8

Scotland

A Tale of Two Referendums

One of the most significant factors behind the fragmentation of party support at the 2015 General Election was the success of the SNP and the collapse of Scottish Labour. The 2015 Election was Labour's worst performance in Scotland in terms of vote share since 1918 and the best ever achieved by the SNP. By 2017, although the SNP gains had receded from the high of 2015, the picture in Scotland had changed fundamentally. The Conservatives, who had held no more than a single Scottish seat since 1992, pushed Labour into third place. Scotland has seen unique levels of volatility in recent general elections and these changes, and their explanation, are an essential part of understanding GB-wide change.

The SNP's share of the nationwide vote increased from 1.6 per cent in 2010 to 4.7 per cent in 2015, making a large contribution to the rise in challenger-party voting at the national level. However, the local picture was even more dramatic. In 2010, Labour won forty-one of fifty-nine seats in Scotland with over 40 per cent of the Scottish vote, while the SNP won only six seats with 20 per cent of the vote. In 2015, Labour could muster only 24 per cent of the popular vote and a single Westminster seat, while the SNP won 50 per cent of the vote and all but three of the fifty-nine Scottish seats. The SNP landslide made them the third largest party in the Westminster Parliament. Much of this success persisted into the 2017 General Election but the SNP's vote share fell by thirteen percentage points between 2015 and 2017 to 37 per cent and the party lost twenty-one of their fifty-six seats. The main beneficiaries were the Scottish Conservatives, whose vote doubled to 29 per cent and who gained thirteen seats. Scottish Labour's vote recovered slightly to 27 per cent, but they won only seven seats, making them only the third largest party.

What precipitated these dramatic changes in electoral fortunes? In this chapter, we consider how an electoral shock—the Scottish independence referendum—altered the basis of political alignments in Scotland. We demonstrate that the referendum brought 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 show how the referendum acted as a catalyst for Labour's collapse in Scotland in 2015, leading to a realignment of voters and parties according to whether they supported Scottish independence. This realignment occurred primarily because the referendum aligned attitudes towards

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independence and party choice more closely rather than because it substantially increased support for independence. Having voted in favour of Scottish independence, Yes supporters appeared unable to reconcile themselves with supporting a unionist political party.

Scottish electoral politics was further disrupted by the EU referendum in 2016, which cut across both traditional party lines and the emergent independence divide. This second shock led to a largely unexpected Conservative revival at the 2017 General Election. As in the rest of Britain, the EU referendum drew voters back to the main parties, reversing the fragmentation of 2015 (see Chapter 9) but maintaining high levels of electoral volatility.

This, then, is the tale of how two referendums—and two electoral shocks—can help explain dramatic political changes in the 2015 and 2017 General Elections, as they unfolded in Scotland.

This first part of the chapter examines the impact of the Scottish referendum on voting in the 2015 General Election. We then consider how the EU referendum brought about a Conservative resurgence in Scotland in 2017.

8.1 The independence referendum: An electoral shock

The Scottish independence referendum took place on 18 September 2014 and was the result of a long-running campaign for independence led by the SNP since their formation in 1934. The Scottish government announced the decision to hold the referendum following the SNP victory in the Scottish Parliamentary Elections of 2011. It required the agreement of the UK Parliament, which the coalition government in Westminster formally provided in the 2012 Edinburgh agreement.

Formally, both campaigns were non-partisan, but the major Westminster parties (and their Scottish counterparts) all lined up to back the *Better Together* campaign, while the SNP dominated the *Yes Scotland* campaign, although *Yes Scotland* did involve members of other parties including the Scottish Greens and Labour for Independence. The result of the referendum saw the pro-Union ('*Better Together*') side winning by a margin of 55 per cent to 45 per cent, 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 per cent—the highest ever recorded for a vote in Scotland—underlined the high level of engagement across the electorate.

Many of Labour's electoral problems were brewing well before the referendum was announced. Although Labour had won the majority of Scottish seats in every general election since 1959, they had come second to the SNP in the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011. Notwithstanding this, Labour had enjoyed a comfortable lead in the opinion polls (for Westminster elections) in Scotland throughout the period from the 2011 Scottish Parliament Election through

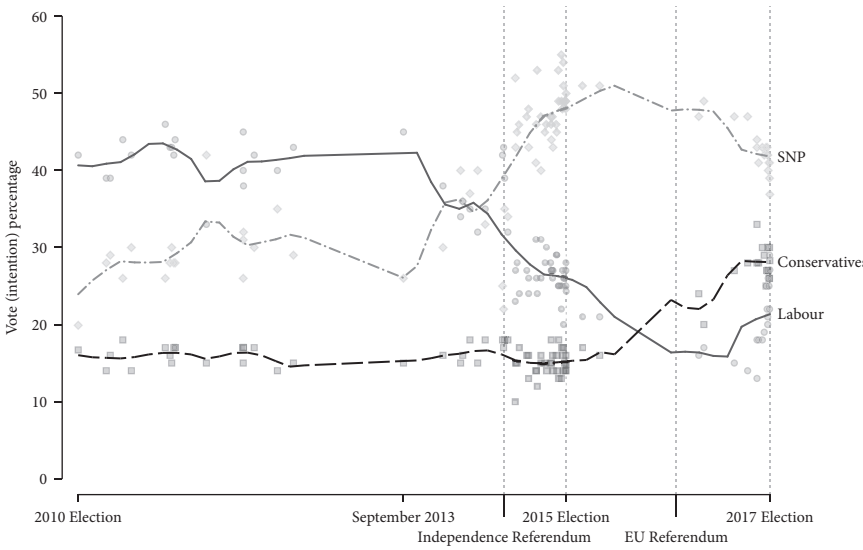

Figure 8.1 SNP, Labour, and The Conservatives in the polls: Westminster voting intention, March 2011–June 2017

to April 2014, when the referendum campaign was in full swing (Figure 8.1). However, from then on the picture changed dramatically. The referendum campaign seemed to damage Labour's popularity, which continued to erode right through to the 2015 General Election, which delivered Labour's worst defeat in Scotland since 1918. There was very little sign of recovery for Labour in 2017 when they fell into third place behind the Conservatives. The most dramatic period of decline for Labour immediately followed the referendum, which reflected a strengthening of the alignment between independence referendum voting and party choice in the immediate post-referendum period.

8.2 Labour's decline, 2014–15

The decline in Labour's popularity was not spread evenly across the population. Data from the BES internet panel and the 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 8.2). Rather, the shifts in Scottish voting behaviour occurred primarily among those who supported independence: large numbers of whom deserted Labour and switched their allegiance to the SNP.

Figure 8.2 shows that while around two-thirds of Yes voters intended to vote for the SNP before the independence referendum (February–March 2014),

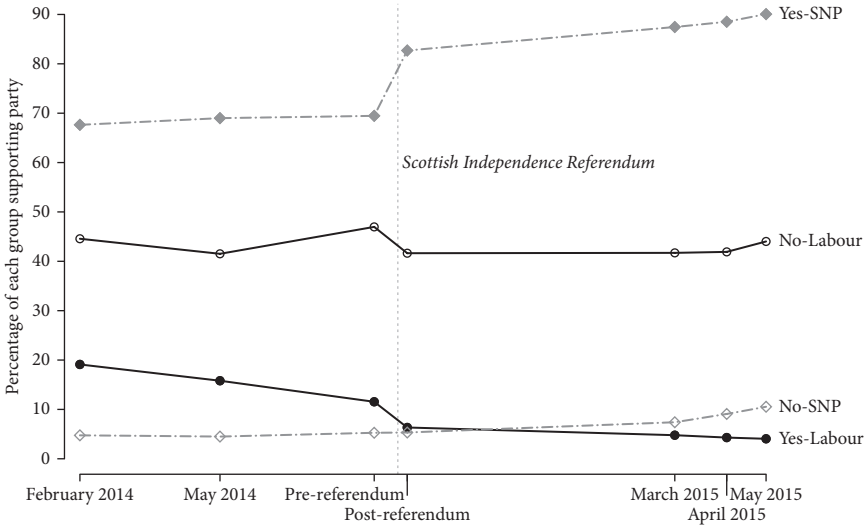

Figure 8.2 General election vote intention of Yes and No voters, 2014–15

approximately 20 per cent still intended to vote Labour. Despite the SNP lead among pro-independence voters, Labour's comfortable lead among unionists meant that Labour was still ahead in the opinion polls at the start of 2014. The picture changed very little in May following the European Parliamentary Elections, in which the SNP won the most votes in Scotland by a margin over Labour of 29 per cent to 25 per cent: a narrower victory than in the 2009 European elections. After the independence referendum in September 2014, however, a dramatic change occurred: 83 per cent of Yes voters now intended to vote SNP (an increase of 13 points compared to the immediately pre-referendum wave) compared to only 6 per cent who intended to vote Labour (a decrease of 5 points from the pre-referendum wave). By the time of the General Election in 2015 90 per cent of Yes voters reported voting for the SNP.

