



The Scottish Parliament
Pàrlamaid na h-Alba

SPICe

The Information Centre
An t-Ionad Fiosrachaidh

SPICe Briefing

Pàipear-ullachaidh SPICe

Election 2021

Andrew Aiton, Sarah Atherton, Ross Burnside, Allan Campbell, Nicola Hudson,
Iain McIver and Emma Robinson

This briefing analyses the result of
the 2021 Scottish Parliament
election.



10 May 2021
SB 21-24

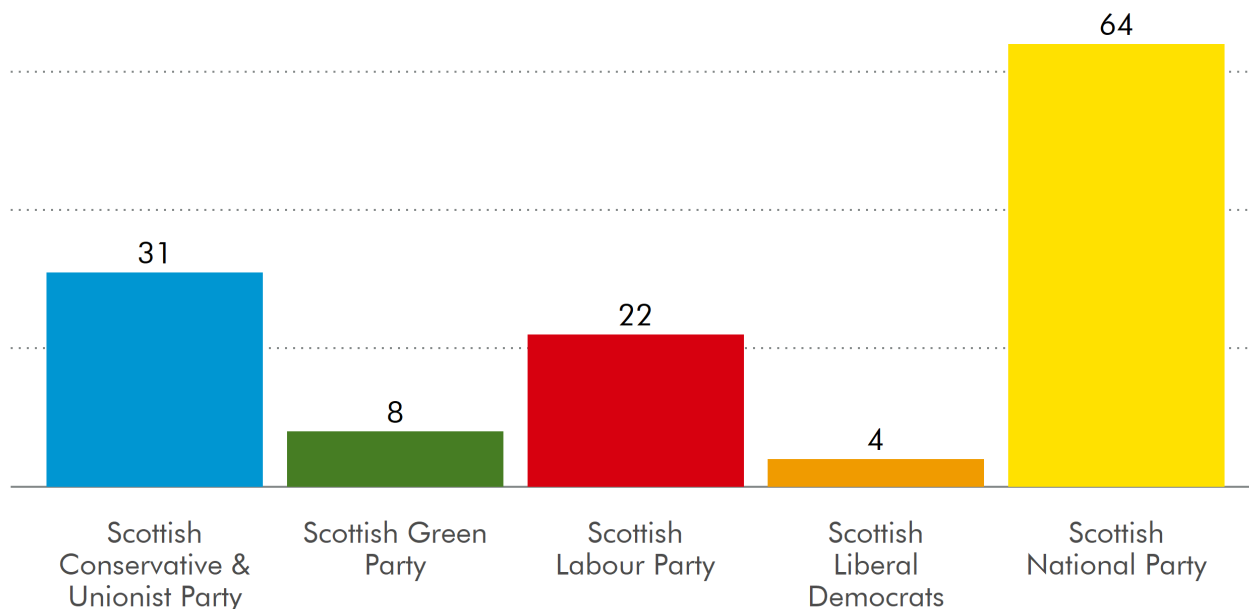
Contents

The result	3
What does the result mean for Session 6?	6
Overview	6
Are there any patterns to the election results?	6
What does the result mean for the formation of the Scottish Government?	7
Diversity	7
Turnout	7
What is the result likely to mean for the Session 6 Parliament?	8
Comparison with previous parliaments	9
State of the parties	11
Constituency and regional list vote	11
Composition of the Parliament	15
MSPs who did not re-stand for election	15
MSPs who lost their seats at the 2021 election	16
New Members	16
Gender	19
Class of 1999	20
Turnout	21
Size of the electorate	23
Extension of the franchise	24
Why might turnout have risen?	24
A good election for the opinion polls?	25

The result

The 2021 Scottish Parliament election produced the following result.

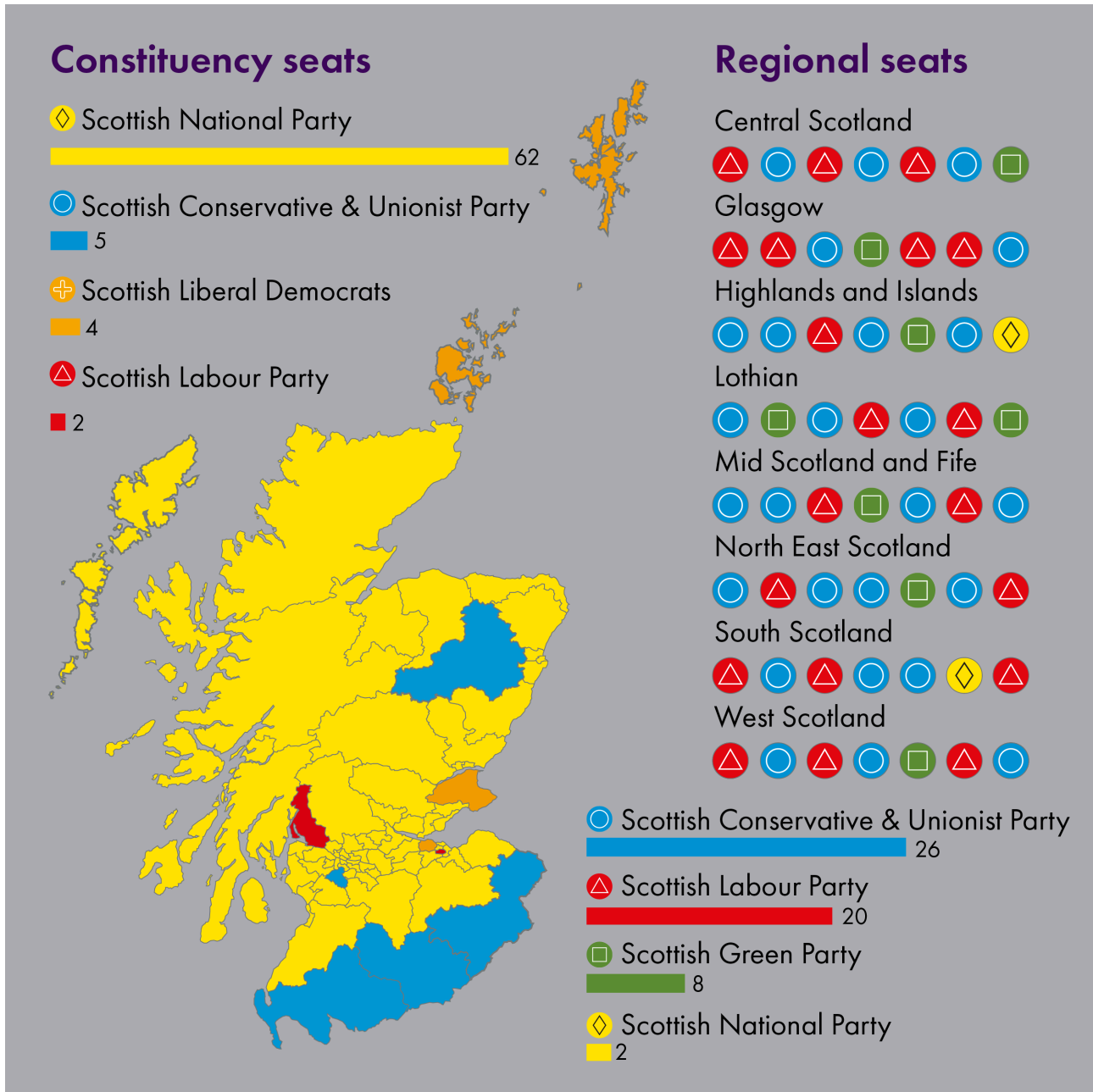
Figure 1: 2021 election result



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

The Scottish National Party (SNP) were the largest political party in the 2021 election, winning more than double the amount of seats of the 2nd placed party, the Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party. The SNP won 62 of their total seats in the constituency vote, and the Liberal Democrats won all four of their seats in constituencies. The Scottish Labour Party and the Scottish Conservative Party won most of their seats via the regional list, and the Scottish Green Party won all eight of their seats via the regional list vote.

