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## SNP readies the bubbly, but the fizz could be flattened by first past the post

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The polls look stunning, but Nicola Sturgeon's SNP know they've a long way to go yet. Andrew Milligan/PA

Another month, another set of Lord Ashcroft constituency polls, but these ones have somehow managed to raise the electoral temperature in Scotland once again. This time the news is even more grave for Labour, with the polls now indicate that the Scottish National Party (SNP) is set to win 56 of 59 Scottish seats. At present, the SNP has six whilst Labour has 41. If the result is anything like what the polls are indicating, it will be nothing short of catastrophic for Labour.

Most notable of the constituencies polled by Ashcroft was Gordon Brown's Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath seat. The Labour candidate replacing the former prime minister is facing a

swing of 29 points to the SNP, putting its candidate, Roger Mullin, six points in the lead. Elsewhere even former Lib Dem leader Charles Kennedy is facing defeat, while Scottish Labour leader Jim Murphy is on a knife edge.

Polls are only a snapshot of now, of course. With two months to go until the general election on May 7, there is still a lot of water to flow under the bridge. But what is happening in Scotland may turn out to signal a realignment in how voters are approaching UK general elections.

## Past experience

The textbook approach to elections in Scotland has been one of “general election, vote British; Scottish parliament election, vote Scottish”. There was a clear example not long ago, where the Holyrood victory of the SNP in 2007 was followed by Labour’s “business as usual” general election victory in Scotland in 2010. Even the SNP’s spectacular victory in 2011 was seen in the context of Scottish politics and was not thought to have any serious implications for this year’s general election. This now appears entirely wrong, of course.

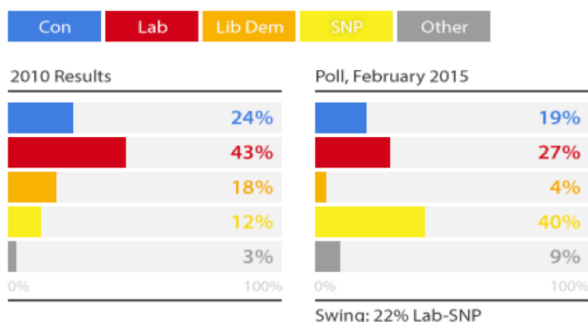
Take Alistair Darling’s constituency of Edinburgh South West. The SNP finished third in this seat in 2010. At the Scottish parliament, most of the Edinburgh Pentlands constituency coincides with this seat, but parts of the constituencies of Edinburgh Central, Edinburgh Southern and Edinburgh Western also fall within it.

At the 2011 Scottish election, the SNP came from third place to win in Edinburgh Central and Edinburgh Pentlands. In Edinburgh Western they came from second place, but in Edinburgh Southern they came from fourth place and increased their share of the vote by 12 points.

Now take a look at Lord Ashcroft’s polling of Darling’s constituency, which forecasts a 28-point swing for the SNP from fourth to first.

### Edinburgh South West

2010 Lab Majority: 18.6% over Con; 30.6% over SNP



Lord Ashcroft

What we may be seeing is Scottish parliament election voting patterns being repeated at a UK general election. Similar patterns are seen in East Renfrewshire (Jim Murphy’s seat), Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell’s seat) and Dumfries and Galloway (shadow defence minister Russell Brown). The SNP were third in each of these seats in 2010. Now they are polling at respectively one point behind, equal and 16 points ahead of the incumbent.

## 2011 is back

Obviously we can only speculate at this stage, but the similar patterns of voting intention between the 2011 Scottish election and the upcoming general election suggest that what made the SNP successful in 2011 is working again.

Research into voting behaviour at the 2011 election showed that independence was not the

main reason for the SNP's success. It was the perception that they would show more competence relative to Labour, would stand up for Scotland, and had the most able leadership.

Obviously the dynamics of voting decisions are different in general elections because of the UK-wide dimension. But when it comes to competence and standing up for Scotland, voters could quite logically conclude that the SNP would act as Scotland's "lobbyist" in Westminster in pushing for a favourable budget deal, for example. Crucially, they are perceived to be able to do so more competently than Labour.

Labour has traditionally held the "standing for Scotland" mantle, but polling has shown that their performance in the referendum campaign has changed this. As many as 40% of voters are less likely to vote for them in future, with only 15% more likely. On the other hand, 36% of voters were more likely to vote SNP given its performance in the referendum campaign compared to 31% who were less likely.

The whole saga around former Scottish Labour leader Johann Lamont accusing the London leadership of treating Scotland as a "branch office" will not have helped these matters either. Labour is now desperately trying to win back former Labour voters who voted Yes in the referendum.

Despite being on the winning side of the referendum campaign, Labour seems to have lost the ability to be trusted as the best guarantors of Scottish interests at Westminster. According to a Daily Record poll from January, the largest proportion of Scottish voters want to see Labour govern with SNP support after the general election.

In terms of leadership, the SNP is also streets ahead of Labour, with Jim Murphy's trust ratings lagging substantially behind Nicola Sturgeon's.

The Scottish public see the SNP leadership team as superior to that of Scottish Labour's and, just as in 2011, such perceptions appear to be fuelling unprecedented levels of support for the party. Astonishingly, David Cameron is more popular than Ed Miliband in Scotland.

## Some words of warning

But if the similarities with the 2011 Scottish election look striking, it is vital to bear this in mind: the number of seats that change hands depends heavily on the overall national swing from Labour to the SNP.

A report by John Curtice for the Electoral Reform Society shows that while a 15-point lead over Labour would give the SNP around 45 seats, a 10-point lead would take the seat tally down to around 35. Despite riding high in the polls, the SNP is still vulnerable to the dynamics of first past the post.

The British dimension of the election will also become all the more apparent the closer we get to the election. This may help Labour close the gap and mitigate against the worst poll predictions. None of this changes the fact that the SNP surge appears to be here to stay. Thanks to the referendum, it certainly does look like the traditional maxims stating how Scottish voters tend to behave at UK general elections are about to be rewritten.



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