**The Dominant Ideas of the Scottish National Party**

**Dominant Idea #1: Constitutional Reform.**

The UK constitution - including the union between Scotland and England - is a matter reserved to Westminster by law.

However, it could be argued that reservation does not explicitly prevent Holyrood from consulting the public on independence. Then again, a "yes" vote in any referendum would create an expectation that major constitutional change would follow, as it did in the advisory vote on Brexit.

Scottish independence was a dominant issue in the May 2021 Scottish parliament election. Both the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the Scottish Conservatives placed the issue at the centre of their campaigns. Scottish voters were first asked whether they wanted Scotland to become an independent country in a referendum in September 2014: the result was 55% to 45% against.

The issue of independence has been put back onto the agenda by Brexit – Scotland voted 62% to 38% in favour of Remain in the EU referendum – and particularly once it became apparent that the UK government planned to take the UK out of the EU single market and customs union.

Under the Scotland Act 1998, the Scottish parliament is not allowed to pass legislation relating to matters “reserved” to Westminster, including “the Union of the Kingdoms of Scotland and England”. This is widely interpreted to mean that any referendum relating to Scottish independence would require Westminster’s approval. However, this has never been tested in court, so there remains some uncertainty about whether Holyrood could hold an ‘advisory’ referendum (in which the Scottish electorate were asked whether they supported the principle of independence but did not mandate independence itself) without consent.

The power to hold the 2014 referendum was transferred in 2012 after the UK and Scottish governments signed the Edinburgh Agreement. The UK parliament passed a ‘Section 30 order’ – which gave the Scottish parliament the power to legislate for the referendum— which “put beyond doubt” the legality of the vote. The power was only transferred on a temporary basis.

The Scottish government has never explicitly conceded that a referendum could not be held without Westminster’s authorisation. But its preference is to proceed with agreement, since any unauthorised referendum could be blocked in the Supreme Court or simply boycotted by unionist parties.

In the lead up to the May 2021 Scottish Parliament General Election, the SNP declared that if the party won a simple majority in the Scottish Parliament “there can be no moral or democratic justification for Boris Johnson or any Westminster government to obstruct the right of the people of Scotland to decide their own future. We propose that the referendum should be held once the Covid crisis has passed but in good time to decide that we want to equip our Parliament with the powers it needs to drive our long-term recovery from Covid.”

In March 2021, the Scottish government introduced a draft Independence Referendum Bill, which if passed, would mandate a second vote on independence to be held.

The SNP also published a “road to a referendum” document setting out its planned next steps. The party is expected to request a new Section 30 order – which would transfer the power to hold a second independence referendum to the Scottish parliament– from the UK government. This would ensure that the Scottish parliament could then pass its referendum bill without fear of legal challenge.

However, if that request is refused, then the SNP will seek to pass its referendum bill using the Scottish parliament’s existing powers. In that scenario, the bill would almost certainly be referred by the UK government to the Supreme Court, which would be asked to determine whether it lay within the legislative powers of the Scottish parliament. If the Supreme Court ruled against the Scottish government, then the bill would be prevented from becoming law. The SNP has not stated what its next move would be in this circumstance.

**The impact of this dominant idea on the support of and electoral performance of the SNP.**

Opinion polls

Immediately after the EU referendum (2016), the polls indicated a swing towards support for independence. However, this support was not sustained, and most polls between 2016 and 2018 found that a narrow but clear majority would vote against independence.

The polls then appeared to narrow throughout 2019 and the start of 2020, with polling experts citing Brexit as a key factor in the rise in support for independence.

Since the start of the coronavirus pandemic, support for independence has risen further with most polls in 2020 and 2021 showing a clearer majority in favour of a Yes vote, including by a record margin of 59% to 41% in an October 2020 Ipsos Mori poll.

However, as the election approached the polls narrowed again. In the 10 polls conducted in the two weeks before the election, Yes was only ahead in one.

Independence was viewed as the most important issue by fewer than one in five people according to poll data published in April 2021 in The Herald.

The poll, carried out by Savanta ComRes for The Scotsman put independence as the most important issue for just 19% of respondents, and down from a high of 23% in the same series of polls.

Only 19% of those partaking in the poll said that independence was one of the top issues facing Scotland.

When asked to pick their three “most important issues facing Scotland” 45% of Scots said health, 35% picked employment and welfare, 31% opted for education, and 25% said Brexit. Independence was on 19% with the environment on 17% and housing on 16%.

Support from the union and independence was tied at 50% once don't knows had been excluded but showed that 38% were keen on a referendum in the next two years, with 53% saying a second vote should happen within the next five years or sooner.

2021 election results

In the elections to the Scottish Parliament in May 2021 the Scottish National Party won the most seats (64 of 129) with 44.2% of the vote, but failed to win an overall majority. The total number of SNP MSPs elected was one more than in 2016.

The Conservatives gained the second largest share of the vote (22.8%), winning 31 seats, which was the same number as in 2016. Labour took 19.8% of the vote, which was lower than in 2016 (20.8%) and won 22 seats, 2 fewer than in 2016.The Liberal Democrats took 6.0% of the vote and lost 1 seat, finishing on 4 seats. The Green Party took 4.7% of the total vote but finished with 8 seats, 2 more than in 2016.

**TASKS**

1. Summarise the SNP’s dominant idea of constitutional reform.
2. Give a detailed example of an SNP policy that relates to this dominant idea.
3. How significant was this dominant idea in the electoral performance of the SNP in the May 2021 Scottish Parliament election? You should use polling and electoral data to support your argument.
4. Are there other interpretations (excluding the dominant idea of constitutional reform) of the reasons for the electoral success of the SNP?