

Scotland votes: have we seen ‘peak SNP’?

Blog post by Associate Adviser Roberto Robles, 09 May 2016

The SNP have unexpectedly lost majority power in Scotland - what does this mean for the Scottish independence movement? Is it a sign of reversion to the pre-independence referendum status quo? Or are there signs that the SNP have actually helped drive a bigger shift in Scottish politics?

The election actually highlighted again the most important feature of the SNP phenomenon, which is the wide range of its coalition and the way it has changed the debate. The SNP has managed to brand itself as the ‘party of Scotland’, and built a base of support that reaches from former Conservative voters in rural areas to former inner city Labour voters, and the spread of that coalition held up well last week. The SNP is now seen as Scotland’s voice within the United Kingdom.

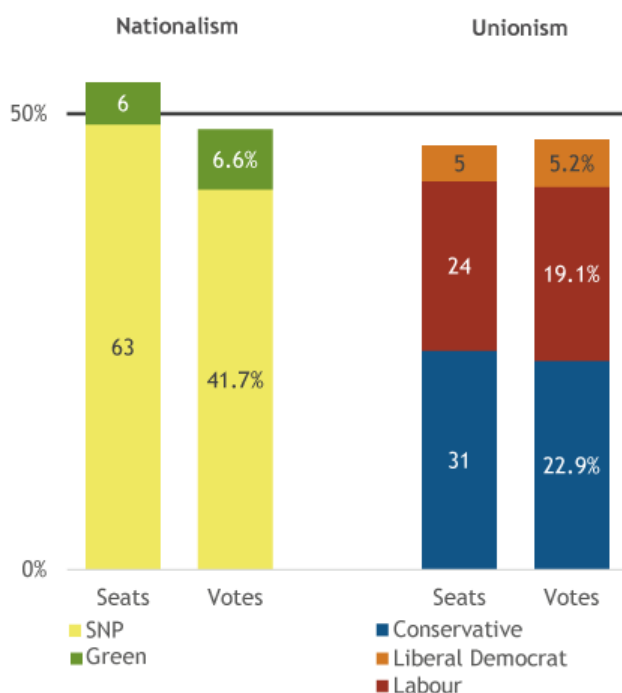


Fig: Scottish Parliamentary results 2016
Source: BBC

The SNP’s other crucial effect on Scottish politics has been to redefine Scottish politics in terms of independence versus unionism. The big loser here was again the Labour Party, which found itself segregated from many of its traditional blue collar voters by its opposition to independence and fell to third place behind the Conservatives, and failed to make inroads among left-wing voters despite Jeremy Corbyn’s leadership and a policy pitch further to the left than the SNP’s. Given the new paradigm in Scottish politics, this is another reminder that a Labour recovery in Scotland without a much clearer and more assertive take on the value of independence or greater devolution may be difficult.

The Scottish Tories had a good night for the same reason - with a clearer unionist pitch and a popular leader, they were able to scoop up tactical votes from anti-independence voters, delivering a result that should not be confused with increased support for the party’s Westminster leadership.

In this wider debate the SNP actually came out ahead. Gains by the pro-independence Greens mean there continues to be a pro-independence majority in the Scottish Parliament. But this majority is built on less than 50% of the vote, and will have reinforced Nicola Sturgeon’s manifest caution on a second independence referendum. This may change if the UK as a whole were to vote ‘Leave’ on

the 23rd of June but Scots voted to stay; polls show the prospect of leaving the EU might push Scots over the line on independence, and the SNP might still calculate that a second referendum on independence was desirable or necessary - and winnable.

Despite the headline seat numbers, this election was still defined by the SNP's view of Scotland's future choices.