

Campaign Dynamics

Scottish Election Study 2021 Briefing 1

Some highlights from the ESRC-funded study of more than 4,000 Scottish voters
before and after the 2021 Scottish Parliament

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THE UNIVERSITY of EDINBURGH
School of Social and
Political Science



University
of Essex



University
of Glasgow

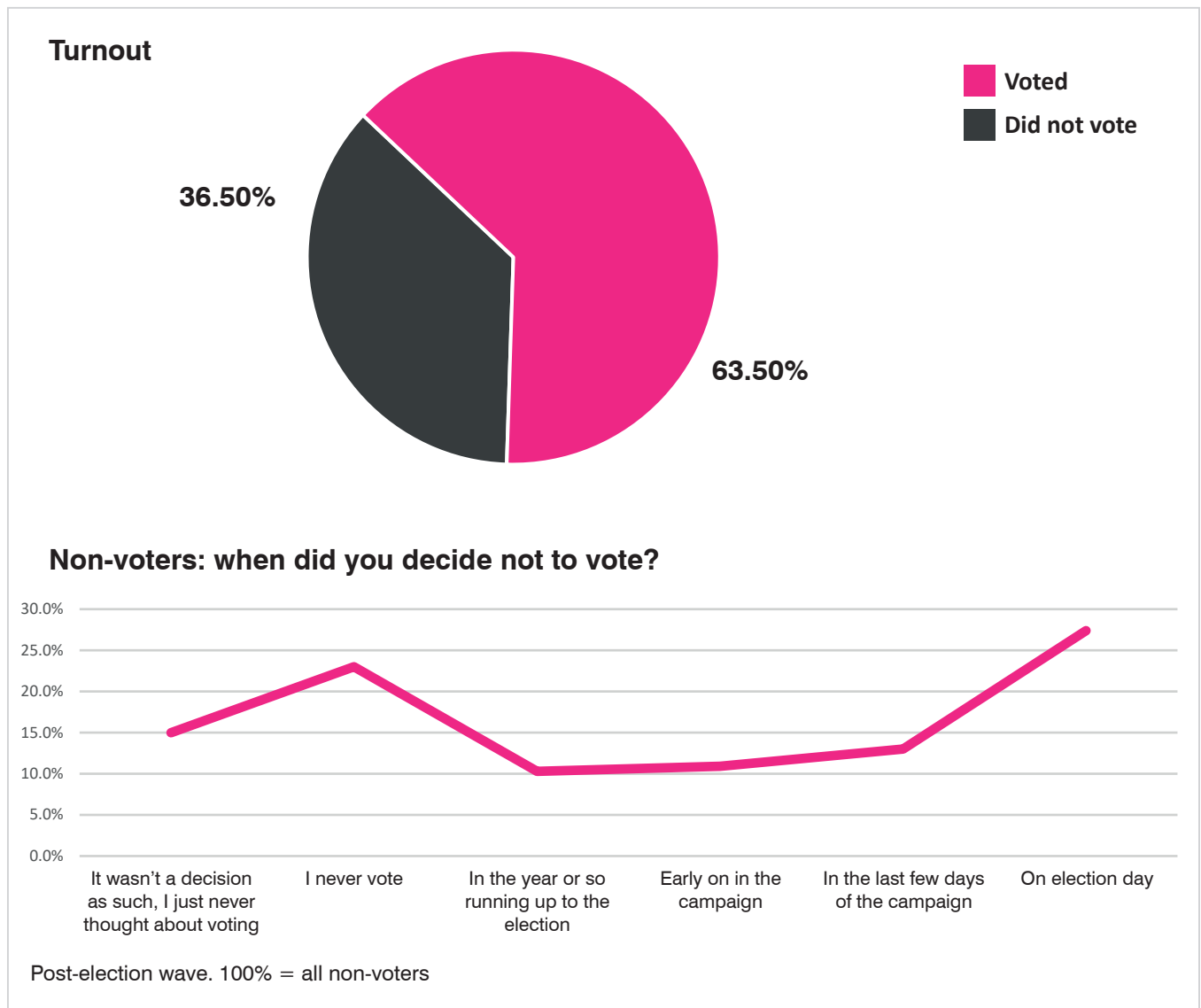


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Campaign Dynamics — Briefing 1

