**The limits of partisan loyalty**   
How the Scottish Independence Referendum cost Labour

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**Abstract**

The 2015 General Election saw a collapse in Labour support in Scotland resulting in almost total annihilation in terms of Parliamentary seats north of the border. In this paper we show how the referendum on independence in Scotland in September 2014 precipitated this upheaval. Drawing on theories of attitudinal and behavioural inconsistency from social psychology, we reveal how Labour supporters who voted ‘Yes’ to independence subsequently became more favourably disposed towards Scottish National Party (SNP) and the policies that they advocated. A realignment of attitudes and voting among erstwhile Labour voters meant that those supporting independence were more likely to switch to the SNP after the referendum. We argue that the Scottish independence referendum had a profound re-aligning effect on party identification in Scotland, cementing the link between SNP voting and pro-independence attitudes.

Keywords

Referendum; realignment; Scotland; Social identity theory; spill-over

“*I am a trade unionist and coming from a Labour supporting background I should be red through and through but I could never vote for such a bunch of lying toe rags*”

Comment posted by a ‘Yes’ voter on whatscotlandthinks.org

**Introduction**

The triumph of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the collapse of Scottish Labour at the 2015 UK general election was one of the most dramatic upheavals in British electoral history and a crucial factor in shaping the outcome of the election. In 2010 Labour had won 41 of the 56 seats in Scotland with over 40% of the vote, whilst the SNP had won only six with 20%. In 2015 Labour could muster only 24% of the popular vote and a single seat while the SNP won 50% of the vote and all but three of the 59 seats. This was Labour worst performance in Scotland in terms of vote share since 1918 and the best ever achieved by the SNP. It also made the SNP the third largest party in Parliament, and contributed to the fragmentation of the party system both in terms of vote share and Parliamentary representation (J. Green and Prosser 2016).

But what precipitated such a dramatic change in electoral fortunes? In this article we consider how a political event - the independence referendum - altered the basis of political alignments in Scotland, bringing about a shift in the underlying structure of political allegiances through widespread changes to political identities, and the nature of their relationship to party support. We argue that whilst the referendum did not create Labour’s Scottish problems in a vacuum, it certainly acted as catalyst for Labour collapse in Scotland.

Previous research has shown that second-order elections may influence voting behaviour in first-order elections (Bechtel 2012). Here we extend this logic to referendums and demonstrate that voting in apparently stand-alone and non-partisan electoral contests can also have spill-over effects on to ‘first-order’ elections. Research in the US context has demonstrated that this can be the case, albeit with less immediately dramatic consequences compared to the Scottish case. Bowler et al. (2006) have shown that a series of anti-immigrant ballot initiatives in California led to a decrease in the likelihood of Latinos identifying as Republican. Donovan et al. (2008) show that state ballot initiatives on same sex marriage increased the issue salience of gay marriage and the importance of gay marriage to vote choice at the 2004 Presidential Election.

**Background**

The Scottish independence referendum which took place on September 18th 2014 was the result of a long-running campaign for independence led by the Scottish National Party since their formation in 1934 and followed the creation of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999. The decision to hold the referendum was made by the Scottish Parliament following the SNP victory in the Scottish Parliamentary Elections of 2011, but required the agreement of the UK Parliament, which was formally provided by the coalition government in Westminster in the 2012 Edinburgh agreement. The result of the referendum saw the pro-Union (‘*Better Together*’) side winning by a margin of 55% to 45%, despite a dramatic narrowing of their lead in the polls in the run up to referendum day. The referendum followed a hard-fought campaign and the turnout rate of 85% – the highest ever recorded for a vote in Scotland – underlined the high level of engagement across the electorate.

The major Westminster parties (and their Scottish counterparts) all lined up to back the *Better Together* campaign, while the Scottish National Party (SNP) dominated the *Yes Scotland* campaign, although formally both campaigns were non-partisan and *Yes Scotland* involved members of other parties including the Scottish Greens and Labour for Independence.

In terms of electoral politics many of Labour’s problems that the independence referendum highlighted were brewing well before the referendum was announced. Although Labour had held the majority of Scottish seats in every general election since 1959, they had come second in the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011 under the Additional Member System to a burgeoning SNP under the leadership of Alex Salmond. Notwithstanding this, in terms of popular support Labour had enjoyed a comfortable lead in the opinion polls for Westminster elections in Scotland throughout the period following the SNP victory in 2011 through to April 2014 when the referendum campaign was in full swing. It is important to note that in terms of vote intention at least, the impact of the referendum campaign on Labour’s popularity did not seem to hit until shortly before referendum day, their support continued to erode steadily thereafter, right through to the General Election of 2015. The most dramatic period of decline for Labour immediately followed the referendum, which our analyses suggest reflects the shifting of alignments of political attitudes and partisanship in the immediate post-referendum period.

The decline in Labour voting was not spread evenly across the population. Data from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) (Fieldhouse et al. 2017) and Scottish Referendum Study (SRS) (Henderson et al. 2014) reveal that the referendum had little impact on the voting intentions of Scots who voted against independence (Figure 1). Rather the shifts in Scottish voting behaviour occurred primarily amongst those supporting independence that deserted Labour, switching allegiance to the SNP. Figure 1 shows how at the beginning of the period (February-March 2014) around two-thirds of people who voted in favour of independence (hereafter ‘Yes voters’) intended to vote for the SNP, and approximately 20% still intended to vote Labour. Indeed, with Labour still ahead in the opinion polls at the start of 2014 the SNP lead amongst pro-independence voters was insufficient to outweigh Labour’s comfortable lead amongst unionists. The picture from the BESIP changed very little in May following the European Parliamentary Elections which saw the SNP emerge as the largest party in Scotland but by a narrow margin over Labour of 29% to 25%, less than in the corresponding elections of 2009, when the SNP had beaten Labour by 8.3%. After the referendum in September, however, a dramatic change had occurred: 83% of Yes voters were now intending to vote SNP compared to only 6% Labour. In contrast No voters barely moved. By March 2015 we see that almost 88% of Yes voters intended to vote SNP, and this increased still further over the election campaign, with 90% of Yes voters in BESIP reporting voting for the SNP in May 2015.

