Brexit, general election and Indyref: the role of low-income voters in Scotland

by Matthew Goodwin and Oliver Heath

Analysing Brexit, the general election and the Scottish independence referendum – how low-income voters hold the key to Number 10.

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INSPIRING SOCIAL CHANGE

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Scottish politics is in a state of flux and the referendums on Scottish independence in 2014, and then Britain's EU membership in 2016, have created new dividing lines in politics. Politically, what happens in Scotland at the next general election could determine whether Labour or the Conservative Party hold the keys to Downing Street or the Scottish National Party (SNP) holds the balance of power. This research looks at why there are good reasons for the main parties to think seriously about how to win over voters in Scotland, in particular low-income voters, who are increasingly a key battleground in Scottish and British politics more widely.

What you need to know

- Low-income voters do not have cohesive preferences on the two big referendum issues. Attempts to win them over only on these constitutional issues will likely have limited success.

- Parties would do well to pitch to other issues and discover more about the preferences and concerns of these voters.

- The SNP need to expand their base and rejuvenate their message; Labour may be able to get through to voters by offering a programme based more on competence and delivery; the Conservative Party may find further growth somewhat limited.

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Contents

Executive summary

Key points

- Politically, what happens in Scotland at the next general election could determine whether Labour or the Conservative Party hold the keys to Downing Street or the SNP holds the balance of power. This is why there are good reasons for the main parties to think seriously about how to win over voters in Scotland, in particular low-income voters, who are increasingly a key battleground in Scottish and British politics more widely.

- What happens in Scotland, however, will be shaped by emerging issues. Scottish politics is in a state of flux and the referendums on Scottish independence in 2014, and then Britain's EU membership in 2016, have created new dividing lines in politics.

- Our analysis finds that it was people living in places which had most strongly supported Brexit in 2016 that were then most likely to vote in 2017, a pattern that separates Scotland from the rest of the UK.

- The SNP continues to perform strongly among low-income voters who live on less than £20,000 per year, the working-class and pro-independence voters. But compared to 2015, their lead among lower-income voters has declined, underlining their need to rejuvenate their offer to this key group. The party also faces challenges, including the fact it is struggling among pro-union Leave voters in Scotland.

- The Conservative Party has made big inroads among pro-union and pro-Brexit voters, and has also won over low-income voters from Labour, people who voted 'No' to Scottish independence in 2014 and then 'Yes' to Brexit in 2016.

- Labour, meanwhile, is squeezed. While it has clawed back a few seats, it needs to find a way of becoming far more distinctive in Scottish politics.

- All parties therefore have good reason to think seriously about how to win over voters in Scotland, and particularly low-income voters. Though how they do so may require some imagination. Low-income voters do not have cohesive preferences on the two big referendum issues, and so attempts to win them over only on these constitutional issues will likely have limited success. Parties would do well to pitch to other issues and to find more out about the preferences and concerns of these voters.

1. Introduction

The winds of political change that swept through Scotland in recent years, particularly since the 2014 referendum on Scottish Independence, have had a major effect on British politics. While the SNP emerged from defeat at the 2014 independence referendum to dominate Scotland's electoral map in 2015, and become the third largest party at Westminster, the picture then changed again at the 2017 general election. The SNP lost more than a quarter of their share of the vote and 21 of the 56 constituencies they had won only two years earlier. The 2017 election also saw a Conservative Party resurgence in Scotland, as well as a very minor advance for the Labour Party, revealing how Scottish politics is today not only more competitive than it was in 2015 but also increasingly unpredictable.

These changes mean that, for the main parties, there is now all to play for. There is now a larger number of marginal seats in Scotland. Between 2015 and 2017, the number of marginal seats in Britain as a whole (i.e. seats won with majorities of less than 1% of votes cast) more than doubled, rising from 13 to 31. Yet many these are in Scotland, where the number of these marginal seats increased from just one in 2015 to 12 in 2017. Therefore, all the major parties would do well to devote more attention to Scotland and, in particular, to the needs and aspirations of lower-income voters who, as we will see, are key to Scottish politics.

Indeed, at the 2017 general election each of the parties made a fairly clear pitch to voters on lower incomes and those at risk of poverty. Though the SNP's central message was for Scotland's independence and for a second independence referendum to take place 'at the end of the Brexit process', the SNP also put forward a series of policies that were designed to appeal to lower income voters. They called for an 'end to austerity', including ending further social security cuts, and an end to the freeze on working-age benefits. They talked of protecting working family budgets; a freeze on the basic rate of income tax for low and middle earners; abolishing the two-child cap on tax credits; banning zero-hours contracts; increasing the minimum wage. In addition, a specific pitch to those on low incomes was supporting the annual uprating of all benefits by at least CPI inflation; and scrapping the Bedroom Tax when they have the powers to do so.

The SNP also reminded voters that since 2013 it had extended free childcare for low-income households, supported the same households since 2013 through the Scottish Welfare Fund, and extended the child allowance in the Council Tax Reduction scheme, which also brought benefits to lower-income households. On Brexit, the SNP promised that it would ensure that Scotland was not side-lined and called for Scots to have a say on the final deal.

Scottish Labour, meanwhile, also made a series of pledges; it would also bring an end to austerity; introduce a £10 real living wage; cap household energy costs; deliver a new social security bill that would increase employment and support allowance by £30 per week. In addition, it would scrap the 'bedroom tax'; scrap cuts to the Bereavement Support payment and make specific changes to ensure that low-income voters can access further education. Labour accepted the Brexit result but promised to focus more on the benefits of the single market and customs union, and ensure the UK parliament has a meaningful vote on the outcome.

The Conservative Party promised to increase the personal allowance by 2020, harmonize tax rates in Scotland with the rest of the UK, increase the national living wage to 60% of median earnings by 2020, and work to increase protections for 'gig economy' workers. It promised measures to curb high energy costs that hit low-income households hardest, such as offering smart meters to every household and a tariff cap. It also talked more about the Brexit referendum, promising to get a good deal on Brexit and maximise the opportunities that it could bring.

But to what extent did these rival messages cut through? How did issues like Brexit and Scottish Independence affect the parties' support in Scotland, and to which groups of voters did these messages appeal most strongly? In this report, we explore how people voted in the election and how patterns of political support have changed, devoting specific attention to the behaviour of low-income voters. We consider the implications of these changes for Scotland and Britain.

This report adds to our previous work for JRF that has explored recent political change in Britain. Our first report, published in the aftermath of the 2016 EU referendum, showed how a lack of opportunity across the country led to the Brexit vote. The second, published shortly after of the 2017 general election, showed how lower income and marginalized voters across Britain – though particularly in England - were divided between their worries over identity issues like immigration, and their worries over economic issues like living standards, redistribution and inequality. In this report, we explore these themes further but within the specific context of Scotland, looking at how the dynamics of party support in general elections shifted against the backdrop of two major referendums.

2. Political change: a brief overview

Scotland has witnessed considerable and rapid political change. The 2017 general election was the fifth time in four years that Scottish voters navigated a major electoral contest, coming after the independence referendum in 2014, the 2015 general election and then in quick succession the elections to the Scottish Parliament and the EU referendum in 2016. As Figure 1 shows, in only a short period of time the Scottish party system has been completely transformed, with the SNP moving from third place in 2010 to finishing first in both 2015 and 2017, while Labour has fallen from first to third and the Conservative Party has jumped from fourth to second (British Election Study Team, 2017). This volatility not only underscores the need to examine the dynamics of voting in Scotland more closely, but also suggests that there may be further change.