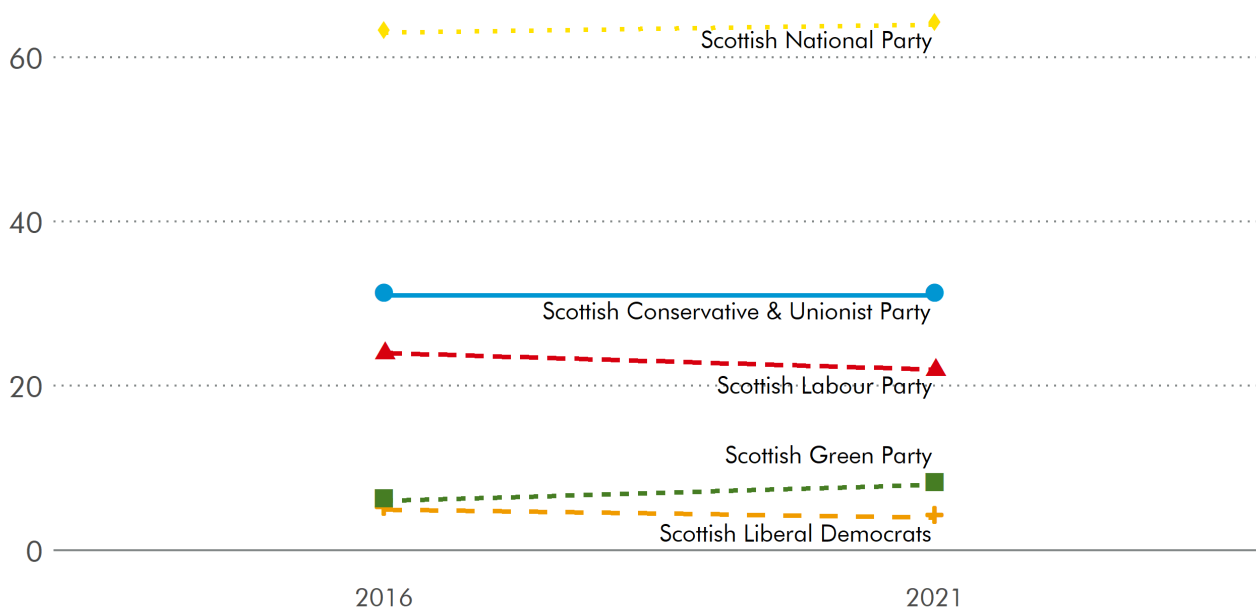
Figure 2: Constituencies and regional seats



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

This was the 6th election to the Scottish Parliament since devolution in 1999. The figure below shows results by political party compared with the previous Scottish Parliament election in 2016.

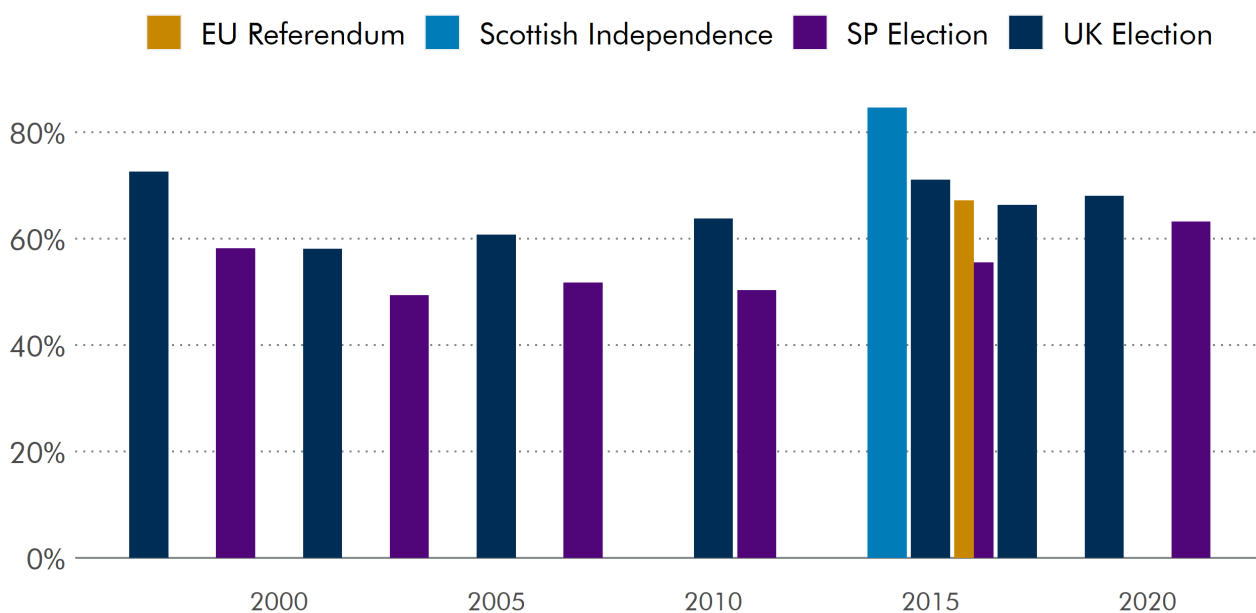
Figure 3: Change in seats, 2016 to 2021



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

Turnout in the election was 63.5%, the highest recorded for a Scottish Parliamentary election, breaking the 60% barrier for the first time. This record turnout was still lower than the 2019 UK election (68%), and the record turnout recorded in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The figure below compares turnout to previous elections and referendums.

Figure 4: Historic turnouts



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

The data behind this briefing will be available on the [Scottish Parliament website](#).

What does the result mean for Session 6?

Overview

The overall result of the election means there is not a significant change in the make up of the Parliament in terms of seat distribution across parties. The top story has been the SNP narrowly missing out on obtaining a majority with 64 seats – one short of the 65 required for a majority.

The shape of the Parliament is the SNP 64 seats (an increase of one from 2016); Conservatives 31 (unchanged from 2016); Labour 22 (down two from 2016); Scottish Greens eight (up two from 2016) and the Liberal Democrats four (down one).

The SNP won 62 of the 73 constituency seats, making gains from the Conservatives in the seats of Ayr and Edinburgh Central. East Lothian was also a gain for the SNP, but this time from Labour.

Are there any patterns to the election results?

It's early days in terms of analysing all of the data to come from the election. What is clear is that there was no significant national swing of support for one party to support for another, as demonstrated by parties returning a reasonably similar number of seats at this election as they did in 2016.

The Greens made two gains on the list, taking one in Central Scotland previously held by Labour and one in the North East previously held by the Liberal Democrats. The Greens' success resulted in them being the only opposition party to increase their number of seats. It also means that there is a majority in the Parliament in support of holding a second referendum on independence.

What the results did show was that incumbent candidates did well. Kate Forbes of the SNP took 56% of the vote and increased her majority to 15,861 (in 2016 she took nearly 48% of votes and had a majority of 9,043).

In Dumbarton, Labour's Jackie Baillie held the seat. In 2016 she won by just 109 votes and saw her vote share fall. This time around she increased her majority to 1,483 and her vote share also went up as she secured 46% of votes (her vote share in 2016 was 40%).

Willie Rennie and Alex Cole Hamilton of the Liberal Democrats likewise saw their majorities increase significantly, with both securing 55% of the vote. Despite this, as a result of the Liberal Democrats losing a seat overall, they will not be represented on the [Parliamentary Bureau](#) (the group which proposes the Parliament's business programme). The party polled under 5% of votes in 50 of the 73 constituency seats, meaning that they also lost their deposits for those seats.

There will no doubt be further analysis of the results in the days and weeks to come which will focus on whether voters' positions on issues like Brexit and independence influenced their vote. Equally, across the UK, parties of government did well. This raises the question of whether voters were supportive of their government because of the way the COVID-19

pandemic has been handled to date.

What does the result mean for the formation of the Scottish Government?

In spite of not quite gaining a majority, it is clear that the SNP will form the next Scottish Government and serve a fourth term in office. The SNP appear to have two governing options - they can again form a minority government, looking to the independence-supporting Scottish Greens to secure votes on the key constitutional issue. Or they may explore a more formal arrangement with the Greens and enter into a coalition government thereby securing an outright majority.

These issues are likely to take a little time to work through. The first order of business after members of the new Parliament are sworn in will be to elect a Presiding Officer and deputies. The business of the Parliament electing a First Minister will have to wait until the following week.

In the coming weeks Scotland will also see new Cabinet Secretaries and Ministers appointed, and there will be changes, given that some big names in the previous Scottish Government did not stand for re-election. Notable names include Michael Russell, former Cabinet Secretary for the Constitution, Europe and External Affairs, Roseanna Cunningham, former Cabinet Secretary for Environment, Climate Change and Land Reform and former Health Secretary Jeane Freeman. Paul Wheelhouse, who was the serving Minister for Energy, Connectivity and the Islands, was not returned.

Diversity

In a historic moment for the Parliament, two women of colour were elected. Kaukab Stewart MSP was elected to represent the Glasgow Kelvin constituency, and Pam Gosal MSP was returned for the West of Scotland region.

