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## Gendered nationalism: The gender gap in support for the Scottish National Party



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Abstract:	Recent major surveys of the Scottish electorate and of Scottish National Party members have revealed a distinct gender gap in support for the party. Men are markedly more likely than women to vote for the SNP and they comprise more than two-thirds of its membership. In this article, we use data from those surveys to test various possible explanations for the disproportionately male support for the SNP. While popular accounts have focused on the gendered appeal of recent leaders and the party's fluctuating efforts at achieving gender equality in its parliamentary representation, we find much stronger support for a different explanation. Women are less inclined to support and to join the SNP because they are markedly less supportive of its central objective of independence for Scotland. Since men and women barely differ in their reported national identities, the origins of this gender gap in support for independence presents a puzzle for further research.

## Introduction

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Researchers exploring the bases of support for political parties have typically looked to social and economic factors, pre-eminently class and religion. However, this approach has enjoyed only limited success when applied to ethno-regionalist parties in general (De Winter and Cachafeiro, 2002) and to the Scottish National Party (SNP) in particular. The nationalist basis of SNP support is unmistakable: those who feel Scottish rather than British and those who share the party's commitment to independence are disproportionately likely to support the SNP. Yet Scottish identity and support for independence cut across the traditional cleavages and so analyses of the SNP vote have tended to emphasize heterogeneity, with researchers remarking on the party's ability to win support across social groups (Miller, 1981; McCrone, 1992: 164-66; Paterson, 2006). Furthermore, the few patterns that did distinguish SNP electoral support, such as relative strength among younger voters and relative weakness among Catholics (Kendrick, 1983; Bennie *et al.*, 1997, ch. 8), are gradually being eroded. In the 2007 Scottish Parliament election, when the SNP became the largest party in Scotland for the first time, its support was even more than usually drawn from across the social and economic board (Johns *et al.*, 2010).

However, one socio-demographic variable is strongly associated with SNP voting and membership. That variable is gender.<sup>1</sup> There is a marked gender gap in SNP voting. In 2007, the SNP won 35% of men's but only 27% of women's regional votes (Johns *et al.*, 2010, ch. 2),<sup>2</sup> and

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<sup>1</sup> In this article we will generally refer to that variable as 'gender' rather than 'sex' (although both will be used in a bid to avoid constant repetition). While both of the surveys used ask about respondents' sex, the key theoretical arguments concern gender rather than sex differences, and in any case the term 'gender gap' is ubiquitous in this branch of electoral research.

<sup>2</sup> A mixed electoral system is used for Scottish Parliament elections, with voters having two ballots: one for a constituency candidate elected by simple plurality, and one for a party list in multi-member regions elected by proportional representation. The analyses in this article are based on the latter 'regional' vote. In 2007, most constituency seats were not contested by the minor parties and regional list votes are thus probably a truer indication of voters' preferences. (It is worth noting that, according to survey data collected at each of the three Scottish Parliament elections to date, the gender gap does not differ significantly in size across the two votes – see Table 1 below)

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3 similar differences have been observed at most previous elections. Meanwhile, the SNP's  
4 membership is even more disproportionately male than its electoral support. According to a  
5 recent survey, only 32% of SNP members are women. Both of these gender imbalances are  
6 pronounced relative to those found for other parties, both in the UK and elsewhere. While  
7 unusually broad in traditional social and economic terms, the SNP's support is unusually  
8 concentrated in terms of gender. The 'maleness' of the SNP is especially notable given that the  
9 party has historically had a reasonable record in terms of the representation of women – at least  
10 compared with other parties in Scotland – amongst its senior office-holders and in publicly-  
11 elected posts.  
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24 The gender gap in SNP support constitutes something of a puzzle, then, and our purpose here  
25 is to work towards solving that puzzle. The empirical bases of the article are two major pieces of  
26 survey research: the 2007 Scottish Election Study (SES) and, later that same year, a survey of the  
27 entire SNP membership (detailed information about both surveys, and about the variables and  
28 measures used for this article, is provided in Appendix A). In the two main sections of the article,  
29 we use these data to explore possible reasons for the gender gaps in voting and membership  
30 respectively. The striking consistency of findings across the two surveys allows us, in the  
31 concluding section, to offer a straightforward explanation for the party's gendered appeal.  
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### 46 **The gender gap in SNP voting**

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48 In 2007, the SNP became the largest party in Scotland in terms of electoral support for the first  
49 time. Between the 2003 and 2007 Scottish Parliament elections the SNP gained ten percentage  
50 points on the regional list vote and nine points in the constituency votes. Beyond the shift in  
51 overall vote shares, another striking difference between those two elections concerns the gender  
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basis of SNP support. The party drew support fairly evenly from both sexes in 2003 but, by stark contrast, there was an eight-point gender gap in 2007: men were markedly more likely to vote for the SNP. In other words, the gains in 2007 were made disproportionately among men. However, when those two elections are seen in broader historical perspective, it is 2003 rather than 2007 that represents the exception: the tendency for the SNP to appeal more to men than women has emerged persistently in studies of the Scottish electorate (Miller, 1981: 147-8; Paterson, 2006). This point is illustrated in Table 1, which shows the proportion of male and female voters choosing the SNP at various elections – both to the Westminster and Scottish Parliaments – since October 1974.<sup>3</sup>

**Table 1**  
**Percentage SNP voting by sex, October 1974-May 2007**

	1974	1979	1992	1997	1999		2001	2003		2005	2007	
	(Oct.)				Reg.	Con.		Reg.	Con.		Reg.	Con.
Male	34	20	23	24	31	33	22	21	24	20	35	38
Female	26	14	19	19	24	25	18	20	24	15	27	28
<b>Gender gap</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>7</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>9</b>
<i>N Male</i>	555	342	372	321	505	512	228	385	404	311	578	577
<i>N Female</i>	620	366	429	376	533	555	291	458	482	418	597	599

*Sources:* British Election Studies 1974-2005; Scottish Social Attitudes 1999 and 2003; Scottish Election Study 2007

This gender gap is wide in comparative terms. Although there is considerable variation across countries and across time, gender differences in voting behaviour are typically modest, and in some countries more or less non-existent (Inglehart and Norris, 2000; Studlar *et al.*, 1998; Jelen *et al.*, 1994; Mayer and Smith, 1985). Among exceptions, probably the most prominent is the

<sup>3</sup> The time series jumps from 1979 to 1992 because in neither 1983 nor 1987 was there a large-sample (N≈1,000) survey of Scottish voters. Note also that the gender gap may not exactly match the male minus female calculation because of rounding.