Figure 1   General election results in Scotland, 1997–2017
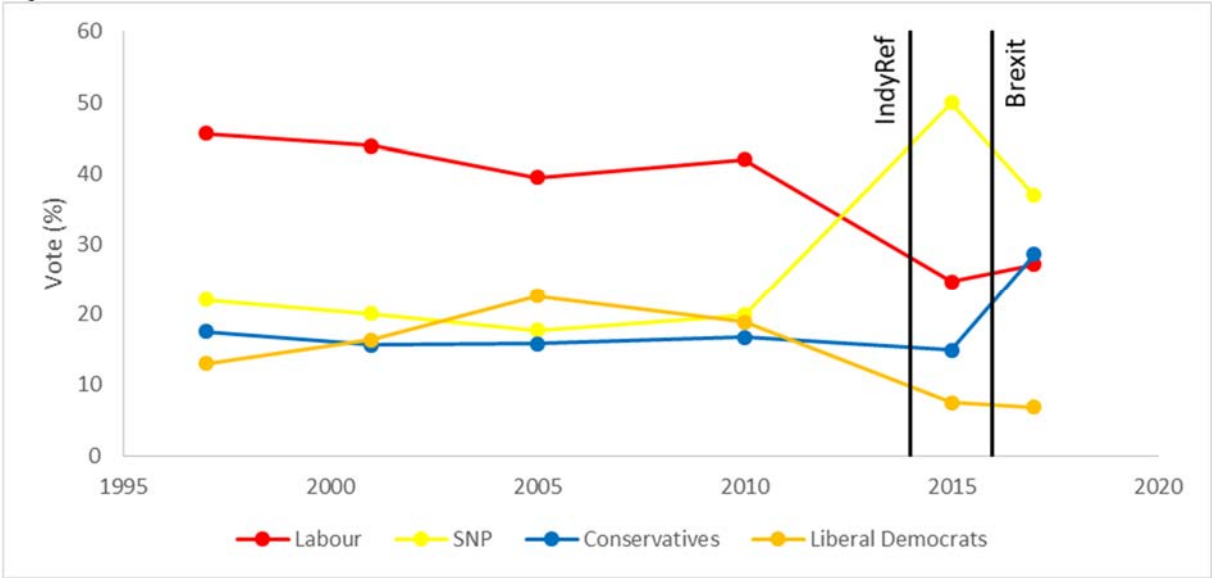
These referendums ushered in major changes that often cut across traditional voting lines. Although the SNP and pro-independence voters lost the 2014 referendum, the SNP has nonetheless subsequently come to dominate Scottish politics. At the subsequent 2015 general election, the Scottish nationalists enjoyed a remarkable result, winning 56 of 59 seats and 50% of the vote. Every other party – Labour, the Conservative Party, and Liberal Democrats - left the 2015 general election with a lower share of the vote and only one seat each. These losses were especially severe for Labour, which lost 40 seats, and the Liberal Democrats, who lost 10. These results played a key part in David Cameron's ability to secure a surprise Conservative majority government, which in turn cleared the way for a national referendum on whether Britain should remain in or leave the European Union.

One year later, the differences between Scotland and the rest of the UK were underlined when Scotland voted 62%-38% in favour of remaining in the EU while England broke 54%-46% for Leave, and Britain as a whole voted 52%-48% for Brexit. Support for Leave in Scotland ranged from an estimated 55% in Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk to only 19% in Edinburgh North and Leith.[i] Only two Scottish constituencies are estimated to have given majority support to Brexit, while support for Remain surpassed 60% in more than half of all seats.[ii]

Less than one year after the EU referendum, Britain held another general election. In Scotland, the 2017 general election saw a revival of fortunes for the Conservative Party, under the leadership of Ruth Davidson. Although across the UK, Theresa May and her party failed to achieve their much-anticipated majority, in Scotland they did enjoy significant gains. Between 1997 and 2015, support for the Conservative Party in Scotland had held static on around 16-17% of the vote. Yet by the 2016 Scottish Parliament election this had jumped to 22-23%, allowing the party to replace Labour as the second largest group in the Scottish Parliament. The Conservative advance gathered further pace in 2017, when the party achieved its highest share of the vote in Scotland since 1979. The number of Conservative MPs in Scotland surged from one in 2015 to 13 in 2017, with the twelve gains all coming at the expense of the SNP (Curtice, 2017). The party's share of the vote increased by an average of 5.5 percentage points across the UK, but in Scotland it jumped by nearly 14 points. The party only failed to increase its support in one seat (Orkney and Shetland) and saw its vote share jump by at least 15 percentage points in 20 seats. This left the party as the second largest in Scotland and handed the Conservatives their first victory over Labour in Scotland at a general election since 1959. Without these advances in Scotland, the Conservative Party would be out of power in Westminster.

Labour, in contrast, under-performed in Scotland relative to elsewhere in the UK. While Jeremy Corbyn and Labour saw their average share of the vote increase by nearly 10 percentage points across the UK, in Scotland Labour's vote only increased by an average of 2.8 points. Yet this rise, alongside more significant gains in specific seats, was sufficient for Labour to claw back six seats, all of which were taken from the SNP. The Liberal Democrats meanwhile have had somewhat mixed fortunes in Scotland. After only winning one seat in Scotland in 2015 (Orkney and Shetland), and finishing second in eight, two years later the party retained this seat and clawed back another three (East Dunbartonshire, Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross, and Edinburgh West), although as things stand they are only second in one seat (North East Fife).

For these reasons there are today, more than ever, clear incentives for the parties to focus on Scotland and make a compelling and concerted pitch to Scottish voters. Indeed, one simple fact is that since the 2017 general election there are now a larger number of marginal constituencies in Scotland. What happens in Scotland, therefore, could hold the key to whether Labour or the Conservative Party enter Downing Street after the next election, or whether the SNP will hold the balance of power and play kingmaker.

For Labour to win a majority at the next general election, assuming a uniform swing, they will require a swing of just short of five points, though they could conceivably govern as part of a majority with the Scottish National Party and the Lib Dems on a lower swing of less than two percentage points. The importance of Scotland is reflected in the fact that while across the UK there are 21 seats where Labour requires only a one percentage point swing or less to capture them, one third of these are in Scotland (and all are held by the SNP).[iii] There are also a further 16 seats in Scotland where Labour requires a five-point swing or less, all of which are also currently held by the SNP. Put another way, this means that while there are 79 seats across the UK that would fall to Labour on a five-point swing or less, no fewer than 23 of these are in Scotland.

Such numbers explain why, after the 2017 general election, which saw Labour increase its number of seats in Scotland from one to seven, Jeremy Corbyn was quick to go on a tour of 18 marginal seats in Scotland. Conversely, if Labour made no progress at all in Scotland, or even retreated, then the party's task of capturing seats in England would be made harder as a larger swing is required to move territory from blue to red. For the Conservative Party, meanwhile, holding on to their recent gains and making further advances will be key to fending off the Labour challenge and the prospect of a Labour-led coalition. There are currently two (SNP-held) seats where a swing of less than 0.3% would put them in Conservative hands and a further nine seats where they need less than a five-point swing.[iv]
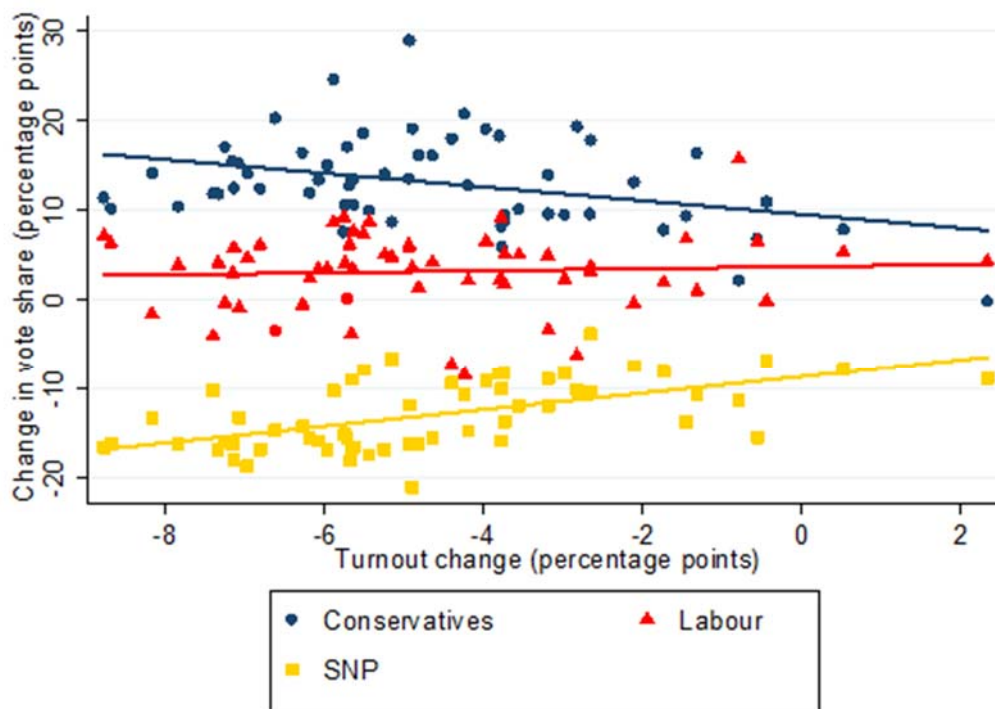
3. Turnout

After so many elections in recent years a certain amount of electoral fatigue might be expected. In Scotland, the level of turnout at the 2017 general election was just over 66%, two points lower than the level across the UK as a whole, and nearly five points lower than it had been in Scotland in 2015. Turnout in the EU referendum had been about the same (67%). But turnout was a long way short of the high-water mark of nearly 85% that had been recorded at the 2014 referendum on Scottish independence.

We can get a sharper understanding of the factors that influenced turnout in Scotland by considering a number of different factors simultaneously. We can do this by using a statistical technique called 'linear regression'. The results are presented in Table A1 (shown at the end of the report), but we summarize them here. When we consider a range of different factors related to turnout we find across Scotland, turnout tended to be higher in constituencies where there were large numbers of graduates and which were heavily white, while turnout tended to be lower in constituencies where there were large numbers of young people. This is a similar pattern to what we observed across the whole of the UK (Heath and Goodwin 2017). However, if we look at seats where turnout changed relative to 2015, then a slightly different pattern emerges.