8.3 From referendum voting to party choice

In Chapter 3, we set out how major political events can act as shocks that alter the structure of political alignments. In this chapter, we explore the mechanisms by which one such event—the Scottish independence referendum—had precisely this effect. By choosing sides in the referendum, many voters faced potentially conflicting political loyalties, and were therefore forced to reconsider both their partisan allegiances and their political values. For example, could Labour identifiers who were Yes voters reconcile supporting a SNP-backed Yes campaign and

opposing the Labour backed 'No' campaign, with continuing to support Labour? In short, the answer appears to be 'no'.

The most common understanding of electoral behaviour is that people cast votes that reflect their political preferences and party attachments. Previous research has shown that the reverse causal ordering can also be true: the act of casting a vote for a party may lead to changes in voters' attachments to parties (Markus and Converse 1979; Dinas 2014). This is one way in which second-order elections—where the 'costs' of voting for different parties are lower—provide opportunities for small parties to gain support and increase their perceived viability in subsequent first-order elections (Farrer 2015; Prosser 2016b; MacAllister, Fieldhouse, and Russell 2002).

Referendums present a rather different set of circumstances and opportunities, but they have the potential for influencing first-order elections in a similar fashion. The main difference is that a referendum is not a straightforward competition between parties. In this sense, we might expect the potential for spillover to be reduced. For example, if parties are not in direct competition with each other, the result cannot act as a guide to voters about electoral viability and hence strategic voting. 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, the Parti Quebecois enjoyed an increase in both vote share and seats in the 1981 Quebec provincial elections (Clarke 1983) that followed the unsuccessful 1976 referendum campaign.

Insights from political and social psychology help explain why attitudes and attachments might shift as a result of political behaviour. Voters engage in motivated reasoning in order to reconcile new political information with their pre-existing views and behaviours (Lodge and Taber 2013). Motivated reasoning tends to increase the *stability* of political attitudes and alignments, and the act of voting can buttress voters' affective orientations towards a pre-existing attitude or affiliation. For example, partisanship can be reinforced by voting because voting provides signals about group identity, which in turn strengthens partisan ties (Dinas 2014). However, the same process can lead to a *change* in political attitudes and alignments in the event of one-off or idiosyncratic political behaviours. For example, Bølstad et al. (2013) find a positive effect of tactical voting 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 it is easier to like it.

In political psychology, partisan identification has been likened to social identity (Greene 1999; Huddy 2001; Greene 2004; Huddy, Mason, and Aarøe 2015; Huddy 2013). Social Identity Theory (Tajfel and Turner 1979; Tajfel 1981) suggests that a person's perceptions of other members of a group can affect their attitudes and norms through a process of self-categorization and meta-contrast whereby

group members maximize inter-group differentiation and minimize within-group differentiation (Turner et al. 1987). Self-categorization may therefore lead a person to more strongly differentiate between their own party and its opponents (Duck, Hogg, and Terry 1995; Greene 2004). Moreover, an individual's behaviour may reinforce their group identification (if the behaviour is aligned with their identity), especially when that behaviour is public.

If political partisanship can form the basis of social identity and self-categorization, it seems plausible that other salient political divisions might also act as a basis for social identities. In the case of the Scottish referendum, the campaign and the position that citizens adopted was highly salient and socially significant. The referendum therefore had the potential to make Yes-voting Labour supporters regard Labour as part of an out-group ('unionists'), and the SNP as an in-group ('nationalists'). Competing social identities could lead to a switch or weakening of party identification among Labour supporters who voted Yes. Certainly, such a shift would reduce the cognitive dissonance of combining pro-Labour and pro-independence identities. This dissonance (and its resolution) is nicely summed up by a quotation from a Yes voter on whatscotlandthinks.org: '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.'

By shifting the basis of voter identity from being defined by a party to an alternative form of self-categorization (nationalist versus unionist), the referendum weakened the salience of traditional partisanship. Moreover, an increase in the salience of a new group identity (e.g. 'nationalists' or 'Yes voters') can override the attitudes and norms associated with other groups the person identifies with (Mullen, Brown, and Smith 1992; Eifert, Miguel, and Posner 2010). In other words, citizens moved their attitudes and norms into line with those of their new identity. In the case of Yes voting, these attitudes and norms would be feeling more Scottish, more pro-independence, and less favourably inclined towards those on the unionist side—including the Labour Party.

While it is possible for citizens to hold multiple political identities, it seems likely that identifying with the Yes campaign (or as a nationalist-separatist) might supplant existing party identities because these identities came into direct conflict with Labour identification. This is particularly the case given the high salience of Scottish independence and the strong identity-basis of the Scottish independence campaign.

8.4 Labour's dwindling base

The crucial shift we wish to explain in this chapter is the exodus of Labour voters between spring 2014 and May 2015. Comparing wave 1 (February 2014) and wave 6 (May 2015) of the internet panel, we find that one third of all those who

supported Labour in early 2014 shifted to the SNP by the time of the 2015 General Election, and these made up 12 per cent of all Scottish voters. This is not to say that there was no important change prior to 2014, but the 2015 BES panel data (which started in February 2014) is still able to capture a substantial proportion of the shift from Labour to the SNP. Because of our interest in the collapse of Labour voting in 2015, in the following analysis, we focus on Scots who intended to vote Labour when we first interviewed them in 2014. Figure 8.3 provides an illustration of how Yes voters in this group intended to vote in Westminster elections at two key moments (immediately prior to the referendum, and immediately after the referendum), and how they actually voted at the 2015 Election. The thickness of each block is proportional to the size of the group, with the darker blocks indicating those intending to vote Labour and the lighter blocks indicating those intending to vote SNP (and actually doing so in the final time point).

Immediately before the referendum, about two-thirds of previously Labour-supporting Yes voters were still intending to vote Labour, a proportion which dropped to less than half in the immediate aftermath of the referendum. By the time of the 2015 Election, Labour only hung onto a small minority of its previous supporters on the Yes side: around four in five Yes voters who had intended to vote Labour fifteen months earlier voted for the SNP in 2015.