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3 USA. In the 2008 presidential election, for example, 56% of women but only 49% of men voted  
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5 for Barack Obama (Center for American Women and Politics, 2009), a seven-point gap fairly  
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7 typical of the tendency for males to vote disproportionately Republican and females to vote  
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9 disproportionately Democratic (Seltzer *et al.*, 1997). The SNP gender gap is therefore  
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11 comparable in size with the paradigm case in the literature.  
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### 17 *Explaining the electoral gender gap*

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19 In the absence of previous studies directly addressing this question, we can look to two sources  
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21 for guidance in explaining the SNP's electoral gender gap. The first is the recent history of the  
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23 party. According to leading figures involved in SNP campaigning since devolution, the party  
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25 made strenuous efforts to enhance its appeal to women voters after survey evidence from the  
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27 1999 elections and subsequent opinion polls showed SNP support to be relatively weak in this  
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29 half of the electorate. There were various aspects to this strategy. One was an emphasis on policy  
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31 concerns thought to be women's priorities, such as education and health. In addition, senior  
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33 women including Nicola Sturgeon and Fiona Hyslop were given more prominent roles. John  
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35 Swinney, SNP leader in 2003, was less combative than his predecessor Alex Salmond and was  
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37 keen to adopt a more women-friendly approach to campaigning. The efforts to win female votes  
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39 eased rather, however, when Salmond resumed the leadership in 2004. Salmond's priorities  
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41 differed from those of his predecessor. His placing of Bashir Ahmad second on the SNP party  
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43 list for the Glasgow region in 2007 all but ensured that the first Asian Scot would enter the  
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45 Scottish Parliament, but Salmond set no objective for women's representation. This represents a  
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47 shift in priorities compared to the run-up to the 1999 election, when Salmond had given strong  
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49 backing to 'zipping' for the party's regional lists, a policy which would have ensured near gender  
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3 parity in SNP parliamentary representation. This proposal was rejected at a special party  
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5 conference in 1998. The result was that the party slipped further away from gender parity in  
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7 parliamentary representation: women comprised 43% of the first cohort of SNP Members of the  
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9 Scottish Parliament (MSPs), but this had fallen to 25% by 2007. The decline reflects not only the  
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11 absence of mechanisms to ensure equality but also the fact that gender equality in representation  
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13 slipped down the party's agenda. On this reading, leadership, party image, perceived issue  
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15 priorities and the parliamentary representation of women are possible factors determining the  
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17 gender balance of SNP support. However, this account does not explain the enduring gender gap  
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19 – why it is that, as leaders and campaigning styles change, the 'default' position seems to be a  
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21 disproportionately male support for the party. Furthermore, this account tends to treat women's  
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23 voting behaviour as the phenomenon to be explained (see Miller *et al.*, 1991). Yet, as Table 1  
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25 shows, it is the male electorate whose SNP support has fluctuated more.  
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32 The second source of guidance is the research literature on gender gaps elsewhere. This has  
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34 often been couched in terms of the left-right (or liberal-conservative) spectrum, with differences  
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36 in voting behaviour attributed to gender differences in attitudes or ideology (e.g. Inglehart and  
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38 Norris, 2000; Campbell, 2004). While the links between sex and such variables as national  
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40 identity and constitutional preferences have not been explored in the gender gap literature, these  
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42 debates provide several useful pointers, in particular concerning issue priorities and value  
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44 differences, which can be applied in the SNP's case.  
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49 Given the quantitative approach taken here, these explanations are operationalized via  
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51 variables measured in the SES surveys (see Appendix A for details). In order for a given variable  
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53 to explain the gender gap, it needs to be related both to gender and to vote choice and in the same  
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55 'direction'. For example, although support for Alex Salmond is strongly related to support for the  
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3 SNP, it will only explain (at least part of) the gender gap if male voters are disproportionately  
4 favourable towards the party leader. It cannot explain the gap if the sexes share more or less the  
5 same view of Salmond, or if it turns out that women are actually more favourably disposed to  
6 him than men. In the latter case, the leadership variable would actually be narrowing or  
7 suppressing the gender gap: females would be still less likely to vote SNP were it not for the  
8 party's leader. In the analyses below, we examine whether potential explanatory variables fulfil  
9 those statistical conditions and how controlling for them affects the gender gap.  
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20 Two different analytic approaches are used. First, the explanatory variables are tested one at  
21 a time, in each case measuring the gender gap net of their effect. Second, the variables are added  
22 cumulatively, in batches, and in rough causal order based on the 'funnel of causality' posited by  
23 the Michigan scholars (Campbell *et al.*, 1960) and applied to SNP voting by Miller (1981). The  
24 model-building approach gives an indication of whether the gender gap remains when  
25 controlling for multiple variables. Since sex is causally prior to all of the explanatory factors  
26 investigated here, the task here is to identify those intervening variables through which that  
27 relationship operates. In short, what is it about men that makes them more likely (and about  
28 women that makes them less likely) to vote for the SNP?  
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41 Regardless of analytic approach, the statistical method is the same: logistic regression  
42 predicting an SNP regional list vote in 2007. A baseline model was estimated with gender as the  
43 single predictor. This produces the odds ratio associated with the basic gender-vote  
44 crosstabulation and hence with the 'gross' gender gap of 8.3 points. Re-estimating that model  
45 with one or more additional predictors is likely to have at least some effect on the odds ratio for  
46 gender. Using the marginals from the original crosstabulation, we can reproduce the data that  
47 would be required to generate this new odds ratio. Calculating percentages from those new data  
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3 results in the ‘net’ gender gap; that is, the gap controlling for the variable (or variables) added to  
4 the model. The basis of the next section of the article is to gauge changes in the gender gap as  
5 different control variables are tested.  
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### 10 11 12 *Testing explanatory variables individually*