With respect to turnout change between 2015 and 2017, we find that turnout in Scotland tended to increase most in seats that have lots of graduates and ethnic minorities. However, turnout tended to decrease the most in places where there were lots of young people and in places that had tended to be more likely to vote Remain in the EU referendum. This contrasts sharply to the rest of the UK, where there had been much talk about an apparent 'Youthquake' and a 'revenge of the Remainers' at the polls, where pro-EU voters mobilized against the Conservative Party's vision of a hard Brexit. In Scotland, we find the opposite. It was people living in places which had most strongly supported Brexit in the referendum that were more likely to vote in 2017 than they had been at the previous election in 2015.

These changes in turnout also have implications for patterns of party support. We can see that in places where turnout declined a lot the SNP tended to suffer, perhaps indicating that people who had previously voted for the party opted to stay at home. This finding points to the need for the SNP to galvanize voters ahead of the next election, perhaps with a more compelling offer than that made in 2017. Whereas changes in turnout do not appear to influence Labour's share of the vote, there is some evidence that the Conservatives' share of the vote was somewhat higher in places that had witnessed a decline in turnout in 2017, indicating that Conservative supporters were more likely to continue to turnout than other parties' supporters (see Figure 2).

**Figure 2   Changes in turnout and patterns of party support**

The Conservatives tended to do better in places were turnout declined. One example is the seat of Gordon, which the SNP's Alex Salmond won in 2015 but then lost to the Conservative Party in 2017, while turnout fell by five points. Another is Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, where turnout fell by five points. In this seat, the SNP managed to retain power, but their majority was halved while the Conservatives surged from fourth to second. Similarly, in Ochil and South Perthshire, where turnout dropped by four points, the Conservative Party captured the seat from the SNP. In all these seats, as well as Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock, the Conservative Party vote surged by at least 20 points. This suggests that differential turnout may have been at least part of the story for changes in the party's vote share. Whereas lower turnout tended to hurt the SNP, if anything it seemed to help the Conservatives, as their supporters - perhaps - were relatively more likely to turnout than supporters of other parties.

4. Independence referendum, Brexit and the dynamics of the 2017 vote in Scotland

To explore how people voted in Scotland at the 2017 general election, and the deeper currents that have reshaped Scottish politics, we can now use individual-level data from the British Election Study (BES) Internet panel to paint a fuller picture (Fieldhouse, 2017). The survey interviewed 3,266 people in Scotland in the immediate aftermath of the 2017 election, which provides a sample large enough to allow us to analyse the voting behaviour of different sub-groups. The survey is also helpful because the questionnaire on which it is based probes a wide range of topics, including attitudes toward austerity and inequality, Brexit, and the Scottish Independence referendum, as well as people's backgrounds.

We start by simply examining the flow of the vote from the 2015 general election (GE) to the 2017 GE, which allows us to see where (and from who) each of the parties gained and lost their votes (see Figure 3). The most noticeable finding is the extent to which the SNP held on reasonably well to its vote share from 2015: 77% of people who had voted for the SNP in 2015 voted for it again in 2017. Voters who defected away from the party were slightly more likely to vote Labour than Conservative, though there was not much difference between the two.

Figure 3   Reported vote in 2015 and 2017
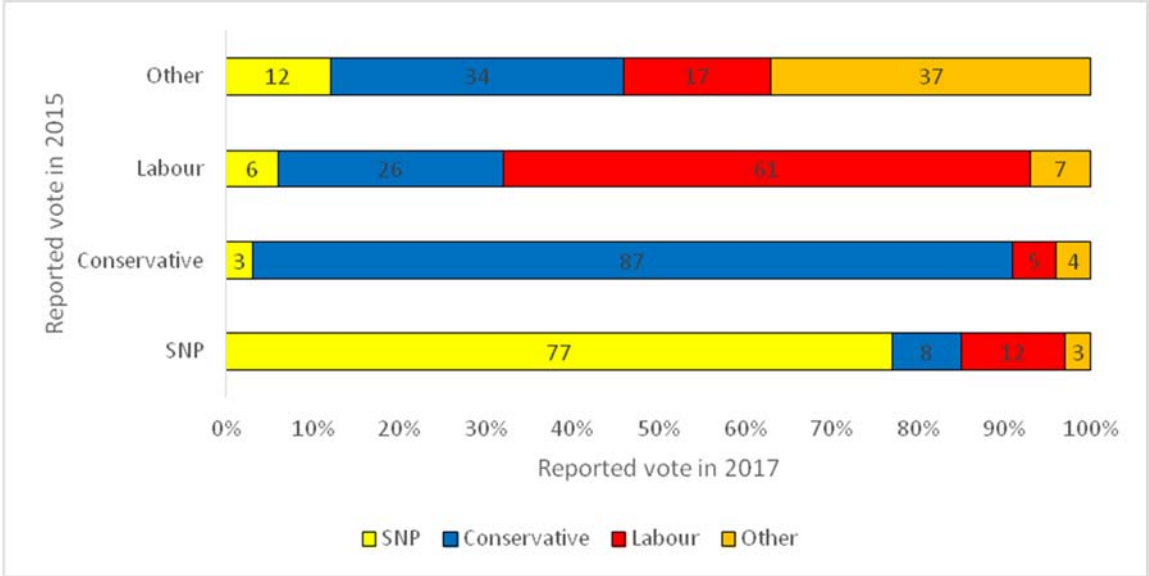
The Conservatives, however, were even more successful at retaining their support from the previous election in 2015. Of those voters in Scotland who had backed the Tories in 2015, nearly nine in ten did so again in 2017. However, whereas the SNP did not manage to attract voters who had previously supported other parties, the Conservatives were able to attract a substantial number of voters who had previously backed Labour (26% of people who voted Labour in 2015 voted for the Conservatives in 2017). Although Labour managed to pick up some votes from the SNP, it couldn't hold on very well to the votes it won in 2015, losing about a quarter to the Conservatives. Thus, what it gained on the one hand it lost on the other. Despite gaining six seats, Labour couldn't mount an effective challenge to the SNP and lost a lot of its own votes to the Conservatives, who jumped ahead of them to become the main opposition in Scotland.

Part of the reason for this somewhat complicated electoral arithmetic in Scotland is that the two referendums on Scottish independence and EU membership created new fault lines in Scotland. The referendums disrupted long-standing patterns of political behaviour, and although no party was a consistent winner, Labour was the biggest loser in each case (Henderson and Mitchell, 2018). Figure 4 shows the proportion of each party's vote base that had supported different options in the referendums. We can see that the majority of people who voted for the SNP in 2017 had previously backed Yes to Independence in 2014 and then Remain in 2016. The SNP was also supported by some pro-Independence Leavers, but very few people who opposed Scottish independence voted for the SNP in 2017.

The majority of people who voted for the Conservatives in 2017 had voted against Scottish Independence in 2014, and the largest group of Conservative voters had also backed Leave in the 2016 EU referendum. At the aggregate level, it is worth noting that in the 10 most pro-Leave seats in Scotland the Conservative Party's vote share increased by an average of 16 percentage points while in the 10 most pro-Remain seats it increased by only 9.4 points. Furthermore, of the 10 seats in Scotland that had recorded the highest levels of support for Leave at the 2016 referendum, six were captured from the SNP by the Conservative Party. Conversely, of the 10 seats in Scotland that recorded the highest levels of support for Remain at the 2016 referendum, seven stayed in the hands of the SNP and only three changed hands, two going to the Liberal Democrats and only one to the Tories (East Renfrewshire).

Labour voters meanwhile, had backed a range of different alternatives in the 2014 and 2016 referendums. Although the largest group of Labour voters were Remainers, the party was not much more popular among this group than the Conservative Party. In the 10 most pro-Leave seats in Scotland, the Labour Party's average share of the vote increased by 3.4 percentage points while in the 10 most pro-Remain seats Labour's average vote share increased by a similar 3.7 points, further indicating to how the referendum fault line appears to have impacted Labour less than the Tories.

The SNP, therefore, consolidated the Yes vote, the Conservatives consolidated the No-Leave vote, and Labour was a bit squeezed in the middle. For more details on how the 2014 and 2016 referendums cut across party lines and produced major disturbances in Scotland's party system: see analysis by Prosser and Fieldhouse (British Election Study Team, 2017).