Figure 1. General election vote intention of Yes and No voters 2014-2015.



In this paper we show that voting in the referendum precipitated switching party allegiance in Scotland. This resulted not from a process of persuasion, where some voters became convinced of the case for Scottish independence and subsequently switched to the SNP, but through the changing alignments between support for Scottish independence and support for the Labour party. Having voted in favour of Scottish independence, Yes supporters could not reconcile themselves with supporting a unionist political party.

**Attitudes, behaviour and identity**

The argument that electoral events may themselves have feedback effects on political alignments is not new. In particular, it has been suggested that how people vote influences party identification as well as the reverse (Markus and Converse 1979). It is long established in social psychology that as well as attitudes leading to behaviour, behaviour can lead to attitude formation and change. Prominent examples of psychological theories that predict a change in attitudes arising from changes in behaviour include cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957), balance theory (Heider 1958), and self-perception theory (Bem 1967).

In the political domain, voters engage in motivated reasoning in order to reconcile new political information with their pre-existing views and behaviours (Lodge and Taber 2013). In general motivated reasoning tends to increase the *stability* of political attitudes and alignments and the act of voting itself can buttress voters’ affective orientations towards a pre-existing attitude or affiliation. Dinas (2014) demonstrates that people reinforce their partisan predispositions by voting for their preferred party, arguing that voting provides signals of group identity, which in turn strengthens people's partisan ties. However the same process can lead to *change* in political attitudes and alignments in the event of one-off or idiosyncratic political behaviours. Bølstad et al (2013) reveal a positive effect of the act of voting tactically on preferences for the party voted for, attributing this to the reduction of cognitive dissonance – having voted for a party it is harder to dislike that party and easier to like it.

The idea that political identity might shift in response to behaviour is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981). Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that how citizens perceive other members of a group can affect attitudes and norms through a process of self-categorisation and meta-contrast, whereby group members maximise inter-group differentiation and minimise within group differentiation. Self-identity can operate at different levels of abstraction – from the individual self (‘I’) to shared group identities (‘we’). For self-categorization theory the situational salience of group membership is key to the role of social identities in explaining behaviour (Turner et al. 1987). The move from personal to social identity increases the adherence to group norms and self-stereotyping (Hogg, Hardie, and Reynolds 1995; Terry and Hogg 1996; Turner et al. 1987) ‘factors that are logical precursors to political cohesion’ (Huddy 2013, 740).

In political science, partisan identification has been likened to other forms of social identity as described in social identity theory (Greene 1999; Huddy 2001; Greene 2004; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Huddy 2013). Self-categorisation may therefore lead to greater differentiation between one’s own party and its opponents (Duck, Hogg, and Terry 1995; Greene 2004). While people have multiple identities of varying importance, it has been successfully demonstrated that political parties can be relevant psychologically salient bases for identification and form the basis of stable political identities in a similar way to other social identities (D. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002; Greene 1999; Greene 2004).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) predicts that group norms and attitudes towards behaviour are correlated and that the effect of the attitude on behaviour is stronger for people who perceive an attitudinally congruent group norm (Terry and Hogg 1996). Moreover, behaviours may reinforce group identification especially when those behaviours are public in nature. In other words, we might anticipate a circular model of attitudes, behaviour and identity. If political partisanship can form the basis of social identity and self-categorisation, it is possible that other salient political positions may do likewise. In the case of the Scottish referendum, the campaign and the view citizens took on independence was highly salient and socially significant. Following the logic of self-categorization, the referendum might change the perception of Yes-voting Labour supporters to regard other Labour voters to be part of an out-group (‘unionists’) whilst SNP supporters will be increasingly viewed as an in-group (‘nationalists’). This will be manifested in a switch or weakening of party-identification amongst erstwhile Labour supporters who voted ‘Yes’. Certainly, such a shift would serve to reduce the cognitive dissonance inherent in a combination of pro-Labour and pro-independence identities as nicely articulated by the quotation at the beginning of this article.

By shifting the basis of social identity of voters from one which is defined by party to a new basis of self-categorisation (nationalist versus unionist), the referendum could weaken the salience of traditional partisanship. Moreover, an increase in the salience of a new group (e.g. ‘nationalists’ or ‘Yes voters’) can override the attitudes and norms associated with other groups (Mullen, Brown, and Smith 1992; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010). In other words, citizens may move their attitudes and norms into line with those of their new identity. It is therefore likely that voters on either side of the debate were potentially subject to changing their views on key political issues and on the political parties in keeping with the dominant group norm. In the case of ‘Yes’ voting this would be feeling more Scottish, more pro-independence and less favourably inclined towards those on the unionist side including the Labour Party.

This change in attitudes may also extend to evaluations of key protagonists, particularly the political parties and their leaders, and insofar as these attitudes and evaluations influence future vote choices, the referendum may have a further indirect impact on party support in subsequent elections. Whilst changes in perceived competence due to the increased exposure of Scottish voters to political leaders may be offered as an alternative explanation of Labour’s Scottish collapse, it is entirely consistent with the SIT approach that shifting perceptions of competence are driven by changes in identity precipitated by the referendum campaign. Social identity theories of leadership emphasise the importance of group context for understanding how people feel towards leaders (Hogg 2001; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2010). Leaders are seen as the prototypical group members and the changing situational salience of Scottish nationalist identity is likely to have led to change in feelings towards SNP and Labour leaders. As Green et al. argue, partisans update their evaluations in response to performance like any other voters but this does not normally lead to sustained changes in voting behaviour or partisanship unless there are fundamental changes in the social imagery of the parties (D. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002).