As we discussed in Chapter 4, the independence referendum took place in the context of weak partisan identification. Stronger identities provide more

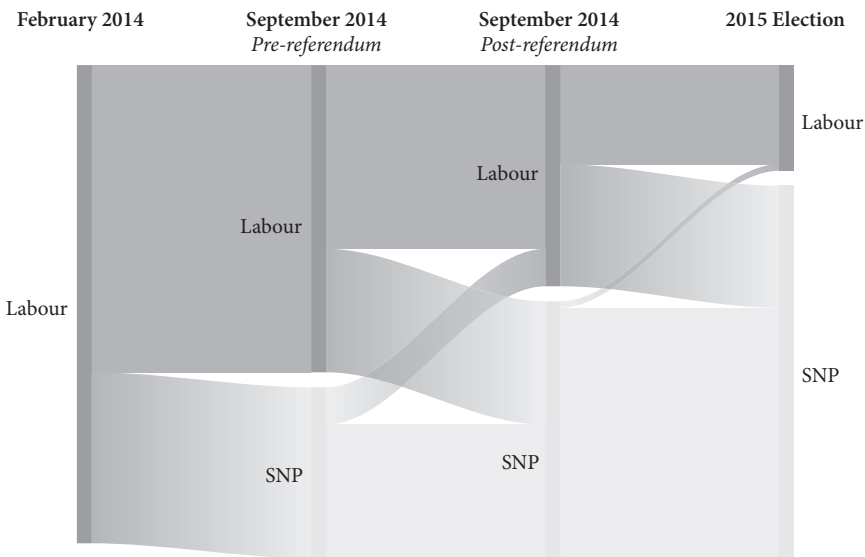

Figure 8.3 Flow of votes between Labour and SNP for initially Labour-supporting Yes voters between key periods in the run-up and aftermath of the Scottish independence referendum

Table 8.1 Proportion of Labour/Yes voters switching to the SNP by pre-referendum Labour party identity strength

Labour Identity Strength	% Voting SNP in 2015
None/Other party	83
Not very strong	80
Fairly strong	79
Very strong	61

motivation to resolve conflicting demands in ways which maintain existing identities and so we would expect fewer strong Labour identifiers to defect to the SNP after the referendum, which is what we see in Table 8.1. However, such was the importance of the referendum that even a majority of very strong Labour identifiers in February 2014 who voted Yes switched to the SNP (but did so at a rate more than 20 points lower than non-identifiers).

For 'No' supporters, we would not expect a conflict between their political identities—voting No was perfectly compatible with continued support for the unionist Labour and Conservative parties—and so we would expect less switching between parties following the referendum.

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. We are interested in whether the referendum as a shock had an effect on vote choice, and if so, whether this was due to a change in people's attitudes and identities, or a change in the relationship between those attitudes and identities and vote choice. To investigate this, we turn to multivariate longitudinal models to provide evidence of the most likely direction of causal effects. These models allow 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 any two-way relationship.[1] In other words, we can show how attitudes, evaluations, and identities informed referendum vote choice, and in turn how these were affected by that vote choice.

8.5 The independence referendum effect

Our key objective is to measure the effect of Independence Referendum voting intention and referendum vote on switching to the SNP, while controlling for those

[1] Although we cannot completely isolate the causal effect due to the possibility of reciprocal causality, our cross-lagged models minimize this problem by measuring the explanatory variables in the preceding time point and by allowing us to control for lagged versions of the dependent variable. A simplified illustration of the structure of these models is shown in Figure A8.1 in the appendix.

factors (measured in the previous wave) that affected referendum vote, as well as other factors that might have precipitated switching.

Before examining the impact of the referendum on the outcomes of interest, we should note that many of the factors that influenced general election vote choice also influenced referendum voting. Explaining referendum vote choice is not the main aim of this chapter, but it is worth noting that, controlling for prior referendum vote intention, the main influences on referendum vote in May 2014 were devolution preferences[2] and feelings towards the party leaders (see Table A8.2 in the appendix for the full results of the cross-lagged model). Prior to the referendum, approval of the Scottish government and hypothetical economic expectations also played a role in predicting referendum vote intention. Referendum vote was also influenced by devolution preferences, satisfaction with UK democracy, and expectations about the Scottish economy if Scotland became independent.

Our models also account for vote intention at the previous wave, vote at the 2010 Westminster and 2011 Holyrood elections, British and Scottish national identity, approval of Scottish government performance, party leader like scores, devolution preferences, and satisfaction with democracy in the UK. Given these very comprehensive controls, it is perhaps not surprising that referendum vote intention has no significant impact on general election vote intention in the first wave, and is only marginally significant 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 pre-referendum waves) on switching to the SNP if the respondent did not intend to vote SNP in the previous wave in Figure 8.4. The plot shows a large increase in the effect of referendum vote between the pre-referendum and post-referendum waves. This suggests that voting in the referendum—nailing one's colours to the mast in that election—had a greater effect on party choice than intention alone. More specifically, voting Yes directly led to an increase in the probability of voting SNP in the 2015 General Election among erstwhile Labour supporters. Referendum vote continues to predict switching in the further post-referendum waves, but the effect has a declining magnitude as the election approaches. The size of the effect declines before May 2015, reflecting the fact that, by that point, all but a handful of Yes voters had already switched to the SNP (as shown in Figure 8.2).

[2] These were measured on a latent scale estimated with an IRT model, using respondent preferences for whether the Scottish government should have control of different policy areas (Welfare, the NHS, Defence, Tax, and Policing), see Table A8.1 in the appendix.

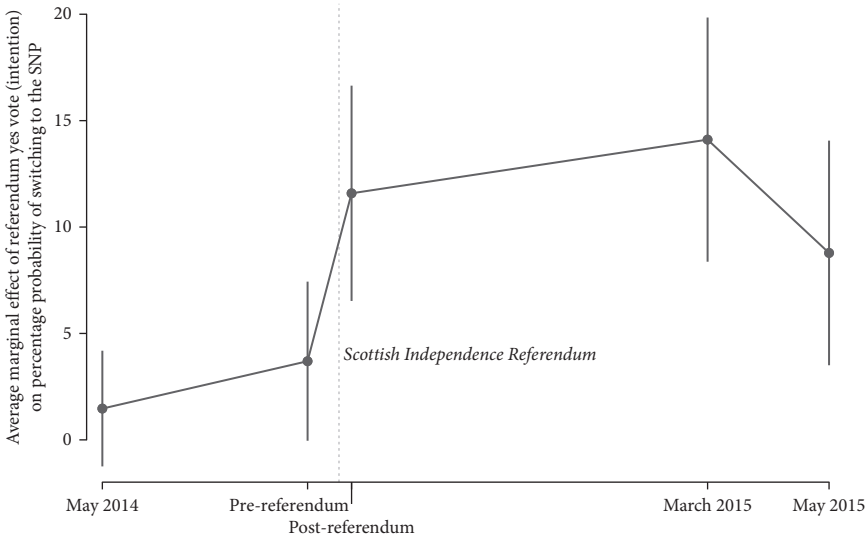

Figure 8.4 The average marginal effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on switching to the SNP if not intending to vote SNP in the previous wave

8.6 Changing identities?

In February 2014, 89 per cent of our cohort of Labour supporters identified with the party, but this fell to 75 per cent by March 2015 and 65 per cent by May 2015 (post-election). However, this fall occurred mainly within those who voted Yes in September 2014: Labour identity among Yes voters in this group fell from 84 per cent in February 2014 to 37 per cent in May 2015. Although Labour identification also fell among No voters, the equivalent drop was much smaller, from 90 per cent to 77 per cent.

To reveal the extent to which these shifts in identity result from referendum voting or from some other change in attitudes or evaluations we look to our model. Figure 8.5 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 were less likely to continue to identify with Labour in every subsequent wave.