This briefing presents the results from Wave 1 and Wave 2 of the 2021 Scottish Election Study, which capture public opinion both before and after the May 2021 Scottish Parliament Election. Here we present findings on attitudes during the campaign period and the factors which shaped vote choice. We first focus on electoral turnout: the decision of whether or not to vote itself. We look at the timing of this decision and at the extent to which 2021 voters have a different relationship to politics to non-voters. We then turn to the vote choice itself, including changes in preferences from 2016. These dynamics help to illustrate the ways in which the campaign might have impacted voter attitudes. Looking at the campaign itself, we examine public assessments of party issue competence in key policy areas. We also provide data on how voters view party leaders, and whether the leader debates played any role in decision-making.

Deciding Whether to Vote

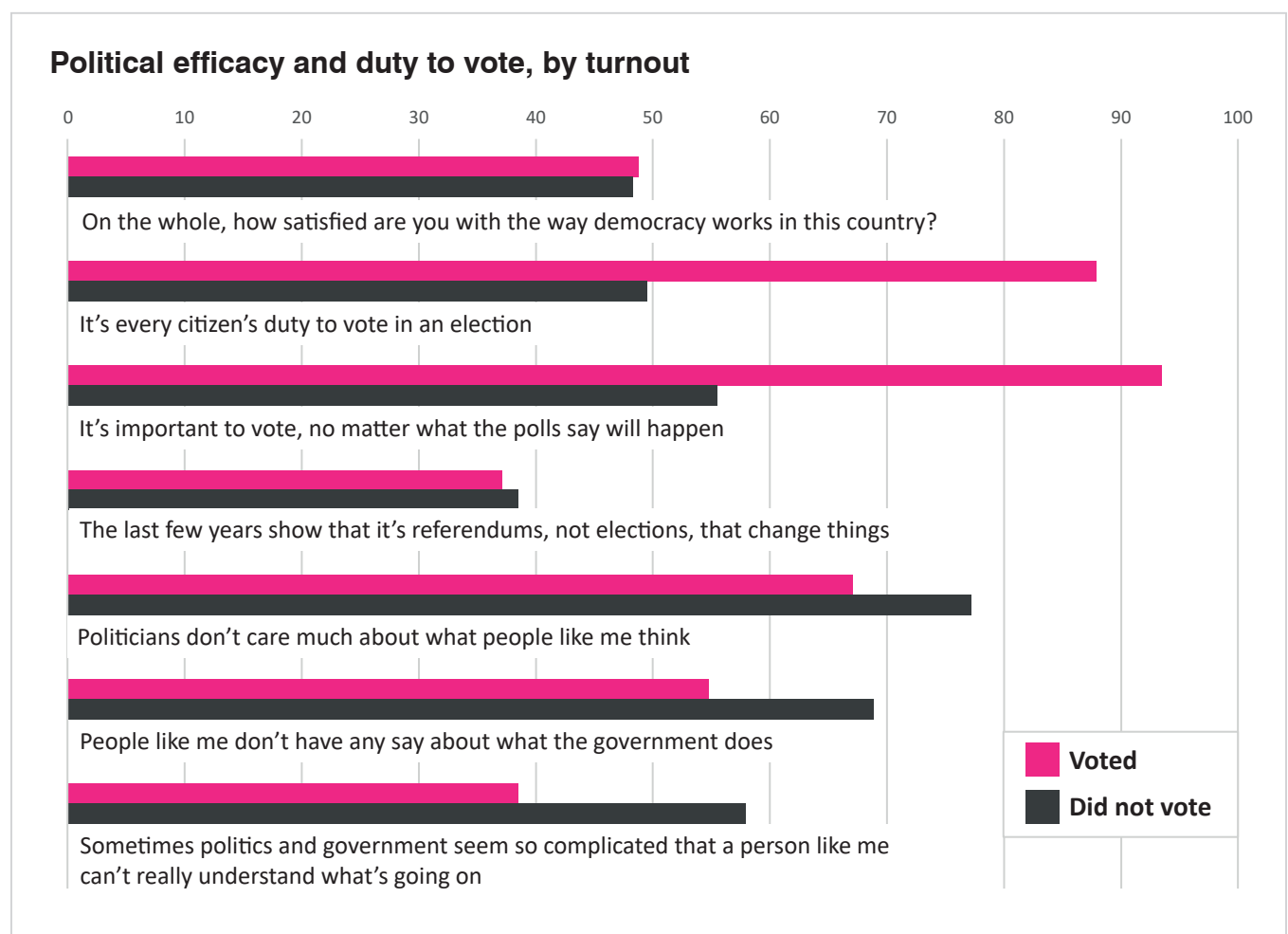


Official turnout statistics and 2021 ES Wave 2 data, post-election

