became all about the fraud, all this investigating about fraud.”

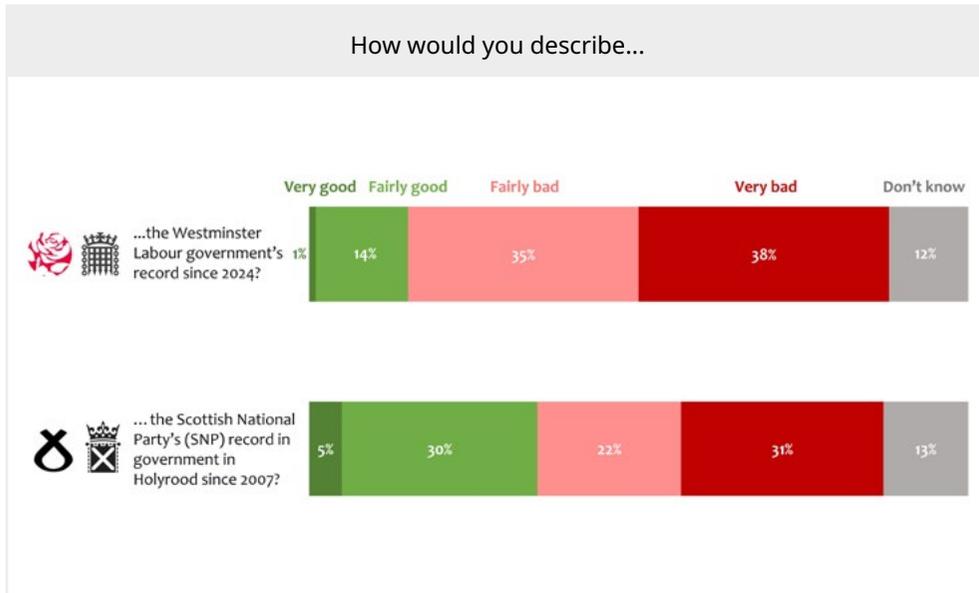
“ If the SNP had a top ten hit list, we’ll fix the top ten and put independence to one side... I only voted Labour because they weren’t going to have a default second referendum.”

“ It’s like a broken record, the SNP. It’s becoming a bit monotonous. If anything goes wrong, it’s Westminster’s fault. It’s time for change and something else needs to happen.”

“ When I’m working with clients, you have people doing the same jobs in England as Scotland, but they’re earning more and paying less tax.”

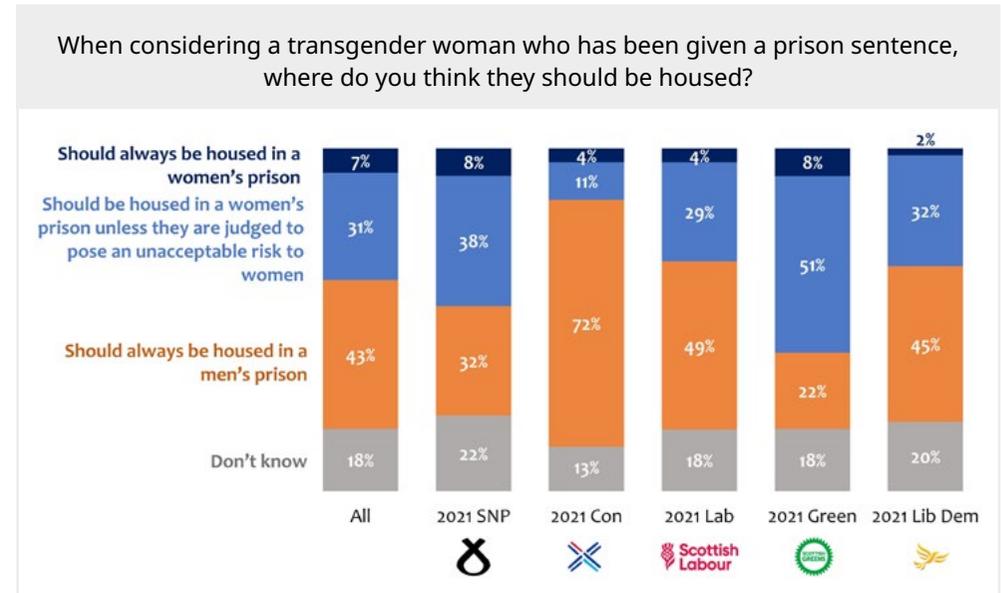
“ There was an NHS nurse called Sandie Peggie. Once you start following these cases and realise that a lot of our politicians seem incapable of seeing something that most people would think is fairly obvious. This woman had to go to court and had the whole NHS testifying against her to say that black was white, that a man was a woman. You just think, this is mad, isn’t it?”

“ Is it so bad now to have a child and look after your own kid? But you’ve got to have everything bought with the taxpayers’ money. They’re just wasting money on this.”