Figure 4 Reported vote in 2017 and how people voted in the referendums
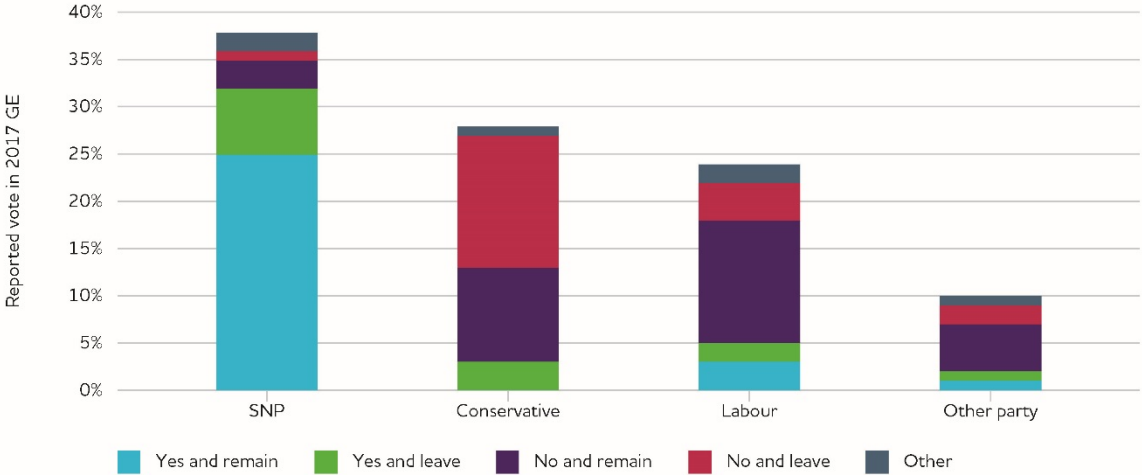
What was the role of income in these political shifts? Overall, people on high incomes tended to back both unions: 41% opposed Scottish Independence, as well as Brexit. By contrast, just 27% of people on low incomes voted both No and Remain (see Figure 5). Low-income voters were more divided on the issues of independence (from both the UK and the EU) and roughly equal numbers of low-income voters had supported Yes-Remain and No-Remain, and somewhat more than other income groups had voted Yes-Leave.

This indicates that people on low incomes did not have cohesive political preferences on the two major referendums that had rocked Scotland and Britain more generally. This perhaps suggests that attempts to **mobilize them on these issues would only have limited success and that parties may have more success by pitching to other issues.**

Figure 5 Income and past vote in referendums
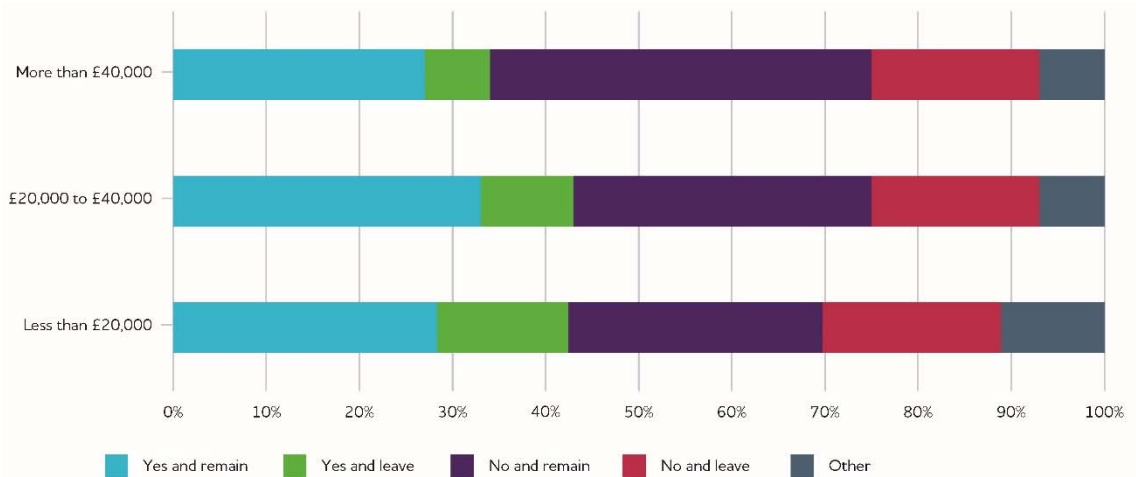
We can get a clearer sense of how the referendums affected support for the main parties among low-income voters in Scotland by examining trends in political support over the last few years. As Figure 6 shows, before the 2014 independence referendum low-income voters were more likely to support the SNP than Labour, with the Conservatives some way back. After the 2014 referendum, support for the SNP among low-income voters then surged reaching over 50%, whereas support for Labour among low-income voters declined. There is little sign that there was an immediate pro-Union bounce for the Conservatives. After the Brexit referendum, however, there was a noticeable increase in support for the Conservatives among low-income voters, and a noticeable decline in support among this group for the SNP. Labour made a late surge among low-income voters during the short campaign to catch up with the Conservatives, but still finished somewhere short of where they had been before the 2014 independence vote. This underlines the need both for the SNP to re-engage with low-income voters if they are to stall or reverse their electoral decline, and for both the Conservative and Labour parties to seriously engage with this group if they are to continue to fuel their revival in Scottish politics.

Figure 6 Vote intention of low-income voters, 2014-2017
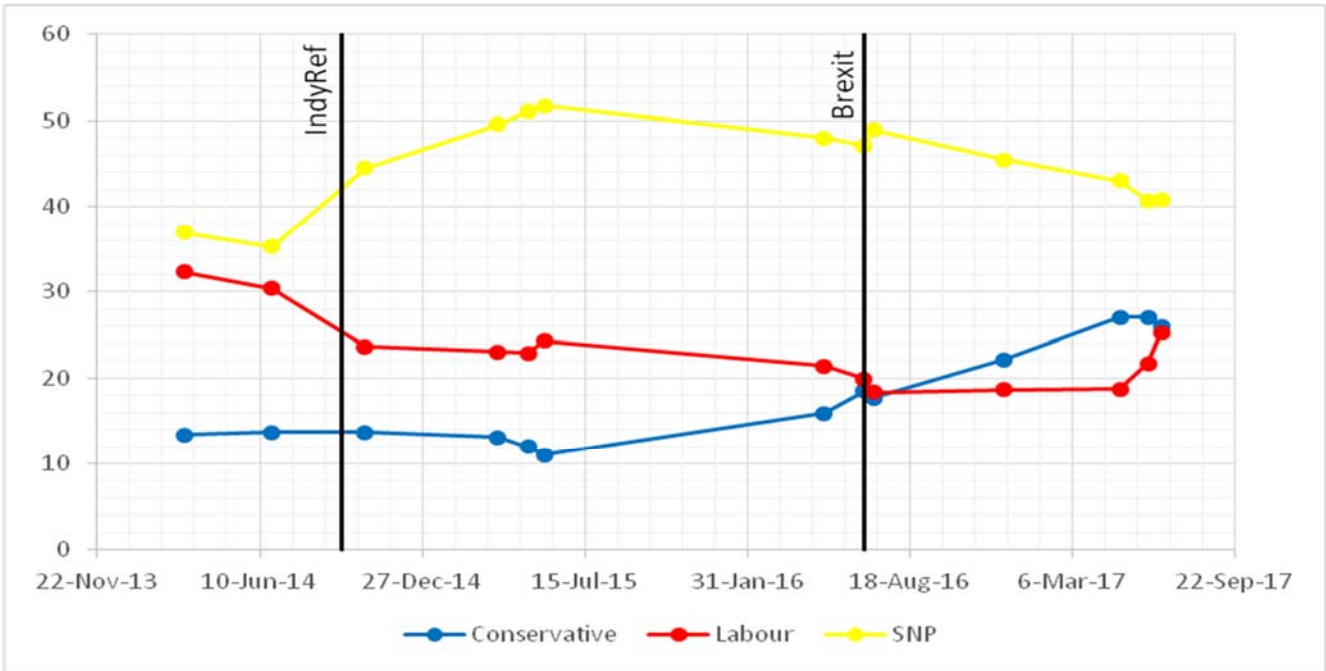
5. Poverty, income and the 2017 election

Despite the political upheaval of the two referendums, social divides in political support were not particularly clear-cut in the 2017 GE, and there is little evidence of any dramatic realignment along social lines. As Figure 7 shows, in 2017 the SNP still enjoyed support across the board, and with few exceptions was the most popular party among all demographic sub-groups. The SNP was particularly popular among those on low incomes (people earning less than £20,000 per year), the working class (social grade C2DE), the unemployed and the young.

For people on low incomes, the reported vote share of the SNP was 40%, compared to 26% for Labour and the Conservatives, giving the SNP a healthy lead of 14 percentage points. This was somewhat down on the level of support the SNP enjoyed among this sub-group in 2015, when its lead over Labour had been 22 points. By contrast, among people on high incomes the Conservatives were the most popular party, and received 36% of the vote, compared to 31% for the SNP and just 20% for Labour. This represented a 16-point increase in support for the Conservatives, which saw them leap-frog the SNP, going from 18 points behind them in 2015 to five points ahead of them in 2017 (see Appendix for details on how the vote changed since 2015).

With respect to other groups at risk of poverty, unemployed people were far more likely to vote SNP (45%) than Labour (20%) or Conservatives (22%). A similar picture emerges with respect to the market research social grade classifications, which is a somewhat crude measure of social class. This indicates that the working class (C2DE) were much more likely to vote SNP (41%) than Labour (24%) or the Conservatives (27%). Nonetheless the Conservatives were still able to improve their vote share among this group, which increased by 14 percentage points since 2015 and saw them overtake Labour.
A slightly different picture emerges with respect to age. People aged 65 or more were much more likely to vote Conservative (42%) than SNP (25%) or Labour (23%). This represented a surge in support for the Conservatives among this group and was 18 points higher than the share of the vote they received in 2015, perhaps because of Brexit – which our earlier work showed was much more popular among the old than young (Goodwin and Heath 2016).

Figure 7 Reported vote choice among demographic sub-groups in Scotland

(C2DE refers to the 'working class', as defined by this market research classification. AB refers to the 'middle class', as defined by this market research classification).
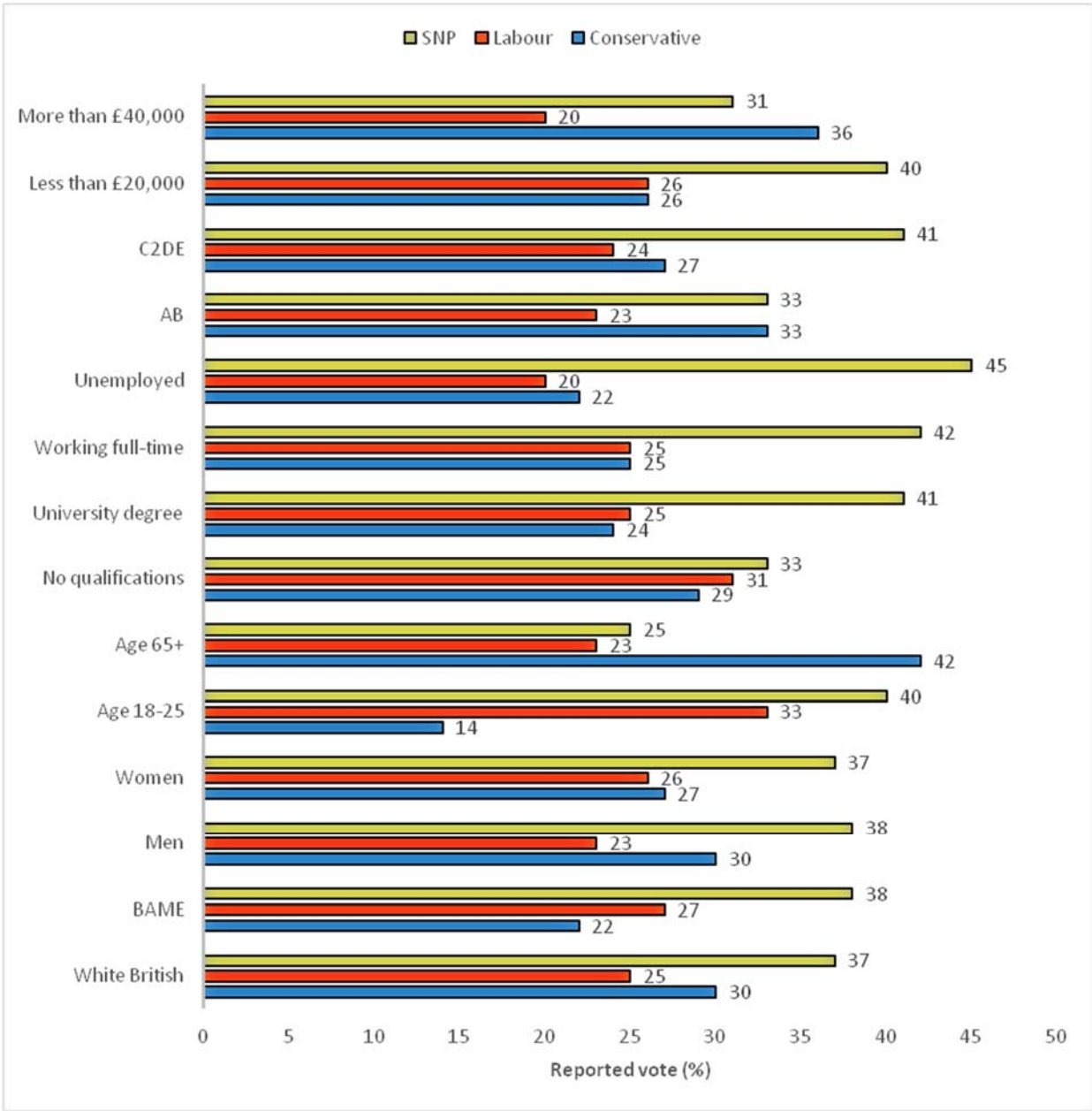
We can also explore differences in people's subjective experiences of economic well-being. Overall, most people in Scotland thought that the national economy had got worse over the last 12 months. People in Scotland were somewhat more likely to think this than people in England - 68% vs 59% (data not available for Northern Ireland).

Figure 8 Evaluations of the national economy by country
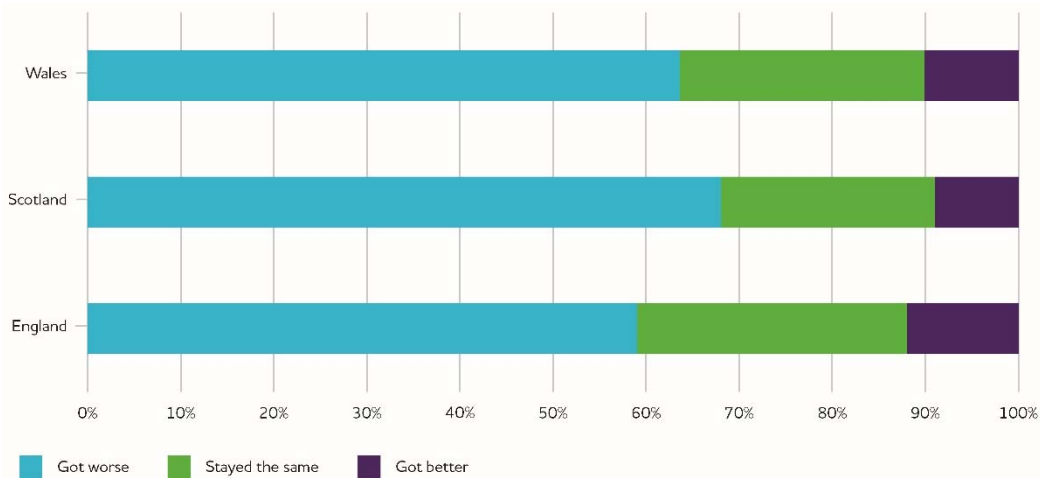
In terms of how economic evaluations were related to vote choice, people who thought their own personal finances had got worse, or that the national economy had got worse, were both more likely to vote SNP than Labour or the Conservatives. **This appears to indicate that people were more likely to blame the Conservative government in Westminster for their economic difficulties than the SNP government in Holyrood.**

Figure 9 Economic evaluations and party support, row percentages
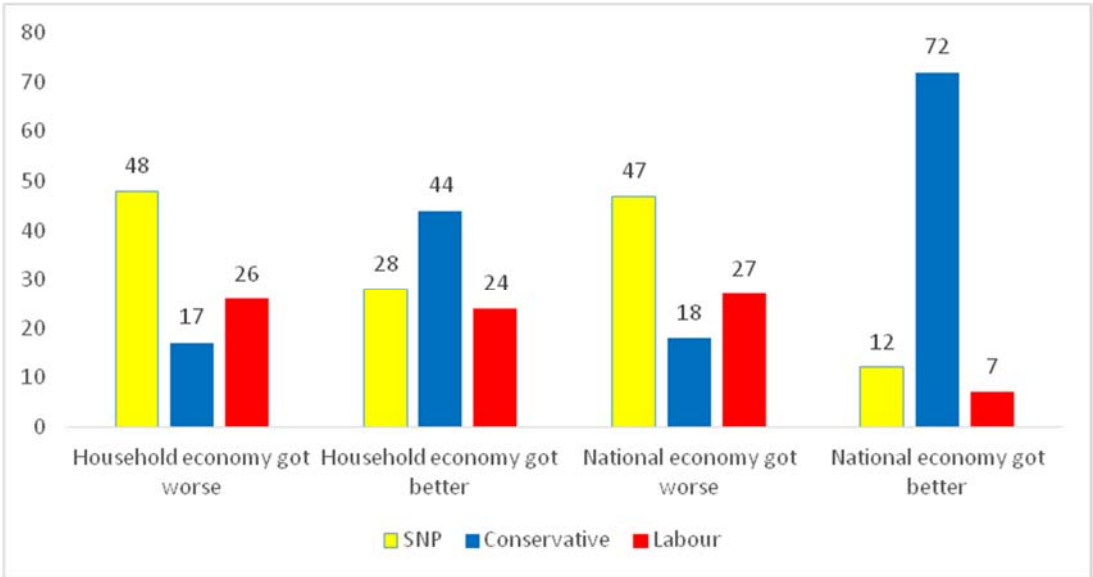
Overall then, these figures indicate that the relationship between poverty, or groups at risk of poverty, and vote choice was not clear-cut. Although the Conservatives were the most popular party among those on high incomes, and the joint most popular party among the middle classes, they also managed to increase their share of the vote among those on low incomes and the working class by over 10 percentage points, among the latter even managing to overtake Labour. They were also by far and away the most popular party among the old.

