

# Young Voters

## Scottish Election Study 2021 Briefing 3

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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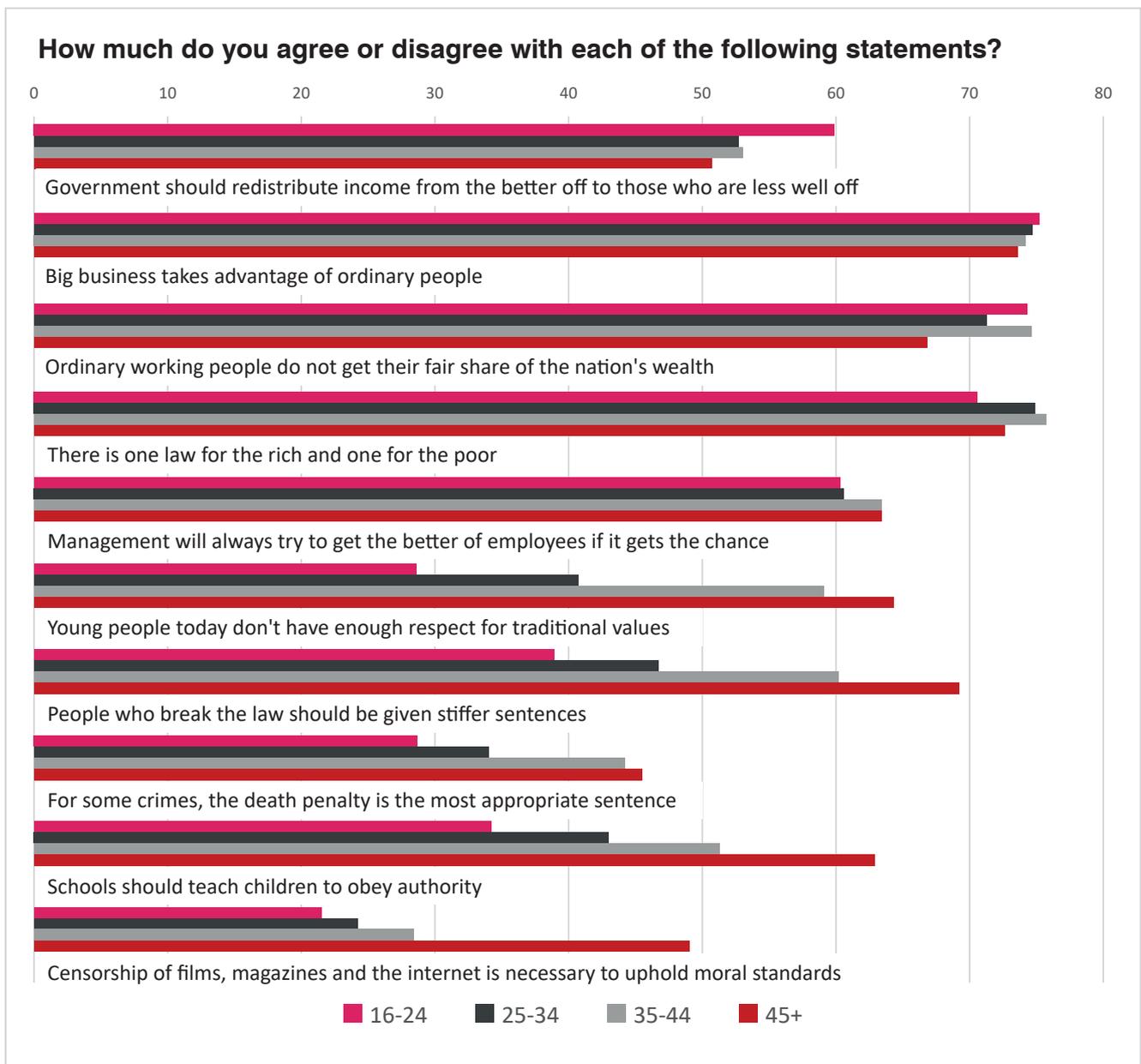