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14 We begin by testing a series of ‘background’ (i.e. demographic and socioeconomic) variables  
15 (see Table 2). The first of these is age. This is unlikely to have a large impact on the gender gap  
16 because the age profile of male and female voters is not very different. Longer female life  
17 expectancy does, however, mean that women are disproportionately represented among older  
18 voters. In previous years this might have helped to explain the gender gap, because the party’s  
19 surge in the 1970s owed much to support from newer voters and the average SNP voter was  
20 much younger than the average voter (Kendrick, 1983). However, the age gap in SNP voting had  
21 more or less closed by the 1990s (Paterson, 2006) and in 2007 actually reversed (Johns *et al.*,  
22 2010, ch. 2) such that, like women, SNP supporters are slightly older than the average voter.<sup>4</sup>  
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24 The effect of age is thus to narrow the gender gap and hence, when that effect is controlled, the  
25 gap does indeed widen slightly to 9.0 points. As expected, however, this impact is small.  
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27 Controlling for the other two background variables, social class and religion, has still less effect  
28 on the gender gap.<sup>5</sup> Although both show noticeable variations across the sexes, with men  
29 substantially more likely to be in non-manual work and to disclaim any religious affiliation,  
30 neither variable proved more than a weak predictor of SNP support in 2007 (Johns *et al.*, *ibid.*).  
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51 <sup>4</sup> There is evidence in 2007 of a curvilinear relationship between age and SNP voting, with the odds of supporting  
52 the party increasing until the age of around 70 and then beginning to fall slightly. To take account of this, the  
53 analysis reported here is based on dummy variables representing age categories rather than assuming a simple linear  
54 effect. For details of the categorisation of age, see Appendix A.

55 <sup>5</sup> As indicated in Appendix A, social class was measured using the National Readership Survey six-class schema. It  
56 is an individual- rather than a household-level measure, based on a respondent’s current or previous occupation. In  
57 those rare cases – just under 5% of SES respondents, and a still lower proportion of those who voted – where a  
58 respondent has never worked, their spouse or partner’s occupation is used to assign them to a social class.  
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**Table 2**  
**Effect of controlling individual variables on the gender gap in SNP voting**

Individual variable controlled	Odds ratio (male/female)	Implied gender gap	<i>N</i>
None (baseline)	1.479	8.3	1208
<i>Background variables</i>			
Age	1.527	9.0	1208
Religion	1.462	8.1	1208
Objective social class	1.495	8.6	1208
<i>Political engagement</i>			
Education	1.490	8.5	1208
Political interest	1.314	5.8	1206
Newspaper readership	1.468	8.2	1208
<i>National identity &amp; constitutional preferences</i>			
National identity	1.748	11.8	1201
View on more powers for SP	1.634	10.5	1208
View on fiscal powers for SP	1.475	8.3	1208
View on independence	1.025	0.5	1208
View on independence referendum	1.590	9.9	1208
<i>Left-right issue positions/priorities</i>			
Increase/reduce taxes and spending	1.477	8.3	1208
Top issue priority (public services v other)	1.348	6.4	1208
<i>2007 issues</i>			
Preferred local taxation	1.508	8.8	1208
View on Iraq and Trident	1.684	11.1	1208
<i>Leadership</i>			
Evaluation of Alex Salmond	1.299	5.6	1208

Next we deal with three variables gathered under the broad heading of political engagement. Neither education nor newspaper readership has more than a negligible effect on the gender gap because, differences across the sexes notwithstanding, neither was more than weakly related to SNP voting in 2007. However, the results with political interest are quite different. The

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3 politically interested were substantially more likely to be men and also to vote SNP. This  
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5 variable appears able to account for around one-third of the gender gap, which narrows  
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7 noticeably to 5.8 points when political interest is controlled. The gender gap in political interest  
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9 is a persistent finding and has a variety of causes (as well as being in part an artefact of the  
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11 standard measures) (Burns *et al.*, 2001, ch. 4; Campbell and Winters, 2008). Less easily  
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13 explained is the positive association between interest and SNP voting. However, a comparison  
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15 reveals it to be a phenomenon specific to 2007: in neither 2003 nor 2005 were SNP voters  
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17 disproportionately interested in politics.<sup>6</sup> The most likely explanation is that interest is driven in  
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19 quite large part by success. On this reading, being causally posterior to party choice, interest  
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21 cannot account for gender differences in SNP voting.  
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27 Turning now to the specifically Scottish dimension of SNP support, we first consider national  
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29 identity. Not only has this long been recognized as a key mobilizer in support for the SNP (Brand  
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31 *et al.*, 1994; Paterson, 2006), but it might also be thought to have *prima facie* links with gender  
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33 given that national identity is often constructed and expressed in typically masculine contexts  
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35 such as international sport or military history (Cronin and Mayall, 1998; Mayer, 2000). Some  
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37 scholars (e.g. Stychin, 1998) dismiss such arguments as over-simplistic, however, and the SES  
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39 evidence supports their scepticism. Women were actually more likely than men (61% compared  
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41 to 56%) to claim Scottishness as their primary identity (when asked to place themselves on a  
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43 scale running from 'Scottish not British' to 'British not Scottish'). The SNP's particular appeal  
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45 to men must have some other basis, then, because an appeal based on national identity should  
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47 have particular attraction for female voters. Indeed, when national identity is controlled, the  
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49 gender gap widens noticeably to 11.8 points.  
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57 <sup>6</sup> The 2005 data are also drawn from an internet survey and so the SNP-interest association in 2007 is not simply an  
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59 artefact of that mode of survey administration.  
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Studies have found that national identity has limited direct impact on SNP support (Paterson *et al.*, 2001, ch. 5; Johns *et al.*, 2010). Rather, strong Scottish identifiers support the party either because such identity generates support for the SNP's constitutional policies, or even because Scottish identity is a manifestation rather than a cause of support for constitutional change. Before we consider the flagship policy of independence, it is worth noting that the most popular constitutional option in 2007 was further devolution (often referred to as 'more powers') – that is, the transfer of additional policy responsibilities, especially in the field of economic and fiscal policy, from the UK Parliament to the Scottish Parliament. Many voters favouring that option voted for the SNP (Johns *et al.*, 2010, ch. 5). Of course, this could only account for the gender gap if men were appreciably keener than women to see additional powers transferred to the Scottish Parliament. That was the case in 1974, prior to the 1979 devolution referendum when women were more likely to endorse the constitutional status quo. In contrast, in 2007, the 'more powers' option was a little more popular among women. As with national identity, the gender gap would have been even wider (more than ten points) had it not been for women's rather greater appetite for 'more powers'. Meanwhile, when asked more specifically about the transfer of fiscal powers men and women shared more or less identical views. Overall, then, attitudes to devolution cannot account for the gender gap in SNP voting.

