

The Scottish National Party's success in winning an outright majority at Holyrood in May 2011 was an extraordinary result in an 'ordinary' election. Research shows that Scots voters did not move further towards secession and independence.

The coalition government at Westminster has promised more devolution to Scotland. But in May 2011 Scottish voters gave SNP leader Alex Salmond a clear majority in the Scottish Parliament, thus making a referendum on secession from the UK inevitable by 2014. [Rob Johns](#), [James Mitchell](#) and [Chris Carman](#) from the Scottish Election Study read the runes on what Scots voters intended at this historic election, and find that they were overwhelmingly rewarding Salmond and the SNP for effective leadership and government at Holyrood. The 2011 election may hence be more 'ordinary' than it appears, with voters responding to the same political cues that matter across the UK.



The Scottish National Party won majority control of government in the Scottish Parliament election on 5 May 2011, a result that confounded pre-election polls and commentaries. It also created a conjuncture unforeseen by the architects of devolution in the first Blair government, who deliberately chose a (broadly) proportional electoral system so as to minimise the risk of a Nationalist majority in Parliament ever moving Scotland towards independence. So this was an extraordinary result in historical context.

Yet looking closer at voters' attitudes and choices, this seems a much more 'ordinary' election. Using data from the ESRC-funded [Scottish Election Study 2011](#), we show that the SNP won its majority for that most mundane of electoral reasons – most voters thought that the Alex Salmond and his party would do a better job in office than their rivals, including their chief rival and long the permanent party of government, the Labour Party.



For readers who are not full-time students of Scottish politics, we need to establish a couple of general points about Scottish Parliament elections. First, Scots voters think that it matters a lot who wins at Holyrood. Whereas local and European elections are often seen as a low-stakes opportunity to 'send a message' about politics at Westminster, clear majorities of voters north of the border regard the Scottish government (rather than the UK government) as responsible both for policy and outcomes in such key domains as health, education, and law and order.



Second, and as a result, voting in Scottish Parliament elections is not simply an expression of people's national identity or constitutional preferences. There is no paradox in the fact that SNP support has more than doubled between 2003 and 2011 while support for Scottish independence has flatlined. Voters can distinguish between choosing Scotland's government and choosing Scotland's constitutional future. When asked in our survey to say "How do you think the return of an SNP minority government would affect the likelihood of independence?", only 7 per cent of respondents said that would make it 'much more likely'. The largest group, 42 per cent, said that it would 'make no difference'. So what used to be thought of as a major deterrent to voting SNP – fear of independence – no longer operates for many voters.

Of course, highlighting the absence of a reason *not* to vote SNP does not explain why voters *did* vote for the party. This is where the ordinariness of the 2011 election comes in. In an era of ideological convergence, parties tend to win elections by being seen as more competent than their rivals. And, in 2011, the SNP was widely regarded as the most competent party, especially compared with Labour in four key areas: performance, image, leadership, and willingness to stand up for Scotland.

We asked our respondents to rate the performance of various parties in government, both at the Scottish and UK levels. Our Table below shows that voters were relatively impressed by the performance of the SNP minority government. Indeed, since even popular governments usually win grudging respect rather than lavish praise, the SNP's +36 rating is impressive. (Here we subtract the two 'bad' percentages from the two 'good' percentages). It is not surprising that the Scottish government was rated more positively than the outgoing or incoming UK governments. More important is that voters did not believe that Labour would have done an especially good job if they had been in power at Holyrood. This gave the SNP a clear and crucial