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# Young Voters — Briefing 3

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 2021 Scottish Parliament Election. Here we present findings on young voters in Scotland. We look at the extent to which their attitudes, values, forms of political participation and voting behaviour differ from the rest of the electorate. Economic and cultural values, attitudes to immigration and constitutional preferences are key determinants of how people vote in Scottish elections. Highlighting gaps between younger and older voters is therefore helpful to better understand respective differences in voting behaviour. Similarly, we include data on interest in elections and the ways in which young and older voters engage with politics. We then turn to voting itself: electoral registration, as well as vote choice.

## Economic and Cultural Values

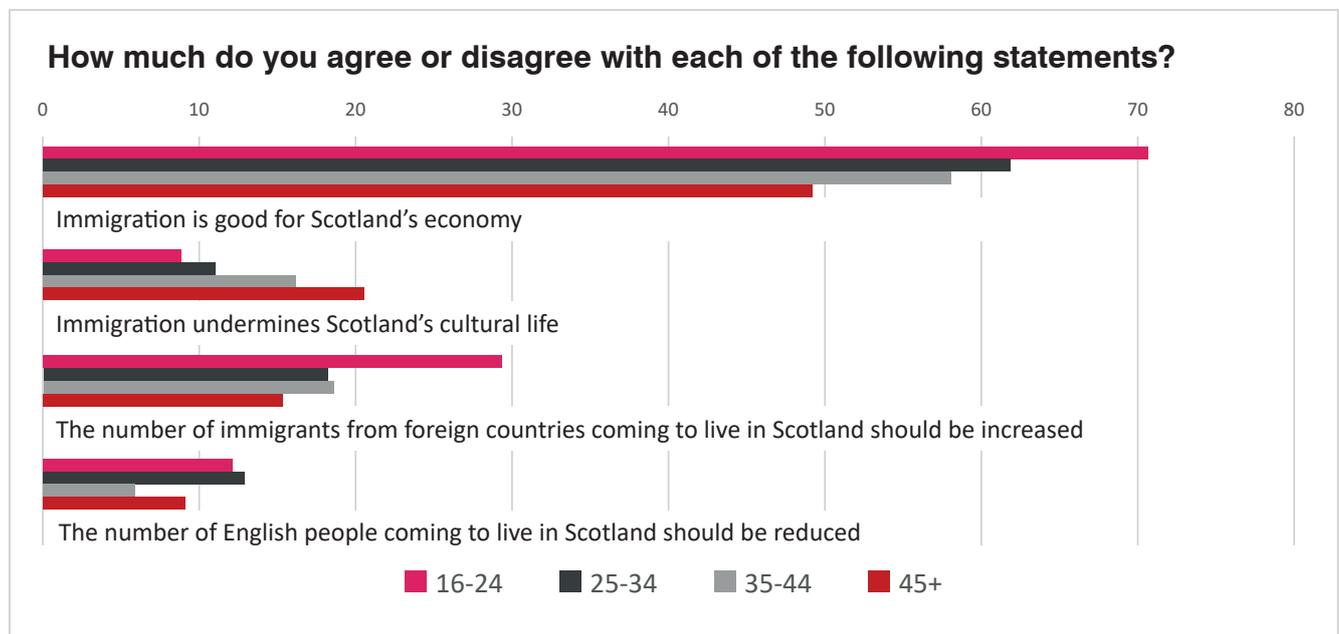


2021 SES Wave 2 data, post-election

Our 2021 data shows a high degree of consensus on economic attitudes between age groups in Scotland. The above statements are understood to measure left-wing economic stances, and although young respondents are especially likely to agree with them, the rest of the electorate is not far behind.

In contrast with this, there are large divides on social and cultural attitudes – a rift that is equally as visible between the very youngest cohort and those immediately older than them, as it is between young and old voters. Young Scottish respondents are very liberal, whilst older voters are more likely to hold authoritarian attitudes. It is unclear whether this rift will persist over time: it is widely understood that citizens tend to become more conservative as they age, but the lifecycle experienced by Baby Boomers has become increasingly disrupted, and political socialisation and peer attitudes can have strong effects on people’s political beliefs.