With attitudes to independence, however, matters are very different. When asked how they would vote in a straight yes/no referendum on independence, 37% of males but only 26% of females answered 'yes'.<sup>7</sup> Since these attitudes were the most powerful predictor of SNP voting (Johns *et al.*, 2010, ch. 10), it is not surprising that they go a long way to explaining the gender gap in support for the party. Indeed, once attitudes to independence are controlled, this difference

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<sup>7</sup> Respondents were also asked about their likely referendum vote if a 'more powers' option was also available, and elsewhere on the survey they ranked a longer list of constitutional options in preference order. Whichever way the question was asked, there was at least a ten-point difference between men and women in support for independence.

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3 narrows almost completely (to 0.5 points, neither substantively nor statistically significant). In  
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5 short, women are less likely to vote for the SNP because they are less likely to support its policy  
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7 of independence. It is noteworthy that female antipathy to independence did not translate into  
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9 opposition to the SNP's promised referendum on independence. Women were slightly more  
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11 likely to support that proposal. This may indicate that such a referendum was seen more as a  
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13 safeguard against than as a route to independence. Controlling for support for that referendum,  
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15 the gender gap was slightly wider (9.9 points), suggesting that the SNP's showing among women  
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17 was indeed improved slightly by their pledge to consult the people on independence.  
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22 The next set of variables concern the SNP's issue positions and priorities. First, we analyse  
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24 respondents' self-placements on a scale running from substantial cuts to substantial increases in  
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26 taxes and spending on public services. Among the British electorate as a whole, as Campbell  
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28 (2006) shows, the average male voter falls closer to the right-wing end of this scale, and the SES  
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30 results show a similar pattern. However, this ideological gender gap is narrow. Moreover, both  
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32 men and women voters placed the SNP almost at the exact centre-point of this scale, belying any  
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34 suggestion that women were turned off the SNP because of their more left-wing stance on fiscal  
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36 policy. The gender gap of 8.3 points is therefore unaffected by controlling for that variable. On  
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38 the other hand, the gender gap does narrow somewhat when we turn from issue positions to issue  
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40 priorities. Respondents were asked an open-ended question about the most important issue to  
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42 them when deciding how to vote in 2007. Again in line with Campbell's (2006) findings, women  
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44 were considerably more likely to mention the core public service issues of education and health.  
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46 Yet these did not tend to be the top priority issues for SNP voters. Hence, when we control for  
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48 issue priorities (via a straightforward 'public services or not' dichotomous variable), we see the  
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3 gender gap close to 6.6 points. In other words, male voters responded more positively to the  
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5 perceived priorities of the SNP.  
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8 Beyond the longstanding commitment to independence, the SNP's most prominent policy  
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10 position in 2007 was a proposal to replace the council tax with a local income tax. However,  
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12 since this stance was endorsed by the overwhelming majority of both men and women,  
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14 controlling for views on local taxation has virtually no impact on the gender gap. The SNP was  
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16 also strongly critical of Labour at Westminster's decisions to go into Iraq and to replace the  
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18 Trident nuclear system, and voters opposed to Iraq and Trident were indeed substantially more  
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20 likely to vote SNP. In line with numerous studies showing that women are less likely (at least in  
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22 Western democracies) to support aggressive foreign policies (Wilcox *et al.*, 1996; Eichenberg,  
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24 2007), it was female voters who were more likely to share the SNP's standpoint on these issues.  
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26 With attitudes to Iraq and Trident controlled, the gender gap widens perceptibly to 11.1 points,  
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28 implying again that the SNP's support would have been still more disproportionately male had  
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30 they taken a different stance on those issues.  
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36 The final variable to be considered is evaluations of Alex Salmond, the SNP leader. Here, the  
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38 SES evidence comes from a series of leadership ratings on an 11-point like-dislike scale. The  
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40 mean male rating of Salmond was around half a point higher than the mean female rating, a  
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42 difference which appears more substantial in the light of the general tendency for women to  
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44 report more positive evaluations. Salmond was the only politician included on the survey to elicit  
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46 significantly higher ratings from male respondents. The upshot is that, when leader evaluations  
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48 are controlled, the net gender gap narrows by around one-third. Two points are worth noting  
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50 about this. First, while females were less positive than males about the SNP leader, they  
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52 nonetheless rated him more highly in absolute terms than any of the other politicians. The  
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3 implication is that, insofar as leadership can account for the gender gap in SNP voting, this is  
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5 because Salmond won support from men rather than losing it amongst women. Secondly,  
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7 leadership evaluations are likely to be causally posterior to some of the factors already  
8  
9 considered. For example, it could be that males preferred Alex Salmond because he led a party to  
10  
11 which they were already particularly favourably disposed, perhaps because they share the SNP's  
12  
13 preference for independence. In that case, differences in leadership evaluations are a by-product  
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15 and not a cause of the gender gap under study here. That possibility reinforces the need for a  
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17 composite model with multivariate controls, as analysed in the next section.  
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#### 24 *Building a composite model*

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27 Our composite model is based on the same variables, analysed in the same order, as in the  
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29 previous section. The only exception is political interest which is excluded given the compelling  
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31 evidence that it is endogenous to party support. The basic causal structure, beginning with fixed  
32  
33 demographic characteristics and culminating in short-term factors like leadership evaluations, is  
34  
35 well established and plausible. Things are less clear-cut in the middle of the funnel of causality:  
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37 reciprocal effects cannot be ruled out and different orders could be defended. That said, the key  
38  
39 decision – to introduce the 'Scottish' variables (national identity and constitutional preferences)  
40  
41 before the more general issue and ideological variables – seems justified given the nature of the  
42  
43 SNP and its support. Since the focus of interest here is again the effect of gender on vote, we do  
44  
45 not report the coefficients or odds ratios for the various control variables,<sup>8</sup> but instead again track  
46  
47 the changes in the odds ratio for gender and the implied gender gap. The results are reported in  
48  
49 Table 3 which shows the opening and closing of the gender gap as successive batches of  
50  
51 variables are added to the model.  
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58 <sup>8</sup> Full multivariate models of party choice in 2007 are reported by Johns *et al.* (2010).  
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**Table 3**  
**Effect of adding cumulative controls on the gender gap in SNP voting**