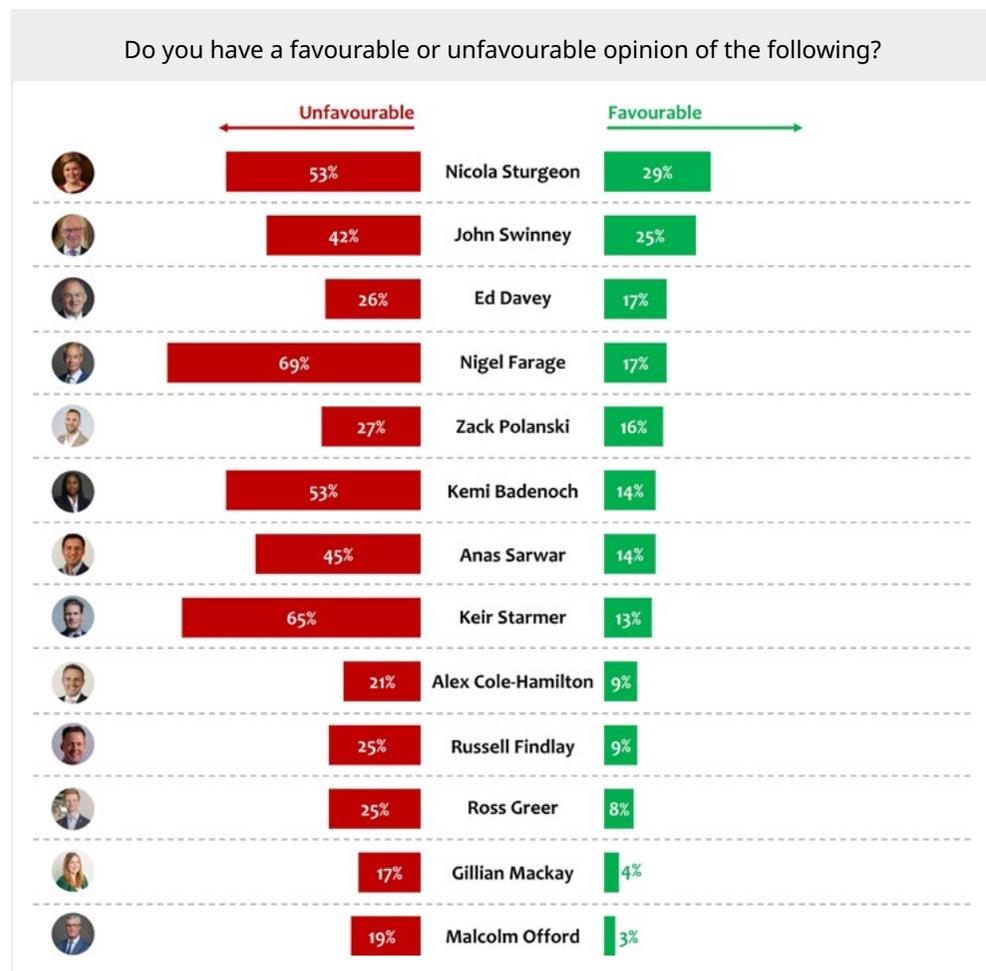
Scots said they thought the **Westminster Labour government's record** since the 2024 election was bad, by 73% to 15%. 2024 Labour voters said it was doing a bad job by 68% to 23%.

However, they thought the **SNP government's record in Holyrood** since 2007 was bad by the narrower margin of 53% to 35%. Nearly two thirds (65%) of 2021 SNP list voters said they thought their party had done a good job in government, as did 79% of those intending to vote SNP in the regional list vote.

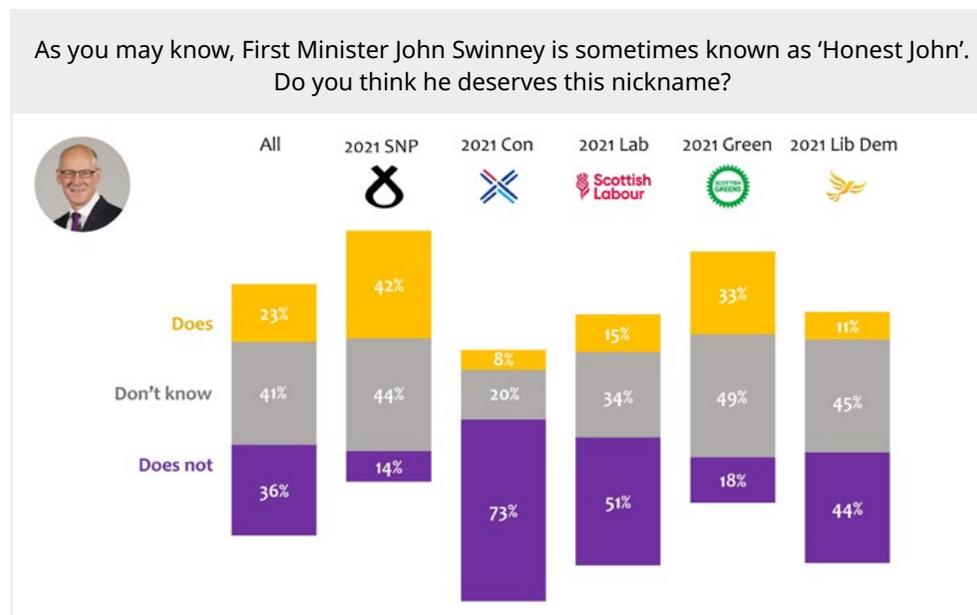


Only 7% of Scots, including 8% of likely SNP list voters and 17% of likely Greens, said they thought a **transgender woman given a custodial sentence** should always be housed in a woman's prison. A further 31%, including 42% of likely SNP voters and a majority (56%) of likely Greens, thought such an individual should be housed in a women's prison unless they are judged to pose an unacceptable risk to women. A plurality of all voters (43%), including majorities of Conservatives and Reform UK voters and a plurality of Labour voters, said that a transgender woman should always be housed in a men's prison.

## Parties, leaders and politicians



When we asked how favourable or otherwise people felt towards various politicians, Nicola Sturgeon emerged with the most positive score (but also one of the highest negatives). Nigel Farage had a higher favourable score than Keir Starmer, but their net scores (favourable minus unfavourable) were the same.



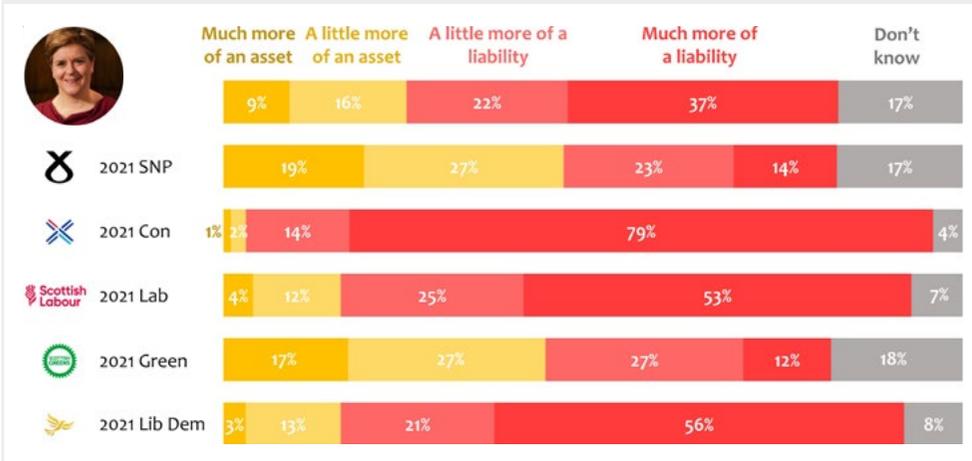
Just under a quarter of Scots said they thought first minister John Swinney deserved the nickname **"Honest John"**, including only just over half of SNP supporters. Voters as a whole were more likely to say he does not deserve the nickname (36%), but even more than that (41%) said they didn't know if he deserved it or not. Our focus groups tended to think he was uninspiring, if uncontroversial.