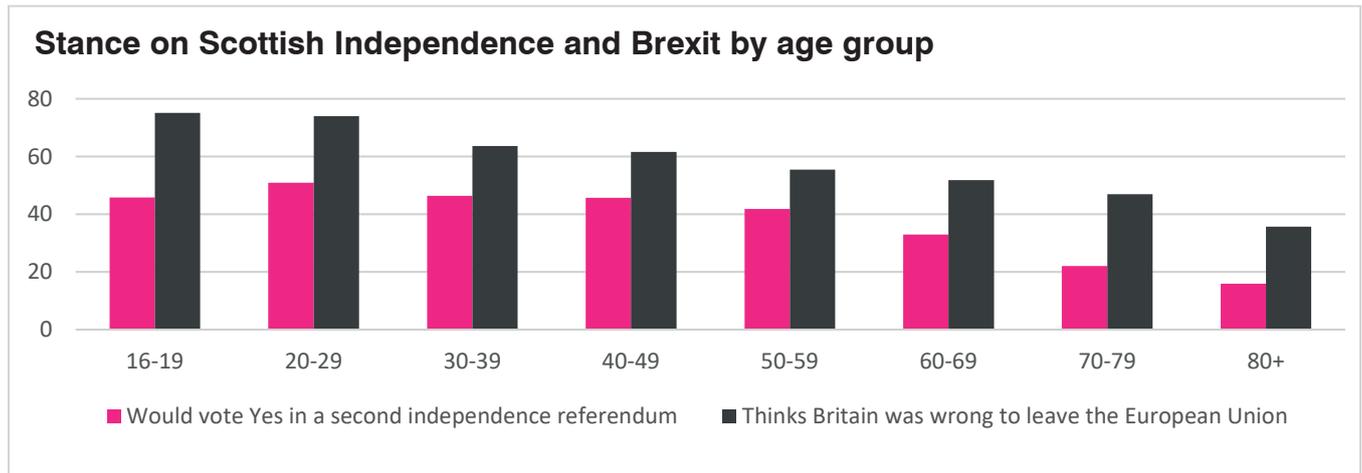
## Attitudes to Immigration



**2021 SES Wave 2 data, post-election**

Differences are also evident when it comes to attitudes to immigration. The youngest groups are significantly more likely to say immigration is good for the economy and less likely to say it has negative cultural impacts – although there is a reasonable degree of consensus on this question across age groups. The youngest age group is the most in favour of increasing immigration, but also of restricting internal immigration from England – two attitudes that go against the views of the rest of the electorate. This adds to the understanding that it is sociocultural attitudes, rather than economic views, which divide the generations in Scotland.