Variables added to cumulative model	Odds ratio (male/female)	Implied gender gap	<i>N</i>
None (baseline)	1.479	8.3	1208
<i>Background</i>			
Age, religion, class	1.506	8.8	1208
<i>Political engagement</i>			
Education, newspaper readership	1.486	8.5	1208
<i>National identity</i>			
	1.795	12.4	1201
<i>Constitutional preferences</i>			
More powers for SP, fiscal powers for SP, view on referendum, view on independence	1.277	5.2	1201
<i>Left-right issue positions/priorities</i>			
Taxes and spending, top issue priority	1.266	5.0	1201
<i>2007 issues</i>			
Local taxation, Iraq, Trident	1.305	5.7	1201
<i>Evaluation of Alex Salmond</i>			
	1.156	3.1	1201

The broad pattern of results is that which would be expected given the analysis in the previous section. However, the model-building approach here allows us to draw certain conclusions with more confidence. First, demographic and socioeconomic variables are actually serving to narrow the gender gap slightly and so, when they are controlled, that gap opens out slightly. It is not because males have different backgrounds and life experiences that they are particularly prone to vote SNP. Nor is it because they feel more Scottish: again, controlling for national identity serves to widen the gender gap perceptibly. The big shift in the graph is triggered by controlling for constitutional preferences. Once again, then, the biggest single reason why men are more likely to vote for the SNP is because they are more likely to favour independence. However,



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3 whereas at the bivariate level the effect of controlling for that variable was to eliminate the  
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5 gender gap almost entirely, in this analysis a 5-point gap remains. There are other factors at play  
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7 in the gender-vote relationship. The other most notable such factor is attitudes towards the SNP's  
8  
9 leader. Controlling for those evaluations had the potential to reduce the gender gap quite  
10  
11 substantially, even with an extensive series of prior variables held constant. Alex Salmond's  
12  
13 particular popularity among men is not simply a consequence but also to some extent a cause of  
14  
15 males' positive attitudes towards his party. The final point to note is that there remains a gender  
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17 gap (albeit not a statistically significant difference) of around three percentage points even  
18  
19 controlling for all of these other factors. Given that this is around two-fifths of the size of the  
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21 original gap, we can claim only partial success in our attempt to explain what it is about male  
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23 voters that makes them more likely to support the SNP.  
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### 33 **The gender gap in SNP membership**

34  
35 The SNP's difficulties in attracting support from women are magnified when we turn from voters  
36  
37 to party members. Only 31.8% of SNP membership survey respondents were women.<sup>9</sup> To some  
38  
39 extent this reflects a tendency pervasive across time and across countries for party membership  
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41 to be less common among women (Lovenduski and Hills, 1981; Widfeldt, 1995). However, as  
42  
43 Table 4 shows, the SNP has a very small proportion of women by most yardsticks. This does not  
44  
45 appear to be a particularly Scottish phenomenon. There is little comparable data on other parties  
46  
47 in Scotland but, where sample sizes permit a meaningful comparison between a party's  
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52  
53 <sup>9</sup> The accuracy of this estimate depends on roughly equal response rates among males and females. Survey  
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55 methodologists have seldom found large gender gaps in response rates and, while the patterns differ by survey topic  
56  
57 and mode of administration, non-response tends if anything to be more common among males (Moore and Tarnai,  
58  
59 2002). If that were the case here, our survey would actually understate the male predominance within the SNP's  
60  
membership. However, given the near-impossibility of estimating the extent of any such bias, we can only note the  
potential problem of differential non-response and proceed using the survey estimate.

membership in Scotland and in Britain as a whole, the proportion of women is not consistently smaller in the former case. It is the SNP figure that is the outlier, being some way further from gender parity than any of the others – Scottish or British – in the table. The purpose of this section is to seek possible explanations for that disparity, and specifically to assess whether it seems to be driven by the same factors that proved important when we examined the electoral gender gap. First, though, we need to say a word about our empirical approach in this section.

**Table 4**  
**Sex breakdown of membership of different parties**

	Year(s) of survey	% female members	N
<i>Scottish members only</i>			
SNP	2007/08	32	6885
Labour	1997	39	371
Conservative	1992	61	178
Greens	1990	45	506
Greens	2002	37	258
<i>All British members</i>			
Labour	1989/90	39	5033
Labour	1997	39	5757
Conservative	1992	52	2404
Liberal Democrats	1993	47	1629
Liberal Democrats	1998/99	46	2866
Greens	1990	44	4357
Greens	2002	42	1430

Sources: Various party membership studies

#### *Explaining the membership gender gap*

The empirical approach in this section is necessarily different. The election study data included voters for all parties and thus allowed us to identify the factors determining whether or not voters

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2  
3 chose the SNP. By contrast, the membership survey does not include non-members (or members  
4 of other parties). In considering the relationship between gender and SNP membership, then, we  
5 are confined to comparing male and female members of the party. Any inferences drawn from  
6 such comparisons depend on the assumption of parallel gender differences among non-members.  
7  
8 The previous section is therefore useful not only in highlighting the kinds of factors most likely  
9 to explain the gender gap in membership, but also because it provided some baseline information  
10 about the relationship between gender and key variables – such as national identity and  
11 constitutional preferences – in the electorate as a whole. Considered alone, the survey of SNP  
12 members is severely limited in what it can tell us about the determinants of membership. In  
13 conjunction with a (roughly contemporaneous) survey of the entire electorate, however, a  
14 detailed profile of male and female SNP members becomes more informative. Nonetheless,  
15 given that our information about non-members is drawn from other data collections, our  
16 evidence about why women may be less likely to join the SNP is also necessarily indirect.  
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34 We begin by looking at age among SNP members. At 59 years, the average age of SNP  
35 members is quite high, making this – as in the previous section – an unpromising candidate for  
36 explaining the gender gap. Demographic differences mean that, other things remaining the same,  
37 a more mature support is likely to be a disproportionately female support, and indeed the small  
38 gap between the mean female age (60.4) and mean male age (57.9) is similar in size to the  
39 corresponding gap in the overall population due to longer female life expectancy. Hence the  
40 gender differences in the left-hand panel of Table 5 are expected: the proportions of women are  
41 larger in the older age groups. However, if we look only at those who joined since 2005, then a  
42 more nuanced pattern emerges that cannot be ascribed solely to demographic patterns. The first  
43 point to note is that, among recent joiners, the proportion of females falls to just 28.2%. While  
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the SNP has enjoyed increased recruitment in recent years, it has been relatively unsuccessful in attracting women, particularly younger women. Females are especially underrepresented in the younger categories of new members, and overrepresented not in the oldest but in the older middle-aged categories.<sup>10</sup> There is no obvious explanation for this pattern; what is clear is that it does not bode well for any imminent narrowing of the gender gap in membership.