“ They need someone charismatic to come in. Swiney's a wet weekend, isn't he.”

“ He just comes across as an office manager type. An interim manager.”

“ He's beneficial to the SNP in that he's less controversial than Humza Yousaf and Sturgeon. He's been a bit more quiet, more boring, just working away. He's not said or done anything controversial. But he has no new ideas.”

Do you think Nicola Sturgeon is more of an asset or a liability to the SNP in the current Holyrood election campaign?



A majority of Scots (59%) said they saw **Nicola Sturgeon as a liability** rather than an asset to her party. Likely Green voters were also more likely to see her as a liability. However, SNP voters themselves were more likely to take the opposite view: those intending to back the party in the regional list vote this year saw her as an asset by 50% to 33%.

Focus group participants from all political backgrounds spoke positively about Nicola Sturgeon – though most also thought she had chosen the right time to leave.

“Ultimately the buck stops with you, doesn't it? That's why she's taken that step back. I'm not saying I think badly of the time she was in, but I wouldn't necessarily think of her as someone I'd want to be in in the future.”

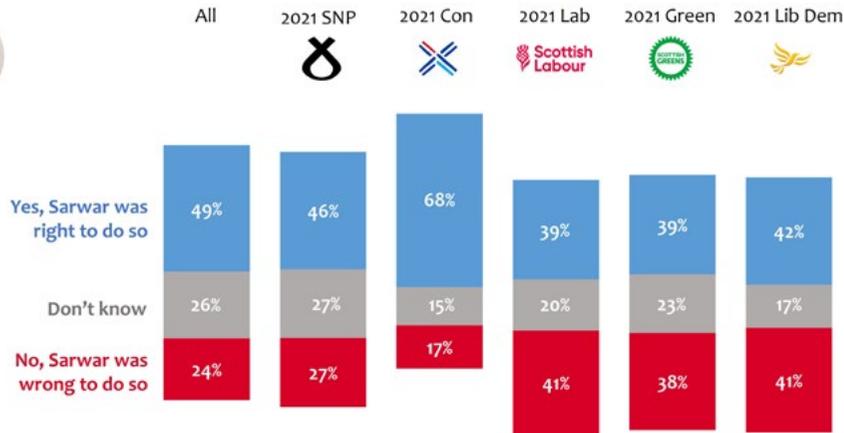
“I think it was time to go. I wouldn't want her reputation to be tarnished in a lot of ways because I've got a lot of respect for her. But you've really got to wonder.”

“She talked a good game during covid. He was having his parties. I don't believe in the whole independence thing, but she did well there.”

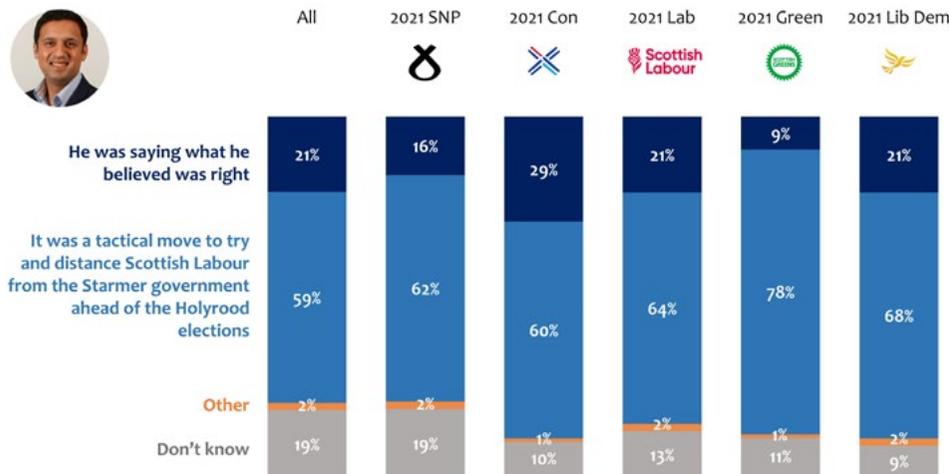
“I think politics has gone downhill since all the females were in power. Nicola Sturgeon, Kezia Dugdale, Ruth Davidson – they used to give great arguments for and against and you could listen. Now we've got... well.”

“She's got great experience as a politician, so hopefully they will draw on that in some shape or form. You can't just dismiss her.”

As you may know, Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar recently called for Keir Starmer to resign as Prime Minister. Do you think Sarwar was right to call for Starmer's resignation?



Why do you think Anas Sarwar called for Keir Starmer to resign?



By a margin of 2 to 1, Scots thought Scottish Labour leader **Anas Sarwar was right to call for Keir Starmer to resign** as prime minister (indeed those intending to vote for Scottish Labour in the Holyrood elections were the only group to disagree). However, a majority of all parties' voters thought Sarwar had made the call as a tactical move to distance Scottish Labour from the Starmer government, rather than that he was saying what he believed was right.

In our focus groups, most participants thought the move was unlikely to have the desired effect, whether to help dislodge Starmer or to boost Scottish Labour in the Holyrood elections – though a few respected his stance.

- “ I think it was career suicide. It's not team playing. Trying to tell the guys in Westminster to leave. You think that's going to work?”
- “ He feels quite genuine in speaking up for people in the Glasgow hospital case, and he's totally supported people who have lost family members in that. But Labour are in a really difficult position. Who are we? Are we Scottish Labour? The SNP have taken all their policies. Where do we sit? It's a very difficult position I think.”
- “ It was very reckless and stupid. He was dangling in the wind a bit. It made him look really weak.”
- “ The Labour party's performance at a UK level has been so bad that it's probably impossible for people to separate that.”
- “ They may as well just call themselves Labour, in my opinion. It's just the same party.”
- “ He gets my vote because he stood up to him. It would be easier to follow UK Labour than to stand on your own two feet as Scottish Labour.”

Most of those in our focus groups who had voted Labour at the 2024 general election were not impressed with the **record of Keir Starmer's government**. For a number of previous SNP voters, Labour's record in Westminster was another reason to stick with the nationalists in Holyrood.