## Attitudes to Constitutional Change

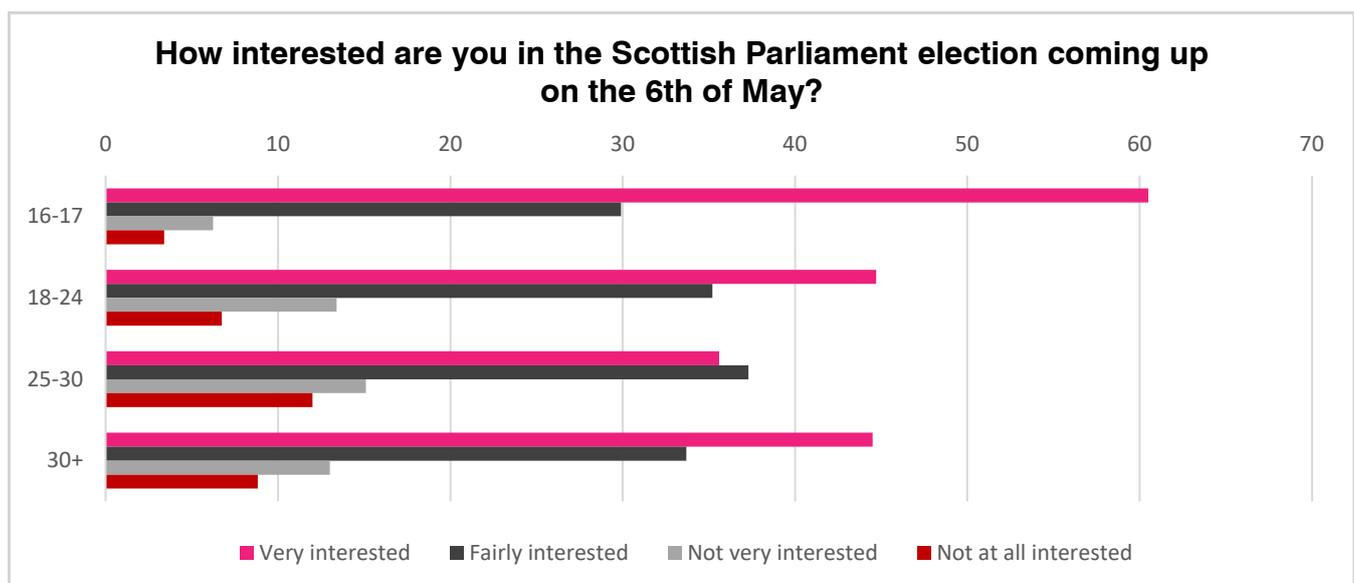


### 2021 SES Waves 1 and 2 data

There are significant age divides when it comes to both constitutional questions in Scotland. Our 2021 data shows a clear decrease in support for independence with age. Older voters, who grew up in the post-war era, were more likely to prefer the status quo. Younger cohorts on the other hand, the youngest of whom would have struggled to remember a time before Scottish devolution, leaned in favour of constitutional change - with the youngest citizens now three times more likely to support the project than their grandparents' generation.

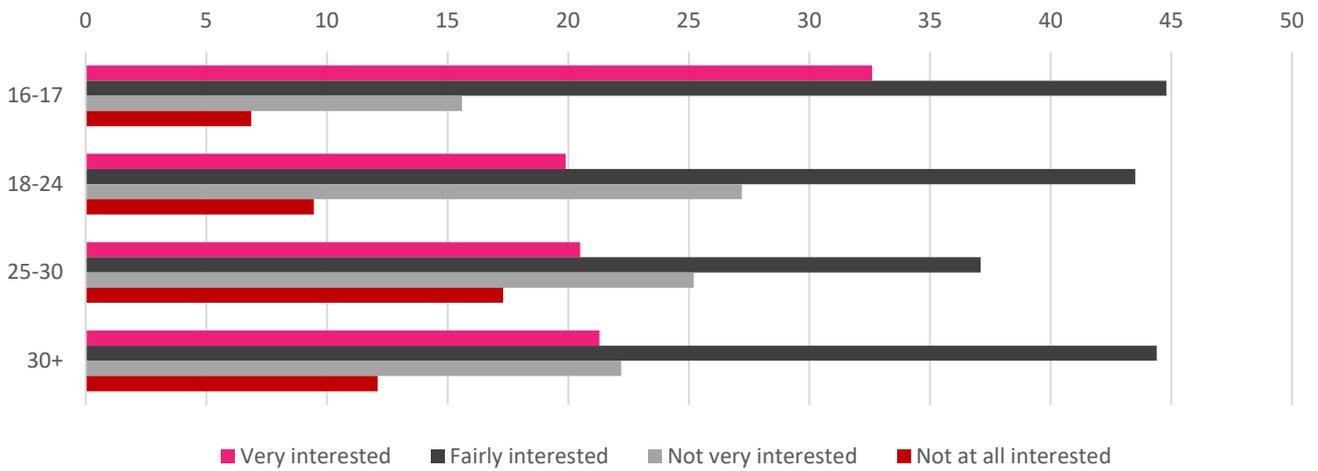
A similar age divide is evident when it comes to Brexit. The under-40s believe by a margin of four-to-one or more that the UK's exit from the European Union was the wrong choice. Older voters are more likely to support Brexit, but only the very oldest (80+) break in favour of it.