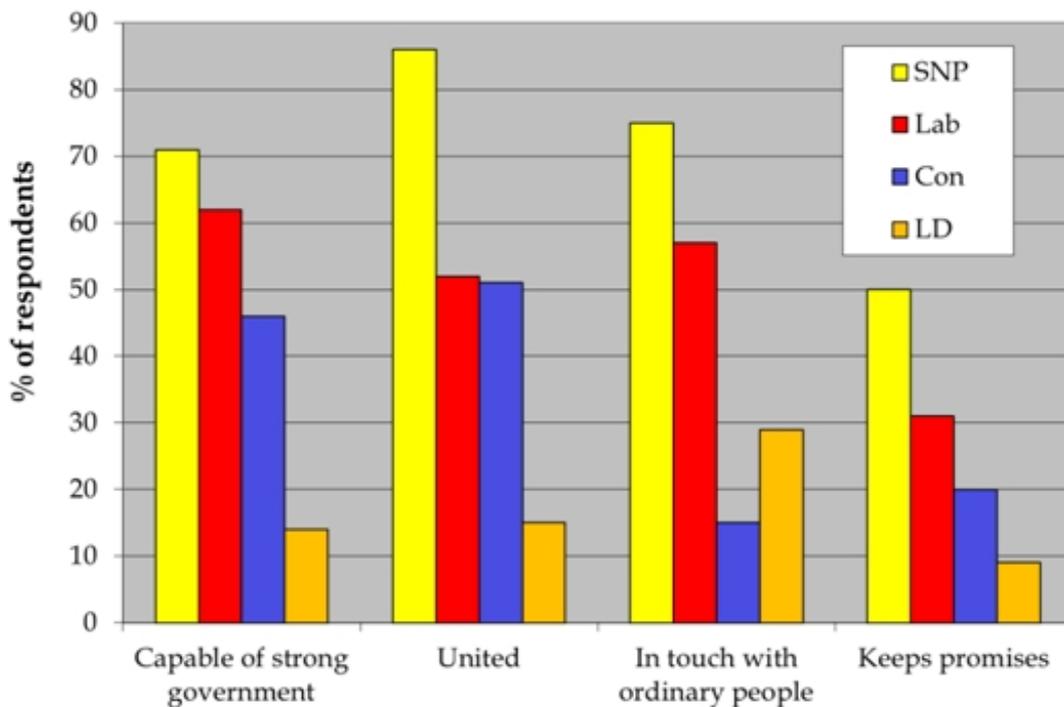
competence advantage.

Table: How Scottish voters rated the performance of the Scottish and UK governments, May 2011

The SNP also projected a more positive party image in 2011, as our first Chart below demonstrates. Not only was it seen as more capable of strong government, but respondents also rated it as more united, more trustworthy, and more interested in ordinary people. Labour's ratings were better than those of the other two top four parties. The Liberal Democrats received especially short shrift from a Scottish electorate unimpressed by their decision to join the Conservatives in coalition. But, in all cases, Labour trailed behind voters' evaluations of the SNP.

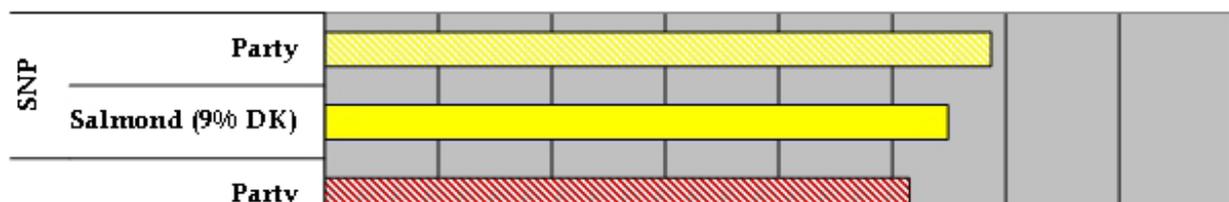
	How good a job done by...				
	Scottish govt		UK govt		
	SNP 07-11 %	Lab if in govt %	Lab 97-10 %	Con 2010- %	LD 2010- %
Very good	14	4	5	4	1
Fairly good	42	27	31	18	13
Neither	25	26	19	23	23
Fairly bad	12	25	21	25	26
Very bad	8	18	25	30	36
Good - bad	+36	-12	-10	-33	-48