**Table 5**  
**Sex of membership by age group**

<i>Age group</i>	<i>All members</i>			<i>Joined since 2005</i>		
	<i>Female (%)</i>	<i>Male (%)</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>Female (%)</i>	<i>Male (%)</i>	<i>N</i>
18-34	25	75	526	21	79	298
35-44	26	74	756	24	76	279
45-54	28	72	1116	30	70	292
55-64	35	65	1717	33	67	369
65-74	34	66	1603	32	68	239
75+	36	64	1019	29	71	123
Total	32	68	6737	28	72	1600

Another of the background variables considered earlier, religion, looks a more promising potential explanation for the gender gap in SNP membership. In the population as a whole, as noted earlier, men are substantially less likely (by ten percentage points) to report a religious affiliation. And the proportion of SNP members claiming a religious affiliation (57%) was noticeably smaller than the corresponding proportion in the 2001 census in Scotland (67%). Evidence from a religion by gender analysis of the membership is inconclusive, however. The gender difference in religious affiliations within the membership is exactly the same ten-point gap as in the population. This leaves open the possibility that greater religiosity among women (partly) explains their under-representation in the SNP. But of course the converse could be true:

<sup>10</sup> We do not report significance tests in this section of the article. With responses from around 7,000 members, almost any difference is significant; our concern is with substantive importance. In any case, given that we were surveying the entire membership, the logic of inferential statistics (which assumes random sampling from a far greater population) does not really apply.

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3 it may be that the SNP membership is less religious because it contains fewer women.  
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5 Unfortunately, our analyses cannot clarify causal direction so as to remove that ambiguity.  
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8 For obvious reasons, the membership survey respondents were asked not about general  
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10 interest in politics but about a range of activities and involvements within the party. The gender  
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12 gaps in these variables were typically modest. Overall, 34% of men described themselves as  
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14 ‘very’ or ‘fairly’ active within the party compared to 31% of women. Men were slightly more  
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16 likely to attend local party meetings regularly and markedly more likely to have stood for elected  
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18 office within the party. On the other hand, they were less likely to have canvassed voters by  
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20 telephone or to have attended the party’s national conference. Once again, there are limits to the  
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22 inferences that can be drawn from these comparisons. Nevertheless, they give the impression that  
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24 the SNP can call upon active members of both sexes. Gender differences in involvement in the  
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26 population can probably explain why most parties struggle to attract as many female as male  
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28 joiners (see Table 4), but they seem unlikely to account for the SNP’s particularly wide gender  
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30 gap in membership. This conclusion is bolstered by the age profile of the party, which suggests  
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32 that family commitments – one reason why women might be less likely to join – are likely to  
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34 have eased for many members. Only 7% of SNP members have children below the age of five  
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36 under their care.  
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43 Another possible reason for the membership gender gap is sex differences in levels of  
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45 political efficacy. This has two broad aspects: internal or self-efficacy, i.e. a feeling of being  
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47 personally capable of participating, and external or collective efficacy, i.e. the belief that  
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49 institutions and conditions allow that participation to make a difference. Unsurprisingly, given  
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51 the upbeat post-election mood in the party, external efficacy scores were high among both men  
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53 and women. This was true not only on general questions about the amount of influence wielded  
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3 by members but also on a specific question about gender parity: hardly anyone of either sex (7%  
4 of women and 5% of men) agreed that ‘the party does not do enough to ensure that equal  
5 numbers of men and women are selected as SNP candidates’. Again, then, it seems unlikely that  
6 women are put off from joining the party because they see no opportunity to make a contribution  
7 or to have a say. However, there are signs – echoing previous findings from surveys of broader  
8 electorates (e.g. Vaus and McAllister, 1989) – that women members have a lower sense of  
9 internal political efficacy. Women were rather less likely to agree that they ‘could have a real  
10 influence’ and markedly less likely to agree that they ‘could do a good job as an SNP councillor’.  
11 The fact that these differences persist even among party members tends to arouse suspicions that  
12 they may also partly explain why women were less likely to join in the first place. Again,  
13 however, we cannot make this argument with great conviction in the absence of precisely  
14 comparable data among non-members. In any case, it cannot explain the particularly wide gender  
15 gap in the SNP’s membership.  
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34 We therefore turn to the ‘Scottish’ variables that are the specific underpinnings of SNP  
35 support. As we have seen, there is little difference in terms of national identity between women  
36 and men in the electorate. Table 6 shows that this is also true among members, less surprisingly  
37 in this case given the strong skew towards the Scottish end of the spectrum. Given that men and  
38 women both inside and outside of the party are equally likely to feel Scottish, it seems highly  
39 unlikely that national identity can explain the gender gap in membership. There is a potentially  
40 important caveat to this. This standard measure of identity is relative rather than absolute: we  
41 know that men are no more likely to feel Scottish *rather than* British but these data leave open  
42 the possibility that they feel their Scottish identity more strongly. We discuss this further in  
43 concluding the article.  
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**Table 6**  
**National identity by sex among SNP members**

	Female (%)	Male (%)
Scottish not British	77.4	77.5
More Scottish than British	15.5	16.3
Equally Scottish and British	2.4	2.6
More British than Scottish	0.3	0.2
British not Scottish	0.4	0.2
Other	3.9	3.3
<i>N</i>	2141	4595

As among the electorate, the results are very different when we turn from national identity to the constitutional question. Just as female voters are markedly less radical in their constitutional preferences, so too are women members of the SNP, more than one in six of whom cited ‘further devolution short of independence’ as their preferred option. Women were correspondingly less likely to endorse the SNP’s official policy of independence in the EU (though, interestingly, no less likely to favour independence outside the EU). The nine-point gap in support for party policy is more or less identical in size to the corresponding gap within the electorate (whether we compare with the same five-option question as in Table 7 or with a simpler referendum vote intention question). It is also worth emphasising that, among both members and voters, those women who oppose independence do not instead tend to favour the status quo. The ‘more powers’ option is the one that attracts more female support. Differing appetites for independence thus look like an explanation for the gender gap in SNP membership, just as they did for that same gap in electoral support.