## Interest in Politics



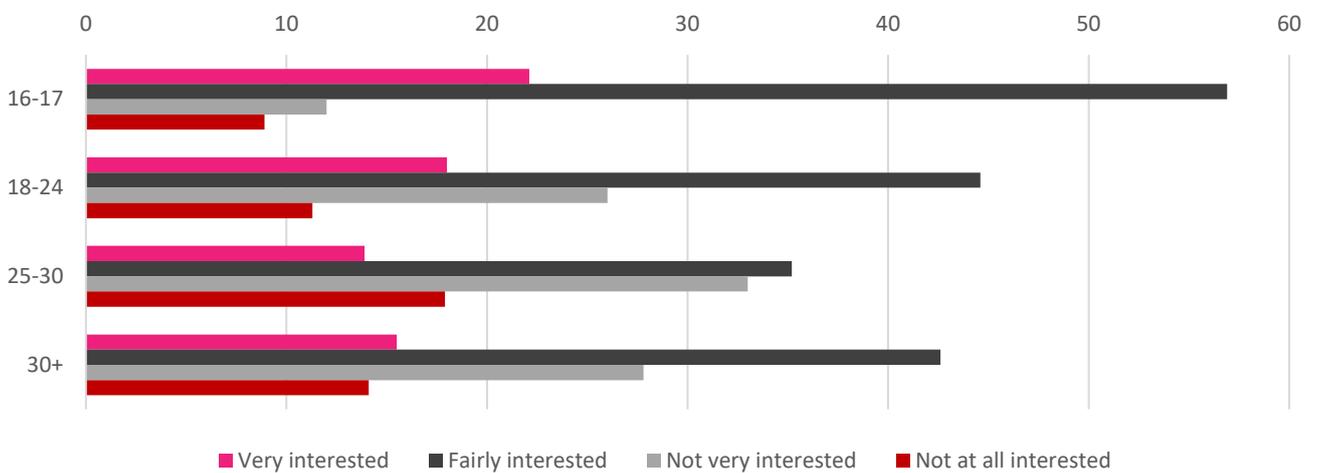
### 2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

### How interested are you in Politics at Holyrood in general?



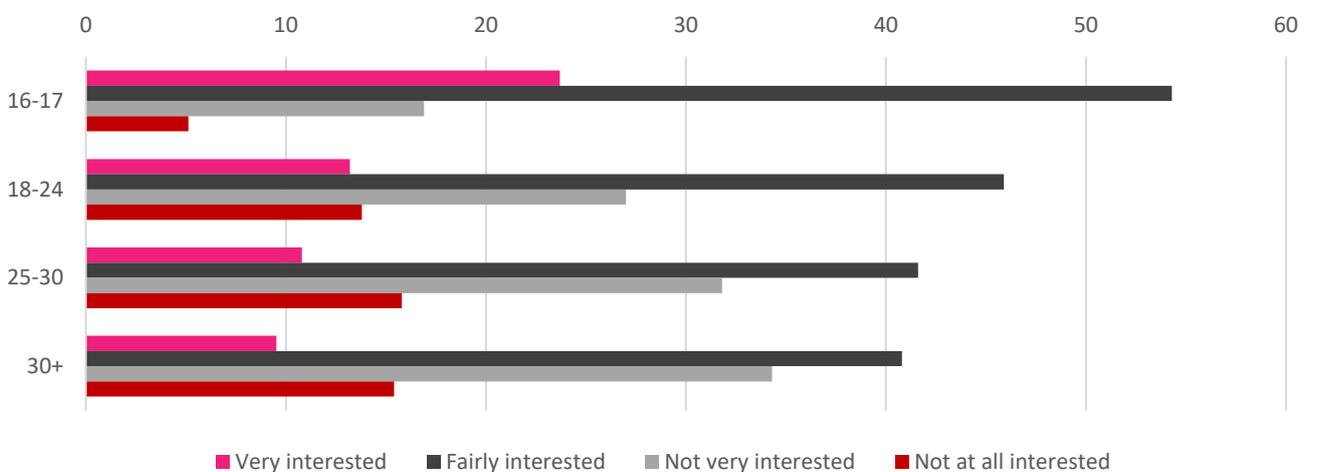
2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