By contrast, though the SNP still enjoyed the backing of many low-income voters, the working class, and the unemployed – their advantage over the other parties within these groups slipped a bit from the last election. Labour meanwhile was not the most popular party for any social group, and only saw its share of the vote increase among the young (a pattern that was also evident in the rest of the UK).

Some of these changes in party support may be related to the two referendums. As has been previously shown, the 2014 independence referendum gave a boost to the SNP across the board, largely at Labour's expense (Fieldhouse and Prosser 2017). Similarly, Brexit appears to have helped the Conservatives. Although Brexit was not particularly popular in Scotland, nearly 40% of Scots still voted to Leave the EU and the Conservatives have successfully managed to convert some of this pro-Brexit sentiment to their advantage. As elsewhere in Britain, Brexit was particularly popular among the old, those on low incomes, and the working class, and the Conservatives witnessed a substantial increase in their share of the vote among these groups (though not limited to just these groups).

Labour, meanwhile, did not take a distinctive position on either of these two referendum issues. Instead, during the 2017 general election campaign Labour sought to emphasize their opposition to austerity and inequality. Scotland is generally regarded as somewhat more left-wing than the rest of the UK – and those on low incomes tend to be more pro-redistribution than those on higher incomes.[v] So, to what extent did this strategy pay-off?

To investigate this, we first examine where voters located themselves on a scale of redistribution and where they located the main parties. The exact question that respondents were asked is: 'Some people feel that government should make much greater efforts to make people's incomes more equal. Other people feel that government should be much less concerned about how equal people's incomes are. Where would you place yourself and the political parties on this scale?' Figure 10 shows that voters in Scotland tend to place themselves somewhat to the left of centre on the scale of redistribution. Although Labour is regarded as the most left-wing party, there is very little difference between where voters place Labour and the SNP on the ideological spectrum – and both parties basically occupy the same ground (at least in the eyes of voters). By contrast, the Conservatives are seen as much more to the right.

Figure 10 Voter and party positions on redistribution[vi]
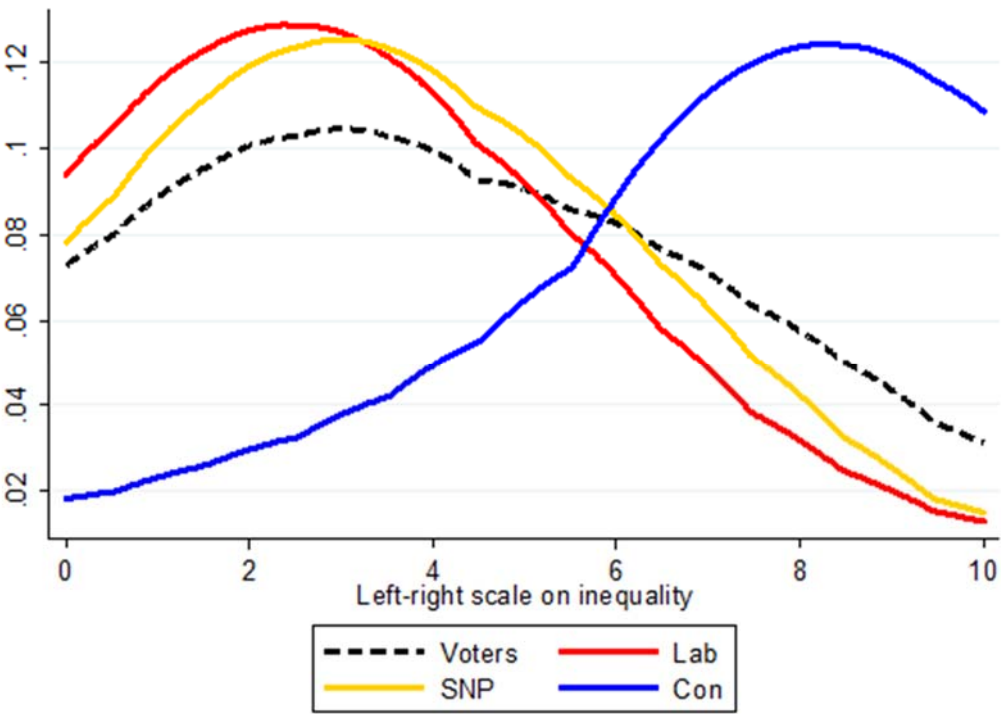
In England, elections are primarily a contest between a party of the centre right, the Conservatives, and one of the centre left. At the 2017 general election, this presented voters with a clear ideological choice. However, in Scotland Labour faces a very different competitive environment. The presence of the SNP – which is also seen as a left-wing party, means that Labour has far more competition on the left in Scotland than it does in England. This means that the electoral pay-off from Corbyn's left-wing strategy may not have been as great in Scotland as it was in England. It also suggests that, going forward, Labour may find it difficult to make major inroads among this group unless it can make a louder and more direct pitch to low-income voters in Scotland. To achieve this understanding the concerns and interests of

these voters is crucial. If successful, this could potentially help Labour to win back some seats in Scotland, thereby easing its path to power in Britain overall.

So what are the interests and values of people on low incomes in Scotland? How do the attitudes of Scottish people towards redistribution, Brexit and Scottish Independence relate to their income? The full results of our more technical analysis are presented in Table A2, at the end of the report. Here, we will summarize our key findings. As elsewhere in the UK, we find that people on low incomes are much more economically left-wing than people on high incomes, and much more concerned about income inequality. Given the commitments made by both the SNP and Labour during the campaign, we may therefore expect low-income voters to be drawn towards these two parties on economic policies.

By contrast, a slightly different pattern emerges with respect to Brexit issues and whether people prioritize retaining access to the single market or controlling immigration. These attitudes are strongly influenced not by levels of income but education, and age. Graduates and younger voters tend to be much more in favour of prioritizing access to the Single Market than people with low educational qualifications and the old, who tend to be more in favour of restricting immigration (this is very similar to the patterns that we identified in the rest of the UK in our earlier JRF report, see Goodwin and Heath 2017). There is not much evidence though that these Brexit attitudes are influenced by income. Thus, the Conservative Party's focus on a 'hard' Brexit and restricting immigration may have had more impact on the old and those with few qualifications than low-income voters in particular. Lastly, with respect to Scottish Independence, people on low incomes are more likely to favour Independence than people on high incomes. This may pull them towards the SNP.

To get a sense of how these different factors played out in the election we examine the impact of different demographic and attitudinal factors on vote choice by using 'logistic regression'. This allows us to examine the 'independent' impact of each variable on individual support for each of the two main parties while controlling for each of the other variables. For example, we know that people on low incomes tend to be more left wing than people on high incomes. So, in Figure 7, part of what we observe as an effect of income may in fact be 'explained' by someone's attitude towards redistribution. To investigate this we examine both variables (and others) simultaneously. By examining income and attitudes towards redistribution together, we can tell whether people with similar views on redistribution but different levels of income differ in terms of their support for the three main parties. Our results are presented in Table A2 (shown at the end of the report), but we summarize them here.

When we consider just demographic factors we find a number of social divides that separate support for the three main parties. In particular, we find that people on high incomes, the middle class and the elderly are significantly more likely than those on low incomes, the working class and young people to vote for the Conservatives rather than the SNP. However, controlling for all these factors, graduates are more likely than people with few educational qualifications to vote SNP rather than Conservative. With respect to Labour, we find that the middle class and young people are more likely than working class and old people to vote Labour rather than the SNP, but that once again graduates are more likely to vote SNP than Labour. There are no significant income effects, or differences by gender or ethnicity.

However, when we also take into consideration people's attitudes towards the economy, redistribution, Brexit and Scottish Independence, we find that many of these social divides fade. There is no significant relationship between education or income or class or BAME or gender and vote choice. That is, once we control for all the attitudinal variables in the model, there is no difference between how men and women vote, or how people on low incomes and high incomes vote. Whatever differences existed between these groups in the demographic model are therefore accounted for by the attitudinal variables. The only social factor that still appears to matter is age.

Older people are more likely than younger people to vote Conservative than SNP or Labour. There are clear patterns with respect to people's evaluation of the economy.

People who think their personal financial situation had improved were more likely than those who thought it had got worse to vote Conservative than SNP (and were somewhat more likely to vote Labour than SNP).

People who thought the national economic situation had improved were also more likely than those who thought it got worse to vote Conservative rather than SNP (although there was no difference between support for Labour and SNP).

As expected, there are strong referendum effects.

People who backed No to Independence, and Leave in the EU referendum, were much more likely than those who backed Yes and Remain to vote Conservative rather than SNP (and were also more likely to vote Labour than SNP, though not by so much).