Whilst it is consistent with social identity theory for citizens to hold multiple political identities, where these identities come in to direct conflict it is quite likely that identifying with the Yes campaign (or as a nationalist-separatist) might supplant existing party identities, or at least weaken Labour identification, particularly given the high salience of Scottish independence at the time. This suggests the potential for a possible lasting shift in alignments, similar to the weakening of traditional partisan attachments in the US deep South in response to the civil rights movement and the position taken by the Democrats in that upheaval (D. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler 2002), albeit much more quickly.

Previous research has shown that second order elections can provide opportunities for small parties to gain support and increase their perceived viability in subsequent first order elections (Farrer 2015; Prosser 2016; MacAllister et al. 2002). Other research has shown that the act of casting a vote in an election more generally may lead to changes in attachment to the parties competing (Bølstad et al 2013; Dinas 2014). Thus second order electoral contests may impact ‘first order’ partisan identities and attachments. Referendums do present a rather different set of circumstances and hence opportunities, but they have as great if not greater potential for affecting first-order elections. The main difference is of course that a referendum is not necessarily a straightforward competition between parties. In this sense, we might expect the potential for spill-over to be reduced. If parties are not directly competing with each other the result cannot act as a guide to voters about electoral viability and is therefore unlikely to be a major barrier in breaking down the psychological effects of strategic voting (Duverger 1954; MacAllister, Fieldhouse, and Russell 2002). However, if a referendum is structured by party competition – that is the political parties are openly campaigning on one side of the debate or the other – then a referendum campaign might expose previously latent issues in party choice, raising the salience of a potentially cross cutting political cleavage. For example, following the unsuccessful referendum campaign in Quebec in 1976, the Parti Quebecois enjoyed an increase in both vote share and seats in the 1981 provincial elections in (Clarke 1983). The parallels with the Scottish independence referendum are obvious, the referendums in both countries (including the more recent 1995 Quebec referendum) being called by nationalist parties holding power in devolved parliaments, that had come to power on the back of a resurgence of territorial nationalism.

Unlike research on second order elections, we are looking at the effect of ‘second order’ voting on a first order general election rather than the reverse. In distinction to other research on voting spill-over effects (Franklin 2017; Ferland 2014) we are not anticipating that the act of voting for an alternative (non-mainstream) party at a second order election will increase support for those parties through a habit mechanism (Dinas 2014; Franklin 2017). Rather, we are examining the impact of a referendum in which voters are not asked to choose a party. Therefore the referendum cannot act as a ‘stepping stone’ in the sense that Franklin (2017) describes, but instead we are making a link between political identity in a highly salient and emotive referendum campaign and the subsequent effect of that on the willingness to maintain or to change one’s existing partisan identity and vote choice. We hypothesise that taking sides in a highly salient referendum required voters to reconsider both their partisan allegiances and their political values. For example, could erstwhile Labour identifiers who were Yes voters reconcile their support for a SNP backed Yes campaign and their opposition to the Labour backed ‘No’ campaign, with a continued allegiance with Labour? In short, the answer appears to be ‘no’.

**Data and methodology**

To examine this question, it is important to allow for the potentially endogenous relationship between party identification, political attitudes, referendum vote and general election vote. To try to unpick this, we use merged panel data from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP), waves 1 through 6 (Fieldhouse et al. 2017), carried out between February 2014 and May 2015, and the Scottish Referendum Study (SRS) pre-referendum wave (Henderson et al. 2014) which surveyed the same respondents. The first two waves of the BESIP precede the independence referendum, taking place in February-March and May-June 2014 respectively. The SRS pre-referendum wave took place in September 2014 immediately before the referendum on September 18th and the BESIP post referendum wave (which provides data on referendum vote) was carried out between September 19th and 17th October 2014. We also use pre-general election wave data from BESIP wave 4 (March-April, 2015) and post-election data including vote choice in wave 6 (May-June 2015). This allows us to adopt a cross-lagged panel design as illustrated in simplified form in Figure 2.

The design as illustrated in Figure 2 allows us to test the direct and indirect effects of the referendum on vote choice. More specifically, it allows us to test how prior referendum vote intention and (from wave 3) referendum vote choice influenced party identification and political attitudes, whilst controlling for lagged versions of those variables. The inclusion of lagged dependent variables in a cross-lagged design provides a means to test whether referendum voting was a cause or consequence of these political attitudes, evaluations and party identification. We also include other factors in the model that we expected to influence referendum choice (and intention), and as potential alternate explanations of changes to party identity and vote choice: Britishness and Scottishness, approval of the Scottish Government performance, and party leader like scores (both as a measure of competence evaluations), devolution preferences,[[1]](#footnote-2) and satisfaction with democracy in the UK. Because we are interested in the indirect effects of the referendum as well as the direct effects, we model these as dependent variables as well as independent variables. Where these are modelled, the explanatory variables include their lagged value (at t-1), party identification and referendum vote choice/intention. The models of party identification and General election vote choice include referendum vote/intention. For the referendum vote choice party of the model we also include variables that are collected only before the referendum that measure hypothetical economic expectations under independence (both personal and general). We also include age, subjective social class, political knowledge, and prior vote (Labour in 2010 and SNP at the 2011 Scottish Parliament election) in all the models as controls.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Figure 2. Cross-lagged model of attitudes, referendum vote, and party ID/vote intention



T1=Feb/march (BESIP wave 1)

T2=May 2014(BESIP wave 2)

T3=pre-referendum (SRS pre-referendum)

T4=referendum (BESIP wave 3)

T5=pre-election (BESIP wave 4)

T6= Post general election 2015 (BESIP wave 6)

The models illustrated in Figure 2 are complex with multiple dependent variable and many direct and indirect pathways of relevance to the hypotheses. Fortunately, however, we can avoid a lot of this complexity by limiting our models to include only voters who shared the same voting intention at the outset (t1), thus making the models an analysis of change over the course of the referendum campaign. Table 1 shows the flow of the vote between BESIP wave 1 (Feb-March, 2014) and BESIP wave 6 (May 2015). What is immediately apparent is that the critical movement – and the phenomenon that we are trying to explain in this article – is the exodus of Labour voters from early 2014 to May 2015. We see that 33.4% of all those who supported Labour in 2014 had shifted to the SNP by the general election and these made up 12.3% of all Scottish voters. This was also reflected in the timing of the SNP’s rise in the opinion polls (and Labour’s decline) which occurred from around April 2014 onwards. This is not to say that there was no important change prior to 2014, but by focussing on the 2014-15 period, we are able to capture a substantial proportion of the shift from Labour to the SNP. While for most of our panel we know how they voted in 2010, because we do not have most of the relevant explanatory variables prior to 2014, in our cross-lagged models we treat wave one as t1. For this reason and because of our interest in the haemorrhage of Labour voting we restrict our cross-lagged models to Scottish panel members who intended to vote Labour when we first interviewed them in 2014. In other words, we are examining Labour desertion to the SNP between February 2014 and May 2015.