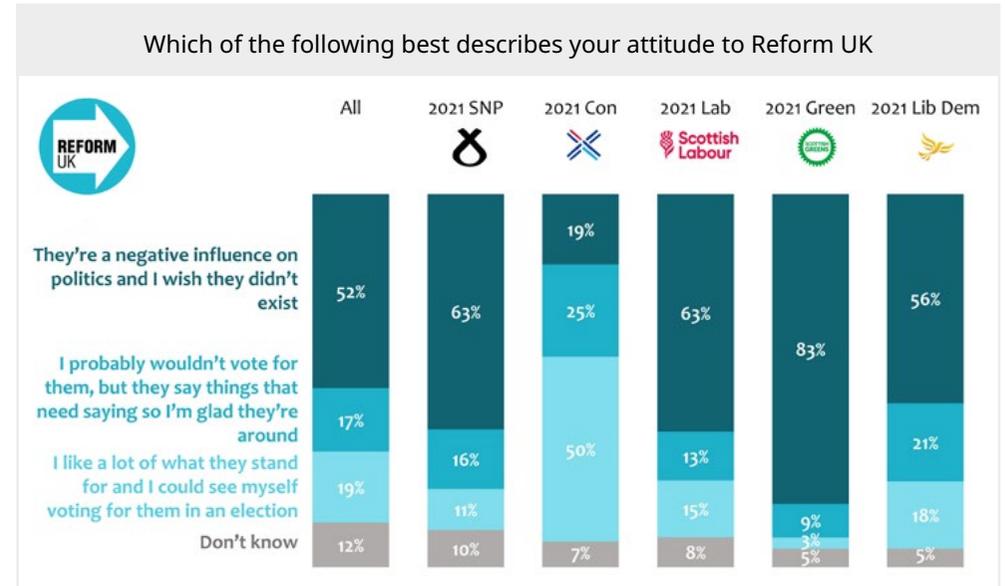
“ I would have expected the Keir Starmer government to be a lot better than this. The Angela Rayner stuff went on for ages, and these people's backgrounds should have been scrutinised, and it happened again with the chief of staff. They've wasted a lot of time.”

“ I look at the Labour party and think, I don't know if I trust you guys. You just seem to fight all the time.”

“ Being self-employed, retired with a pension, kids' inheritance, farmer – everything to do with Labour and the budget is a complete disaster.”

“ Starmer presented as being a grown-up and a serious person. Maybe not the most exciting or dynamic, but at least someone who was serious and could deliver well, deliver competent government again. But he's been terrible, absolutely terrible.”

“ They're essentially another Tory government. I don't think anything has changed. They've become so central, they're veering right. We voted for a different party and we got the same party in a different outfit.”



Just over half of Scots (including around three quarters of likely SNP and Labour voters) said they thought **Reform UK** were a negative influence on politics and they wished the party didn't exist. A further 17%, including one third of likely Conservative voters and more than 1 in 5 likely Lib Dems, say they probably wouldn't vote Reform but they say things that need to be said so they're glad the party is around. Just under 1 in 5, including half of all 2021 Conservative voters, say they like a lot of what the party stands for and could see themselves voting for it in an election.

In our groups, some explained why they thought those interested in Reform had a point, or why they themselves were considering voting for the party. These reasons included the costs of illegal migration, the failure of the established parties, and the chance to exploit Scotland's natural resources. Judging by the groups, Malcolm Offord, Reform's leader in Scotland, has yet to establish a high profile with voters.

“It's not just right-wing people. A lot of people are really unhappy with the loss of public services, and the UK is pretty much an open-door policy, and you're getting people put up in four and five-star accommodation.”

“It seems that in cities like Glasgow, Edinburgh, Perth, Dundee, Stirling, they're all getting bypassed and they're being told if you come up to Aberdeen you'll get housed. Because the housing seems to be more lenient up here.”

“They changed the bedrooms, added toilets. They get cleaning bundles, washing bundles. They have food, everything. A doctor that goes to them, and we can't even get an appointment.”

“I'm going to vote for him because I'm fed up with everybody else. He's not my favourite person but I like what they're trying to do. They're quite confident, not wishy-washy. I know all politicians are slippery, but I kind of believe what he's saying he'll do. Labour, the SNP, Lib Dems don't really believe in what they're saying. But Reform are standing on it with ten toes.”

“That Zia Yusuf. He's been a tech entrepreneur and he's lived a bit.”

“They'd use Scotland's natural resources. They want to scrap net zero. We were given the promise that green energy is cleaner, cheaper and safer than using oil and gas. So why do things keep increasing every year?”

“I feel as though there's a strong need to give someone a sore face.”

Some “Reform-curious” voters had doubts, including the perception that the party tended to jump on bandwagons or that it was too focused on immigration. Some also had reservations about Nigel Farage. SNP voters in particular often saw Reform as a dangerous and divisive party that had no place in Scottish politics.

“I see a lot of things on social media against asylum seekers and refugees and the comments under, and I feel sick reading them. I just think, this is not Scotland. It makes me really anxious at the thought of what might happen.”

“I don't think Labour are being radical enough in Scotland against the far right. There's not really a solution to the far right, so you just go for the safe option, just vote SNP.”

The **Green Party** had caught a number of participants' attention recently, particularly after its victory in the Gorton and Denton by-election. Some said this would make them consider the party more seriously, having previously regarded it as a wasted vote. SNP voters sometimes said they agreed with a lot of Green policies and spoke about the SNP-Green coalition (none could recall why the coalition had collapsed). There was also a feeling that the Greens, at least at a UK level, had momentum and energy that the SNP now lacked.

“Up until the by-election in England, I wouldn't bother putting the Greens because they're not getting in. But seeing that made me think, maybe they're a good alternative for us.”

“It was the Greens that wanted the bus pass. It was their policy and they and the SNP worked on it together.”

“He's got charisma. He's got that X factor that the SNP up here don't have. But whether there's any substance to them we'll have to wait and see, I suppose.”

Others doubted the wisdom of their policies, or the authenticity of the positive, friendly character the party tried to project.

“They might be a bit tarnished in Scotland because there might be a perception that they're a bit mad. Crusty jugglers. And there is a certain middle-class hippie-ism that has got in on it.”

“In the by-election they just came across as being cynical. The campaign communications in different languages and all that stuff. It's just wrong. The perception I took away from that is that they're just as bad as everyone else, and just as cynical as well.”