We cannot model SNP identity before the referendum vote for the simple reason that there are so few SNP identifiers among our cohort of Labour supporters. Following the referendum, however, referendum vote strongly predicts identifying

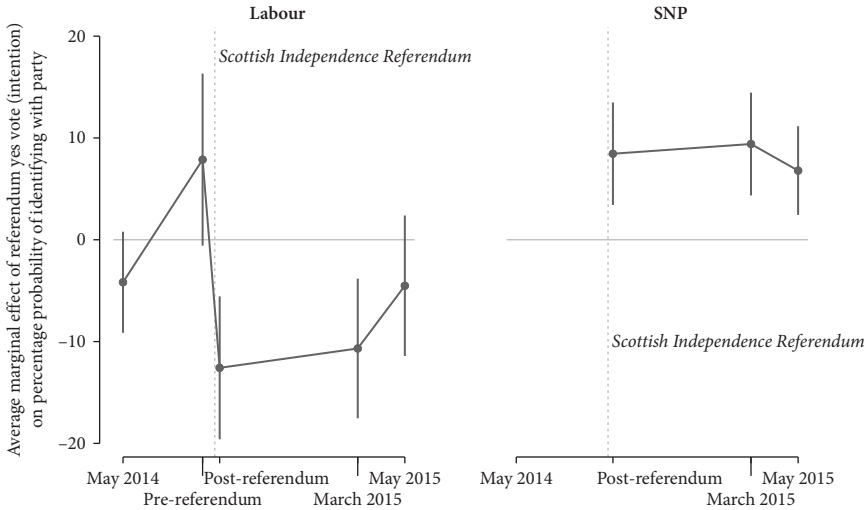

Figure 8.5 The average marginal effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on identifying with Labour and the SNP

with the SNP. Nearly half (45 per cent) of this group (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, the referendum also had an *indirect* effect on party choice at the general election through its influence on party identification. Indeed, it is worth noting that in the 2015 post-election wave, SNP party identity was a very strong predictor of switching to the SNP for the first time.

8.7 Changing evaluations and attitudes

Changes in party support and identification do not occur in isolation from political attitudes and evaluations. Table 8.2 shows the aggregate change in various attitudes among our cohort of Labour supporters between the start of our study in February 2014 and March 2015 (pre-election). There are large changes in the approval of the Scottish government, feelings towards the party leaders, and party identity, especially among those intending to vote for independence. Just over half (55 per cent) of the Yes-voting respondents approved of the Scottish government in February 2014, and this increased to nearly three-quarters (74 per cent) in March 2015. Yes voters became more negative in their feelings about Ed Miliband after the referendum, while No voters were stable in their opinions. The largest changes are how Yes and No voters felt about the SNP leaders. Before the referendum, there was already a clear divide in how future Yes and No voters felt

Table 8.2 Aggregate changes in attitudes by wave (Labour t1 supporters)

Variable	All		Yes Voters		No Voters	
	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	−0.2	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

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 Sturgeon by 4.8 points more than No voters.[3] Although there were only small net changes in Scottishness, Britishness, and satisfaction with UK democracy, changes in Britishness and satisfaction with UK democracy moved in opposite directions for Yes and No voters, with Yes voters becoming more Scottish and No voters more British. Scottishness, on the other hand, increased slightly among both Yes and No voters. It is also worth noting that the percentage of these who intended to vote Yes among February 2014 Labour supporters was only 17 per cent, but 28 per cent reported voting Yes in September 2014.

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, we modelled these variables as dependent variables in the same modelling framework (Table A8.2).[4] What we find is that all the explanatory variables from our vote choice model were predicted by referendum vote choice

[3] In part these changes also reflect the fact that, on average, people liked Nicola Sturgeon more than Alex Salmond. Measured in the post-referendum wave (the only time point we have ratings for both leaders), Yes voters had a 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.

[4] The explanatory variables include the lagged version of the dependent variable, party identification, referendum vote choice/intention, and the same range of controls as previously.

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. One example of how attitudes were influenced by referendum voting over the period is illustrated in Figure 8.6 which shows how referendum voting was associated with a decrease in feelings of Britishness (and to a lesser extent an increase in Scottishness), especially immediately after the referendum.

Social Identity Theory suggests that feelings towards leaders are strongly influenced by their position as in-group members (Hogg 2001; Haslam, Reicher, and Platow 2010). Figure 8.7 illustrates the effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on how voters felt about Ed Miliband and the leader of the SNP (Salmond before and immediately after the referendum, Sturgeon before the 2015 Election). Referendum vote (intention) is a strong influence on how voters felt about party leaders, particularly the leaders of the Yes side and the SNP. An almost identical pattern is found for approval of the Scottish government (not shown), the effect of which also peaked in the immediate run-up to the referendum.

In the following section we explore how, by altering the distribution and alignment of political attitudes and evaluations, referendum voting *indirectly* led to an increase in SNP voting in the general election among erstwhile Labour voters.

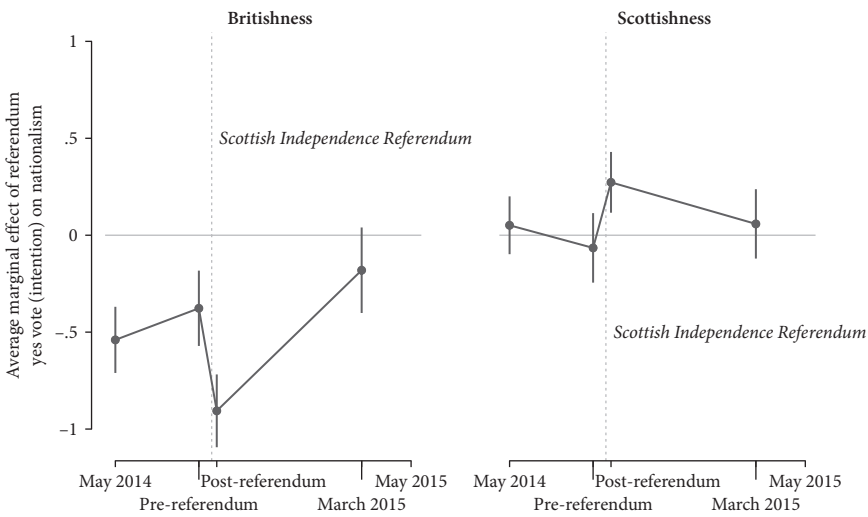

Figure 8.6 Average marginal effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on national identity (1–7 scale)

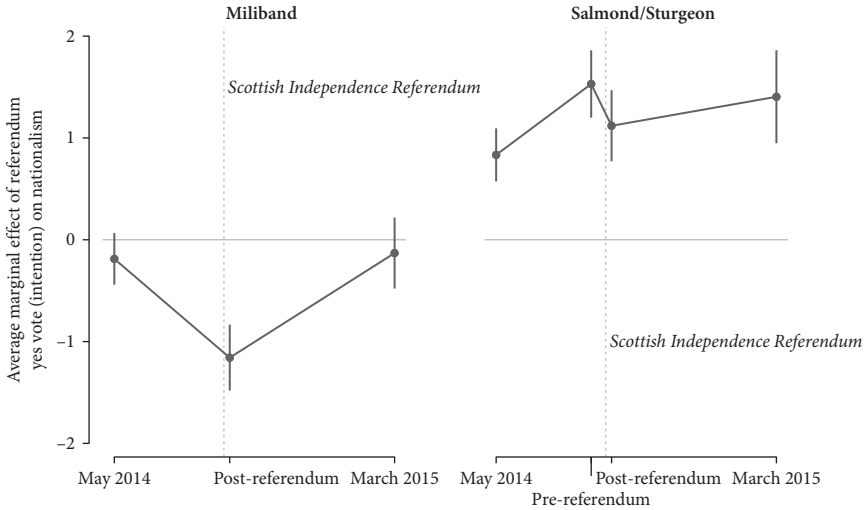

Figure 8.7 Average marginal effect of referendum Yes vote (intention) on feelings towards Labour and SNP party leaders (0–10 scale)

8.8 What if the referendum never happened?

Did people switch to the SNP because the referendum led to changes in the underlying attitudes that underpinned their vote choice, or were their attitudes relatively stable while the relationship between attitudes and vote choice changed? In order to further illuminate *how* the referendum affected the 2015 General Election voting, 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.