Table 1. Intention in Feb 2014 (wave 1) versus eventual W6 GE vote, row percent and total percent

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  |  | **Reported vote May 2016** | | | | | |
| **Vote intention**  **Feb 2014** |  | Labour | SNP | Conservative | Liberal Democrat | Other | Total Vote intention |
| Labour |  | 58.3 | 33.4 | 3 | 3.2 | 2.2 | 36.9 |
| SNP |  | 2.6 | 92.8 | 1.2 | 2.3 | 1 | 33.6 |
| Conservative |  | 18. 39 | 5.3 | 62.5 | 13 | 0.9 | 16.3 |
| Liberal Democrat |  | 21.5 | 22.9 | 6.6 | 44.5 | 4.4 | 4.3 |
| Other |  | 25 | 27.3 | 11.1 | 4.2 | 32.32 | 8.9 |
| Total Vote |  | 28.5 | 47.8 | 13 | 6.3 | 4.4 |  |

**Labour’s dwindling base**

Aside from the circumstantial evidence of the timing of the shift in the popular support for the two parties, Figure 1 revealed an increasing correlation between referendum vote intention and general election vote intention in the run up to the referendum, which continued to increase once votes had been cast.

But when did the key changes occur? Figure 3 provides an illustration of the flow of the vote intentions for Yes voters who were still intending to vote Labour at the start of our panel at three key moments – immediately prior to the referendum, immediately after the referendum, and at the 2015 election. The thickness of each block is proportionate of the size of the group, with the darker blocks indicating those intending to or voting Labour and the lighter blocks indicating those intending to vote/voting SNP.

Immediately prior to the referendum, about two-thirds of previously Labour supporting Yes voters were still intending to vote Labour, a proportion which drops to less than half in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. By the time of the 2015 election Labour had only hung on to a small minority of its previous supporters – around four in five of those Yes voters who had intended to vote Labour only 15 months previously voted for the SNP.

Figure 3. Flow of vote between Labour and SNP for initially Labour supporting Yes voters between key periods in the run-up and aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum.



While the preceding analyses have shown how voting for independence was closely related to shifts in attitudes and party support in the run up to and after the referendum, they provide only circumstantial evidence for our argument. We now turn to the multivariate longitudinal cross-lagged models described above to provide evidence of the most likely direction of causal effects. Although we cannot completely isolate the causal effect due to the possibility of reciprocal causality, the cross-lagged models minimise this problem by measuring the explanatory variables in the preceding time point (t-1) and by allowing us to control for lagged versions of the dependent variable. As noted by Berrington et al (2006) the inclusion of a lagged endogenous variable also provides some protection against the effects of unobserved time-constant variables. The model also allows us to estimate the effects of variables we are interested in on referendum vote choice as well as the reverse, so we are able to get a good picture of the recursive relationship. Indeed, the endogenous nature of the relationship is central to our argument in that we seek to demonstrate how attitudes, evaluations and identities that informed referendum vote choice were also affected by that choice.

**Measuring the referendum effect**

Before examining the impact of the referendum on the outcomes of interest we should note that many of the variables that influence vote choice also influence referendum voting (as illustrated in Figure 2). As explaining referendum vote choice is not the main aim of this article, suffice to say that the determinants of referendum vote are consistent with expectations. Controlling for prior referendum vote intention, the main influences on referendum vote in May 2014 (t2) were devolution preferences, and feelings about the party leaders (Table A2). Prior to the referendum (t3), approval of the Scottish government and hypothetical economic expectations also played a role in referendum vote intention. Finally, allowing for intention at the previous wave, actual referendum vote was additionally influenced by devolution preferences, satisfaction with UK democracy and expectations about the Scottish economy if Scotland became independent.

Turning to SNP vote intention and vote, our objective is to measure the effect of referendum intention and vote on switching to the SNP, whilst controlling for those factors (measured in the previous wave) that affected referendum intention/vote as well as other factors that might have precipitated switching (including previous voting behaviour at the 2010 Westminster and 2011 Holyrood elections). Given these very comprehensive controls measured at t-1, it is perhaps not surprising that the impact of referendum vote intention is not statistically significant in the first wave, and only significant at the p < 0.1 level in the second wave. However after the referendum had taken place, referendum voting has a statistically significant and substantively large effect in every subsequent wave. We illustrate the impact of referendum vote (intention) in Figure 4, which shows the average marginal effect of referendum vote (intention in pre-referendum waves) on switching to the SNP if the respondent did not intend to vote SNP in the previous wave. As can be seen from Figure 4 there is a large increase in its effect between the pre-referendum and post-referendum waves. This suggests that the behaviour of voting in the referendum – nailing one’s colours to the mast – had a greater effect on party choice than intention alone. This supports the argument that voting Yes directly led to an increase in the probability of voting SNP in the General election amongst erstwhile Labour voters, and that this was linked to the act of voting. Referendum vote continues to predict switching in the further post-referendum waves but of declining magnitude as the election approaches. That the size of the effect declines before May 2015, reflecting the fact that by that point, all but a handful or Yes voters had already switched the SNP (as shown in Figure 1).

Figure 4. The effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on switching to the SNP if not intending to vote SNP in the previous wave.