There were some positive mentions for the **Conservatives**, and both Kemi Badenoch and Russell Findlay. A few had heard about policies on student debt and net zero. However, they thought the party still had some way to go to rebuild after 14 years in office.

“Russell Findlay seems OK. I like the way he comes across. But as a party in Scotland they've historically been irrelevant.”

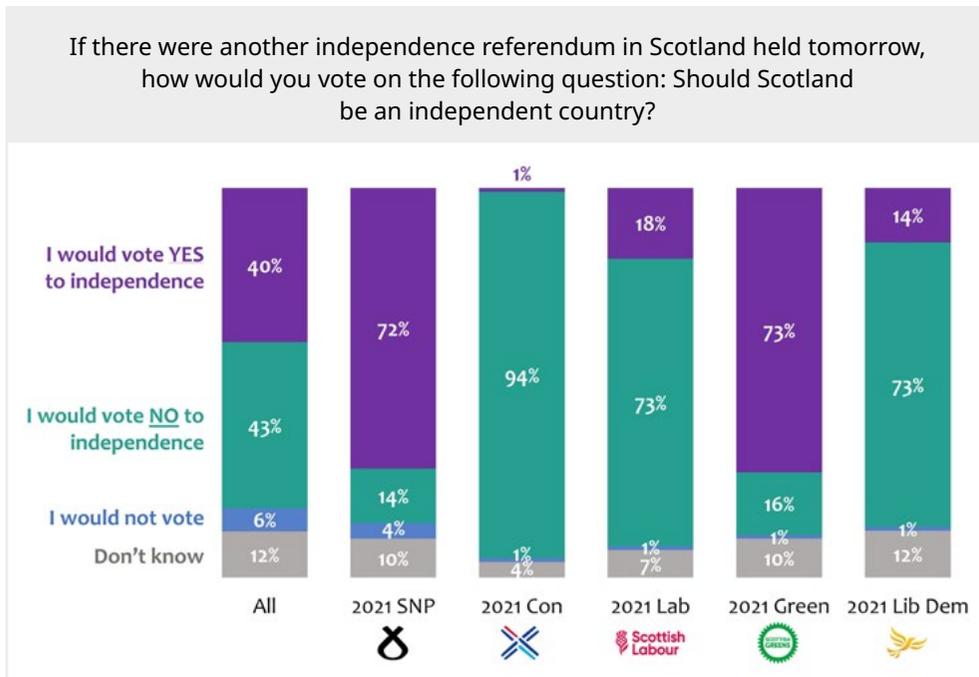
“They raised an issue with student loans and helping people to pay them off quickly, and they're good policies. Whether they will be implemented is a different question. But I like what they're talking about.”

“I think she's quite refreshing as a Conservative leader. She comes from an educated background but not a privileged background, so I think she does talk a lot of sense.”

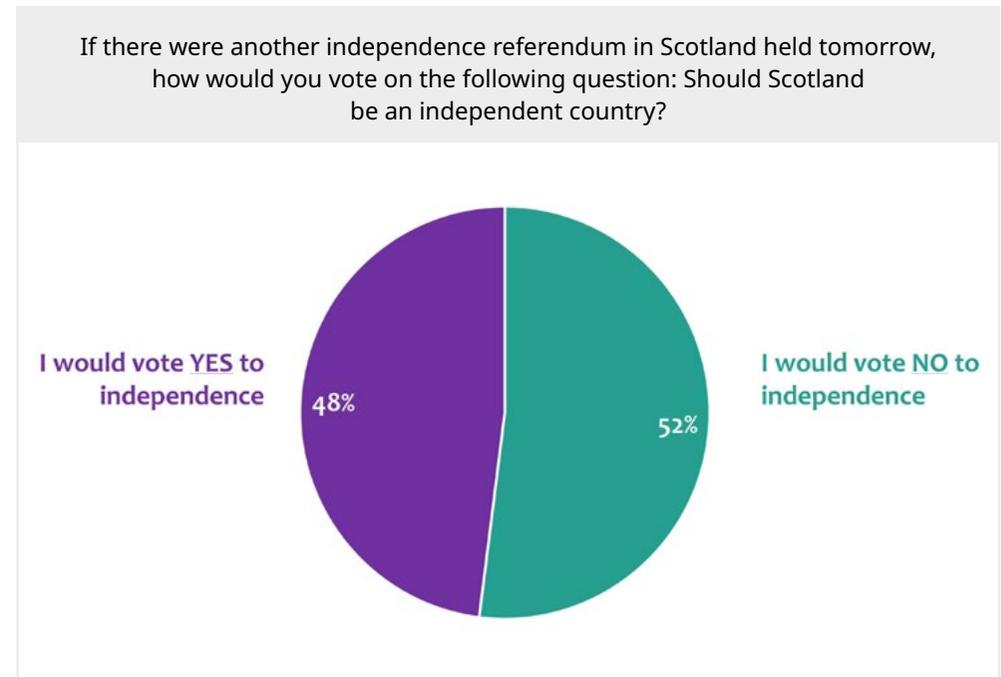
“I don't have any issues with her individually, but I think the damage that's been done to the party over 14 years of failures has damaged her, even though it's not her fault.”

“I think they've mainly just been complaining about Labour not dealing with problems that they had 14 years to deal with.”