Those who had voted No and Remain were also more likely than those who backed Yes and Remain to vote Conservative than SNP (though the difference was less pronounced than for the No-Leavers). Among those who voted Yes in the referendum, people who also voted Leave were more likely than those who backed Remain to vote for the Conservatives than the SNP.

These results indicate that both the Independence referendum and Brexit pulled voters in different directions, and even if the question of Independence still exerts a somewhat greater pull on voters towards the SNP than Brexit does towards the Conservatives, Brexit still matters, and divides people who backed Independence.

Lastly, with respect to redistribution, there are clear ideological divides between the SNP and Conservatives, but not between the SNP and Labour.

People in favour of redistribution are much more likely than those who are not to vote SNP than Conservative (though there is no significant difference between whether they voted SNP or Labour). The main fault lines are therefore between the SNP and Conservatives, where the issues of Scottish Independence, Brexit, and redistribution most polarize voters. Since 2017, the Conservative Party has carved out a distinctive space that pits them directly against the SNP on all three issues. Meanwhile, Labour is much less distinctive because to many voters it seems to resemble the SNP in terms of attitudes towards redistribution, while it is somewhat squeezed in the middle on the issue of the two referendums. This poses a major strategic dilemma to Labour.

6. Conclusions and implications

Voters in Scotland are up for grabs in a major way. Against the backdrop of the referendums in 2014 and 2016, considerable political changes have given way to a political map that looks entirely different to that seen in earlier years. The complete dominance of the SNP has now made way for a landscape that has made a little more room for Labour and a lot more room for the Conservative Party. This reveals why there is all to play for and how, come the next general election, Scotland could hold the key to determining who is the next occupant of Number 10 Downing Street.

Our analysis points to three key messages for the main parties and underlines why each have clear incentives to modify their appeals to voters.

- First, though in England and Wales Labour has polled strongly, in Scotland it is squeezed between the SNP, which remains strong among lower income and pro-independence voters, and the Conservative Party, which is quickly making inroads among pro-union and pro-Brexit voters. This means that, if it is to make its pathway to power easier, Labour must find a way of becoming more distinctive in Scotland. Despite making minor gains in Scotland this time out, there is the very real prospect that these gains are papering over bigger cracks that could see the party lose ground to its two major rivals. Moving further to the left is unlikely to solve Labour's problems.

  Perhaps there is an opportunity for Labour to try and get through to voters by offering a programme based more on competence and delivery. Both the SNP and the Conservatives have a track record of being in power, but many ordinary people feel like their own personal economic situation has deteriorated. Regardless of who they blame for the economic decline or whose fault it is, the fact that so many people are dissatisfied with how things are going is hardly a ringing endorsement for either of the two incumbent parties.

- Second, the SNP remains dominant but it too has problems. Our analysis shows how the SNP does face a 'glass ceiling' in the sense that it is only really winning over pro-independence voters while not making much headway among pro-union voters. Moreover, there are signs that people who previously supported the SNP are now less willing to vote. This means that unless the SNP can somehow expand its base it may continue to suffer losses and face growing competition from the other parties, in particular the Conservative Party. This underlines the need for the Scottish nationalists to rejuvenate their message if, with no second independence referendum in sight, they are to remain dominant.

- Third, the Conservative Party is clearly benefitting from a cocktail of pro-union and pro-Brexit sentiment that has increased its electoral competitiveness in Scotland. The Conservatives have also picked up some low-income voters from Labour, who backed the Union and voted Leave. But their prospects for further growth might be somewhat limited. In a similar way to the SNP, there is a ceiling on how much support can be gained from an appeal based around Brexit and the Union, and the Conservatives are still seen as a right-wing party in a left-wing country.

All parties therefore have good reason to think seriously about how to win over voters in Scotland, and particularly low-income voters. Though how they do so may require some imagination. Low-income voters do not have cohesive preferences on the two big referendum issues, and so attempts to win them over only on these constitutional issues will likely have limited success. Parties would do well to pitch to other issues and to find more out about the preferences and concerns of these voters.

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Appendix: data behind the analysis

Table A1   The most marginal seats in Britain (won by less than 1% of the valid vote)

Seat	Incumbent	Country/Region	Majority (votes/%)
North East Fife	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**2/0%**
Perth and North Perthshire	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**21/0.04%**
Kensington	Labour	London	20/0.05%
Dudley North	Labour	West Midlands	22/0.06%
Southampton Itchen	Conservative	South East	31/0.07%
Newcastle-Under-Lyme	Labour	West Midlands	30/0.07%
Richmond Park	Conservative	London	45/0.07%
Crewe and Nantwich	Labour	North West	48/0.09%
Glasgow South West	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**60/0.17%**
Glasgow East	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**75/0.21%**
Ceredigion	Plaid Cymru	Wales	104/0.26%
Stirling	**Conservative**	**Scotland**	**148/0.30%**
Arfon	Plaid Cymru	Wales	92/0.33%
Canterbury	Labour	South East	187/0.33%
Foyle	Sinn Fein	Northern Ireland	169/0.37%
Barrow and Furness	Labour	North West	209/0.44%
Keighley	Labour	Yorkshire and The Humber	239/0.46%
Airdrie and Shotts	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**195/0.51%**
Ruthergien and Hamilton West	**Labour**	**Scotland**	**265/0.52%**
Lanark and Hamilton East	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**266/0.53%**
Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath	**Labour**	**Scotland**	**259/0.56%**
St Ives	Conservative	South West	312/0.61%
Pudsey	Conservative	Yorkshire and The Humber	331/0.61%
Hastings and Rye	Conservative	South East	346/0.63%
Chipping Barnet	Conservative	London	353/0.64%
Thurrock	Conservative	Eastern	345/0.69%
Preseli Pembrokeshire	Conservative	Wales	314/0.74%
Motherwell and Wishaw	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**318/0.76%**
Glasgow North East	**Labour**	**Scotland**	**242/0.76%**
Ashfield	Labour	East Midlands	441/0.88%
Inverclyde	**SNP**	**Scotland**	**384/0.98%**

Source: House of Commons Library. Scottish seats highlighted in bold.

SNP Seats in Scotland where Labour are within five points

Glasgow South West

Glasgow East
Airdrie and Shotts
Lanark and Hamilton East
Motherwell and Wishaw
Inverclyde
Dunfermline and Fife West
Edinburgh North and Leith
Glasgow North
Glasgow South

SNP Seats where the Conservatives are within five points

Perth and North Perthshire
Lanark and Hamilton East
Edinburgh South West
Argyll and Bute
Central Ayrshire

Figure A1   Change in reported vote choice 2015-2017 among demographic sub-groups in Scotland
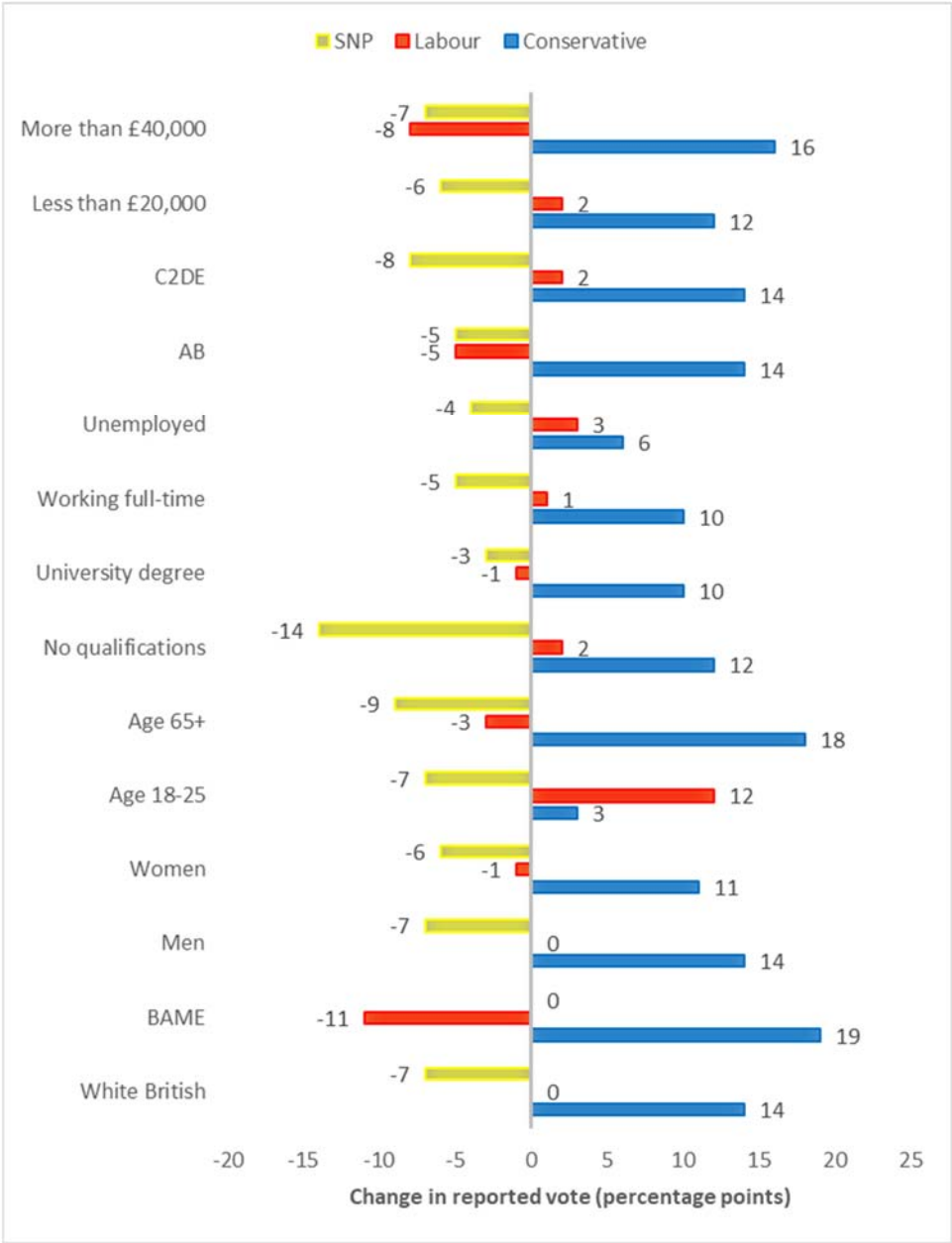
Table A2: Multivariate analysis of turnout change in Scotland, linear regression