But how did the referendum influence party identities? In February 2014, 84% of our cohort of Labour supporters identified with the party, but this had fallen to 67% in March 2015 (t5) and 62% by May 2015 (post-election). However this fall occurred mainly within those who voted Yes in September 2014: Labour identity amongst Yes voters in this cohort fell from 82% in February 2014 to 37% in May 2015. Although Labour identification also fell amongst No voters, the equivalent drop was much smaller, from 85% to 75%.

To reveal the extent to which these shifts in identity are a result of referendum voting or of some other change in attitudes or evaluations we look to our structural equation model (Table A1). Figure 5 shows the impact of referendum vote on identifying with Labour and the SNP allowing for the same control variables as the vote choice models. The pattern is very similar to that seen for the effect of the referendum on switching to the SNP – before the referendum there is no clear and consistent effect of referendum vote intention on identifying with Labour. However following the referendum, those who voted Yes are less likely to continue to identify with Labour in every subsequent wave.

We cannot model SNP identity prior to the referendum vote for the simple fact that there are so few SNP identifiers in our sample of those intending to vote Labour in February 2014 that there is insufficient variation in the dependent variable to model (only 7 respondents – 0.8% of the total – identify with the SNP in the pre-referendum wave of the data). Following the referendum however, referendum vote strongly predicts identifying with the SNP. Nearly half (45%) of this cohort (all of whom had intended to vote Labour in February 2014) who voted for independence, identified with the SNP by the time of the general election in May 2015. Thus through its influence on party identification, and the effect of that on vote choice the referendum also had an *indirect* effect on party choice at the general election. Indeed it is worth noting that in the post-election wave, for the first time, SNP party identity was a very strong predictor of switching to the SNP (Table A2).

Figure 5.The effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on identifying with Labour and the SNP



**Changing evaluations and attitudes**

Changes in party support and identification do not occur in isolation from political attitudes and evaluations. We hypothesised that voting Yes led to a change in political attitudes in a direction consistent with and more favourable to the SNP and unfavourable to Labour. Table 2 shows the aggregate change in key attitudinal indicators between t1 and t5 (pre-election) for our cohort of Labour supporters. There are large changes in the approval of the Scottish government, feelings towards the party leaders, and party identity, especially amongst those intending to vote for independence. Just over half (55%) of the Yes voting respondents approved of the Scottish government in t1, rising to nearly three-quarters (74.4%) in t5. Yes voters became more negative in their feelings about Ed Miliband after the referendum whilst No voters were stable in the opinions. The largest changes are how Yes and No voters felt about the leaders of the SNP. Before the referendum in t1, there is already a clear divide in how future Yes and No voters felt about Alex Salmond, with Yes voters on average liking Salmond by 3.1 points more than No voters. Before the 2015 election Yes voters on average liked Nicola Sturgeon by 4.8 points more than No voters.[[3]](#footnote-4)[1] Although there were only small net changes in Scottishness, Britishness and satisfaction with UK democracy, these changes travelled in opposite directions for Yes and No voters (with Yes voters becoming more Scottish and No voters more British). It is also worth noting that the percentage of these who intended to vote Yes amongst Labour t1 supporters was only 17% in February 2014, but 28% reported voting Yes in September 2014.

Table 2. *Aggregate changes in attitudes by wave (Labour t1 supporters)*

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **All** | | **Yes Voters** | | **No Voters** | |
| **Variable** | **Feb 2014** | **March 2015** | **Feb 2014** | **March 2015** | **Feb 2014** | **March 2015** |
| Scottishness (1-7) | 5.4 | 5.5 | 6 | 6.1 | 5.2 | 5.3 |
| Britishness (1-7) | 5.4 | 5.5 | 4.4 | 4.3 | 5.8 | 5.9 |
| Devolution preferences (z score) | -0.2 | -0.19 | 0.3 | 0.4 | -0.4 | -0.4 |
| Approve of Scottish government (%) | 25.4 | 35.9 | 55 | 74.4 | 13.3 | 21 |
| Satisfied with UK democracy (1-4) | 2.4 | 2.3 | 2 | 1.9 | 2.5 | 2.4 |
| Like Miliband (0-10) | 5.9 | 5.6 | 5.6 | 4.7 | 6 | 6 |
| Like Salmond/Sturgeon (0-10) | 2.6 | 4 | 4.8 | 7.5 | 1.7 | 2.7 |
| Identify with Labour (%) | 88.6 | 75.2 | 84 | 50 | 90.3 | 84.7 |
| Identify with SNP (%) | 2.3 | 10.7 | 6.7 | 35.3 | 0.6 | 1.5 |

Together these findings suggest that referendum voting precipitated a change in attitudes towards devolution, evaluations of Scottish government performance, satisfaction with UK democracy, Scottish and British identities, ratings of political leaders, as well as *directly* affecting vote choice and partisan identification. To test this more thoroughly, attitudinal variables were also defined as dependent variables in the structural equation framework as described above. Table A2 shows the effect of referendum voting on each of the explanatory variables in the vote choice/party identification models. As noted above, the explanatory variables include the lagged dependent variable (t-1), party identification, referendum vote choice/intention and controls. What we find is that all of the explanatory variables from our vote choice model were also predicted by referendum vote choice throughout the period, with the exception of Scottish national identity, which was only significantly affected by referendum vote in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. In other words, through Yes voting, the referendum helped shift attitudes in favour of the SNP by leading to a reduction in British identity, increased approval of the Scottish Government, preference for a more radical devolution of powers, and a reduction in satisfaction with UK democracy. To illustrate one example of how attitudes were influenced by referendum voting over the period, Figure 6 illustrates the changing average marginal effect of referendum voting on national identity. Although for the most part the effect on Scottishness is not statistically significant, this mirrors a significant reduction in Britishness associated with Yes voting. Like Labour identity and switching to the SNP the peak effect is immediately after the referendum in September.