The turnout in the 2021 Scottish Parliament election was 65%, meaning around 3/5 eligible residents cast a ballot. Turnout was lower than the high-watermark of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum (84.6%), as well as the previous UK general election (68.1% in Scotland). However, turnout was significantly higher than the local elections held in the following year (44.8%) as well as past EU elections (39.9% in Scotland in 2019) -this reinforces the idea that Scottish Parliament elections are now considered “first-order” contests.

Our data shows that 23% of 2021 non-voters say they ‘never vote’, and another 15% abstain by default rather than making a conscious decision to stay away. For others, the choice not to vote was taken in the year running up to the election (10%), early on in the campaign (10%) or in the last few days of the campaign (13%). Around one third of non-voters decided to abstain polling day.

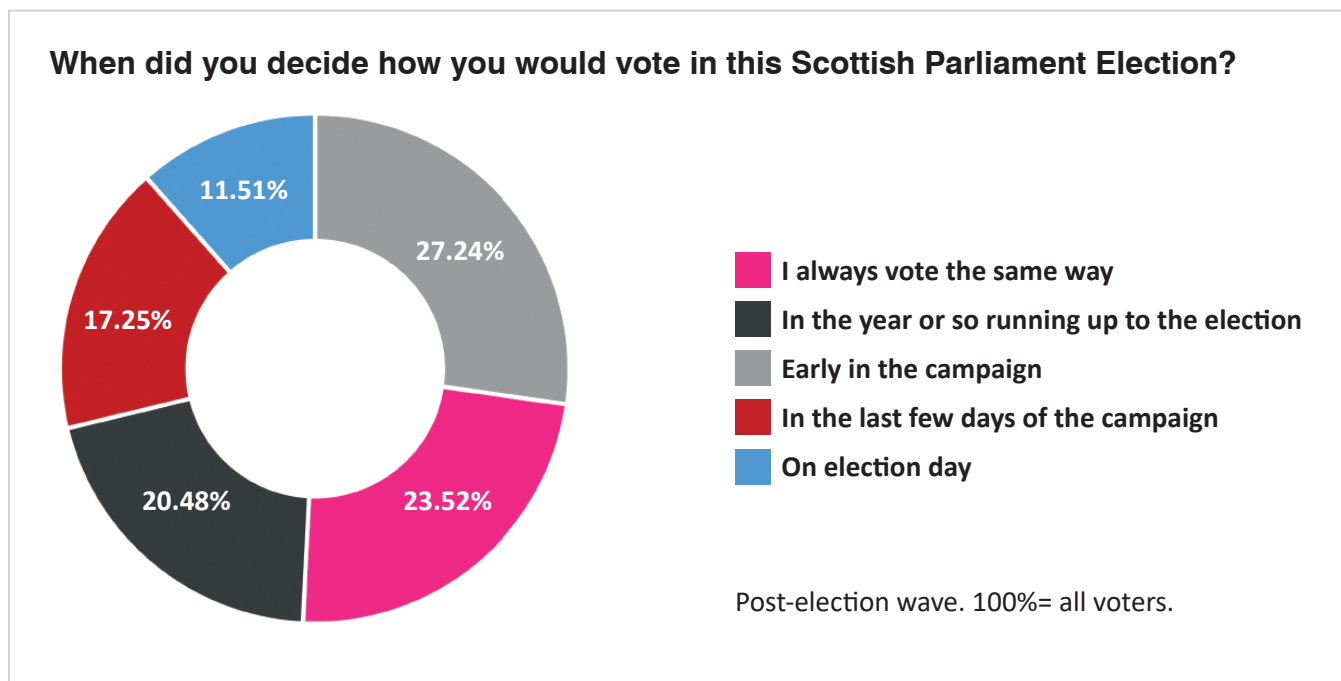
Voters and Non-voters’ Relationship to Politics