**Table 7**  
**Constitutional preferences by sex among SNP members**

	Female (%)	Male (%)
Scotland should become independent outside the European Union	22.3	21.6
Scotland should become independent within the EU	59.4	68.3
The Scottish Parliament's powers should be increased and it should raise more of its own taxes	17.1	9.2
There should be no change to the present arrangements: Scotland should have a devolved Parliament with limited powers	1.0	0.5
The Scottish Parliament should be abolished and all Scottish laws passed by Westminster again	0.2	0.3
<i>N</i>	1977	4120

The discovery that women, both within the SNP and in the wider electorate, are less keen on independence does not in itself constitute an explanation of the gender gap in the party's membership. The missing premise is that constitutional preference is a key driver of joining the party. And that point, while plausible, cannot be conclusively demonstrated in the absence of data from those who choose not to join the party. However, there is evidence from an open-ended question in the SNP membership survey asking members to describe the main reasons they joined the party. Independence is easily the most commonly cited reason overall but women are less likely to be attracted to the party by that policy: 47% of men and 39% of women cite independence as the reason for joining. Aside from the independence gap that we have observed throughout, another noteworthy gender difference is that women were more likely to report social network reasons for joining, in particular family links with existing members (in several cases their partners). This perhaps indicates that women require a stronger situational impetus to join political parties. However, this tends to explain the gender gap in membership of parties across the board. When it comes to the particularly male profile of SNP membership, attitudes to independence again look the most plausible explanation.



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Given the prominence of left-right ideology in previous explanations of partisan gender gaps, it is worth looking briefly at how male and female SNP members placed themselves and the party on a left-right scale. These placements hardly vary. As with the average voter, the average member places the party slightly to the left of the centre of the scale, and there is no difference at all between men and women in this regard. In terms of self-placements, women were marginally only marginally further left (by less than one-tenth of a standard deviation), not enough to account for a large gender gap even if there were compelling evidence that left-right ideology is a prominent motivation for membership.

The final variable considered here is leadership evaluations. Earlier, we found evidence that Alex Salmond's particular appeal to male voters contributed to explaining the electoral gender gap. It is more difficult to test for such a leadership effect on membership since members of both sexes are likely to evaluate their leader very positively, particularly in the aftermath of the most successful election in the party's history. In this context, evidence that female SNP members were nonetheless more lukewarm in their endorsement of their leader would constitute persuasive (if still circumstantial) evidence that the leadership was failing to attract women to join the party. We can explore this via a series of questions asking members to rate a number of senior politicians – from both the SNP and other parties – on an 11-point like-dislike scale. Table 8 first reports the mean ratings given by both male and female SNP members to Alex Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, the leader and deputy leader of the party. There is no evidence that Salmond appealed particularly to men in the party, as his mean rating was slightly higher among females. The gender gap is slightly narrower than with Nicola Sturgeon but ratings of both politicians conform to the general tendency, indicated by respondents' overall ratings of male and female SNP politicians, for women members to give slightly higher ratings than men to

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3 politicians of both sexes. That tendency – itself hardly marked – is more noticeable than any  
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5 inclination among females to be particularly generous to female politicians. Alex Salmond may  
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7 struggle to win electoral support from women and, lacking data from ‘potential’ SNP members,  
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9 we cannot be sure that he is not partly responsible for the disproportionately male membership of  
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11 the party. However, the evidence here suggests that he exerts no deterrent effect on those already  
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13 favourably enough disposed to the party to consider membership.  
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19 **Table 8**  
20 **Mean ratings of politicians by sex among SNP members**

	<i>Mean (0-10) rating by sex of members</i>		Difference (female - male)
	Male	Female	
Alex Salmond	9.24	9.31	+0.07
<i>N</i>	4608	2119	
Nicola Sturgeon	8.74	8.90	+0.16
<i>N</i>	4539	2087	
All male SNP politicians	8.12	8.30	+0.18
<i>N</i>	4614	2127	
All female SNP politicians	8.16	8.37	+0.21
<i>N</i>	4582	2111	