# Independence

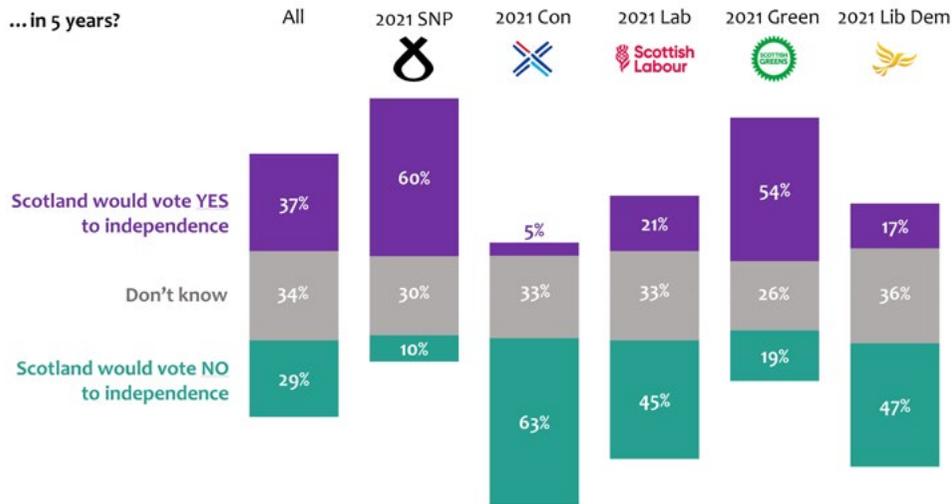
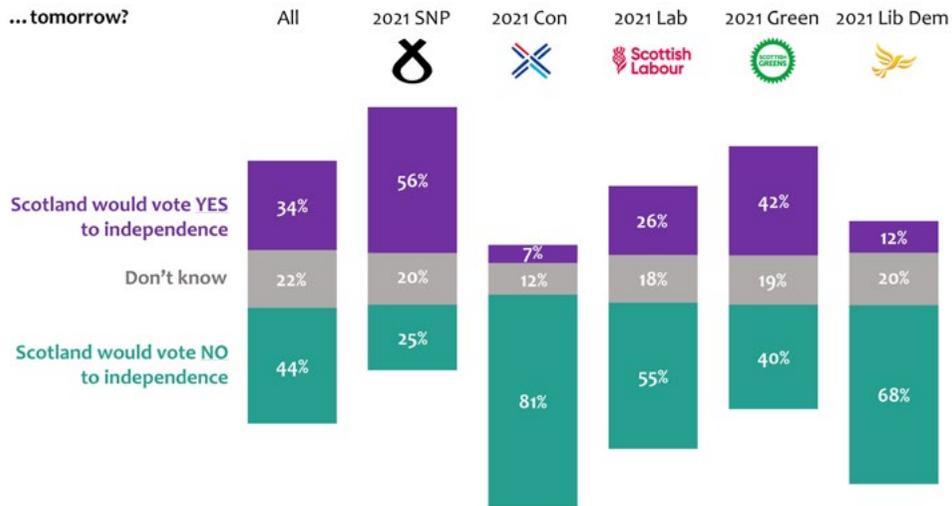


Asked how they would vote **if an independence referendum were held tomorrow**, respondents said they would vote No by 43% to 40%, with 18% saying they didn't know or would not vote. Including only those giving a voting intention, this gives a result of Yes 48%, No 52%. (This compares to a result of Yes 44%, No 56% in our previous survey in February 2023).



Among those currently intending to vote SNP in the regional list vote, 84% said they would vote Yes to independence, while 7% would vote No and 8% don't know. 94% of those intending to vote for the Scottish Conservatives in the regional list vote said they would vote No, as did 73% of those intending to back Scottish Labour, 61% of those backing the Scottish Lib Dems and 79% of those intending to vote Reform. Those intending to vote Green said they would back independence by 69% to 19%, with 12% saying they didn't know or wouldn't vote.

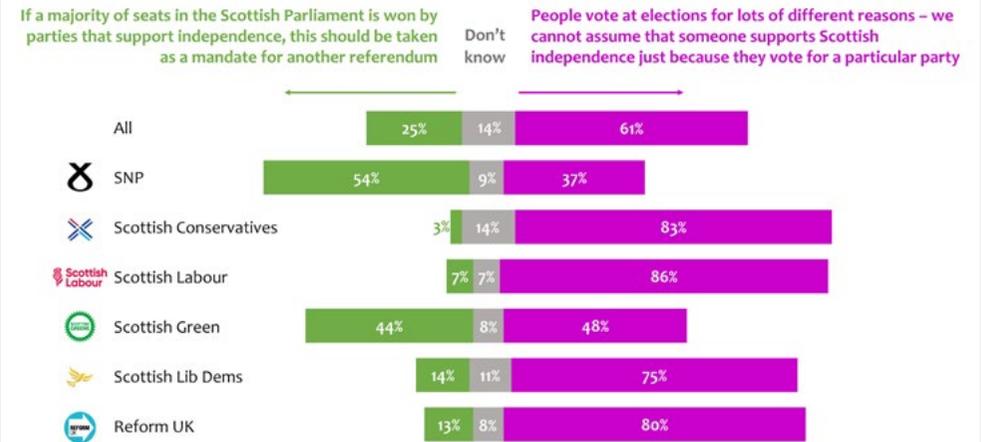
What do you think the result would be if an independence referendum were held...



A plurality of Scots thought a **referendum tomorrow** would result in a No vote on independence, but the reverse was true if a referendum were to be held in 5 years' time.

Thinking about the Holyrood elections and Scottish independence, which of the following comes closest to your view?

[By 2026 regional list voting intention]