2021 ES Wave 1 data, pre-election

This shows that the voters and non-voters often have a different outlook on politics and democracy. Our data shows that this is also the case for 2021. Unsurprisingly, voters are twice as likely to think that it's every citizen's duty to vote in an election and that, no matter what the polls say, it's important to vote. Non-voters are also more likely to feel disaffected from politics. A larger proportion of non-voters thinks that politicians don't care much about what ordinary citizens think, and that 'people like them' don't have much of a say about what the government does. This, added to the fact that they are more likely to think that politics is complicated, in part explains why some vote and others don't.

Deciding How to Vote



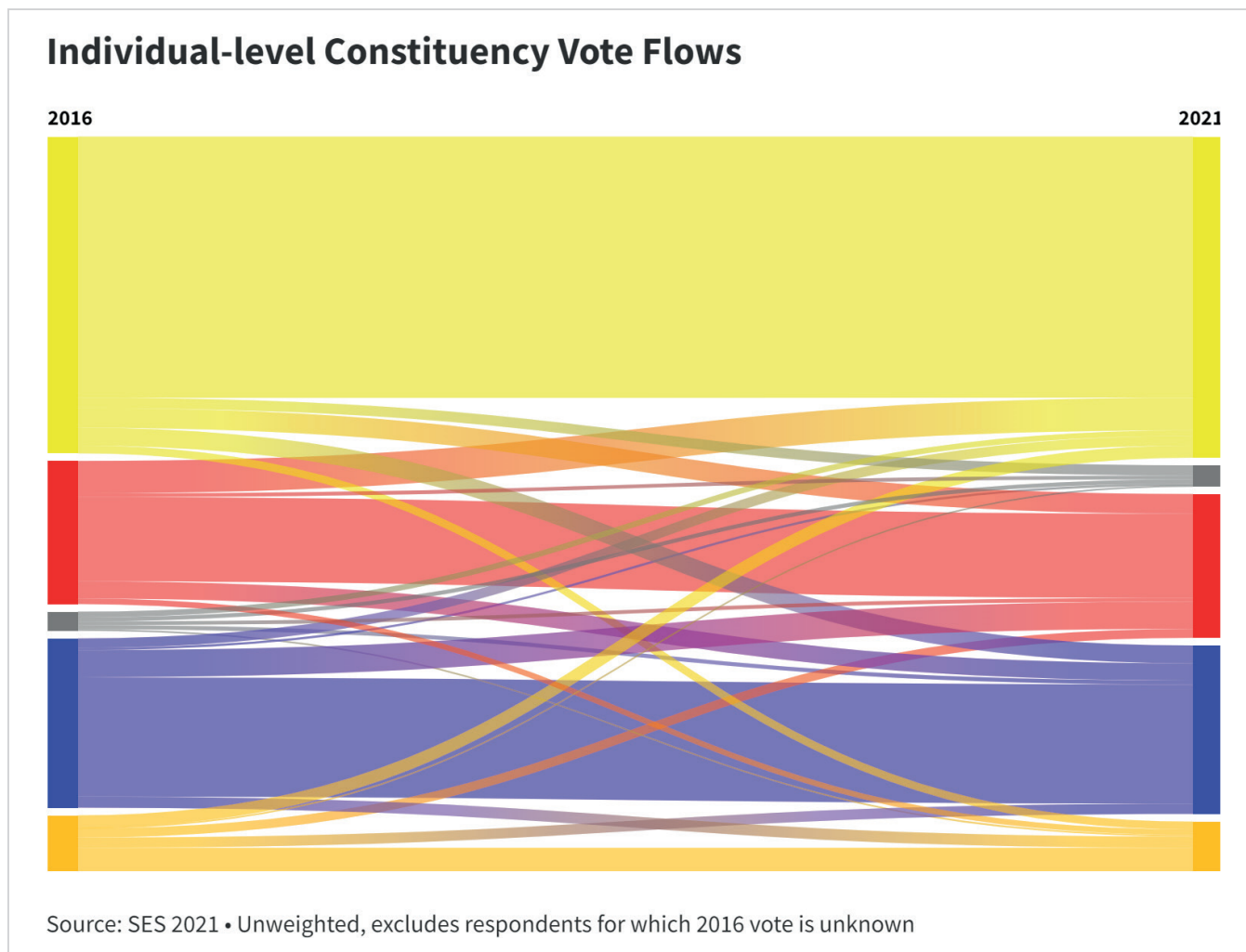