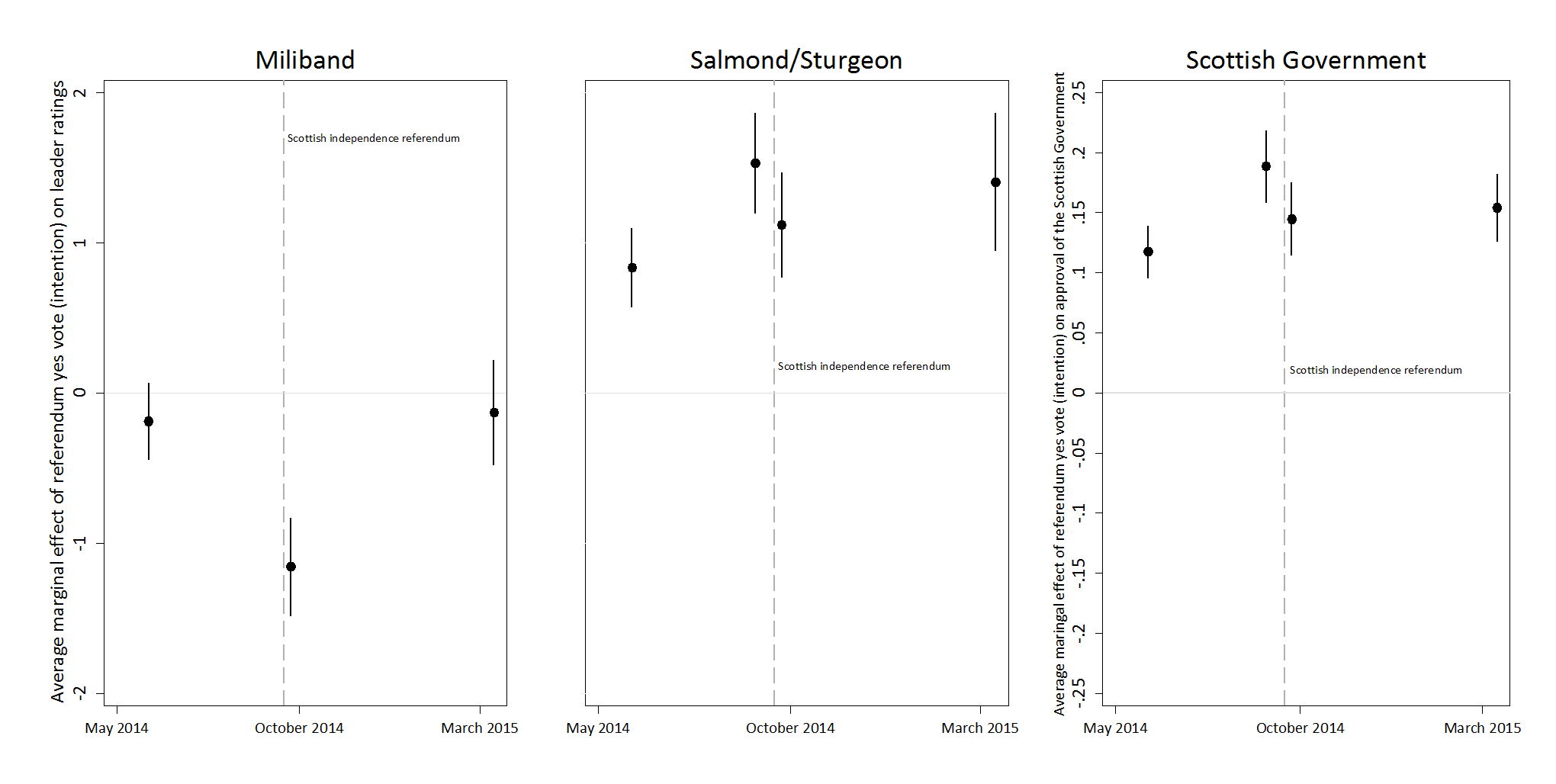
Through changes to the distribution and alignment of attitudes, and the impact those attitudes had on general election vote choice, referendum voting led *indirectly* to the increase in SNP voting in the general election amongst erstwhile Labour voters.

Figure 6. Effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on national identity (0-7 scale)



Figure 7 illustrates the effect of referendum yes vote (intention) on how voters felt about Ed Miliband (the Miliband question was not asked in the SRS pre-referendum wave) and the leader of the SNP (Salmond before and immediately after the referendum, Sturgeon before the 2015 election). In line with our argument that leaders are seen as the prototypical group members, referendum vote (intention) is a strong influence on how voters felt about party leaders – in this case, particularly the leaders of the Yes side and the SNP. An almost identical pattern is found for approval of the Scottish Government, the effect of which also peaked in the immediate run up to the referendum.

Figure 7. Effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on feelings towards Labour and SNP party leaders (0-10 scale)



**What if…?**

The final step in our analysis is to establish how changes in attitudes, evaluations and identities, and their alignment with vote choice affected voting at the 2015 General Election. The preceding analysis has demonstrated that the relationship between referendum vote and 2015 vote is complex. In order to disentangle the different effects of the referendum vote we decompose the shift in party support as a result of the referendum into (i) changes in the *distribution* of attitudes, evaluations, and identities and (ii) changes in the *alignment* of attitudes and party choice. In other words, did people switch to the SNP because the referendum led to changes in underlying attitudes that in turn predict voting SNP, or were attitudes relatively stable but how those attitudes translated into vote choice changed?