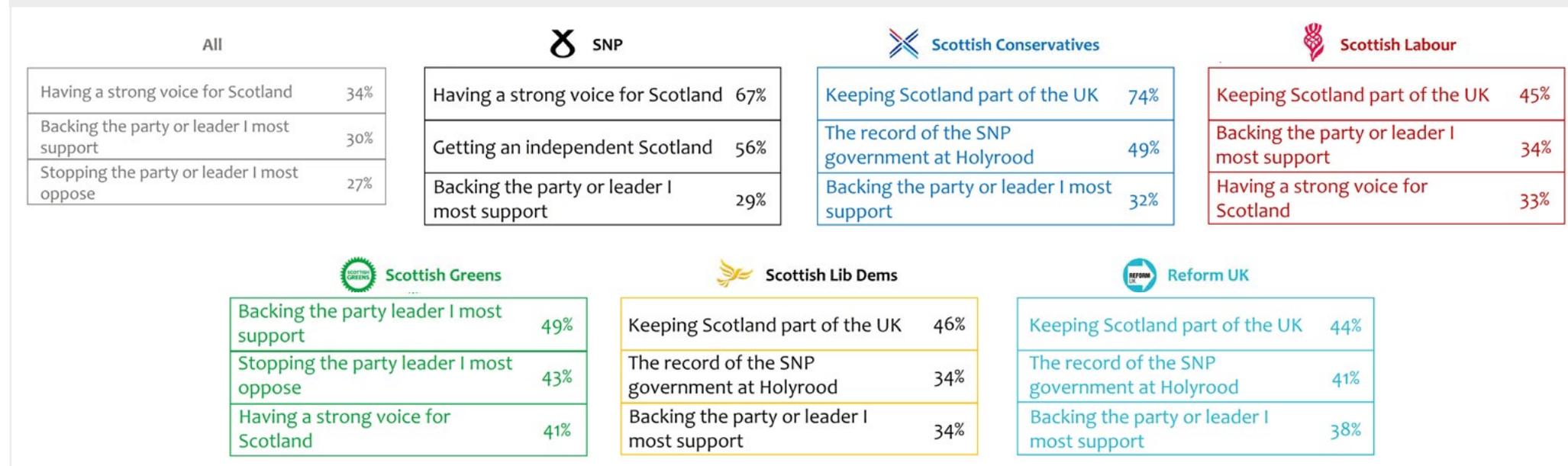


Only a quarter of Scots overall – including only just over half of likely SNP voters – said that pro-independence parties winning a majority of seats in the May election should be taken as a **mandate for another independence referendum**. More than 6 in 10 agreed with the alternative proposition that someone cannot be assumed to support independence just because they support a particular party. Those intending to vote Green chose the second statement by 48% to 44%.

# The Holyrood elections

Thinking about how you might vote in the Scottish Parliament elections, which of the following will you have in mind?

[Showing top 3 issues by 2026 regional list voting intention]



Asked what they would have in mind when deciding how to vote in the Holyrood elections, Scots were most likely to choose having a strong voice for Scotland, followed by backing the party they most support or stopping the party they most oppose. Only 26% overall mentioned the record of the SNP government, putting it in fourth place.

Again, however, there were sharp differences between political groups. Two thirds of those intending to vote SNP chose having a strong voice for Scotland, with just over half (56%) saying they would be using their vote to try and get an independent Scotland. For Reform, Lib Dem and Conservative voters, the biggest motivating factor was keeping Scotland in the UK. For Greens, the top two places went to backing the party they most support and stopping the party they most oppose.

In our focus groups, participants mentioned a number of things that would help determine their vote. These included the cost of living, public services, tax, the SNP government's record, a desire for change, a feeling that areas outside the central belt were neglected by the Edinburgh government, and resisting what they saw as the rise of the far right or the spread of England's political culture, especially over migration and the rise of Reform. Some wanted to keep independence on the agenda, but even some SNP voters said they would prefer issues to take precedence.

“ For me, it’s definitely about keeping independence on the agenda. Whoever is in charge in Westminster, they’re incompetent and they don’t care about Scotland. So I think governing ourselves is the only way forward.”

“ I think independence is quite far down the agenda of the voting public. Of all the things they want in their life, independence is probably further down the list. Trying to push through independence now is like, you’re not listening to us. We want you to fix public services.”

“ I’m looking for basic competence. That’s all. Can someone just do their job? That’s all I want. But I wouldn’t trust any of them to actually do the job.”

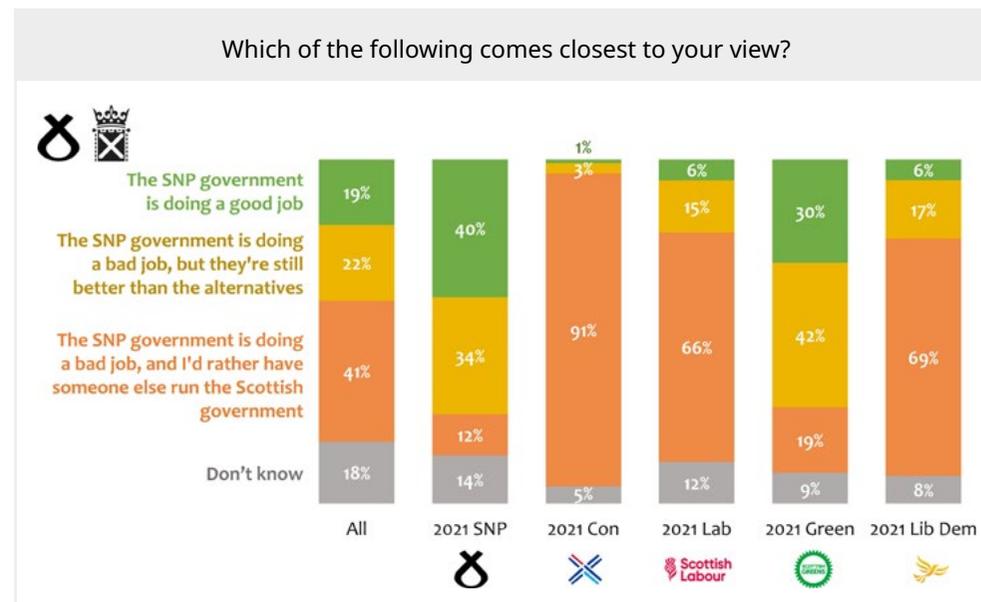
“ Things like schools. NHS Scotland is not in a happy place. Child poverty – anyone who works in childcare knows that they haven’t met any of their objectives for that. It’s pretty diabolical.”

“ I think it’s making a clearer difference between Scotland and England. With Reform coming in in certain places in Scotland, they’re trying to start that fight about immigration. Scotland has always been for people coming here and improving the country and improving their lives. I think it’s making the clearer divide that Scotland is not England and we are not Westminster.”

“ I think fresh blood, whether it’s Labour or Conservative, but definitely change. They’ve been in for 19 years.”

“ I don’t think we get anything here really in Aberdeen.”

“ The fact that taxes are a devolved power in Scotland is a big driving force for me to want to vote in the Scottish election. So specifically in the Scottish election, I’ll vote Conservative.”



Asked which of three statements about the Scottish government came closest to their own view, only just under 1 in 5 voters (19%) said they thought it was doing a good job. This included 40% of those who voted SNP in 2021, and only just over half (55%) of those intending to back the party at the 2026 election. A further 22% overall, including 37% of likely SNP voters, said the SNP was doing a bad job but was still better than the alternatives. This combined overall total of 41% matched the proportion who said the SNP was doing a bad job and they would rather have someone else running the Scottish government.