2021 ES Wave 2 data, post-election

Whilst one in five people who voted in 2021 say that they always vote the same way, and a similar share decided between the 2016 and 2021 elections, over half of voters say that they decided how to vote during the course of the campaign.

This does not necessarily mean that they changed their minds - some may have decided, during the campaign, to stick with their 2016 party choice. But the reported proximity of their decision making to the moment of the election highlights the power of campaigns to shape voters' minds. The extent to which these preferences ended up being different from people's 2016 choices is shown below.

Volatility Between Elections

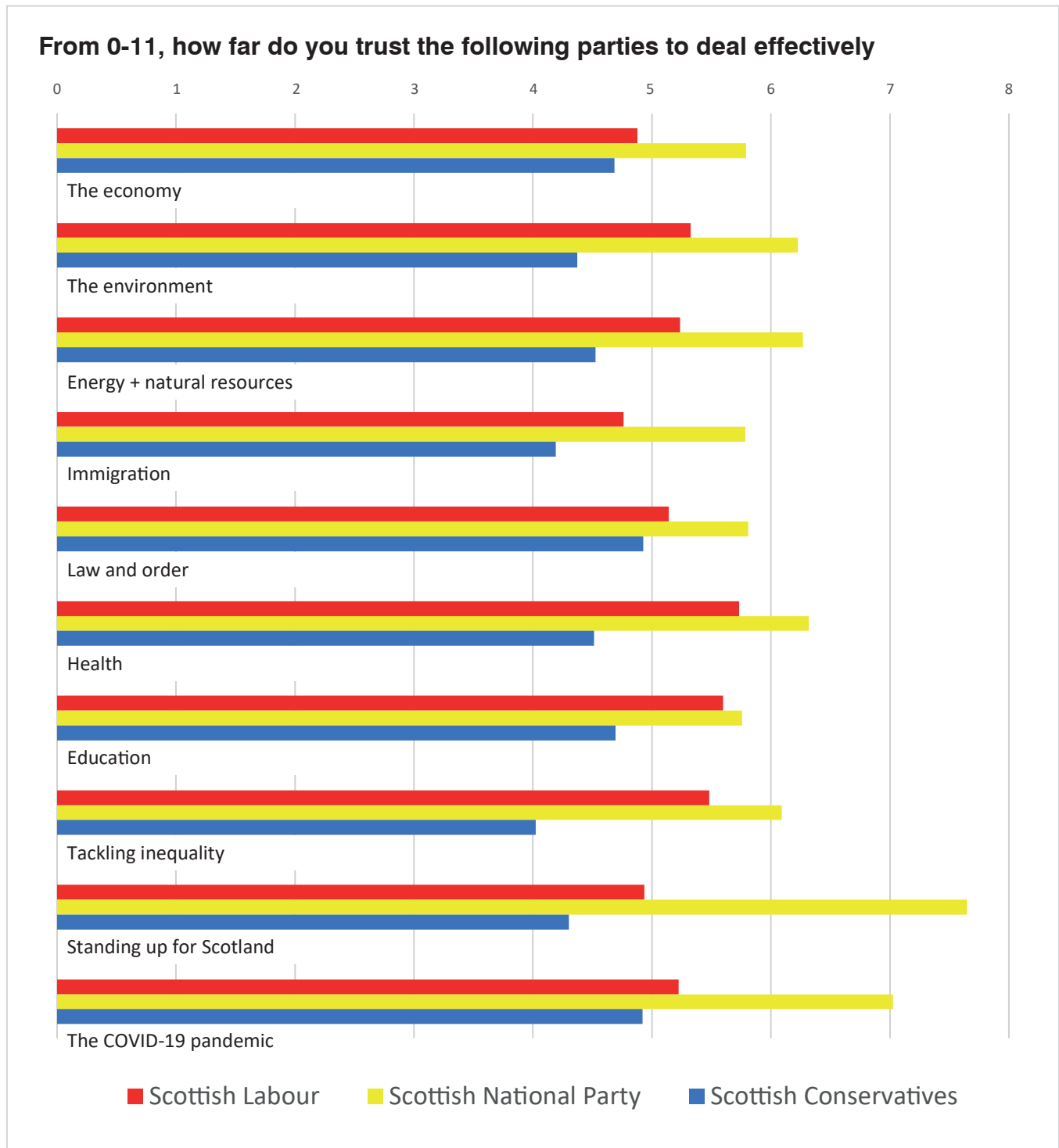
Changes in vote choice between the 2016 and 2021 elections (constituency vote)