Pam Duncan-Glancy was also elected on the Glasgow regional list, and is the first wheelchair user to be elected to the Parliament.

The election saw a record number of female MSPs returned with 58 (45%) due to take their seats this week. The previous highest proportion of female MSPs was in 2003, when the figure was 40%. The increase can be attributed to the efforts of political parties to improve gender balance.

A separate section considers the [composition of the new Parliament](#) in further detail.

Turnout

The 2021 election was also historic because turnout (the percentage of those who are eligible to vote who cast a vote) was at a record high at 63.5%. There were significant differences in turnout across constituencies.

Turnout is covered in more detail in the [turnout section of this briefing](#).

What is the result likely to mean for the Session 6 Parliament?

COVID-19 recovery is central to Session 6. The speed and shape of that recovery is likely to be central to when other issues come before the Parliament.

The success of pro-independence parties at the election means that the constitutional question on the future of Scotland's place in the UK will come before the Parliament at some stage.

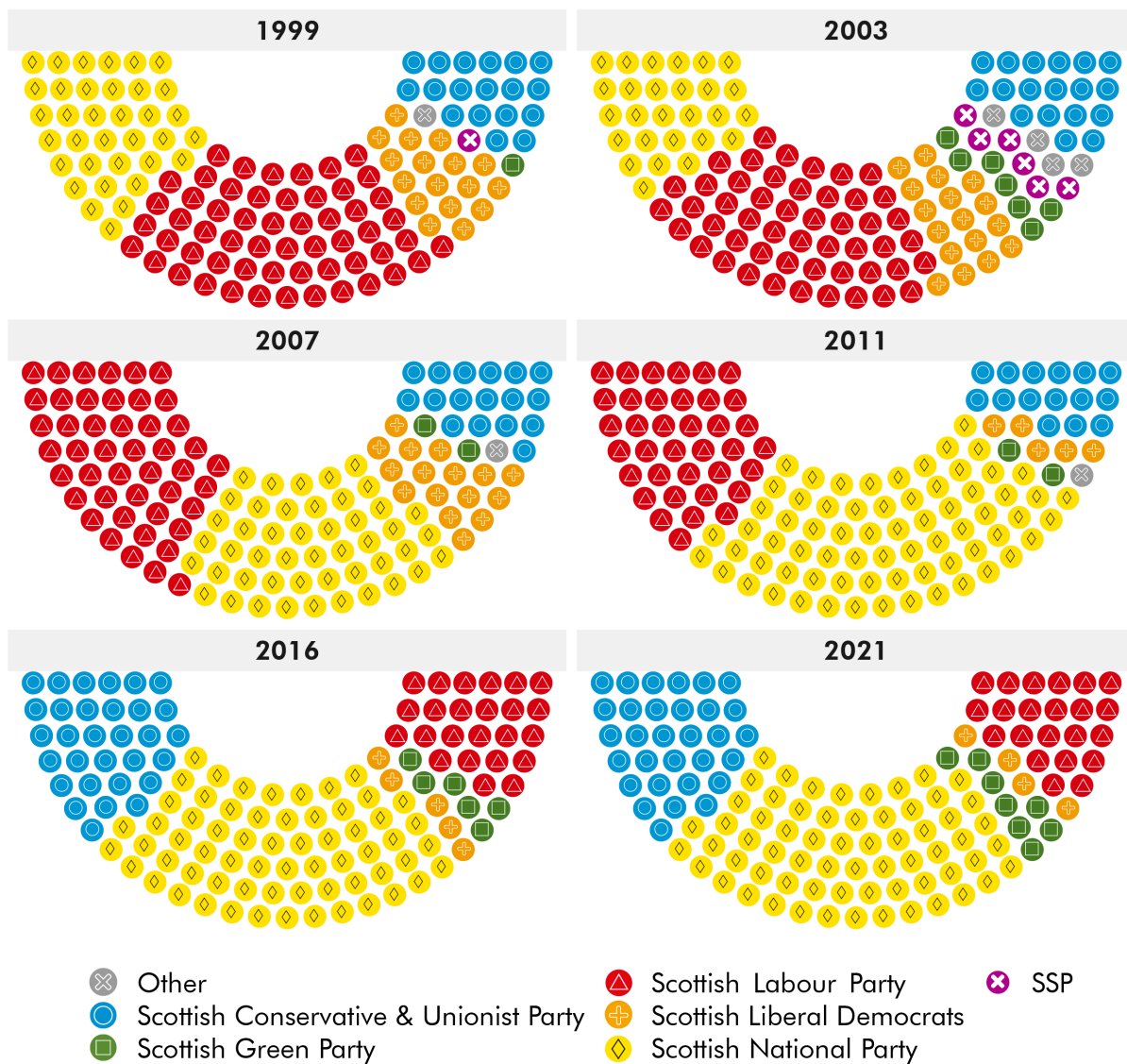
The First Minister has already said that the Scottish Government will push ahead with a second referendum because the election result gave [a clear mandate for that and was the "democratic wishes of the Scottish people"](#). The UK Government response has been that the COVID-19 pandemic recovery should be the priority. Nevertheless, [the First Minister has said that a second independence referendum is "a matter of when, not if"](#).

Ahead of the election, the First Minister had suggested that the timetable would hopefully be in the first half of this session of the Parliament, but that it would be dictated by COVID-19 recovery. At the weekend, [the First Minister did not rule out a referendum as early as spring 2022](#) given the current state of the pandemic in the UK and the effectiveness of the vaccination programme.

Comparison with previous parliaments

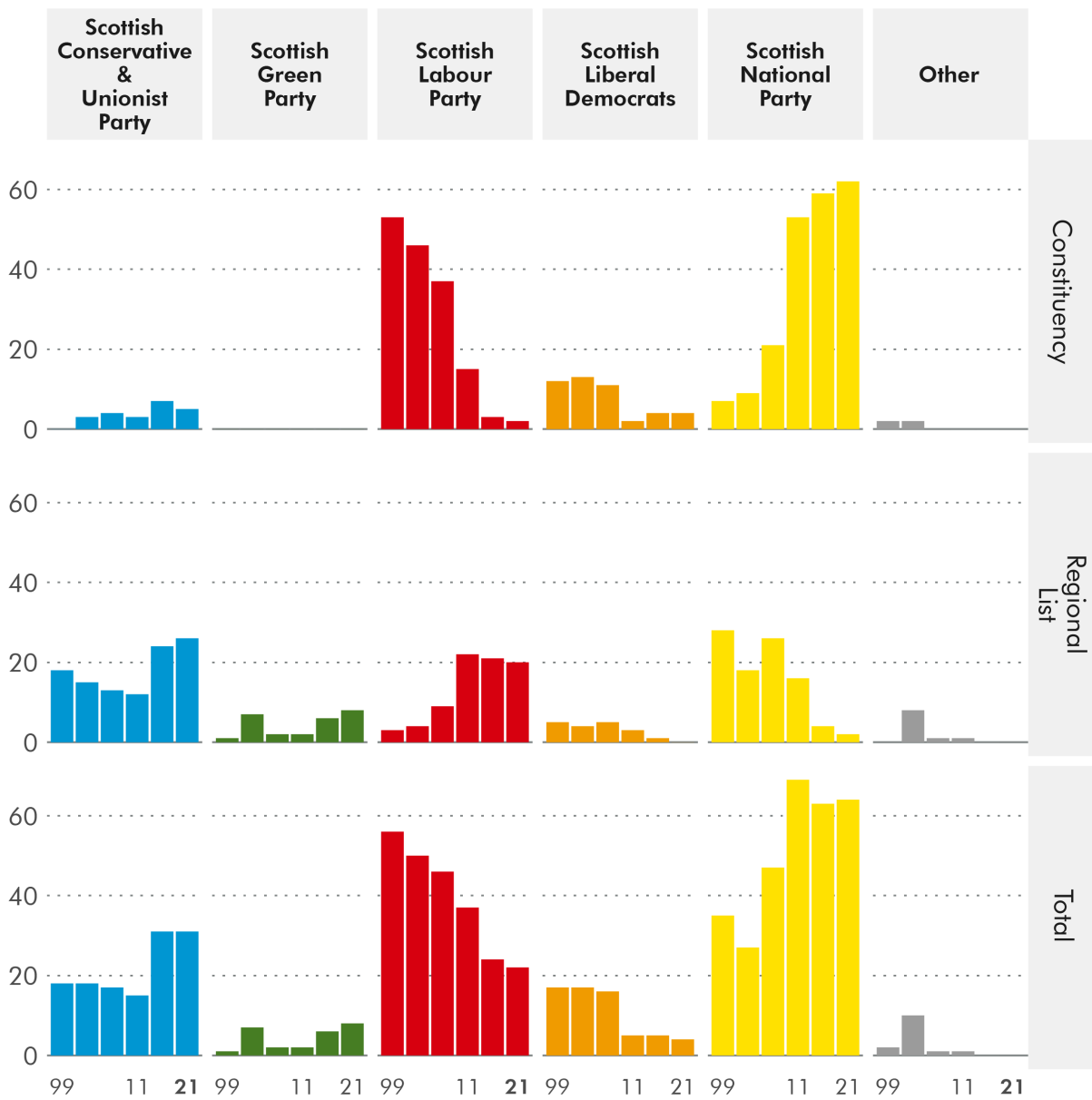
The figures below show political party representation in the Scottish Parliament following each election going back to 1999.