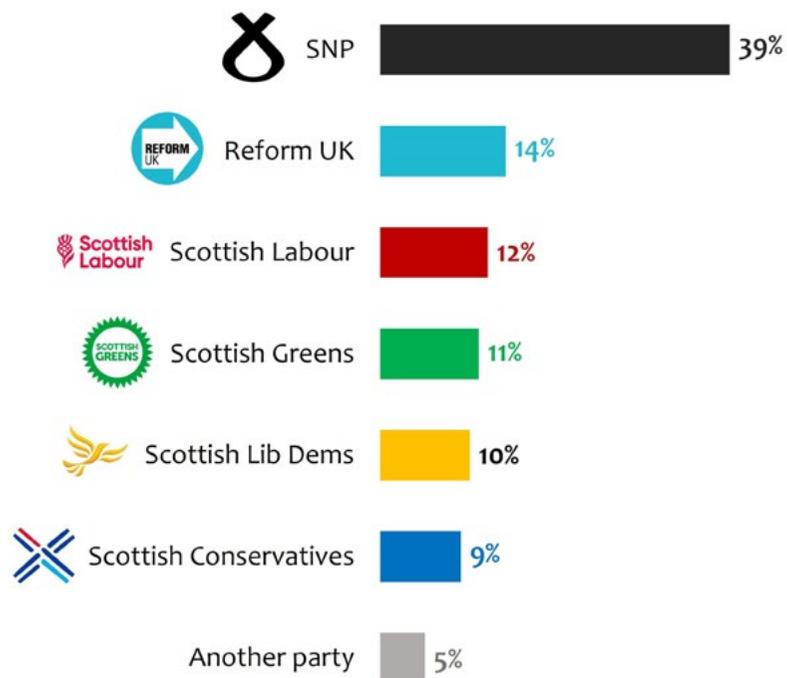
We asked people how likely they thought they were to vote for each party in the Scottish Parliament elections in May on a scale from 0 to 100 – where 0 means there is no chance they will vote for that party and 100 means they will definitely vote for that party.

Looking at those saying they are more likely than not to vote for one party (those whose likelihood of voting for one party was at least 50/100), this implies the following state of the parties in the constituency and regional list votes at the outset of the campaign:

In our focus groups, supporters of all parties expected the SNP to lose seats – though probably remaining the largest party at Holyrood – and that Reform and the Greens were likely to make substantial gains.

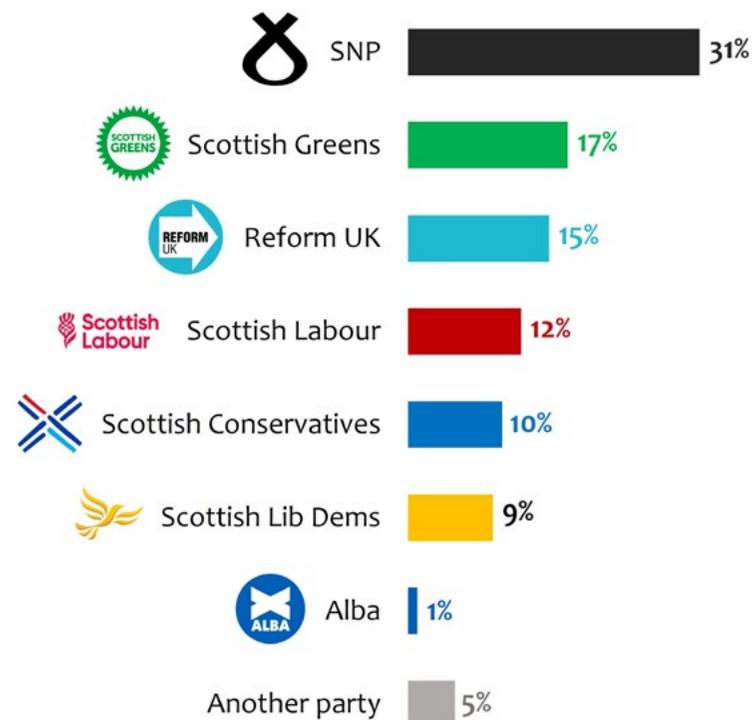
Thinking about the elections to the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood to be held on 7 May, how likely do you think it is that you will vote for each of the following parties using your **constituency/first vote** on a 100-point scale where 0 means you will definitely not vote for that party and 100 means you will definitely vote for that party?

*[Based on the highest given score for any party that was equal to or more than 50]*



Thinking about the elections to the Scottish Parliament in Holyrood to be held on 7 May, how likely do you think it is that you will vote for each of the following parties using your **regional/list vote** on a 100-point scale where 0 means you will definitely not vote for that party and 100 means you will definitely vote for that party?

*[Based on the highest given score for any party that was equal to or more than 50]*



## About Lord Ashcroft

LORD ASHCROFT KCMG PC is an international businessman, philanthropist, author and pollster. He is a former treasurer and deputy chairman of the UK Conservative Party. He is also honorary chairman and a former treasurer of the International Democracy Union. He is founder and chairman of the board of trustees of Crimestoppers, vice-patron of the Intelligence Corps Museum, chairman of the trustees of Ashcroft Technology Academy, a senior fellow of the International Strategic Studies Association, former chancellor of Anglia Ruskin University and a former trustee of Imperial War Museums.

### His political books include:

- Smell the Coffee: A Wake-Up Call for the Conservative Party
- Call Me Dave: The Unauthorised Biography of David Cameron
- Hopes and Fears: Trump, Clinton, the Voters and the Future
- Well, You Did Ask: Why the UK Voted to Leave the EU
- The Lost Majority: The 2017 Election, the Conservative Party, the Voters and the Future
- Jacob's Ladder: The Unauthorised Biography of Jacob Rees-Mogg
- Diagnosis of Defeat: Labour's Turn to Smell the Coffee
- Going for Broke: The Rise of Rishi Sunak
- Reunited Nation? American Politics Beyond the 2020 Election
- Red Knight: The Unauthorised Biography of Sir Keir Starmer
- First Lady: Intrigue at the Court of Carrie and Boris Johnson
- All To Play For: The Advance Of Rishi Sunak
- Red Queen? The Unauthorised Biography of Angela Rayner
- Red Flag: The Uneasy Advance of Sir Keir Starmer

### His other books include:

- Victoria Cross Heroes, Volumes I and II
- Special Forces Heroes
- George Cross Heroes
- Special Ops Heroes
- Heroes of the Skies
- White Flag? An Examination of the UK's Defence Capability
- Unfair Game: An Exposé of South Africa's Captive-Bred Lion Industry
- Life Support: The State of the NHS in an Age of Pandemics
- In the Shadows: The Extraordinary Men and Women of the Intelligence Corps