	Turnout change	
	Coefficient	Std. Err.
% age 18-29 years	-0.16**	0.08
% with degree	0.23***	0.04
% non-white	0.35***	0.10
% voted Leave	0.13***	0.04
Constant	-14.49	2.50
N		
Adjusted R-square		

Notes: *** denotes $p<0.01$; ** denotes $p<0.05$

Table A2 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of turnout change in Scotland from 2015 to 2017 using a statistical technique called 'linear regression'. The coefficients reported in the table indicate whether the variable in question is positively or negatively related to turnout change. Values marked with an asterisk indicate that there is a statistically 'significant' relationship between the variables, controlling for all the other variables in the model. For example, the coefficient for education is positive and significant, indicating that turnout tended to increase more in constituencies where there was a high percentage of graduates than in constituencies where there was a low percentage of graduates.

Table A3: Demographics and values, multivariate regression

Variables	(1) Left–right scale	(2) Income inequality	(3) Liberal–auth scale	(4) Single market vs immigration	(5) Union vs Independence
Age	0.00	0.01	0.03***	0.02***	-0.01**
	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Income					
20 to 40K	0.21**	0.44***	-0.03	-0.16	-0.19
	(0.10)	(0.15)	(0.11)	(0.17)	(0.11)
Over 40K	1.08***	1.35***	-0.07	-0.39	-0.55***
	(0.15)	(0.23)	(0.17)	(0.25)	(0.17)
Missing	0.45***	0.71***	0.08	0.19	-0.38***
	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.13)	(0.19)	(0.12)
Education					
Scottish Higher	0.14	0.37**	-0.76***	-1.22***	0.12
	(0.12)	(0.18)	(0.13)	(0.20)	(0.13)
University	0.12	0.10	-2.03***	-2.72***	0.46***
	(0.10)	(0.16)	(0.12)	(0.17)	(0.11)
Ethnicity					
White other	-0.41	-0.85***	-1.07***	-1.36***	1.82***
	(0.22)	(0.31)	(0.25)	(0.35)	(0.31)
BAME	-0.26	0.18	0.13	0.47	-0.70*
	(0.37)	(0.54)	(0.44)	(0.61)	(0.39)
Other	-1.01**	-1.41**	-1.25**	-1.97***	0.49
	(0.44)	(0.63)	(0.51)	(0.70)	(0.45)
Female	0.38***	-0.05	0.24**	0.26	-0.28***
	(0.08)	(0.12)	(0.09)	(0.14)	(0.09)
Work Status					
Student	0.19	0.45	-1.43***	-1.17***	-0.01
	(0.26)	(0.38)	(0.28)	(0.43)	(0.27)
Retired	0.24*	0.14	-0.26	-0.33	-0.31**
	(0.12)	(0.18)	(0.14)	(0.21)	(0.13)
Not in work	-0.38***	-0.59***	-0.39**	0.02	0.07
	(0.15)	(0.22)	(0.16)	(0.24)	(0.15)
Constant	2.15***	3.01***	5.49***	4.55***	0.32
	(0.24)	(0.36)	(0.27)	(0.40)	(0.25)
Observations	2,505	2,448	2,376	2,431	2,380
R-squared	0.04	0.03	0.20	0.14	

Standard errors in parentheses *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$. Models 1 to 4 report the coefficients from OLS regression, model 5 reports the log odds from Logistic regression.

Table A4	Reported vote, multinomial logistic regression (base SNP)		
VARIABLES	(2) Conservative	(3) Labour	(4) Other_party
Age	0.03***	-0.01	0.01
	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Education			
Scottish Higher	-0.26	-0.35	0.32
	(0.23)	(0.21)	(0.28)
University	-0.25	-0.18	0.21
	(0.22)	(0.19)	(0.26)
Income			
20 to 40K	-0.23	0.01	0.08
	(0.20)	(0.17)	(0.23)
Over 40K	0.02	-0.15	0.41
	(0.31)	(0.28)	(0.32)
Missing	-0.02	0.00	0.11
	(0.23)	(0.20)	(0.26)
Ethnicity			
White other	-1.46**	-0.76	-0.21
	(0.72)	(0.46)	(0.55)
BAME	-0.73	-0.75	0.44
	(0.83)	(0.68)	(0.70)
Other	-0.10	-0.97	0.45
	(0.89)	(0.78)	(0.74)
Female	-0.13	-0.15	-0.12
	(0.17)	(0.14)	(0.19)
Social grade			
C1	-0.42**	-0.18	-0.22
	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.23)
C2DE	-0.39	-0.30	-0.31
	(0.21)	(0.18)	(0.24)
HH economy	0.46***	0.22	0.12
	(0.14)	(0.11)	(0.15)
Nat economy	1.06***	0.22	0.52***
	(0.15)	(0.15)	(0.18)
Referendums			
Voted Yes and Leave	2.53***	0.77***	1.00***
	(0.38)	(0.23)	(0.34)
Voted No and Remain	4.98***	3.57***	3.59***
	(0.36)	(0.19)	(0.26)
Voted No and Leave	6.31***	3.87***	3.75***
	(0.44)	(0.33)	(0.40)
Other	3.07***	2.00***	2.20***
	(0.46)	(0.27)	(0.38)
Redistribution	0.25***	-0.05	0.09***
	(0.03)	(0.03)	(0.03)
Constant	-8.18***	-1.76***	-4.89***
	(0.68)	(0.48)	(0.66)
Observations	2,248	2,248	2,248

Notes: Standard errors in parentheses *** $p<0.01$, ** $p<0.05$, Reference categories are income less than £20,000 per year, Scottish Lower Certificate or below qualifications, white British, male, Social class AB.

Voted Yes and Remain. Higher values on HHecon and Natecon indicate economy improved. Higher values on redistribute indicate opposition to redistribution.

Table A4 presents the results of a multivariate analysis of vote choice in Scotland using a statistical technique called 'logistic regression'. The coefficients reported in the table refers to the log odds ratio. Values marked with an asterisk indicate that there is a statistically 'significant' difference in the likelihood of voting Conservative rather than SNP between the group in question and the reference category, controlling for the other variables in the model. Values greater than zero indicate that the group in question is more likely to vote Conservative than the reference group, holding all other factors constant; and values less than zero indicate that the group in question is less likely to vote Conservative than the reference group, holding all other factors constant.

Notes

[i] These estimates come from data compiled by Chris Hanretty. See Hanretty, C (2017) 'Areal interpolation and the UK's referendum on EU membership', Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, Vol. 27, Issue 4.

[ii] The other being Banff and Buchan.

[iii] These seats are: Glasgow South West, Glasgow East, Airdrie and Shotts, Lanark and Hamilton East, Motherwell and Wishaw, Inverclyde, Dunfermline and Fife West.

[iv] These seats are: Perth and North Perthshire, Lanark and Hamilton East, Edinburgh South West, Argyll and Bute, Ayrshire Central, East Lothian, Linlithgow and Falkirk East, Ayrshire North and Arran, Edinburgh North and Leith, Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey, and Paisley and Renfrewshire North.

[v] According to the BES multi item measure of the left-right scale, 42% of the English placed themselves on the left, compared to 51% of Scots and 46% of the Welsh. (Where left-wing is defined as respondents who scored less than 3 on the 0-10 scale).

[vi] Kernel density plots. In statistics, kernel density estimation is a non-parametric way to estimate the probability density function of a random variable.

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