### How interested are you in the Politics at Westminster in general?



2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

### How interested are you in Politics in the wider world?



2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

The youngest respondents (16-19) are consistently the most likely to say they are very interested in politics, whether in the 2021 election or in general Holyrood, Westminster, or wider world affairs. This could be, in part, due to a predisposition of young survey respondents to be unusually politically interested compared to the average young voter. But it can equally be explained by enthusiasm from voters who, in 2021, are voting in their first election.

In some cases, especially world affairs, this figure declines with age. In the context of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, however, the percentage of respondents saying they are either very or fairly interested in the election is consistently high across all age groups.

## Forms of Political Participation

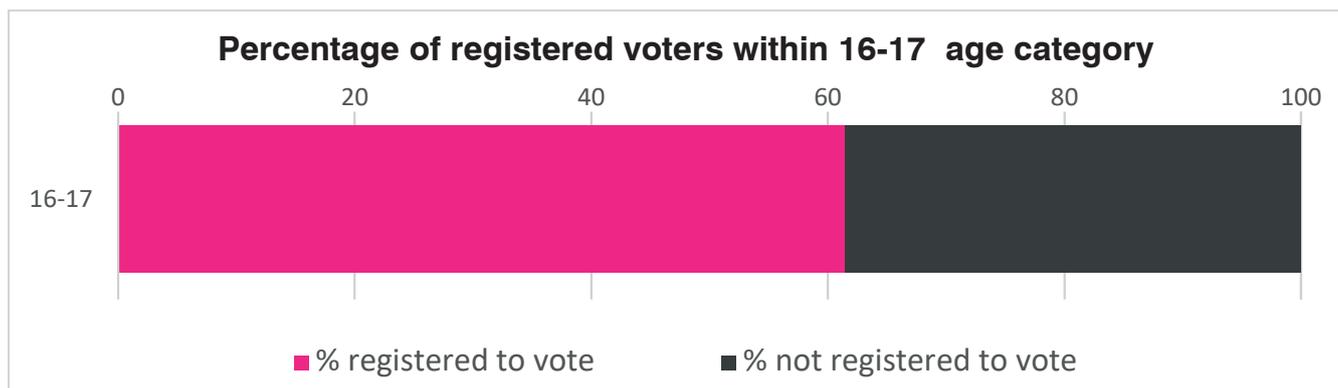
### During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following?

	16-17	18-24	25-30	30+
Contacted a politician, government or local govt official	19.2	12.6	18.3	16.3
Signed a petition on the internet	74.7	62.3	52.7	44.1
Signed a petition in person	1.72	3.13	3.20	1.95
Done any work on behalf of a political party or action group	9.12	4.42	1.62	2.15
Given any money to a political party, organisation or cause	18.0	9.78	6.91	6.60
Taken part in a public protest or demonstration	6.67	7.25	3.92	1.21
Bought - or refused to buy - any products for political or ethical reasons	30.7	22.8	24.0	16.2
Gone on strike or taken industrial action	2.31	0.437	0.481	0.134
Participated in an online political meeting or event	9.42	3.83	4.63	3.01
Posted about politics on social media	44.0	24.0	18.3	14.8
None of these	15.6	23.9	37.8	46.6

### 2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

Our 2021 data brings to light a strong level of political engagement amongst young voters, across a wide series of non-electoral forms of participation. The youngest age group is almost consistently the most likely to have taken part in any of the activities listed above over the 12 months preceding the election. Part of this difference is explained by a shift towards new forms of online political engagement, such as signing petitions on the internet or posting about politics on social media. Offline political action such as boycotting products or partaking in industrial action (e.g. climate strikes) can also originate from online communication. What may have been, in part, differences in access to the internet or in usage habits, are most likely to have also been contextual: with the 12 months immediately preceding the election being marked by recurrent Covid-19 lockdowns, it is perhaps unsurprising that offline forms of non-electoral political action (e.g. public protests and demonstrations) have been less practised by older groups.