Vote choice in 2021, based on 2016 vote (constituency vote). 2021 SES Wave 2 data, post-election

In terms of overall vote shares, the outcome of the 2021 election was not much different from 2016. But beneath the surface, many voters changed their choice in countervailing flows from some parties to others. We can see this in our constituency-level data. There are firstly shifts in vote choice between centre-left parties, where the SNP ended up net-winners. Both Labour and the Liberal Democrats each lost a fifth of their 2016 voters to the SNP, and while the SNP had a larger total number of 2016 voters to retain, the party successfully held on to a higher share than Labour and the Liberal Democrats sent its way. However, the SNP did suffer a net loss of voters to the Conservative Party, with double the SNP voters switching to the Conservatives than vice versa. We understand this to be part of a Brexit inspired realignment in Scottish politics, which we further discuss in Briefing 2.

Campaign Issues and Competence



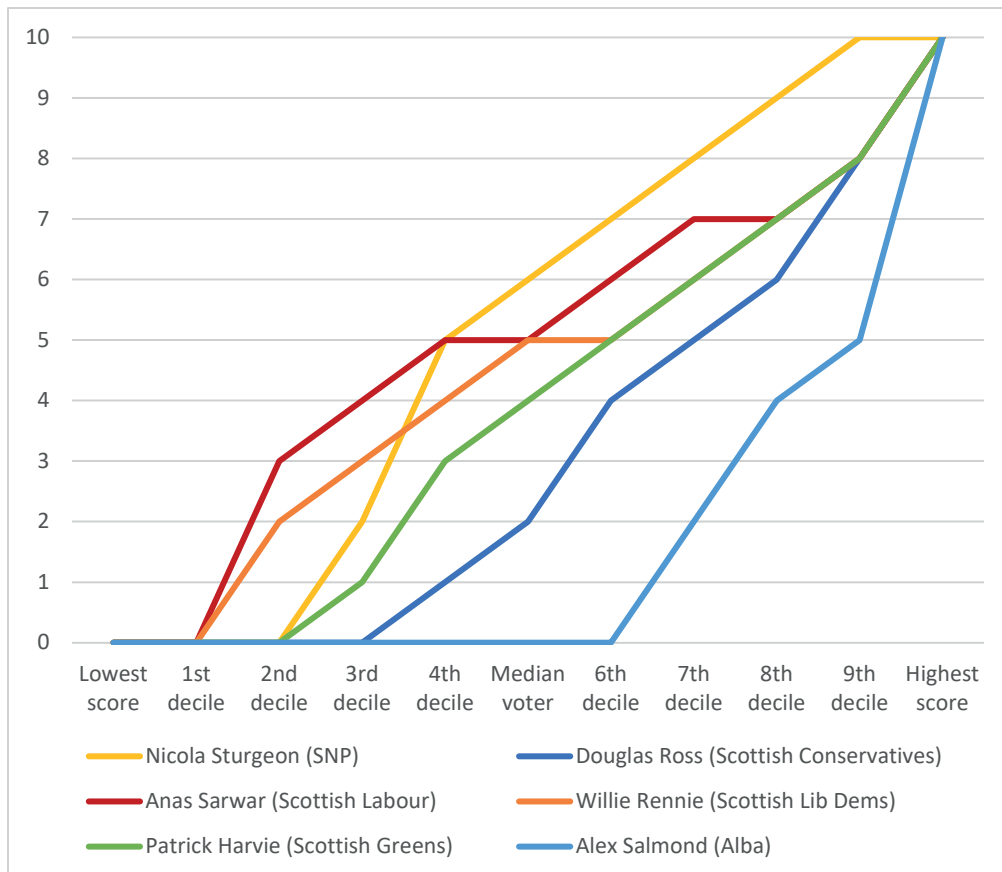
2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