Figure 5: Composition of Scottish Parliaments, 1999-2021



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

Figure 6: Historic share of seats, 1999-2021

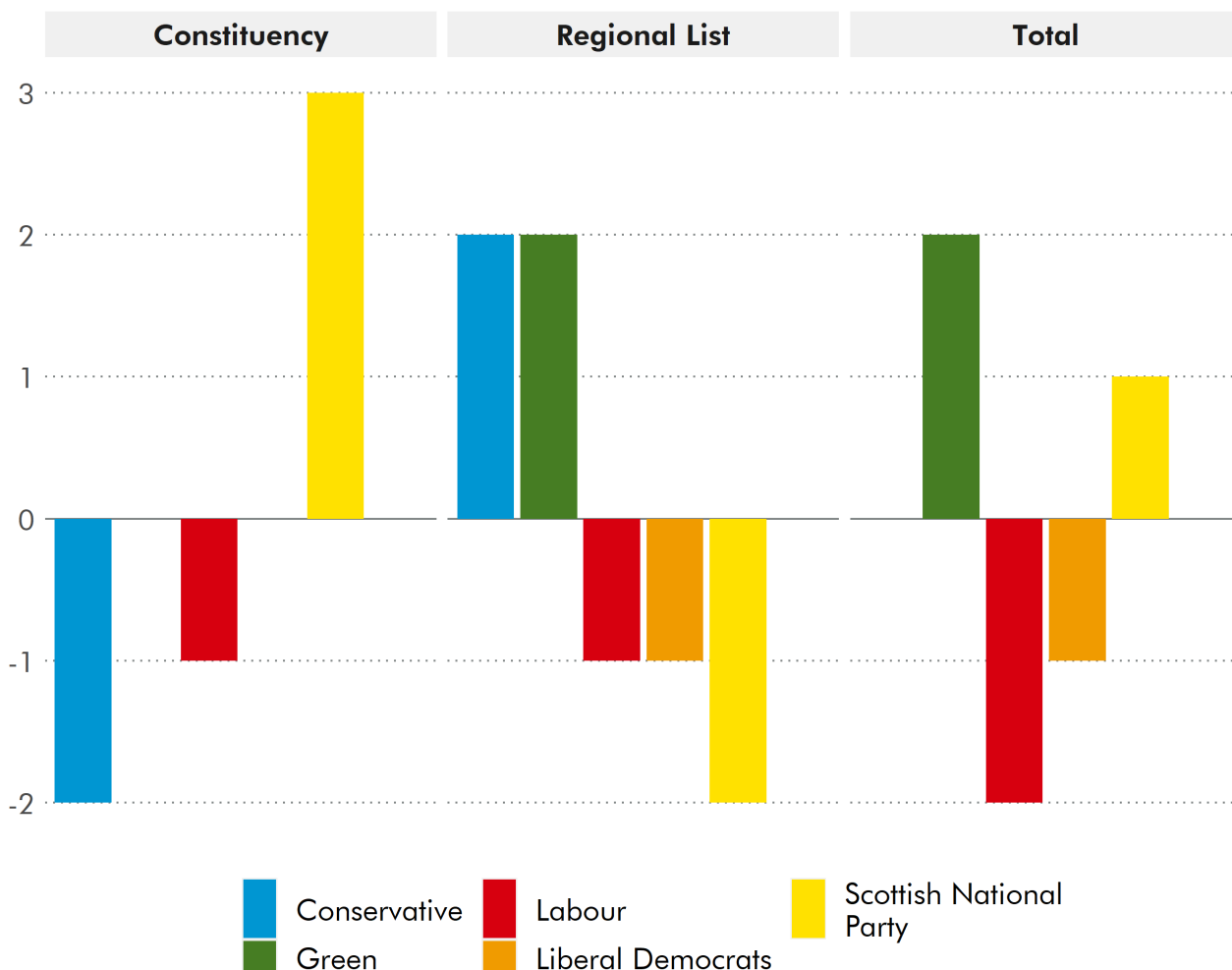


Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

State of the parties

The end result of the election did not significantly change the complexion of the Parliament. The SNP remained the largest political party and gained one seat on the 2016 election, taking them to 64. The Scottish Green Party gained two seats (total eight), the Liberal Democrats lost one seat (total four) and Labour lost two seats (total 22). There was no change to the total Conservative number of seats, which remained at 31.

Figure 7: Change in seats by political party

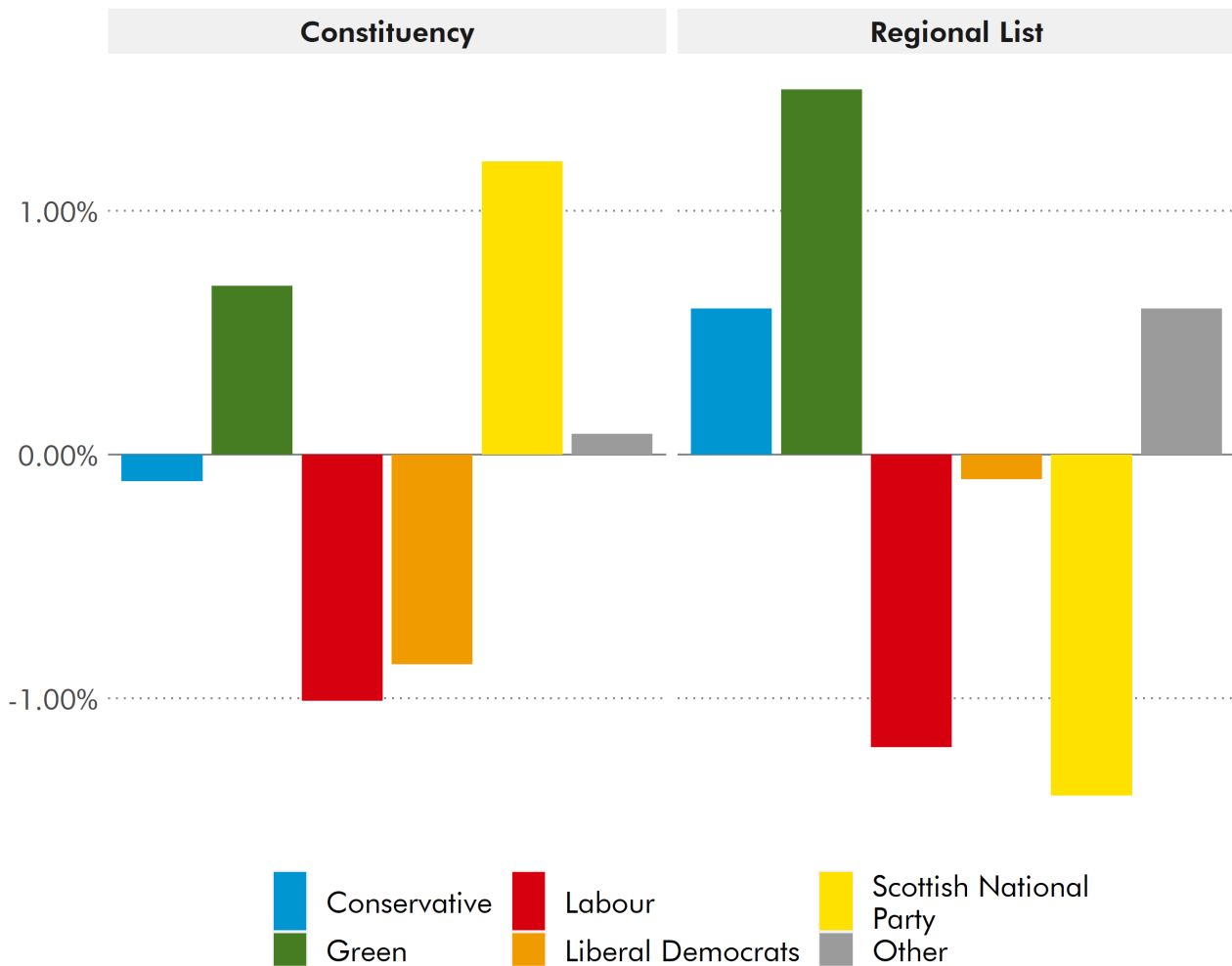


Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

Constituency and regional list vote

The following figure shows the changing share of the vote by political party in the constituency and regional list votes.