We estimate the predicted share of the vote the SNP might have achieved under a series of counterfactual conditions, where post-referendum data about the attitudes and preferences shown in Table 8.2 are substituted for the same respondents' pre-referendum data in a (pre-referendum) model of SNP vote intention (see Table A8.3 in the appendix for the results of this model). From this, we can see how much change in voters' attitudes, evaluations, and identities contributes to the increase in SNP support, as opposed to any change in how those attitudes align with vote choice.

Figure 8.8 shows the predicted proportion of 2010 Labour voters voting SNP in the pre- and post-referendum models. The proportion intending to vote SNP in the pre-referendum model (May 2014) was 13 per cent while the proportion who actually voted SNP was 33 per cent. The first two counterfactuals—holding referendum vote and political attitudes at pre-referendum levels—both show negligible effects on the proportion predicted to vote SNP (predicted proportions of

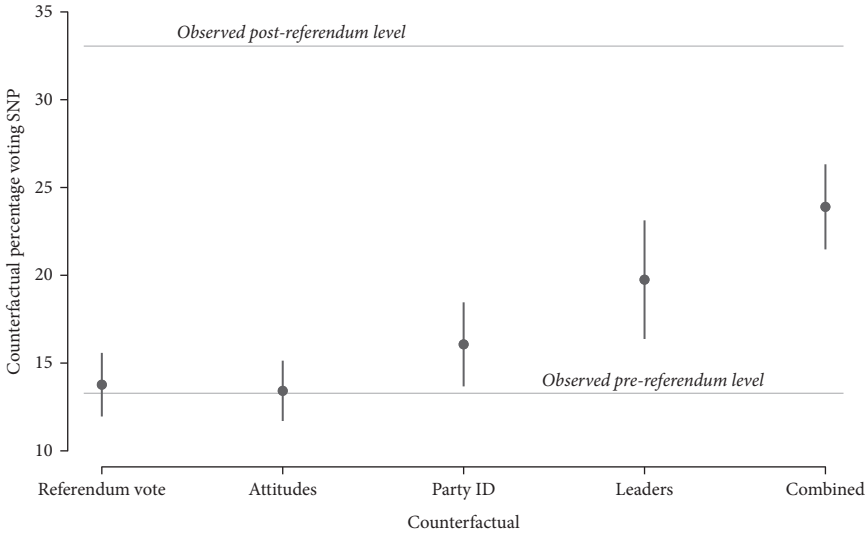

Figure 8.8 Counterfactual effect of change in attitude on voting for the SNP among 2010 Labour voters

13.8 per cent and 13.4 per cent respectively, neither of which is statistically significantly different to the actual pre-referendum proportion). The counterfactuals indicate that party identity and leader ratings account for part of the increase in SNP support: the predicted proportions were 16 per cent and 20 per cent respectively, both of which are statistically significantly different to the baseline. Combining all the counterfactual conditions together gives a predicted proportion of 23.9 per cent—an increase of 10.3 percentage points—just over half of the actual 20 percentage point change.

It is clear from this 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 only a small part 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 also changed after the referendum is how attitudes, evaluations, and identities *aligned* with party choice. Examining the differences in coefficients between the pre- and post-referendum models tells us that there were several important changes to how attitudes, evaluations, and identities predict SNP voting (see Table A8.3 in the appendix). While Britishness has a similar coefficient between models, Scottishness does not predict SNP voting before the referendum but does post-referendum. Similarly, approval of the Scottish government and

devolution preferences do not predict SNP voting pre-referendum but do post-referendum. 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 indicates that although feelings about leaders changed substantially, the effect of these feelings actually diminished, suggesting that changes in feelings about leaders largely result from other changes in political identities and alignments, rather than being a major contributing factor in and of themselves. Finally, the magnitude of the coefficient for referendum vote increases by 70 per cent, supporting the claim 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.

In summary, we have shown that voting for independence in the referendum had a strong effect on switching vote intention (and ultimately actual vote) from Labour to the SNP. This was mainly because of a crystallization of support for the SNP among Yes voters and, more generally, among those with pro-independence attitudes, rather than a large-scale shift in support for independence. We now turn to the General Election of 2017 in which the wheels came off the SNP bandwagon.

8.9 The EU referendum and 2017 General Election

Although the SNP remained the largest party in Scotland at the 2017 Election, they lost over a quarter of their vote share and twenty-one of the fifty-six seats they had won in 2015. However, Labour was not the prime beneficiary of this reversal. Instead, the Scottish Conservatives nearly doubled their vote share from 15 per cent in 2015 to 29 per cent in 2017, picking up twelve seats, and became the second largest party in Scotland (the first time they beat Labour at a General Election in Scotland since 1959). Labour only modestly improved their vote share by 2.8 percentage points and picked up six seats, while the Liberal Democrats managed to gain three seats despite a slight decrease in their share of the vote.

What explains these sudden changes in electoral fortunes?

On the one hand, Labour won over 15 per cent of 2015 SNP voters compared to only 8 per cent for the Conservatives (Table 8.3). Many of these were voters returning home, with 39 per cent having voted Labour in 2010 compared to only 14 per cent SNP and 20 per cent Liberal Democrat. Crucially, however, almost a quarter of 2015 Labour supporters defected to the Conservatives in 2017, compared to only 7 per cent in the opposite direction. So what lay behind this unusually high level of switching between the major parties? We have already seen how the 2014 independence referendum led to the rise of the SNP in 2015 at the expense of Labour, and we have shown how the political divisions created by a referendum counteracted traditional party loyalties. In this section,

Table 8.3 2015–17 vote flow, Scotland

2015 Vote	2017 Vote			
	Con	Lab	LD	SNP
Conservative	86.1	6.5	3.5	3.9
Labour	24.2	61.5	6.1	6.5
Liberal Democrat	36.2	14.8	44.3	4.6
SNP	8.1	15.2	1.8	74.0

we explore how a second shock to the Scottish party system—the 2016 EU referendum—interacted with the earlier shock of the independence referendum. In Chapter 9, we examine the impact of the EU referendum on electoral politics in more detail, and show how it exposed cross-cutting political divisions. Here we explore the impact of the EU referendum in Scotland, and more specifically how, in combination with the Scottish independence referendum, it brought about the surprising result we saw in 2017.

As we have already seen, the Scottish independence referendum created clear divisions in Scottish politics. The SNP, the cheerleaders for independence, were unambiguously in favour of staying in the EU, and, following the vote to leave, tried to leverage Brexit to force a second independence referendum with the aim of keeping Scotland in the EU (McHarg and Mitchell 2017). The Scottish Conservatives, united against independence, were divided over Brexit during the EU referendum campaign, but took a clear stance in favour of Brexit following the referendum result, albeit one that is generally seen as more soft-Brexit supporting than their English counterparts (McEwen 2018). Scottish Labour, also against Scottish independence, tried to carve out a position on the EU somewhere between the SNP and the Conservatives.

The EU referendum clearly cut across the divisions over Scottish independence, with around 60 per cent of both Yes and No voters in the 2014 referendum voting to remain in the EU. Using data from the BES internet panel on how people voted in both the 2014 independence and 2016 EU referendums produces four categories of respondents (excluding respondents who did not vote in one or both referendums). The two largest groups were those that voted No in 2014 and Remain in 2016 (34 per cent of voters in 2017) and Yes/Remain voters (28 per cent), followed by No/Leave voters (22 per cent), and finally Yes/Leave voters (16 per cent). We look at how each of these groups voted in the 2015 and 2017 elections.