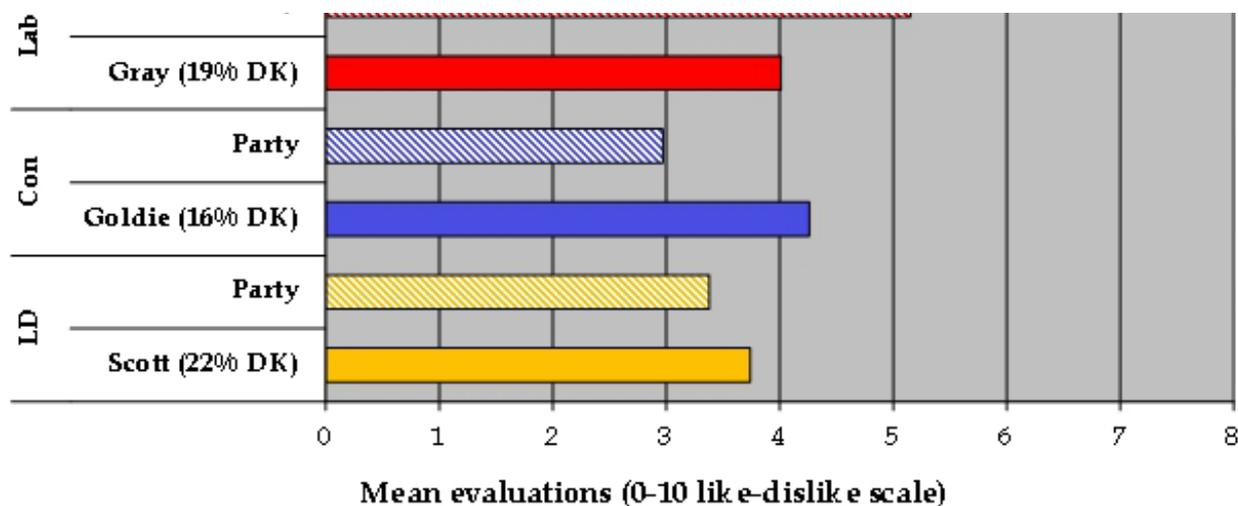
Chart 1: How Scottish respondents rated the overall images of the top four parties on four dimensions



In the May election the role of leaders *inside Scotland* was important for voters. Our second Chart below shows that the SNP's leader, Alex Salmond, was more popular than his main rival for First Minister. Labour leader Ian Gray suffered in terms of profile as well as approval: almost one in five respondents (19%) felt they knew too little about him to offer an opinion, and those that did rate him tended not to be very complimentary.

Chart 2: How the popularity of Scotland's political leaders compared with those of their party





Note: DK here shows how many respondents said ‘don’t know’ when asked about a leader. The higher this level is, the less well-known is the leader involved.

However, these results belie any suggestion that it was the personal popularity of Alex Salmond that ushered his party into power – because the SNP was in fact slightly more popular than its leader. This is not to say that Salmond’s leadership was unimportant. There may be an echo of Tony Blair and New Labour here. Survey data from the 1997 election suggest that Labour’s success owed surprisingly little to Blair’s personal ratings. Yet the key drivers of that triumph – that voters saw Labour as moderate, united, and competent (especially on the economy) – were obviously connected to Blair’s revamp of the party. The same might be true of the Salmond-led SNP, which has unified around a pragmatic approach to independence. Insofar as the 2011 victory was created by Alex Salmond, it is because of what he had done to his party rather than to his personal appeal *per se*.

Finally, the SNP enjoyed its customary advantage when voters were asked to rate the parties in terms of how much each would stand up for Scottish interests. This is not just a general impression. When we asked respondents: “Thinking now of the parties in Scotland, how effective do you think each would be at managing the impact of cuts from Westminster?”, the SNP again came out on top. It was rated as ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ effective by 64 per cent of those who answered the question, while the corresponding figure for Labour was 48 per cent. This helps to explain why Labour lost ground in the run-up to polling day: the party’s strategists had made this a prominent campaign issue, seeking to present themselves as Scotland’s best defence against the Westminster coalition. But in making this choice they were in fact fighting on strong SNP ground. Together, these results look like a clear case of what has been dubbed ‘performance politics’ – in other words, electoral business as usual. Scotland’s voters elected an SNP majority government because enough of them saw it as more likely than its rivals to do a good job in office.

Of course, even if the constitutional question was not the overriding concern for many voters when choosing a party, it was uppermost in commentators’ minds as soon as the scale of the SNP victory became clear. We emphasised earlier that voters distinguish between choosing a Scottish government and choosing a constitutional future (just as they distinguish between voting in Scottish Parliament and Westminster elections – see the [recent post on the Inverclyde by-election](#)). So the results of our 2011 survey can give little or no guidance on the outcome of any future referendum on independence – which the SNP has pledged to hold during this parliamentary term. Our central argument here implies that future Scottish election outcomes are hard to predict in advance – at least, without knowing which party will be seen as most competent. Credibility is more easily lost than gained. So a rocky five years in the challenging fiscal and economic environment that the Scottish Government now faces could yet see the SNP vote fall as sharply in 2015 as it rose in 2011, if the party should lose its reputation for competence.

Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

This blog draws on research for the 2011 Scottish Election Study, funded by the [Economic and Social Research Council](#), the second in what will hopefully become a series of major surveys of voters at Scottish Parliament elections. A representative sample of around 2,000 Scottish adults was surveyed on-line by YouGov both before and after polling day. For more details see www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk.