

#SP16 Six things you need to know about the Scottish election



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You might be wondering if it is worth paying attention to the Scottish election, which will be held [on May 5](#). The result certainly looks a foregone conclusion: the ruling SNP will form a majority government for another five years. But look more closely and there's plenty to say – both about the broad sweep of Scottish politics and the current campaign:

1. SNP arc is almost complete

Don't miss the [monumental nature](#) of what is about to happen. Nicola Sturgeon's victory will represent the peak of a transformation in Scottish politics since 1999 that almost no one predicted – consolidation of the [SNP majority](#) of 2011. The Blair government [designed](#) a system that it was thought would prevent anyone from securing a majority. Instead of Westminster's first-past-the-post system, the Scottish system included 56 seats from [regional lists](#) to offset some of the distribution of the 73 constituency seats. This was intended to make it more proportional, but only up to a point.

In the [2015 UK general election](#) the SNP's 50% share of the vote secured 56 of 59 MPs (95%). If the polls for the current election are right [to indicate](#) that the party can maintain that level of support in constituency votes, it could even

secure a majority before the regional votes are counted. ([One forecast](#) predicts the SNP to get 56% or 72 of the seats, compared to Labour's 32 and the Conservatives' 18. [Others](#) are a bit more upbeat about the Conservatives' hopes, while also playing up the Greens.)

The likelihood of an SNP majority has produced a weird game of chicken in which we all know what will happen regardless of [the campaign](#) but the party leaders still dare each other to declare the result. Everyone knows that admitting defeat opens you to claims of defeatism – as Conservative leader Ruth Davidson [discovered](#) – while hinting at victory [wins you](#) the “most arrogant” prize.

2. The indyref stick

Clearly the [Scottish independence referendum](#) did [not settle](#) the constitutional debate. The main opposition parties, particularly Scottish Labour, are repeating last year's UK election claim that the SNP will use any victory to push for a second referendum. Yet the only plausible trigger, at least in the short term, is the EU referendum: if most voters in Scotland vote to stay in, and most voters in the UK vote to leave, the first minister [has said](#) it would “almost certainly” prompt the SNP to demand a second vote.

3. Tax matters

[Greater devolution](#) has prompted much debate on how to use the so-called “Scottish rate of income tax” that became feasible on April 1 for the first time. You might have expected this campaign to have sparked a lively discussion about the benefits and costs of raising income tax to fund services, or about who should win and lose from tax changes. So far we've mainly seen a pedantic and (perhaps deliberately) confusing [debate about](#) whether it would be progressive to raise income tax by 1p as [proposed by](#) Scottish Labour; the [likely income](#)

from each 1p rise; and the [unintended consequences](#) of greater higher-rate taxation.



So, we won't win.

[PA/Danny Lawson](#)

Knowing the SNP will win the election makes it is relatively hard to take seriously the tax plans of the other parties, including Scottish Labour's planned 1p rise and the Scottish Conservatives' [abandoned hope](#) to reduce it (ditto their [proposal to](#) reintroduce tuition fees). Similarly, gone are the days when the Scottish Greens' [more radical](#) income and land tax plans had any chance of success.

4. The SNP's record

The opposition parties [have been trying](#) to maximise concerns about the performance of the NHS and Police Scotland, and the SNP's failure to reduce the "attainment gap", but there is little evidence to suggest that such criticism is sticking. Indeed, crises like the [Edinburgh PFI schools closures](#) have called into question Labour's record on capital finance up to 2007, even though the SNP has maintained a [similar financing model](#) in office.

This failure to score many hits on the SNP's time in government is weird when you consider that one of the key factors in its 2007 and 2011 successes was the perception of the party's competence. The SNP [did well](#) to maintain that perception in 2011, but despite so long in government it is tempting to think that the [popularity of Nicola Sturgeon](#) and the party's post-referendum bump has made this less of an issue in 2016.

4. Fracking silence

One issue which could have hurt the SNP is fracking. There is

some [internal division](#) in the party about the Scottish government maintaining a [moratorium](#) rather than complete ban on all shale oil and gas development. Scottish Labour [now supports](#) a ban. Yet the moratorium, along with Sturgeon's [recent description](#) of her position as "highly sceptical about fracking" and the SNP decision not to debate the issue at its annual conference, means it will probably remain a non-talking point until after the election.

5. The rest

The smaller parties mattered [in 2003](#), garnering 14 out of 129 seats (or 34 if you include the three independents and 17 Scottish Lib Dems). Now they have become a sideshow. The Scottish Greens, who currently have two seats, [may end up](#) with four. That could be the same as the Lib Dems, who currently have five. The [increasingly comical](#) UKIP are likely to receive none.



Anything for a photo opportunity: Scottish Lib Dem leader Willie Rennie

[PA](#)

6. Progress

Perhaps the most welcome non-talking point was Scottish Labour leader Kezia Dugdale's [decision to](#) "share with the world that I'm in love with a woman". She [generally received](#) praise, establishing the Scottish parliament as home to an [unusually large number](#) of LGB party leaders.

There is also [some evidence](#) to suggest that after a few false dawns, gender-based equality of selection is catching on again. This seems to have been reinforced by the three biggest parties all being led by women.

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