Figure 8.9 shows that those who voted for independence in 2014 and for Remain in the EU referendum voted heavily in favour of the SNP at both elections. These are the voters whose position was in line with SNP policy. As we saw above, the vast majority of Yes voters supported the SNP following the independence

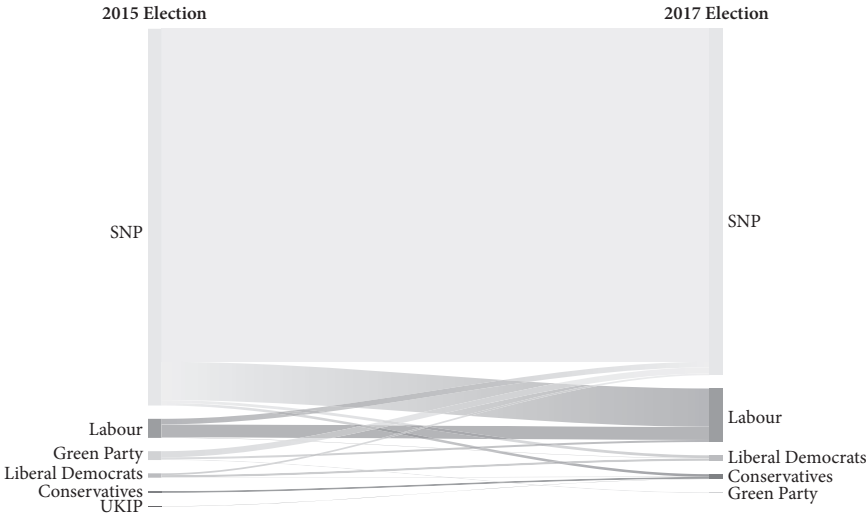

Figure 8.9 2015 and 2017 vote choice for Scottish independence Yes and EU referendum Remain voters

referendum, and, notwithstanding the normal impact of SNP performance and everyday politics, those that agreed with the party on Brexit had no reason to desert it in 2017. The vast majority (92 per cent) of Yes/Remain voters voted SNP in 2015 and this level of support only declined slightly (84 per cent) in 2017.

The importance of the EU referendum in restructuring voting in Scotland is illustrated quite dramatically by the change among Yes/Leave voters, 89 per cent of whom voted for the SNP in 2015 compared to only 57 per cent in 2017 (Figure 8.10). More than four in ten respondents in this group switched to another party in 2017, with similar proportions going to the Conservatives and to Labour. Given the Conservatives' low base in this group in 2015, their success in attracting one in five of Yes/Leave voters in 2017 highlights the importance of the EU referendum. Just as Labour's position on the independence referendum cost Labour votes in 2015, in 2017 many SNP voters were driven away by the party's strong pro-Remain stance.

Those that both voted against independence and to Remain in the EU made up the largest share of the four groups in the Scottish electorate. Figure 8.11 shows that, despite its poor performance overall, Labour dominated this group in 2015, winning around half of these voters. In 2017, however, Labour lost about one in five of these voters to the Conservatives, with a smaller share going to the Liberal Democrats. Smaller numbers of 2015 Conservatives and Liberal Democrats also shifted to Labour, cancelling out some of these losses. Altogether, Labour only won about four out of ten of No/Remain voters in 2017. As a result of picking up a

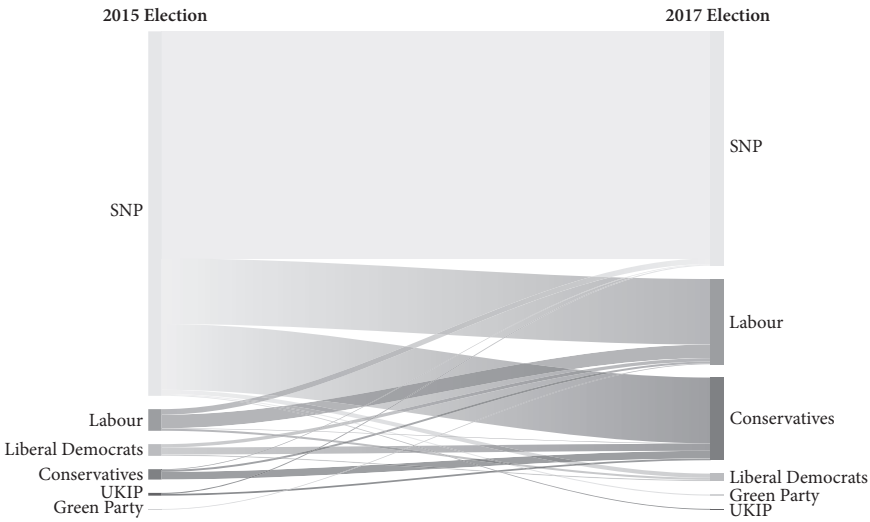

Figure 8.10 2015 and 2017 vote choice for Scottish independence Yes and EU referendum Leave voters

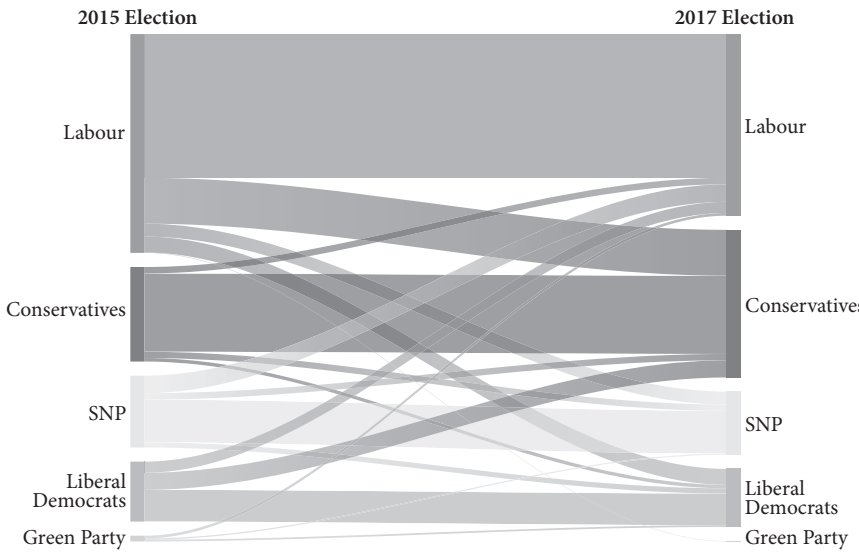

Figure 8.11 2015 and 2017 vote choice for Scottish independence No and EU referendum Remain voters

large number of Labour voters and around one in three 2015 Liberal Democrat voters, the Conservatives increased their share of this group from 21 to 33 per cent between 2015 and 2017. Although the Conservatives were more clearly associated nationally with a hard Brexit, the softer approach from the Scottish Conservatives, together with a strong position against a second independence referendum clearly resonated with this group.

Perhaps more crucial to the Scottish Conservatives' success were the No/Leave voters, whose referendum votes were most in line with the Conservative positions on independence and Brexit. Figure 8.12 shows that this group split almost evenly between the Conservatives and Labour in 2015, but that, in 2017, the Conservatives won almost three times as many of these voters as Labour (65 per cent versus 23 per cent). A closer inspection of the flow of votes among this group reveals that the Conservatives picked up nearly half of 2015 Labour voters, six in ten 2015 Liberal Democrats, and the vast majority of 2015 UKIP voters (Figure 8.12). The SNP also lost over three-quarters of their support among this group, 96 per cent of whom opposed a second independence referendum. The effect of these changes was to nearly double the Conservative share of the vote in this group to 65 per cent, helping them become the second largest party in Scotland.

As we saw earlier in this chapter, pro-independence voters rapidly shifted to the SNP in 2015, virtually wiping Labour off the electoral map. In 2017, Yes/Remain voters mainly stayed loyal to the SNP, but the SNP suffered heavy losses to the major unionist parties among Yes/Leave voters. The relative success of the Conservatives in attracting a substantial minority of No/Remain voters—despite the national party's hard-line position on Brexit—also significantly contributed to their increased vote share. By contrast, Labour performed relatively poorly among the No/Leave group, losing a large proportion of these voters to the Conservatives. The ability of the Conservatives to capture No/Remain voters as well as a clear majority of No/Leave voters clearly reflects the importance of the two referendums in defining Scottish voters' political identities.

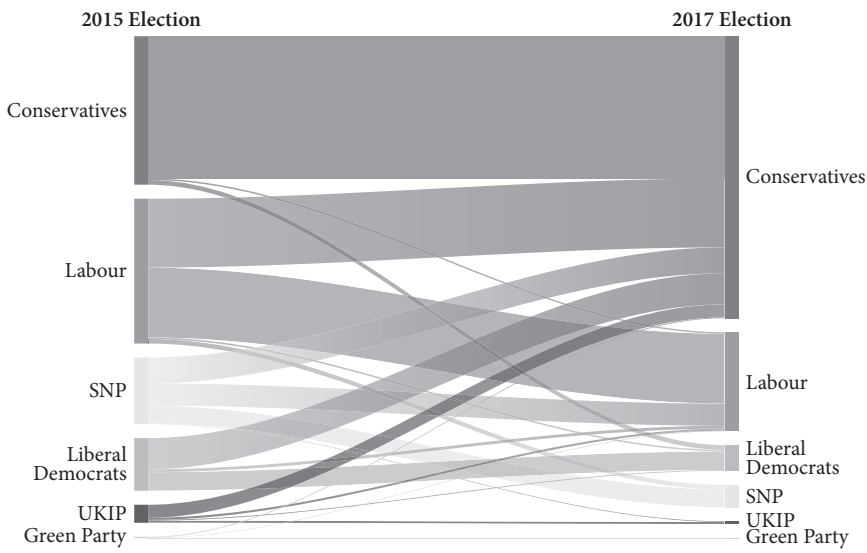

Figure 8.12 2015 and 2017 vote choice for Scottish independence No and EU referendum Leave voters

The relative strength of the new political identities forged in the heat of two referendum campaigns shaped the outcome of the 2017 General Election in Scotland, opening the way for a Conservative recovery based on a strong unionist and Brexit message. We asked a battery of questions about identification with the Yes/No side in the Scottish referendum (in April 2017) and with the Leave/Remain side in the EU referendum (based on similar questions relating to social identities) and found that a large proportion of No/Remain voters more closely identified with 'No' than with 'Remain' (39 per cent). Among this group, the Conservatives led Labour by 45 per cent to 34 per cent. Among those who identified more strongly as 'Remain' than 'No' (36 per cent), Labour led the Conservatives 53 per cent to 20 per cent.

The emergence of the Brexit dimension and how it cut across the independence referendum is illustrated in Figure 8.13 and Figure 8.14, which show how devolution and European integration preferences aligned with vote choice in 2015 and 2017.[5] As explained earlier in this chapter, devolution preference was a strong predictor of referendum vote in 2014 and, through that, 2015 General Election vote. This is illustrated in the top panel of Figure 8.13, which shows how SNP

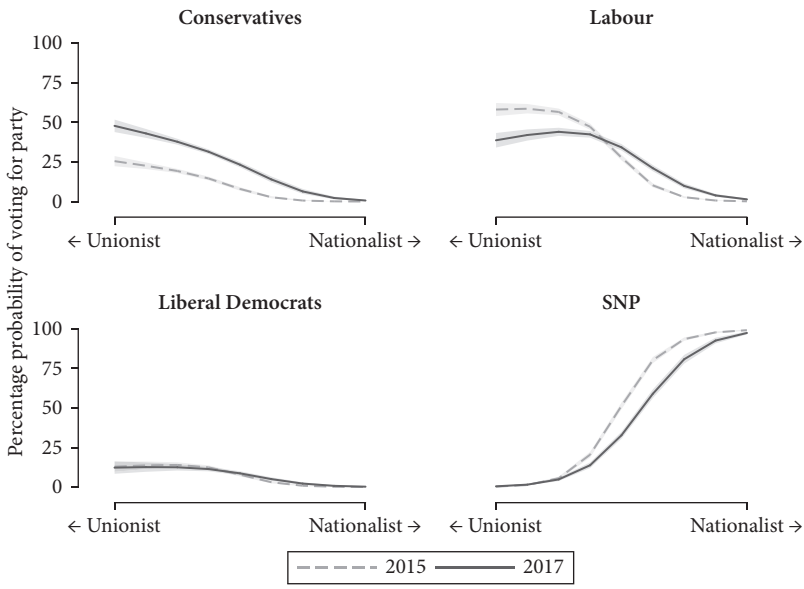

Figure 8.13 Predicted probability of voting for each party by devolution scale

[5] The dependent variable is reported vote in 2015 and 2017. Independent variables are stable value/attitudinal positions measured as latent variables generated from IRT models (results shown in the appendix) using responses to (i) economic left–right (Table A6.1) and (ii) authoritarian–liberal (Table A6.2) values batteries, (iii) devolution preferences (Table A8.4), and (iv) EU scale (Table A8.5). The results of the vote choice model are shown in Table A8.6 in the appendix.

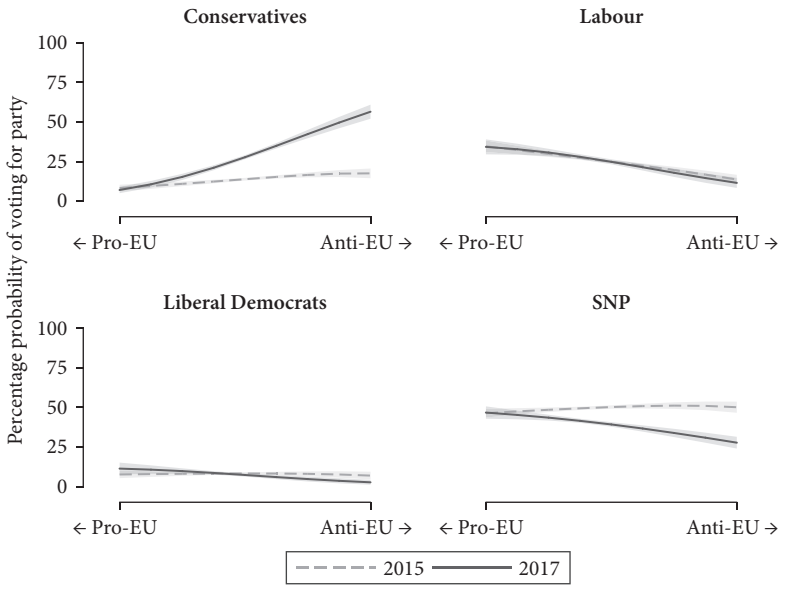

Figure 8.14 Predicted probability of voting for each party by EU scale

voting rises steeply as voters move towards the nationalist end of the scale, while controlling for liberal–authoritarian, left–right, EU, and immigration attitudes. However, in 2017, while this effect is still strong, it is somewhat more muted than it was in 2015. This is mirrored by a weakening of the relationship between Labour voting and devolution preferences. This suggests that that there may have been a slight weakening of the impact of the independence referendum by 2017 as Labour regained support among nationalists at the expense of the SNP. By contrast, Conservative voting rose across virtually the full range of devolution preferences, although the increase was greatest among unionists. Although slightly weakened compared to 2015, the independence cleavage was still of paramount importance in structuring party support in Scotland. We can gauge this by comparing indicators originally designed to measure the strength of class alignment. The Thomsen index (also known as log odds measure of class voting—a measure of relative class voting) calculated for the SNP versus other parties for Yes and No voters was 3.4 in 2015, falling to 3.2 in 2015.[6] These are both extremely high values if we benchmark them against the height of British class voting during the post-war era

[6] The log odds is calculated as the natural log of (% Yes-voting SNP/%Yes-voting other): (% No-voting SNP/% No-voting other). The simple odds (not logged) dropped more dramatically from 29.8 to 24.2. An alternate measure is the Alford index (measured here as % Yes-voting SNP—% No-voting SNP) which dropped from 69 in 2015 to 64 in 2017. For reference, the Alford index of class voting from 1945 to 1960 in Britain was 37.3 (Nieuwbeerta and De Graaf 1999). All measures suggest that independence voting dropped in 2017, but the level was still extremely high compared to measures of class voting in Britain.