To examine the effect of changes in the distribution of attitudes, identities, and evaluations we fit a logit model of vote SNP intention before the referendum amongst Labour 2010 voters (based on actual 2010 vote where available and on vote recall where not) at t2 (with t1 predictors). In simplified form, the model is specified as:

1. SNPt2\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt1 + βt1ATTITUDESt1 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt1+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt1 + ε

Where ‘Attitudes’ is shorthand for Britishness, Scottishness, Approval of the Scottish Government, Devolution preferences, and Satisfaction with UK democracy.[[4]](#footnote-5)

To analyse how the relationship between these variables and vote choice changed after the referendum we also estimate a model of voting for the SNP with the same variables measured after the referendum (in t5, except for referendum vote which is reported at t4):

1. SNPt6\* = αt5 + βt5REFERENDUM YES VOTEt4 + βt5ATTITUDESt5 + βt5PARTY ID STRENGTHt5+ βt5LEADER EVALUATIONSt5 + ε

We then estimate the expected proportion predicted to vote SNP under a series of counter-factual conditions where post referendum data is substituted for the pre referendum data in model i. This is equivalent to a Blinder-Oaxaca wage decomposition where the counter factual represents the situation where voters with post-referendum attitudes (t5) are granted the same return (i.e. coefficients) on their characteristics as pre-referendum voters (t1) (Blinder 1973; Oaxaca 1973).

First, we estimate the counterfactual effect of actual referendum vote (reported in t4) compared to referendum vote intention in t1. This counterfactual examines whether there is no difference between the effect of referendum voting *intention* and actual referendum voting *behaviour*. If this were the case the post referendum increase in SNP support would simply be the result of more people voting Yes than were intending to do so in t1, rather than the behavioural effect we propose here.

1. SNPCF1\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt4 + βt1ATTITUDESt1 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt1+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt1 + ε

Second, we estimate the counterfactual effect of changes in attitudes (reported in t5). In doing so we examine whether the effect of the referendum was one of persuasion and learning – for example, the referendum campaign may have led to people re-examining their own feelings about Scottish and British identity, or their preferences for Scottish control of public policy. Changes in these attitudes may have in turn led to supporting the independence and devolution supporting SNP.

1. SNPCF2\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt1 + βt1ATTITUDESt5 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt1+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt1 + ε

Third, we estimate the counterfactual effect of changes in strength of Labour and SNP party identity. As we saw earlier voting Yes in the referendum, contrary to the position of the Labour party, led to decreases in the likelihood of identifying with Labour and increased the likelihood of identifying with the SNP. Given the importance of party identity for vote choice in election, we expect that changes in identity will lead to a higher predicted proportion of Labour 2010 voters switching to the SNP.

1. SNPCF3\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt1 + βt1ATTITUDESt1 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt5+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt1 + ε

Fourth, we estimate the counterfactual effect of changes in feelings towards the leaders of Labour and the SNP (Salmond pre referendum and Sturgeon post referendum). This counterfactual has several potential interpretations. In our view changes in feelings towards party leaders reflect changes in the importance of political identities. The role of SNP leaders in the referendum campaign positioned them squarely as leaders of supporters of Scottish independence and Labour leaders became associated with the unionist side. The changing salience of Scottish nationalist identities is likely to have led to an evaluation of political figures in terms of independence, and not in terms of political parties. An alternative interpretation is that changes in leader ratings reflect a valence process – increased exposure to leaders during the referendum campaign may have led voters to re-evaluate their opinions about their fitness for office. Although the polarisation of feelings towards leaders along the lines of referendum vote, and the substantial effect of referendum vote intention on leader ratings shown in the structural model (Table A3) suggest that the former interpretation is plausible (with changes to party leaders reflecting motivated reasoning) we cannot fully disentangle these effects. A final confound is that on average, voters liked Nicola Sturgeon more than they liked Alex Salmond. The change in SNP leader after the referendum increases the apparent difference between pre and post referendum leader evaluations, which may inflate the apparent referendum effect on leadership ratings. Again however we cannot disentangle these effects.

1. SNPCF4\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt1 + βt1ATTITUDESt1 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt1+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt5 + ε

Fifth, we combine all of these changes to estimate the combined counterfactual effect of changes to the distribution of the variables in our model. The gap between this estimate and the proportion of Labour 2010 voters who actually ended up voting SNP represents the combined effect of changes in returns to the variables in the model and any change that is not explained by the variables in the model.

1. SNPCF5\* = αt1 + βt1REFERENDUM YES VOTEt4 + βt1ATTITUDESt5 + βt1PARTY ID STRENGTHt5+ βt1LEADER EVALUATIONSt5 + ε

The results for the two models (i and ii) fitted to the pre and post referendum data are shown in table A4. The predicted proportion of 2010 Labour voters voting SNP in each of the models is illustrated in figure 8, the dark plots represent the two fitted models and the lighter plots represent the counterfactual models. The proportion intending to vote SNP at t2 was 13.3% whilst the proportion who actually voted SNP was 33%. The first two counterfactuals – for referendum vote and attitude change – both show that changes to the proportion of people voting Yes and to underlying attitudes have a negligible impact on the proportion predicted to vote SNP (predicted proportions of 13.8% and 13.4% respectively, neither of which is statistically significantly different to the actual pre referendum proportion). The party identity and leader ratings counterfactuals both increase the predicted proportion voting SNP (16% and 19.8% respectively, both of which are statistically significantly different to the baseline). Combining all of the counterfactual conditions together gives a predicted proportion of 23.9% - an increase of 10.3 percentage points – just over half of the actual change.

It is clear from the counterfactual analysis that changes to underlying attitudes such as national identity, preferences for devolution, satisfaction with British democracy, and approval of the Scottish government, play almost no role in explaining the sudden rise of the SNP after the referendum. Instead changes in variables relating to political identity – partisanship and feelings towards political leaders – can explain about half the shift of Labour voters to the SNP after the referendum.

What did change is how attitudes, identities and evaluations are aligned with party choice. Examining the differences in coefficients between the pre and post referendum models in table A4 shows that there a several important changes to how attitudes predict SNP voting. Whilst Britishness has a similar coefficient between models, Scottishness does not predict SNP voting before the referendum but does so post referendum (albeit only at p<0.1 levels of statistical significance). Similarly approval of the Scottish government and devolution preferences do not predict SNP voting pre referendum but do so post referendum (only at the p<0.1 level for devolution preferences). Interestingly, although there are considerable changes to the distribution of leader ratings after the referendum, the coefficients for both SNP leaders and Miliband are much smaller after the referendum. This suggests that although feelings about leaders changed substantially, the effect of these feelings actually diminished – supporting our argument that changes in feelings about leaders are largely a result of other changes in political identities and alignments, rather than a major contributing factor in and of themselves. Finally the magnitude of the coefficient for referendum vote increases by 70%, supporting the earlier analysis that suggested that it was the act of actually casting a vote in the referendum, and not simply the intention, that is important for understanding the post referendum realignment.

