

# Why the SNP will win whatever happens on 7 May

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## Summary

*The Scottish National Party looks set to return a large, visible and potentially powerful group of MPs after the British general election on 7 May which promises to be the tightest in over a generation. The SNP has said the election is not about independence, but that remains the party's objective. Regardless of whether it is Labour or the Conservatives that lead the next British government, the SNP will seek to establish the political conditions under which a second referendum can be justified and is successful. The strategy will involve driving a political wedge between Scotland and England. While a justification for a second referendum is more likely to emerge under a Conservative-led government, English dissatisfaction is likely to grow over time with the consequences of Labour government being sustained in power by the SNP. From an SNP perspective they may need to be more patient under Labour, but they gain more immediately in terms of policy influence. Either way, the SNP wins on 7 May.*

The opinion polls show the Scottish National Party surging ahead of Labour and the other political parties in Scotland in the run up to the British general election on 7 May. The party, which wants Scotland to become independent from the rest of the United Kingdom, is enjoying support of around 45-50% and is on course to win 40-plus of the 59 Scottish seats being contested out of a total of 650 in the British parliament. This may mean the SNP holds the balance of power after the election. But even if it does not it will impact dramatically on British politics, the British parliament and the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK. This note considers the consequences and explains why the SNP is likely to win whatever happens on 7 May.

## New electoral arithmetic

At the 2010 general election the SNP won just six seats with the Scottish Labour Party taking 41. If the latest opinion polls are correct the SNP is likely to win over 40 seats, dramatically reducing Labour's representation in what has traditionally been a party stronghold. The outcome is still uncertain, both because of the margin of error in the opinion polls and because in a first-past-the-post system a swing of a few percentage points in individual constituencies can tip the results in one direction or another. But there will certainly be a large, highly visible and possibly powerful SNP representation in Westminster after 7 May. In many respects this should be no surprise as 45% of Scots voted for

independence in a referendum held last year and the SNP won the same share of the vote in the elections to the Scottish parliament in 2011. What is new is the apparent success of the SNP in carrying its support in Scottish elections over to the British general election.

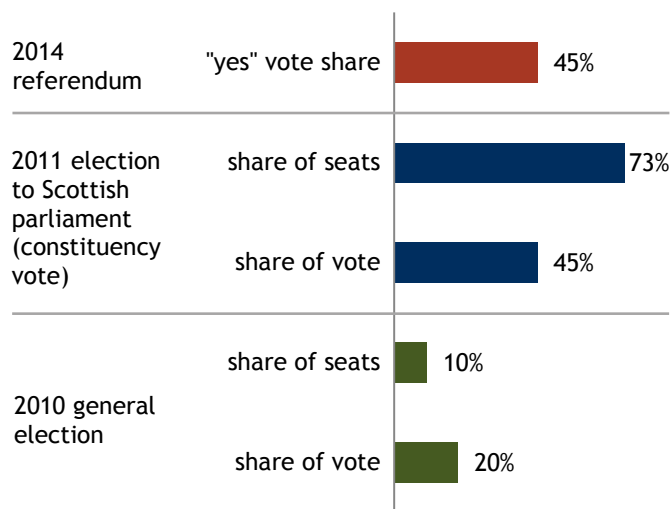


Figure 1: SNP vote shares in recent elections  
Source: House of Commons library

The surge in support for the SNP coincides with what promises to be the tightest UK general election in over a generation. Both of the main parties - the Conservatives and Labour - have been polling at near-identical levels for several months now. Neither the official start of the election campaign, the televised debates, nor the launch of the party manifestos last week has changed this. The only prediction being made with confidence is that the outcome of the election will be a "hung parliament" with no single party holding a majority. The next government will either be a coalition of two or more parties or, more likely, a minority government that relies on the support of parties outside of government. With the SNP set to become the third largest party, it could wield enormous influence.

### The SNP strategy

If the SNP holds the balance of power after the election, what will it do? Most of the other small parties have been careful not to rule out supporting either of the main parties in government, in order to gain maximum leverage in negotiations. The SNP, by contrast, has been much less equivocal. It has ruled out supporting a Conservative-led government, partly for policy reasons, but also because this would cost the SNP votes in Scotland

where the Conservatives are very unpopular. Instead, the SNP has said it will work with other parties on the left to form a "progressive alliance". The party has specifically said they could work with Labour to "lock the Conservatives out of government" and that they could offer support to a Labour government on an issue-by-issue basis.

The more interesting questions, however, are how the SNP will seek to exploit the outcome of the election for its own purposes, regardless of whether there is a Labour or a Conservative-led government, and what this means for both the stability of the government and the very future of the UK. The SNP strategy will have a common element in all scenarios - to drive a political wedge between Scotland and England, which makes up most of the rest of the UK. In the case of a Labour-led government the SNP will need to push the wedge itself; if the Conservatives are in power they will do it for them, even if this is not their intention.