Figure 8: Change in share of the vote, by political party



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#)

Key points to note on the constituency vote are as follows:

- The SNP improved its 2016 position by 1.2 percentage points, and a gain of three seats.
- The Conservatives' share of the constituency vote fell slightly, by 0.1 percentage points, and they lost two constituency seats on 2016.
- Labour's constituency share fell by 1.0 percentage point, and they had a loss of one seat compared with 2016.
- The Liberal Democrats constituency vote share fell by 0.9 percentage points, but their constituency seat numbers remained at four.

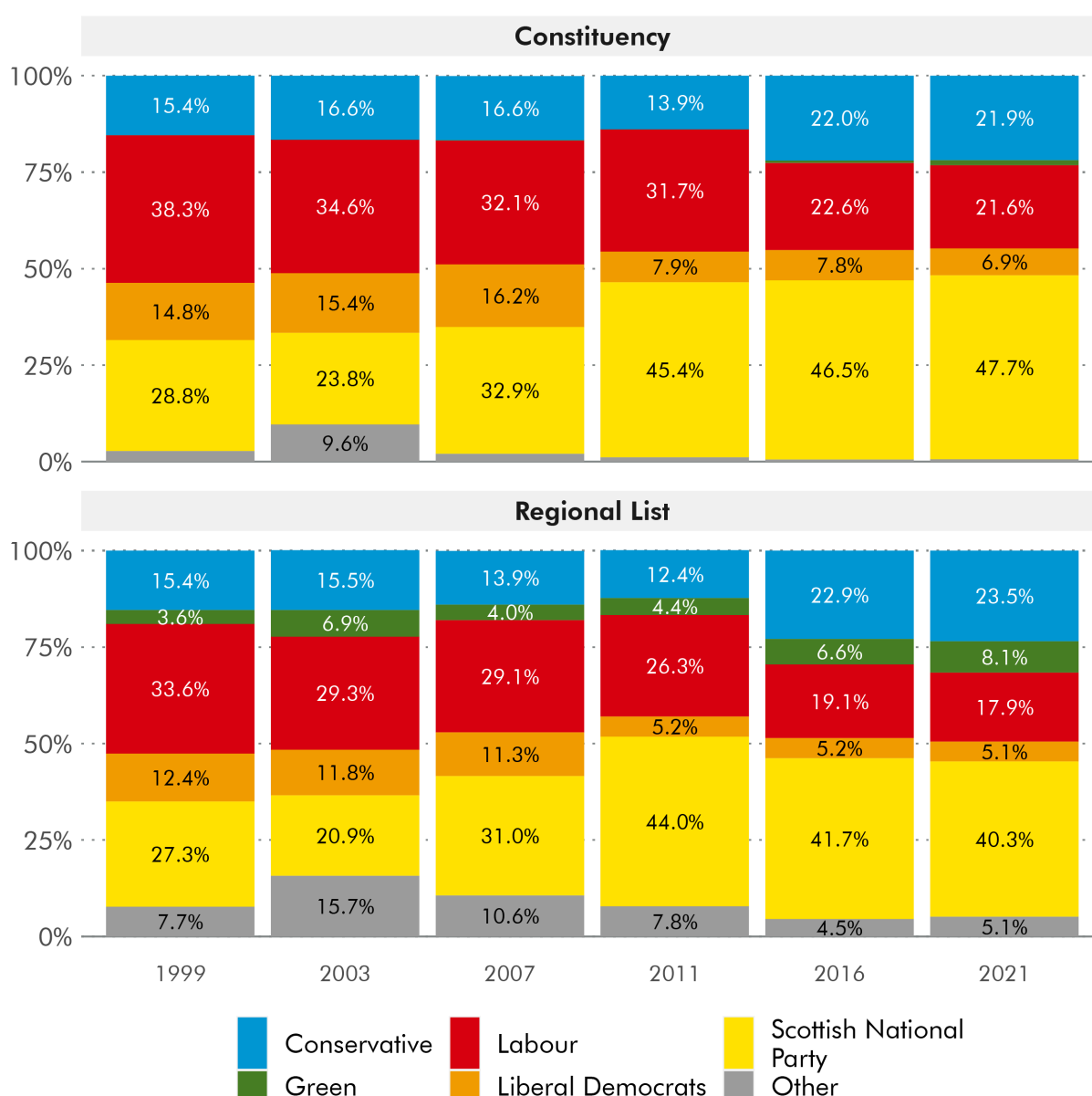
Key points to note on the regional list vote are as follows:

- The SNP regional list vote share fell by 1.4 percentage points. They gained two fewer list seats compared with 2016.
- The Conservatives increased their share of the regional vote by 0.6 percentage points and gained two more regional list MSPs compared with five years ago.

- Labour lost one regional list MSP compared with 2016 on the back of a fall in vote share of 1.2 percentage points.
- The Greens gained two regional list MSPs compared with 2016, on an increased regional list vote share of 1.5 percentage points.
- The Liberal Democrats' regional vote share fell slightly by 0.1 percentage points and resulted in no regional MSPs being returned for the Liberal Democrats (compared to one in 2016).

The infographic below presents the percentage share of the constituency and regional votes in elections since 1999. It shows the changing landscape of Scottish politics since the Scottish Parliament was established.

Figure 9: Historic share of the vote, 1999-2021



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

Looking at the 2021 election results shows that SNP constituency dominance came from a

47.7% share of the vote. In regional voting, the SNP share fell to 40.3%, and that returned 2 MSPs.

The Conservatives attained 21.9% of the constituency vote share and five seats. In the regional list, they achieved a 23.5% vote share and 26 seats.

Labour's national constituency share of 21.6% (just below the Conservatives' 21.9%) returned them only two seats (compared with five Conservatives). However, their regional list share of 17.9% returned 20 MSPs.

The Greens only stood in 12 constituencies, achieving 1.3% of the national share. It was in the regional list where their success came, returning eight MSPs with 8.1% of the regional list vote share.

The Liberal Democrats' 6.9% of the constituency vote returned them all four of their seats. However, 5.1% of the regional list vote didn't return them any MSPs.

Composition of the Parliament

This section of the briefing looks at the composition of the new Parliament in more detail.

MSPs who did not re-stand for election

Ahead of the 2021 Scottish Parliament election, 34 Members announced they would stand down and not seek re-election. Amongst those stepping down was the Scottish Parliament's former Presiding Officer Ken Macintosh.

Table 1: Members who stood down prior to 2021 election

Name	Party	Constituency Or Region
Bill Bowman	Con	North East Scotland
Aileen Campbell	SNP	Clydesdale
Peter Chapman	Con	North East Scotland
Bruce Crawford	SNP	Stirling
Roseanna Cunningham	SNP	Perthshire South and Kinross-shire
Ruth Davidson	Con	Edinburgh Central
Linda Fabiani	SNP	East Kilbride
Mary Fee	Lab	West Scotland
Neil Findlay	Lab	Lothian
John Finnie	Green	Highlands and Islands
Jeane Freeman	SNP	Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley
Iain Gray	Lab	East Lothian
Alison Harris	Con	Central Scotland
Johann Lamont	Lab	Glasgow
Richard Lyle	SNP	Uddingston and Bellshill
Angus MacDonald	SNP	Falkirk East
Lewis Macdonald	Lab	North East Scotland
Ken Macintosh	NPA	West Scotland
Derek Mackay	Ind	Renfrewshire North and West
Jenny Marra	Lab	North East Scotland
Tom Mason	Con	North East Scotland
Mark McDonald	Ind	Aberdeen Donside
Margaret Mitchell	Con	Central Scotland
Alex Neil	SNP	Airdrie and Shotts
Gil Paterson	SNP	Clydebank and Milngavie
Gail Ross	SNP	Caithness, Sutherland and Ross
Mike Rumbles	LD	North East Scotland
Michael Russell	SNP	Argyll and Bute
Elaine Smith	Lab	Central Scotland
Stewart Stevenson	SNP	Banffshire and Buchan Coast
David Stewart	Lab	Highlands and Islands
Adam Tomkins	Con	Glasgow
Maureen Watt	SNP	Aberdeen South and North Kincardine
Sandra White	SNP	Glasgow Kelvin

MSPs who lost their seats at the 2021 election

In total, nine Members lost their seat in the Scottish Parliament at the 2021 election. The breakdown by political party of these members is as follows.

Note: The party and constituency or region listed are the party and constituency or region which they stood for in the 2021 election. This may differ to the party or constituency or region they represented during Session 5.

Table 2: List of Members not returned in 2021 election

Name	Party	Constituency Or Region
Claudia Beamish	Lab	South Scotland
Michelle Ballantyne	Reform	South Scotland
Maurice Corry	Con	West Scotland
James Kelly	Lab	Glasgow
Gordon Lindhurst	Con	Lothian
Joan McAlpine	SNP	South Scotland
John Scott	Con	Ayr
Paul Wheelhouse	SNP	South Scotland
Andy Wightman	Ind	Highlands and Islands

New Members

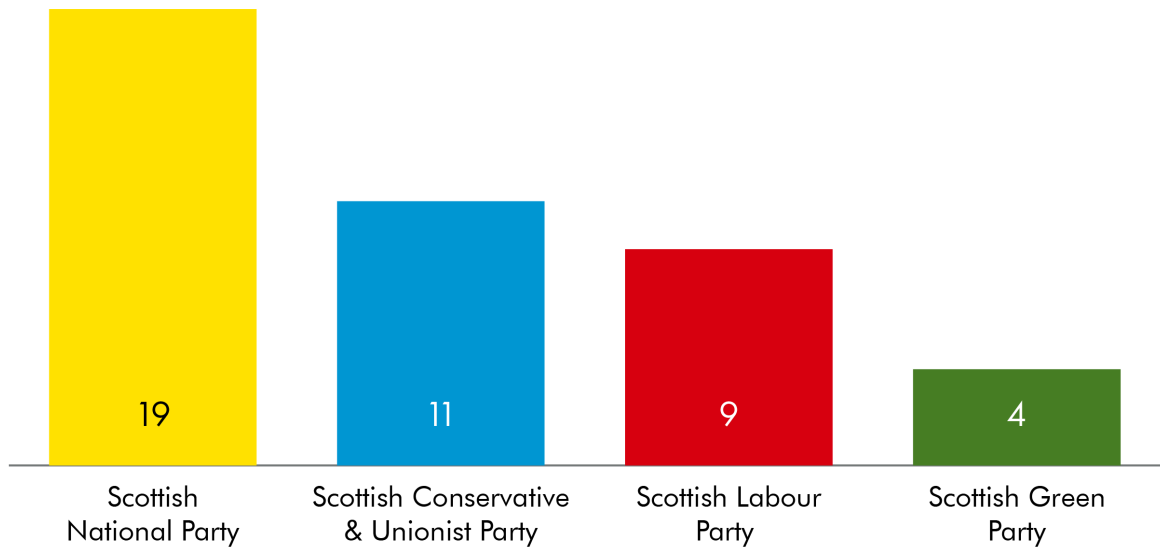
Forty-three new Members were elected to the Parliament at the 2021 election to replace the 34 Members who chose not to seek re-election and the 9 Members who lost their seats. Members who were not serving at the conclusion of Session 5 were considered to be new Members.

This is a decrease from the 51 new Members elected at the 2016 election and the 48 new Members elected at the 2011 election.

Of the 43 new Members, only Douglas Ross has previously served in the Scottish Parliament.

The breakdown by political party of new members is as follows:

Figure 10: New members by political party



Source: SPICe

Table 3: New Members from 2021 election

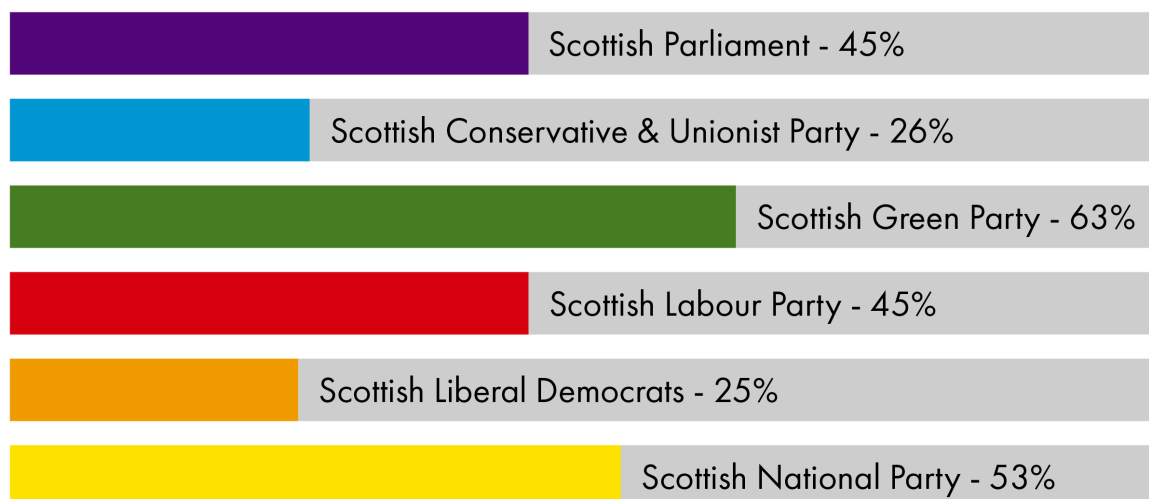
Name	Party	Constituency Or Region
Karen Adam	SNP	Banffshire and Buchan Coast
Siobhian Brown	SNP	Ayr
Ariane Burgess	Green	Highlands and Islands
Stephanie Callaghan	SNP	Uddingston and Bellshill
Maggie Chapman	Green	North East Scotland
Foyso Choudhury	Lab	Lothian
Katy Clark	Lab	West Scotland
Natalie Don	SNP	Renfrewshire North and West
Sharon Dowey	Con	South Scotland
Jackie Dunbar	SNP	Aberdeen Donside
Pam Duncan-Glancy	Lab	Glasgow
Jim Fairlie	SNP	Perthshire South and Kinross-shire
Russell Findlay	Con	West Scotland
Meghan Gallacher	Con	Central Scotland
Pam Gosal	Con	West Scotland
Neil Gray	SNP	Airdrie and Shotts
Sandesh Gulhane	Con	Glasgow
Craig Hoy	Con	South Scotland
Stephen Kerr	Con	Central Scotland
Douglas Lumsden	Con	North East Scotland
Gillian Mackay	Green	Central Scotland
Michael Marra	Lab	North East Scotland
Màiri McAllan	SNP	Clydesdale
Paul McLennan	SNP	East Lothian
Marie McNair	SNP	Clydebank and Milngavie
Jenni Minto	SNP	Argyll and Bute
Carol Mochan	Lab	South Scotland
Audrey Nicoll	SNP	Aberdeen South and North Kincardine
Paul O'Kane	Lab	West Scotland
Angus Robertson	SNP	Edinburgh Central
Emma Roddick	SNP	Highlands and Islands
Douglas Ross	Con	Highlands and Islands
Lorna Slater	Green	Lothian
Collette Stevenson	SNP	East Kilbride
Kaukab Stewart	SNP	Glasgow Kelvin
Paul Sweeney	Lab	Glasgow
Michelle Thomson	SNP	Falkirk East
Evelyn Tweed	SNP	Stirling
Mercedes Villalba	Lab	North East Scotland
Sue Webber	Con	Lothian
Tess White	Con	North East Scotland
Martin Whitfield	Lab	South Scotland
Elena Whitham	SNP	Carrick, Cumnock and Doon Valley

Gender

The number of female Members of the Scottish Parliament has increased to 58 following the 2021 election.

The breakdown of female Members by party and as a proportion of their party's total is shown below.

Figure 11: Female Members by political party



Source: SPICe

Table 4: Female MSPs by Political Party

Party	Constituency	Regional	Total
Scottish Conservative and Unionist Party	1	7	8
Scottish Green Party	0	5	5
Scottish Labour	1	9	10
Scottish Liberal Democrats	1	0	1
Scottish National Party	32	2	34
Total	35	23	58

Table 5: Total number of Female MSPs by Election

Election	Number of Female Members Elected
1999	48
2003	51
2007	43
2011	45
2016	45
2021	58

As a percentage of overall Members, the proportion of women in the Scottish Parliament after the 2021 election (44.9%) is higher than the 34% (220 MPs) elected at the 2019 UK General Election.

Class of 1999

Following the previous Scottish Parliament election in 2016, there were 19 Members who had served continuously since 1999. In addition, a further two Members had served during previous sessions but not continuously.

There are now eight Members who have served continuously since 1999, of whom seven are SNP Members. They are shown below.

Table 6: MSPs serving continuously since 1999

Name	Party	Constituency or Region
Jackie Baillie	Lab	Dumbarton
Fergus Ewing	SNP	Inverness and Nairn
Christine Grahame	SNP	Midlothian South, Tweeddale and Lauderdale
Fiona Hyslop	SNP	Linlithgow
Michael Matheson	SNP	Falkirk West
Shona Robison	SNP	Dundee City East
Nicola Sturgeon	SNP	Glasgow Southside
John Swinney	SNP	Perthshire North

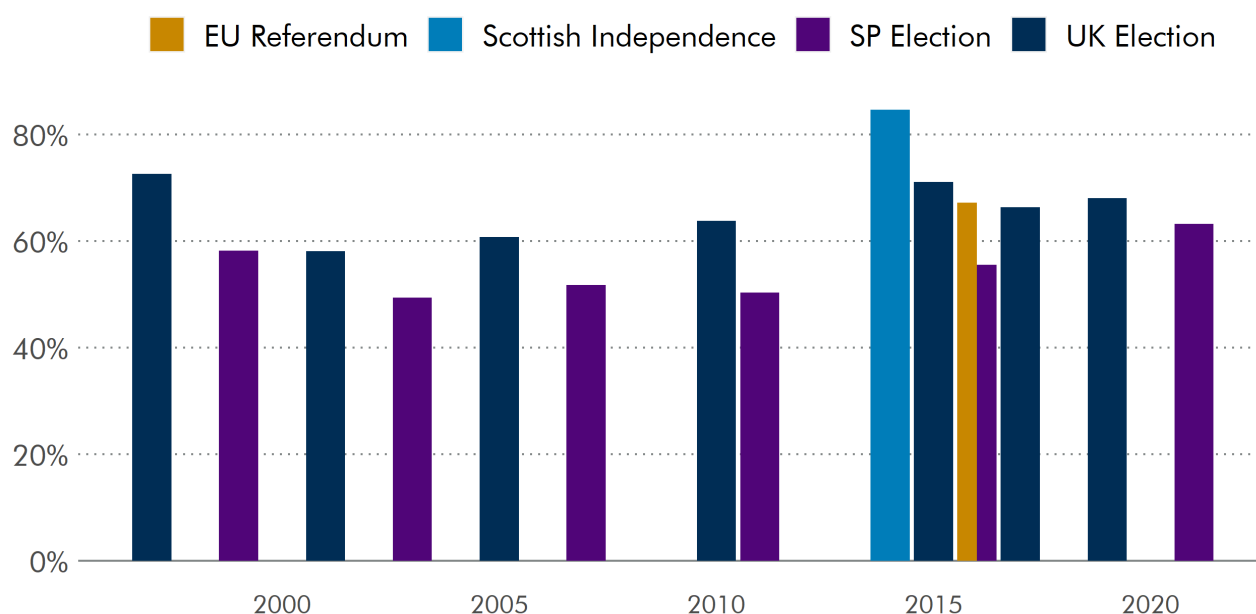
Turnout

The 2021 election saw the largest ever turnout for a Scottish Parliament election. At 63.5%, the turnout beats the previous best of 58.2%, which was recorded at the first Scottish Parliament election in 1999.

Whilst this year's turnout was more in line with turnout in Scotland for recent UK General Elections, it was short of the 68.1% turnout at the December 2019 UK election.

Turnout this year was also substantially below the 84.6% who voted in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum.

Figure 12: Historic turnouts



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

Across all 73 constituencies turnout increased, though there are big differences in the percentage point increases recorded in different constituencies. The largest percentage point increase was in Glasgow Cathcart (12.4%) followed by Glasgow Southside (12.0%) and Moray (11.3%).

The smallest percentage point increase was in Ettrick, Roxburgh and Berwickshire (3.3%) followed by Orkney (3.6%) and Shetland (3.9%).

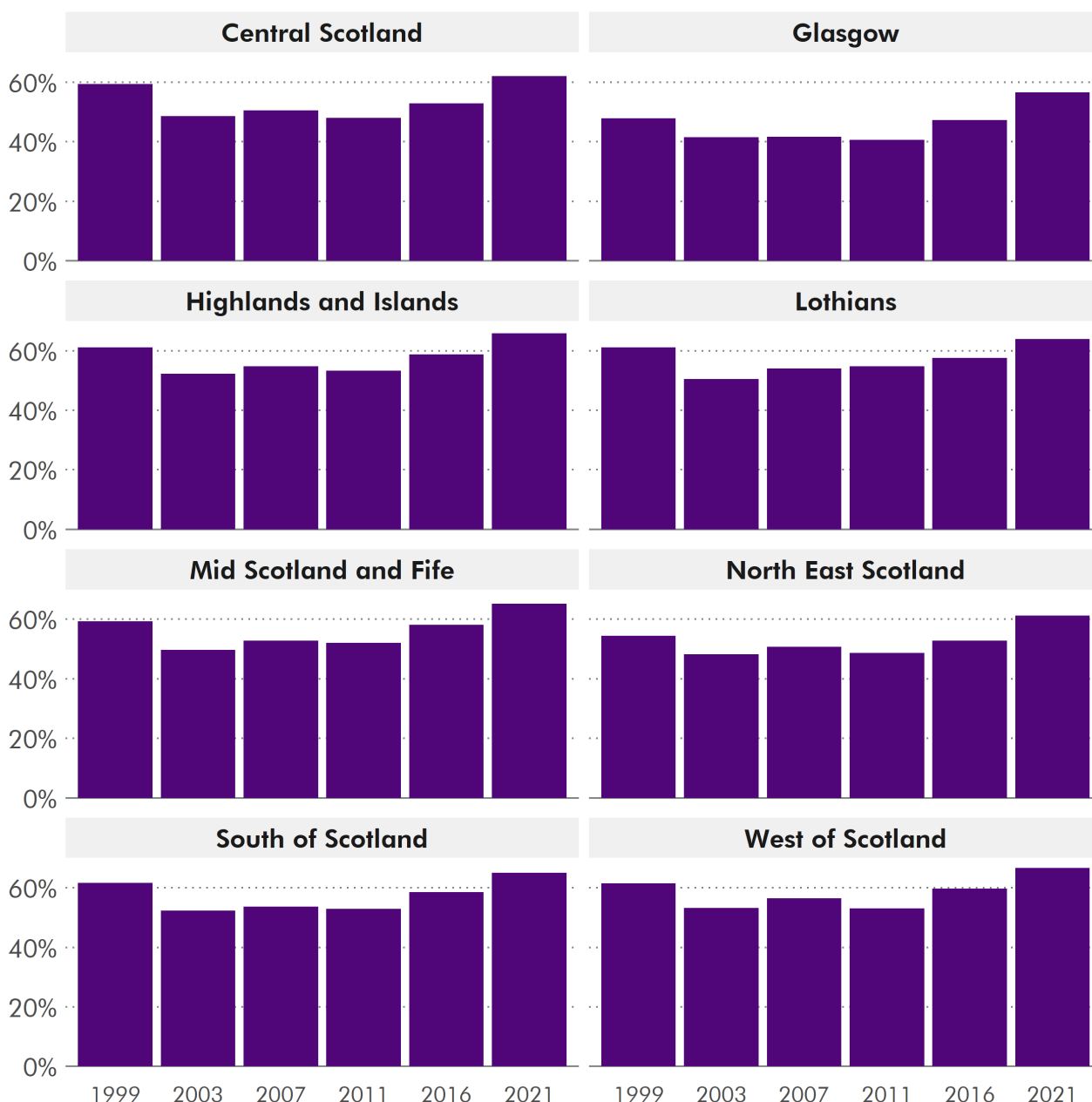
Figure 13: Turnout increase by constituency



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

Turnout was above 60% in seven of Scotland's eight electoral regions. The lowest turnout was registered in Glasgow (57%) with the highest turnout in West of Scotland (67%), closely followed by the Highlands and Islands (66%).

Figure 14: Historic turnout by region



Source: [Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) and SPICe

Size of the electorate

This election saw the largest ever Scottish Parliament election electorate. [Figures from the Electoral Management Board for Scotland](#) showed in total, 4,280,785 people registered to vote. This is [around 180,000 people more than registered for the 2016 election](#). However, it is just over 3,000 fewer than the number who registered to vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum in 2014.