When voters are asked how far they would trust parties to deal effectively with key issues in Scotland, the SNP are on average seen as the most competent across all issues. This is partly down to simple partisanship: the party are by far the most popular and have a near-monopoly on the pro-independence half of the electorate, and those voters are predisposed to rate them highly. In addition to this, however, the party's perceived record in government also had some impact as evidenced by variation in their ratings, particularly with regard to the party's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, an issue which had not previously been on the agenda.

Interestingly, Labour's mean perceived competence was consistently higher than the Conservatives, even though the party received fewer votes. This result means that non-Conservative voters are more critical of the Conservatives than non-Labour voters are of Labour. This reflects both negative party identification against the Conservative party as well as Labour's high degree of overall ideological alignment with the SNP when the constitutional issue is left to one side.

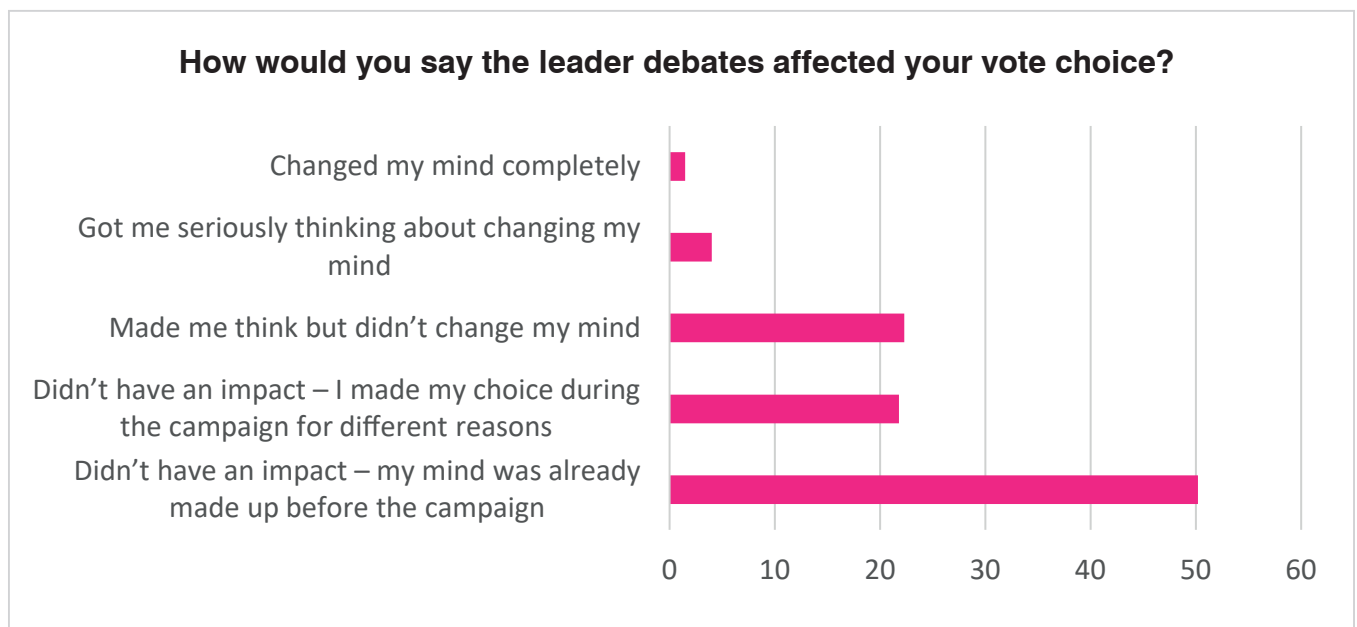
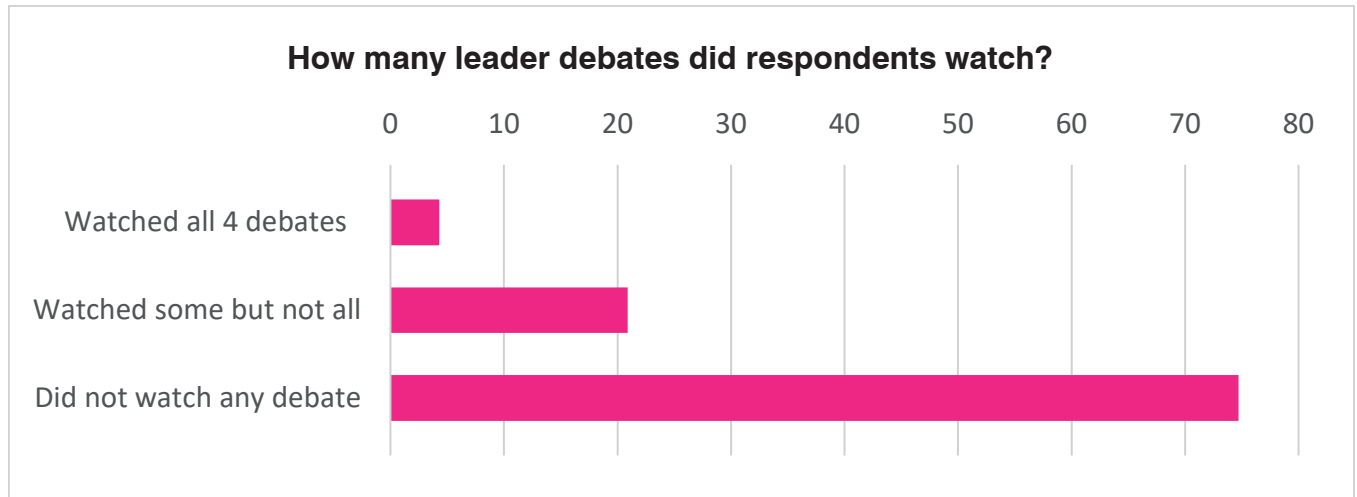
Leader Evaluations