Figure 8.counter-factual effect of change in attitude on voting for the SNP



**Conclusions**

The 2015 General Election was disastrous for Labour, not least because of their almost compete capitulation in Scotland. In this article we have shown how the independence referendum precipitated a shift in allegiances of those backing independence. Overall Labour lost one third of its supporters to the SNP between early 2014 and the 2015 General Election, and nearly half since 2010.

Of all the changes that occurred at the 2015 General Election, this is perhaps the most likely to have a lasting impact on the electoral landscape and the political cleavage structure in Britain. Whilst the SNP suffered a partial reversal of their 2015 gains in the 2017 General Election, they still remained by far the largest Parliamentary party in Scotland in terms of votes and seats in the UK Parliament. Moreover, it was not Labour that was the prime beneficiary of this reversal but rather the Scottish Conservatives who nearly doubled their vote share from 2015, picking up 12 seats, and becoming the second largest party in Scotland (the first time they have beaten Labour at a general election in Scotland since 1959). In contrast Labour only modestly improved their vote share by 2.8% and gained six seats. However, the realigning effect of the independence referendum survives this setback for the SNP: by April 2017 there had been no significant recovery in Labour identification among the cohort of those Yes voters who had supported Labour early 2014.[[5]](#footnote-6) The weakening of the SNP positon in the 2017 General Election largely reflected the impact of the referendum on membership of the European Union which cut across divisions created by the Independence referendum. The SNP lost a considerable amount of support to the Conservatives amongst those who voted to leave the EU (Fieldhouse et al. 2018). Indeed the EU referendum provides another example of a referendum that had a dramatic impact on electoral politics in a first-order election (in this case across the whole of Great Britain).

Social identity theory and the concept of cognitive dissonance help us understand how the disconnection between party loyalties and referendum voting could cause a potential realignment of voters on the basis of their views on independence. To put it simply ‘Yes’ voters could not reconcile a Labour vote with the position they had taken at the referendum. In a structural equation framework we demonstrated that voting in favour of independence directly led to an increase in the probability of voting SNP in the general election amongst erstwhile Labour voters. Indeed the impact of referendum on switching to the SNP was highly significant at every time point even when allowing for a powerful array of explanatory variables.

Moreover, in keeping with social identity theory, these changes to vote choice were linked to changing partisan identities. On the one hand voting ‘Yes’ increased the likelihood of identifying with the SNP and reduced identification with Labour. Changes in party identification were driven primarily by referendum vote choice, especially in the period following the referendum, with Yes voters much less likely to continue identifying with Labour and more likely to identify with the SNP. Only 30% of the Labour supporters as of February 2014 who ended up voting SNP still identified with Labour in May 2015 (compared to 80% at the outset). In other words the shifts in voting were also associated with shifts in party identification, an observation confirmed by the significant role of SNP identity in vote switching in the vote models. In keeping with the concept of self-categorisation, ‘Yes’ voters ceased to define themselves by the party they had supported (Labour) and instead defined themselves politically by their support for independence.

Social identity theory also predicts that attitudes should follow those of the salient reference group. It is therefore perhaps not surprising that we found that changes in attitudes, evaluations and identities were influenced by referendum vote both before and after the referendum took place. In particular, devolution preference, national identity, satisfaction with UK democracy and approval of the Scottish Government all influenced the desertion of Labour supporters to the SNP in 2015. In other words, voting Yes led to a change in political attitudes in a direction consistent with and more favourable to the SNP and unfavourable to Labour. Through this effect on attitudes, evaluations and identities, voting Yes indirectly led to an increase in the probability of voting SNP in the 2015 General Election. However, one of the key findings of the study is that the consequences of the referendum was not so much about how it changed people’s attitudes, evaluations and identities, but more about how these became more closely aligned to party support. In short, the referendum caused a re-alignment of existing attitudes such that voters on the Yes side became increasingly likely to switch allegiance immediately before and after the referendum. Our decomposition of vote switching of Labour to SNP demonstrated that only a fraction of the loss of a third of its 2010 voters to the SNP was attributable to changes in attitudinal positions. What was far more important was that those holding pro-independence attitudes were no longer prepared to lend Labour their support after the referendum had taken place. Together with the re-alignment of party identities described above, this suggests that the Scottish Independence referendum had a profound re-aligning effect on party support in Scotland, strengthening the link between SNP voting and pro-independence attitudes.

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1. These were measured on a latent scale estimated with an Item Response Theory model, using respondent preferences for whether the Scottish government should have control of different policy areas (Welfare, the NHS, Defence, Tax, and Policing). [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Political knowledge is also measured on a latent scale estimated by an IRT model, using questions on whether respondents were able to match British and international political figures with their jobs. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. [1] In part these changes also reflect the fact that on average people liked Nicola Sturgeon more than Alex Salmond. Measured in t3 (the only time point we have ratings for both leaders) Yes voters had mean rating for Sturgeon of 5.9 and Salmond of 5.5 and No voters rated Sturgeon 2.1 and Salmond 1.4. Interestingly No voters also liked Nicola Sturgeon more after the referendum than before it, though their overwhelming feeling was still negative. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. We do not include control variables in these models as we are not interested in (for example) whether there was a shift in alignment of immutable characteristics such as age or social class, only in disentangling the effects of changes in distributions and alignments of potentially malleable variables like attitudes and identities. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. The percentage of Yes voters in the cohort who identified with Labour in wave 11 (April 2017) was 40% (wave 1-11 full weights) compared to 37% in in wave 5 (May 2015, w1-6 full weights) and 82% in wave 1 (Feb 2014, wave 1 full weights). [↑](#footnote-ref-6)