### Living with the Conservatives

In many respects the SNP's task will be easier under a Conservative-led administration. There are three principal ways in which this will help push deeper the political wedge between Scotland and England. The first is by opening up a familiar line of attack, which is that a Conservative administration lacks legitimacy in Scotland. The Conservatives have long given up hope of winning significant numbers of seats in a part of the UK where they have been deeply unpopular since Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister and presided over industrial decline. The Conservatives currently have just one Scottish MP, allowing the SNP to question why a party with so little support in Scotland should wield so much power, which gets to the heart of the independence issue. The argument is, however, likely to resonate even more with the Scottish public after the election because of the way the Conservatives are running their campaign in England. A major theme has been to warn that a Labour government would be in the pocket of the SNP and that this would somehow be illegitimate. In effect they are saying that Scottish votes should not count.

The second factor is the Conservative's response to the independence referendum last September. Within minutes of the official result being declared David Cameron emerged in Downing Street to declare that he wants "English votes for English laws" in the British parliament to address the anomaly by which Scottish MPs can vote on certain English laws, but English MPs are unable to vote on similar laws that apply in Scotland. The

Conservative manifesto re-commits the party to the policy. The idea has merit, particularly when additional powers are being devolved to Scotland. It is also good electoral tactics in England, where it may help the Conservatives win support. However, it creates two classes of MP in Westminster, with those elected in Scotland in the second tier. Moreover, there are very few English-only issues that don't have any implications for Scotland, particularly as a large part of the Scottish budget depends on spending decisions taken for the UK as a whole. The policy will therefore provide a source of grievance in Scotland that the SNP will be able to exploit.

Finally, there is the prospect of a Europe referendum under a Conservative-led government. Scotland is less Eurosceptic than England and the SNP supports continuing EU membership. It is possible that a Europe referendum could see an English majority impose its will on the issue against the wishes of the majority of the Scottish electorate. This would in turn provide a justification for a second independence referendum in Scotland. But even the prospect of a Europe vote would help the SNP, as it would serve to highlight the differences in political culture between Scotland and England. It would also allow the SNP to argue that staying in the United Kingdom is risky for Scotland.

### Working with Labour

Labour has ruled out a formal coalition with the SNP that would bring SNP politicians into government. However, it has left open the possibility of forming a looser arrangement whereby it is able to count on the SNP support in confidence motions and on a case-by-case basis. This is the sort of arrangement the SNP has in mind when its party leader, Nicola Sturgeon, talks of forming a "progressive alliance". Labour may be wary of the SNP, because it knows an arrangement with the party could annoy some English voters, but it may have little choice if it is to form the next government.

Sustaining Labour in power would provide the SNP with alternative means to push deeper the wedge between Scotland and England. Whereas under a Conservative-led government the SNP strategy would be aimed at exploiting Scottish unhappiness with the UK government, under a Labour-led government it would be aimed at creating English dissatisfaction with current constitutional arrangements.

The SNP would be able to do this in three principle ways. The first, and most immediate, would be to harden the terms of the Scotland bill that must go through parliament soon after the election. This increases the powers that are devolved to Scotland, including over fiscal policy, and is a result of commitments made by the parties supporting the "No" campaign during the independence referendum last year. The SNP will have maximum leverage soon after the election when the new government is formed, just when negotiations over the final form of the bill must take place.

The second is to pull the Labour party to the left, away from the centre ground of English politics. This will include pushing Labour towards higher public spending. In addition, the SNP will intervene in some high-profile policy areas, such as by attempting to block the replacement of the Trident nuclear fleet. This is much less likely to succeed, because a Conservative opposition would support it, but the SNP would still regard it as a political victory if it forced Labour to rely on Conservative votes to push this through.

The third way the SNP will drive a deeper political wedge is by exposing anomalies and making mischief with the UK constitution, specifically on the issue of English votes for English laws. Labour has much to lose as it has historically found it harder to win a majority of English seats than the Conservatives. But the SNP will judge it has much to gain over the long term, even if the immediate effect is to reduce the power of Scottish MPs in Westminster. The SNP will calculate that it will be easier for Scotland to separate from England if England moves away from Scotland, even if only in small steps. The SNP may seek to provoke this by being seen to be decisive in votes that impact most directly on England, knowing this will encourage the Conservatives in opposition to pursue the English votes issue.

### The implications

Whether providing support for the government, or in opposition, the large and highly visible bloc of SNP MPs will make its mark on the British parliament and politics after the election. While the SNP has said the election is not about independence this remains the party's ultimate objective. The nationalists have said they will not call a second referendum on independence unless there has been a "material change" to justify this. The SNP will look for opportunities to establish that there has been a material change and either Europe or even "English votes for English laws" might

prove to be sufficient. This means that a second referendum is more likely, in the short term, if there is a Conservative-led government after 7 May. But even if a justification does not emerge quickly the SNP will have plenty of opportunities to foster the political conditions under which a second referendum can be held and possibly succeed in breaking up the UK. Under a Labour government the conditions could emerge over time from English dissatisfaction with the consequences of Labour government being sustained in power by the SNP. From an SNP perspective they may need to be more patient under Labour, but they gain more immediately in terms of policy influence, which is why the SNP will win whatever happens on 7 May.

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