Extension of the franchise

A contributing factor to the increase in the size of the potential electorate was the extension of the electoral franchise. This was the first Scottish election with a new franchise following the passing of the [Scottish Elections \(Franchise and Representation\) Act](#) last year. The Act extended the franchise in Scottish elections to include “all those with a legal right to live in Scotland”. It did this by creating a new category of voter – “qualifying foreign national”.

As a result, [people who have been granted refugee status and those who have been granted asylum were able to vote](#), so long as they satisfied the condition of living in Scotland as well as the conditions which apply to all electors.

Why might turnout have risen?

Two possible contributing factors as to why turnout may have increased for this Scottish election compared to previous ones are the importance of the election in the eyes of the voters and the increased use of postal votes.

This election may have been considered as particularly important for the Scottish electorate with the key issues which dominated the campaign - the constitution and COVID-19 recovery – engaging voters and encouraging them to vote.

The election also saw [the highest number ever registered for a postal vote in Scotland](#). Over one million people registered for a postal vote, equating to 23.8% of the total electorate. Whilst turnout is not broken down between those who used a postal vote and those who voted in person, the increased number of electors able to use a postal vote might have contributed to the increased turnout.

Other factors which may have led to increased turnout include:

- Those who benefited from the extension of the franchise may have been especially determined to exercise the right to vote in Scotland for the first time.
- The impact of COVID-19 related restrictions meant there were fewer distractions for people leading to more voting.
- More people working from home due to COVID-19 may also have allowed electors more opportunity to visit their polling station during election day.

On the other hand, COVID-19 meant the election campaign was different from usual with less opportunity for face to face discussions with voters. As a result more use was made of broadcasting, social media and electoral literature. This change in emphasis in terms of campaigning does not appear to have adversely affected electoral turnout.

A good election for the opinion polls?

In this final section we look at how close the final opinion polls were to the national percentage shares of the vote in the election, on both constituency and regional votes.

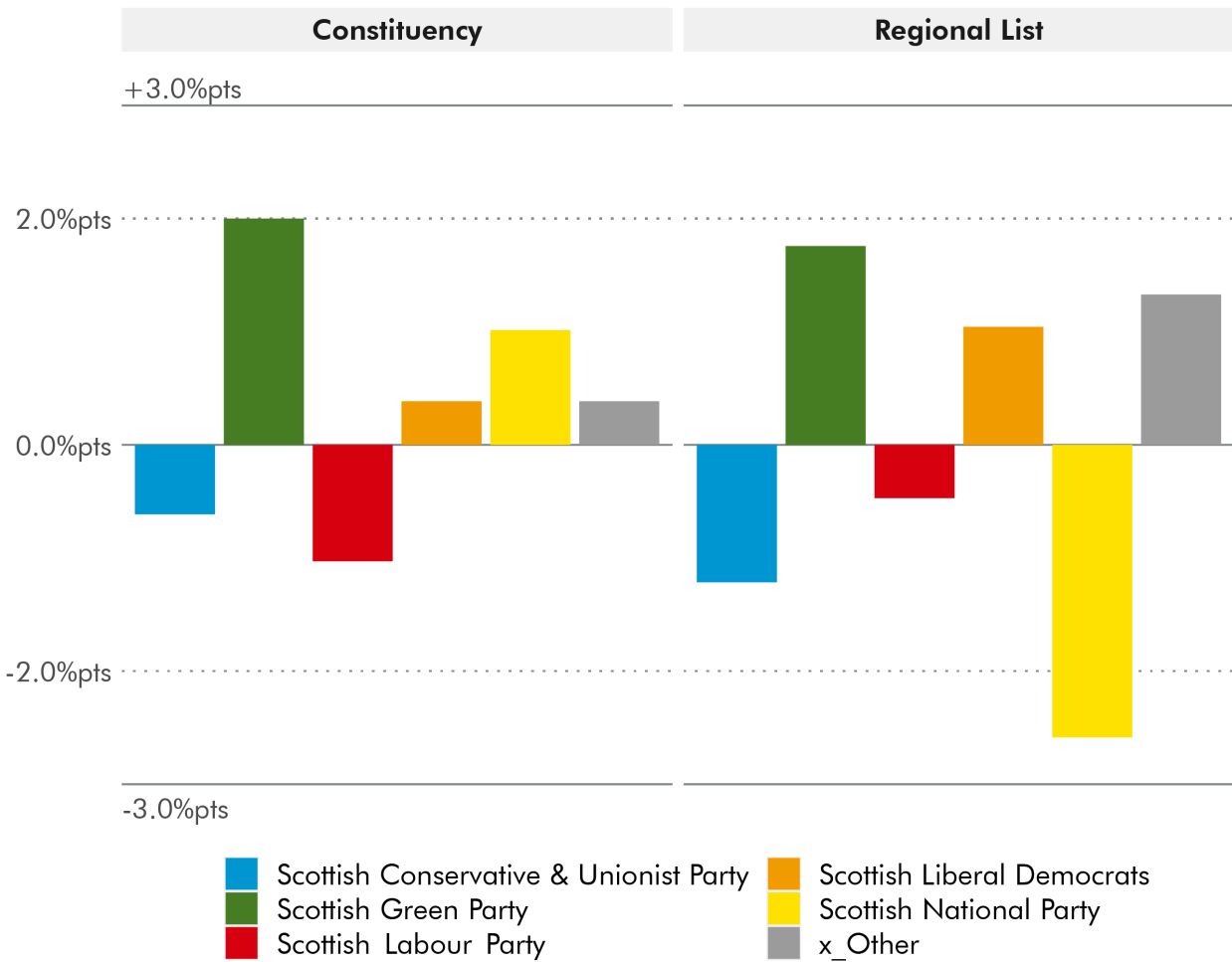
Much criticism has been made of opinion polls in the past for not seemingly predicting the result of Scottish and UK elections accurately. However, opinion polls themselves only provide a snapshot of national percentage shares of the vote. Opinion polls by themselves do not forecast the balance of seats in the parliament. To do this, you need to feed numbers from polls into a model, usually based on the “uniform national swing.” This methodology applies the swing (change) in each party’s share of the vote on a national basis to each individual constituency and region. Obviously, this can’t take into account local issues, campaigns, candidates and variations in local voting patterns.

The first thing to note is that there were many more polls conducted for the 2021 election than for the last election in 2016. For example, from January-May, in 2021 there were more than 30 polls conducted for the Scottish election, but in 2016 in the same period there were only 20. During the campaign period itself, in 2021 more than 15 were conducted but in 2016 it was fewer than 10.

The reasons for this are unclear, but it appears that more media organisations were willing to fund more polls in 2021 than in 2016. In principle, having more polls conducted should give us better data and therefore, in theory, a more accurate forecast of the result. However, in practice, much will depend on the accuracy of the sample and the quality of the polling companies’ methods.

Figure 15 below shows how close an average of the last seven polls - (i.e. the final poll from each of BMG, Panelbase, Ipsos Mori, Opinium, Survation, ComRes and YouGov) was to the final national percentage shares of the vote .

Figure 15: Average of last 7 opinion polls vs final result



Source: SPICe

This shows that, on the constituency votes, the polls did remarkably well – for all parties the final result was very close to the average and well within the +/- 3 percentage point margin for error. The forecast for the Scottish Green Party vote was 2 percentage points above the result, but with the Greens only standing in a small number of constituencies, that is not surprising.

On the regional vote, using an average of the last seven polls, forecasts for all parties were within the margin for error. However, SNP regional votes were under-estimated by nearly 3 percentage points, and Green votes were consistently overestimated. Overall though, this was clearly a successful election for the polling companies.

Scottish Parliament Information Centre (SPICe) Briefings are compiled for the benefit of the Members of the Parliament and their personal staff. Authors are available to discuss the contents of these papers with MSPs and their staff who should contact Sarah Atherton on telephone number 85471 or Sarah.Atherton@parliament.scot.

Members of the public or external organisations may comment on this briefing by emailing us at SPICe@parliament.scot. However, researchers are unable to enter into personal discussion in relation to SPICe Briefing Papers. If you have any general questions about the work of the Parliament you can email the Parliament's Public Information Service at sp.info@parliament.scot. Every effort is made to ensure that the information contained in SPICe briefings is correct at the time of publication. Readers should be aware however that briefings are not necessarily updated or otherwise amended to reflect subsequent changes.