Leader evaluation on a scale of 0-10 by decile



Some leaders are more popular overall than others, but there is also considerable variation in ratings across individual leaders: they are strongly liked by some sections of the electorate but strongly disliked by others. This is the case for Nicola Sturgeon, who is liked by most, with half of the electorate granting her a score of 6/10 or above and with 30% of voters giving her a score of 8/10 or above - but who has another 30% of voters rating her a 2/10 or below. In contrast, Anas Sarwar's ratings do not reach as high for as many voters, with only 10% giving him a score of 8 or above. But those who dislike him do not score him as poorly as those who are not fans of Nicola Sturgeon. Unsurprisingly, the leader with lowest scores is the disgraced former First Minister Alex Salmond, where 60% of respondents rated him zero and 90% below 5.

Leader Debates



100% = people who watched at least one debate (ie. 25% of the respondents above)

Our data shows that only 25% of voters watched at least one of the four televised leader debates. Within this audience, not even 1% of respondents say that the debate made them change their minds. It is well known that leader debates tend not to change many minds, and this reinforces the entrenchment of preferences in Scotland in light of the constitutional issue. Debates, however, still perform an important democratic role by communicating party positions to prospective voters and serving as staging posts in the campaign.

Researchers on the Scottish Referendum Study are:

Ailsa Henderson (Principal Investigator),
Professor of Political Science - University of Edinburgh

Robert Johns (Co-Investigator),
Senior Lecturer in Politics - University of Essex

Christopher Carman (Co-Investigator)
Professor of Politics - University of Glasgow

Chris Hanretty (Co-Investigator)
Professor of Politics - Royal Holloway, University of London

Jac Larner, SES Research Associate
Cardiff University

Fraser McMillan, SES Research Associate
University of Glasgow

Marta Miori, SES Intern
University of Manchester

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