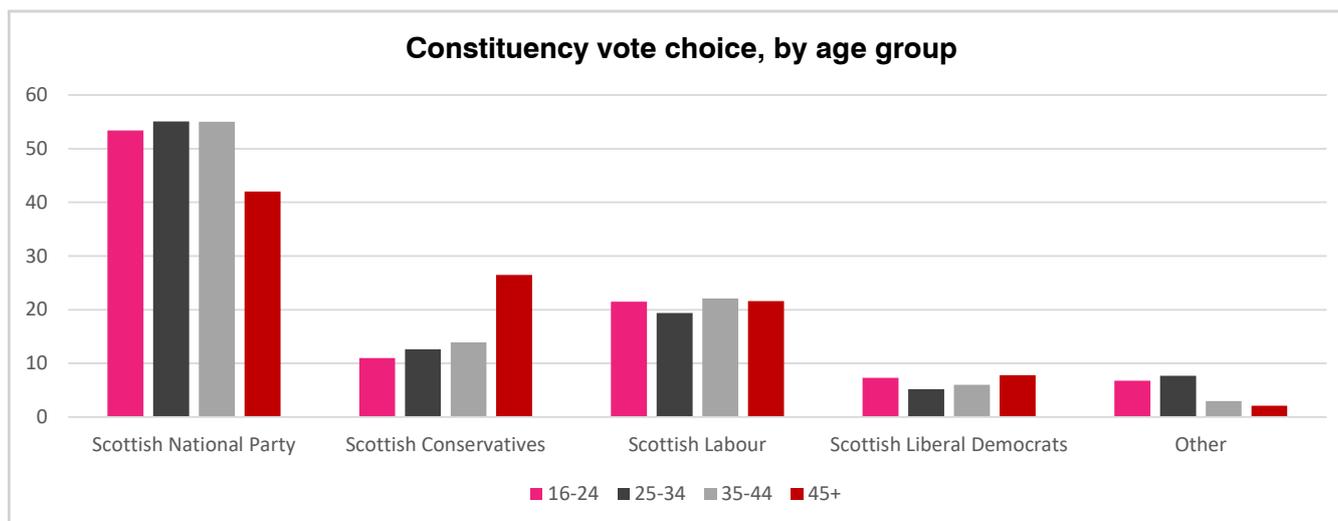
## Electoral Registration



### National Records of Scotland and 2011 Census data

Although younger voters are more politically active, they are less likely to vote and let alone register to vote. Only two thirds of Scottish 16-17 year olds were registered to vote in 2021. Younger voters may have distinct opinions from older sections of the electorate, but as is a recurrent feature of UK elections, their lower turnout hindered their overall impact on the 2021 outcome.

## Vote Choice in the 2021 Scottish Parliament Election



### 2021 SES Wave 1 data, pre-election

In the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, the voting patterns of younger people were markedly different from those of the older half of the electorate (45+), but almost identical to the vote choice of the age categories immediately preceding them. Echoing the continuity in economic values found across age cohorts, nearly 90% of Scottish voters under 30 chose a left-of-centre party. Similarly, a less liberal Scottish Conservative party was unpopular with younger age groups, picking up just over 1 in 10 voters under the age of 30.

A clearer alignment can be seen between constitutional preferences and vote choice. In the 2021 SES overall (see Briefing 2), we found that voters are highly 'sorted' along their constitutional preferences. Here, younger cohorts who, as we have seen, are more likely to support independence, are also more likely to vote for the Scottish National Party than older voters.

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