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Pressure on Nicola Sturgeon is intense, but there's still room to be positive about second Scottish indyref

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Sturges overkill? Dominic Lipinski/PA

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There have been two dramatic stories in Scottish politics in recent days. One has seen Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's first minister, hold talks with her UK counterpart Theresa May over the ongoing Brexit crisis; and confirming she will clarify plans for a second Scottish independence referendum in the coming weeks. The other involved the shock of seeing Sturgeon's predecessor Alex Salmond appear in court charged with attempted rape and sexual assault.

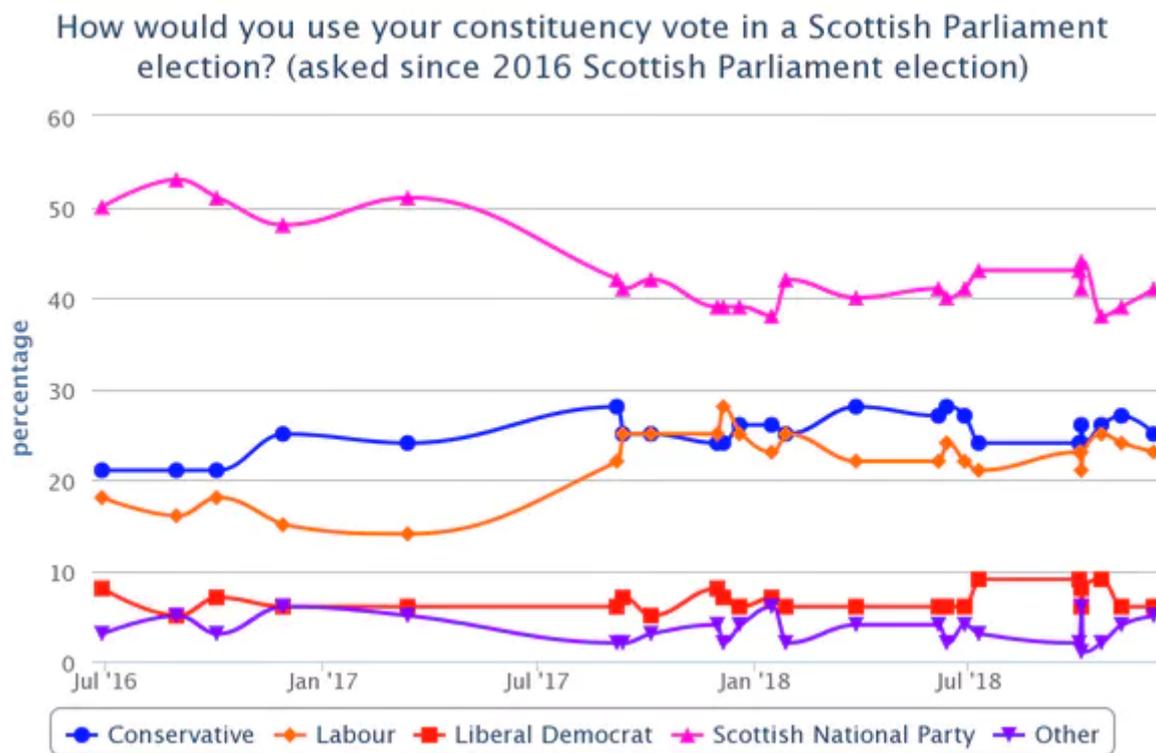
What do these mean for the SNP and a second independence referendum? Salmond is the party's most prominent figure of the last 30 years, who led the Scottish government for seven years and brought about the independence referendum of 2014. There's little that can be said about the specifics of this live legal case, but the fact any case has been brought can only be damaging to the SNP and the independence effort – contrary to Sturgeon's claims that it would make no difference. There are also risks from the numerous other inquiries into alleged procedural misconduct over the Scottish government's investigation of the Salmond allegations, including one into Sturgeon herself.

With the Brexit crisis there are both opportunities and threats – all tied to the independence question. It's worth remembering at the outset that much SNP electoral success from 2007-14 was not down to its backing independence but its attractiveness as a party of government and its ability to implement policy and govern effectively.

SNP popularity spiked following the independence referendum, in which Yes support rose from roughly a third to 45% of the electorate. To some extent, increased independence support gave the party a second electoral wind in the UK election of 2015 and the Scottish election of 2016. At the same time, you have to acknowledge the SNP's durability and success in winning successive elections in government during very economically hard times.

The 2017 misstep

But Scotland is now 11 years into austerity, and the party has governed the whole time. The SNP minority government currently faces problems over the NHS, local government, the Scotrail franchise, Scottish levels of taxation, education policy and a threatened strike by schoolteachers. Despite these, opinion poll support for the party remains strong if not at the levels of previous years.



What Scotland Thinks

Keeping that going is challenging, however, and the party has definitely made political missteps over independence. Look back to the **Brexit referendum** of June 2016 and you see the independence referendum that might have been, as 62% of Scots backed Remain against a UK Leave of 52%. Seeing the potential to convert this into Yes support north of 60%, the SNP launched a short-lived precursor campaign to a second independence referendum.

It created a national survey consultation exercise on Brexit, independence, policy and identity, which yielded about 2m responses – creating the dataset for a future referendum. The party also very publicly launched the fundraising website ScotRef, raising about half of its £1m target.

The referendum didn't get off the ground, of course. Attempts to get permission from the UK government were rebuffed by May and then swept aside by the UK election result in 2017. The SNP lost a third of its seats, again for complex reasons: among other factors, the party's strong backing for EU

Remain had alienated some who favoured Brexit, while No supporters who had previously backed the party deserted it over the push for a second independence referendum. Salmond was among the SNP members who lost his seat.



Alex Salmond on the steps of the Edinburgh Supreme Court. Jane Barlow/PA

The topic of another independence referendum has since been very difficult for Sturgeon and her party. In parallel to the unionist problem, there is internal pressure from party members and supporters and the wider Yes movement for another vote. This prompted substantial public demonstrations by independence supporters in 2018.

The party has three choices: demand another referendum, wait and see or hold one without London's permission. On the latter option, there is regular talk among campaigners about doing a Catalan-style DIY referendum. The legal process would be murky, however, and opponents would probably boycott the poll and damage the legitimacy of the result. This would raise problems for international recognition and EU membership, to say the least.

Waiting also has its problems, though, as the SNP's 2016 "mandate" for another referendum slides and the party and Yes movement lose momentum over independence. Seeking a new mandate in the next Scottish parliamentary election of 2021, when the SNP may lose more electoral support, has a serious downside too.

The case for being positive

That leaves "demand" to consider. And here there is some positive news for the SNP. In recent months, the party has pivoted towards backing a second EU referendum. This allows the party to link independence and Europe at a time of great stress and problems for the UK state and political system.

It also legitimises the idea of a second independence referendum and has allowed the SNP to reach Remain voters who do not support either the party or independence. What it does with Leavers is a continuing problem, though, and it forces SNP leaders to spend time asking for something they're probably not going to get from the UK government – not least in Sturgeon's latest meeting with May.

Were there a so-called people's vote, a repeat of 2016's Leave victory might well make the Union more unattractive to No supporters. On the other hand, a Remain would cancel the SNP's 2016 mandate, but would at least neutralise the potentially tricky issue in any future independence campaign of Scotland wanting to be inside the EU while its southern neighbour was not.

If there is not to be another EU referendum, the question then is how the Brexit crisis spirals in the next few weeks. This presumably explains Sturgeon's plan to reveal her hand on a second independence referendum soon but not yet – no doubt while continuing to distance herself and her party from the Salmond case and the related inquiries. It's still extremely difficult to call how all this potentially impacts on independence. But without question, the stakes have never looked higher for the Yes campaign as the clock ticks down towards Brexit on March 29.

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