(1945–60) when the Thomsen index of class voting was 1.64 (Nieuwbeerta and De Graaf 1999). The independence cleavage was weakened by the EU referendum, but not by a vast amount.

Figure 8.14 reveals how the cross-cutting impact of Europe (defined by attitudes towards integration with the European Union) became much stronger in 2017, partly explaining the weaker pull of devolution preferences. The figure shows that having anti-European attitudes was a much stronger predictor of Conservative voting in 2017 than in 2015.[7] This is mirrored in the weakening of support for the SNP among anti-EU voters. In short, the rise of the European dimension accounts for the rise of the Conservatives at the expense of the SNP in 2017. In contrast, the net effect of EU attitudes on the Labour vote barely changed between 2015 and 2017. Although we saw above that Labour lost a large number of Leave supporters to the Conservatives, they also lost substantial numbers of Remain voters (also to the Conservatives) and gained some Leave supporters from the SNP.

We can also examine the effects of the two referendums on SNP partisanship. The interaction of the two referendums is a clear illustration of the capacity for a new shock to disrupt the effects of an earlier one. Figure 8.15 shows trends in the strength of SNP partisanship among those who voted Yes in the independence

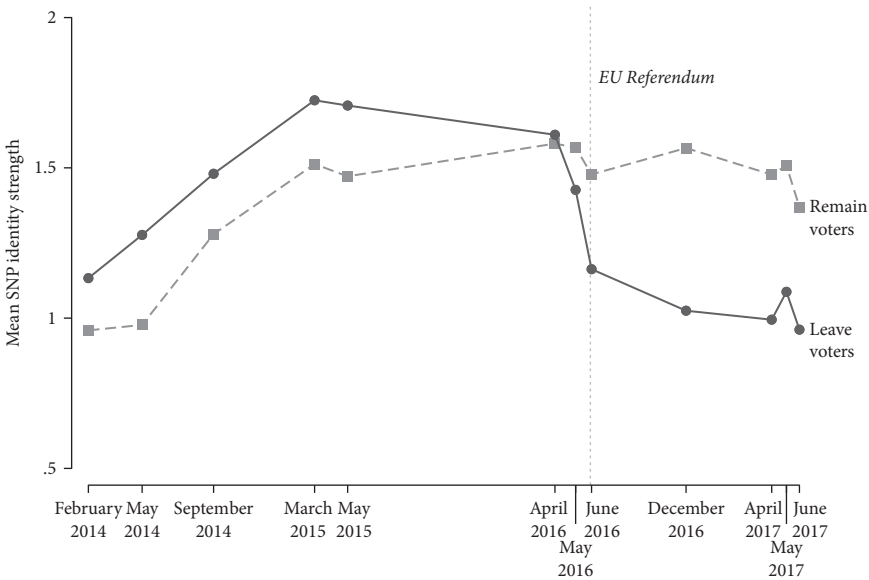

Figure 8.15 Strength of SNP identity among 2014 Scottish independence referendum Yes voters who voted Remain and Leave in the 2016 EU referendum, on a scale where 0 = no/other party id, 1 = not very strong Conservative id, 2 = farily strong Conservative id, 3 = Very strong Conservative id

[7] This is also the case in England and Wales, as shown in Chapter 9.

referendum and later voted Remain or Leave in the 2016 EU referendum. Leave-voting independence supporters started with slightly stronger SNP identities, but both Leavers and Remainers moved in parallel in the run-up to, and aftermath of, the Scottish independence referendum. Once we reach the EU referendum, however, there is a divergence in trends. Remainers felt slightly more strongly SNP compared to the year before, while Leavers had begun to waiver, though they still felt fairly strongly SNP. In the wake of the EU referendum there was an immediate and sharp drop in the strength of SNP identity among Leavers which did not recover by the 2017 election.

Overall, the 2017 General Election outcome in Scotland reflected the impact of two electoral shocks. First, the consequences of the independence referendum were still being felt, allowing the SNP to remain dominant over Labour (albeit to a lesser degree than in 2015). Overlaid on this was the impact of the EU referendum, which contributed to the resurgence of the Scottish Conservatives.

8.10 Conclusions

The 2015 General Election was disastrous for Labour, not least because of their collapse in Scotland. The reduction in Labour's Scottish vote and the rise of the SNP contributed significantly to the overall fragmentation of party support in the 2015 General Election. The Scottish independence referendum acted as a shock to a system that was already unstable due to the long-term weakening of party identities and the decline of Labour's traditional class-based appeal. In this chapter, we have shown how the independence referendum precipitated a shift in allegiances of those backing independence—to the extent that 90 per cent of Yes voters voted for the SNP, including most of those who had still intended to vote Labour early in 2014. Overall, Labour lost one-third of its supporters to the SNP between early 2014 and the 2015 General Election (and nearly half since 2010), the vast majority of whom voted for independence. To put it simply, Yes voters could not reconcile a Labour vote with the position they had taken on the referendum.

This shift occurred in two phases. First, there was a gradual drift to the SNP before the referendum, when there was considerable crossover between party support and positions on independence. This process continued between the referendum and the 2015 General Election, when party alignments crystallized along the independence cleavage. The peak effect of the referendum on changes to party identity, attitudes, and vote choice was in September 2014—immediately after the referendum—but it continued to have an effect on each wave through to election day. Moreover, these changes to vote choice in 2015 were linked to changing partisan identities. Yes voting 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 per cent of those supporting Labour in February 2014, and who ended up voting SNP, identified with Labour in May 2015 (compared to 80 per cent at the outset). In other words, shifts in voting were associated with shifts in party identification.

Voting Yes also led to a change in political attitudes in a direction consistent with and more favourable to the SNP and less favourable to Labour. Through this effect on attitudes, voting Yes indirectly led to an increase in the probability of voting SNP in the 2015 General Election. However, we demonstrated that only a fraction of Labour's loss of 2010 voters to the SNP was attributable to changes in attitudinal positions. The impact of the referendum on political attitudes was less about changing people's minds (to become more Scottish-minded or more pro-devolution), than it was about a strengthening of the alignment between these attitudes and party support. After the referendum had taken place those who had voted Yes in 2014 were no longer prepared to lend Labour their support. In this sense, in terms of our theory of electoral shocks, the independence referendum acted as a shock to the salience of nationalism, devolution, and independence. Voters' position on independence simply mattered more after the independence referendum than they had before. However, the post-referendum strengthening of the relationship between independence attitudes and party identification and voting in the independence referendum may also have acted as a shock to the image of the Labour Party in Scotland, causing voters to see it primarily as a party of the union rather than as a party of the left. The data available and models presented here do not allow us to differentiate between the impact of the changing salience of the independence issue and the changing image of the parties.

We have shown that the Scottish independence referendum had a profound realigning effect on party support in Scotland, cementing the link between SNP voting and pro-independence attitudes, and contributing to the fragmentation of party support across Britain as a whole, in 2015. However, the SNP could not rest on their laurels: by 2017 the Scottish electorate had contributed to a reversal in party fragmentation and the rise of the two-party national vote. A second electoral shock in the form of the EU referendum disrupted the new political equilibrium in Scotland. While the SNP remained the largest Scottish party in the UK Parliament, they lost considerable ground to both the Conservatives and Labour, who won over a substantial proportion of pro-independence Leave voters. Meanwhile, among anti-independence Leave voters, the Conservatives became the favoured party. In the space of three general elections, the Scottish party system was completely transformed. The SNP moved from third place in 2010 to first in 2015 and 2017; Labour fell from first to third; and the Conservatives rose from fourth to second. These dramatic changes were the result of two major electoral shocks in the shape of two referendums less than three years apart. In the following chapter, we discuss the wider impact of the Brexit shock across Britain as a whole.