### 37 Conclusion

38  
39 Despite having had prominent senior female politicians, the Scottish National Party has generally  
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41 polled better amongst men and has a disproportionately small proportion of women members.  
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43 Popular speculation about the reasons for this has focused on two factors: first, fluctuations in the  
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45 party’s commitment to and record on gender equality in representation; secondly on the party’s  
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47 leadership. We found some evidence that the gender gap in SNP electoral support in 2007 was  
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49 partly due to the relative popularity of Alex Salmond among male voters. However, our analyses  
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51 reveal a much more powerful explanation for the gender gaps in both electoral support and  
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53 membership. The party’s flagship policy is Scottish independence. Support for that option is a  
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3 strong motivation both for its voters and its members and such support is markedly stronger  
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5 among men than among women. This goes a long way to solving our puzzle.  
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8 Of course, this simply leads to another gender gap puzzle: why are there differences in  
9  
10 support for independence? Addressing this question is a further research task in itself.  
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12 Meanwhile, we will briefly outline three possible answers. The first refers to a point previously  
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14 noted about the measures of national identity used in this article. Prior studies have shown that  
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16 feeling Scottish and not British is far from a sufficient condition for favouring independence  
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18 (Brown *et al.*, 1999; Denver *et al.*, 2000; Paterson *et al.*, 2001). It seems quite likely that support  
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20 for independence is driven as much by the intensity as by the direction of national identity, and  
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22 men may feel their ‘Scottishness’ more intensely. A second possibility lies in the gender  
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24 differences in issue priorities also mentioned above. Economic, foreign and defence policies are  
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26 the most significant areas for which responsibility would be transferred to Scotland in the event  
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28 of independence, and these are both more often the concern of men. Since responsibilities for  
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30 female priority issues, health and education, have already been devolved, women have in a sense  
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32 less to gain from independence. The third explanation is an application of the recurring finding in  
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34 social psychology and (a little less consistently) microeconomics that men tend to be less risk-  
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36 averse than women (Arch, 1993; Byrnes *et al.*, 1999; Eckel and Grossman, 2003). The extent of  
37  
38 risk involved in Scottish independence is of course strongly disputed but, insofar as its impact is  
39  
40 uncertain, there may be reason to expect women to be warier. Adjudicating between these and  
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42 other explanations will require detailed and tailored measures of the kind that were not available  
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44 in the surveys used here. Future research should take a comparative as well as a methodological  
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46 direction. In similar substantive contexts, the Scottish case has often been compared to several  
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48 others, most often Quebec and Catalonia. That and other cases offer survey data with which the  
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3 relationships between gender, national identity and constitutional preferences can be further  
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5 scrutinized. These relationships await detailed empirical exploration in those contexts, and there  
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7 is no existing literature on gendered tendencies in nationalist or ethno-regionalist parties into  
8  
9 which this article slots neatly. However, it could prove an early contribution to such work.  
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12  
13 Our final point concerns framing. Just as gender gaps in voting vary according to the way  
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15 gender and related issues are presented and discussed at different elections, it seems probable  
16  
17 that the gender gap in support for independence will depend on the framing of that policy in  
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19 party and media discourse. In other words, a greater appeal to men is not intrinsic to the policy of  
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21 independence but is the result of the way that policy has been defined and discussed. Further  
22  
23 research into how and why independence proves less popular among women is therefore of more  
24  
25 than academic interest. It could guide the SNP – and the parties opposed to independence – about  
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27 how the issue should be framed to their maximum advantage.  
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46  
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## Appendix A: Data sources and variables used

### *Scottish Election Study*

The 2007 Scottish Election Study (SES) was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-000-22-2256) and directed by two of the present authors (Mitchell and Johns) along with Professor David Denver of Lancaster University and Professor Charles Pattie of the University of Sheffield. It involved a major panel survey of the Scottish electorate with data collected before and after the election on 3 May 2007. The data were collected via the internet, fieldwork being undertaken by YouGov. The initial sample was drawn from YouGov's panel of subscribers resident in Scotland, and a response rate of 72% generated a pre-election sample of 1,872 respondents. This wave of data collection took place between 17 and 23 April. Of the pre-election respondents, 83% also completed the post-election questionnaire, giving a panel sample size of 1,552 respondents. The post-election data were collected between 4 and 10 May. The analyses presented here are based on data weighted (using YouGov's standard weight) to make the achieved sample representative of the target sample in terms of a range of demographic and attitudinal variables including age, gender, social class, region, newspaper readership and past vote. Further information, including an opportunity to read the questionnaires and to download the survey data, are available via the project website at [www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk](http://www.scottishelectionstudy.org.uk).

Meanwhile, the table below sets out the variables used here in some detail. Unless otherwise indicated in the table, non-response was treated as follows: with categorical variables, non-respondents are included in the reference category (e.g. 'no religion' or 'unclassified'); with scale variables, the mean value was imputed to non-respondents.

	Label in archived data	Notes on coding
Age	age	6 categories: 18-29, 30-39, 40-49, 50-59, 60-69, 70+
Religion	pre_q217-218	4 categories: Catholic, Church of Scotland, other, no religion
Objective social class	pre_q221-226	NRS social grade collapsed into 4 categories: AB, C1, C2DE, unclassified
Education	pre_q230	Age left full-time education
Political interest	pre_q45	5-category scale ('DK' coded as missing)
Newspaper readership	pre_q210-211	3 categories: tabloid, broadsheet, neither
National identity	post_127	Moreno scale ('other' coded as missing)
View on more powers for SP	post_q119	5-point agree/disagree scale
View on fiscal powers for SP	post_q120	5-point agree/disagree scale
View on independence	pre_q163	Dummy variable: support Y/N
View on independence referendum	pre_q161	Dummy variable: support Y/N
Increase/reduce taxes and spending	pre_q119	Self-placement on 11-point issue dimension
Top issue priority (public services v other)	pre_q86	Dummy variable: education or health Y/N
Preferred local taxation	pre_q118	Dummy variable: council tax versus local income tax
View on Iraq and Trident	pre_q115, q117	5-point agree/disagree scales
Evaluation of Alex Salmond	pre_q93	11-point like/dislike scale

*SNP membership survey*

This survey was also funded by the Economic and Social Research Council (RES-062-23-0722) as part of a wider study of the party. It was directed by the present authors. The target sample was the entire party membership which, as of 8 November 2007, stood at 13,203 members. Between 16 and 19 November, a questionnaire was sent to all of those members. Following reminder postcards in early December, and a fresh mailing of questionnaires to non-respondents in mid-March 2008, the eventual achieved N was 7,112, a response rate of 53.9%. (This is similar to those obtained in several of the other party membership studies in the UK.) In the absence of reliable demographic information about the total party membership, we do not apply weights when analysing these data. Further details are available at the study website <http://www.strath.ac.uk/government/staff/mitchelljamesprofessor/snp/>.

The table below sets out the variables used here in some detail. Non-respondents were omitted from analysis (since, in the absence of multivariate modelling, there was less need to impute responses to avoid losing cases).

	Label in archived data	Notes on coding
Age	Age6cats	6 categories: 18-34, 35-44, 45-54, 55-64, 65-74, 75+
When joined the party	Q1	Collapsed into dummy variable: up to 2004 /2005 onwards
Religion	Q54a-b	5 categories: Catholic, Church of Scotland, other Christian, other, no religion
Self-reported activity	Q4	4-category scale
Attendance at local party meetings	Q5	5-category scale
Frequency of party activities	Q8	4-category scales
External efficacy	Q34	5-point agree/disagree scales
Internal efficacy	Q33	5-point agree/disagree scales
National identity	Q23	Moreno scale
Constitutional preference	Q16	First preference based on rankings of five categories
Left-right ideology	Q19d, g	Self- and party-placements on 11-point left-right scale
Evaluation of SNP leaders and prominent figures	Q39a-j	11-point like/dislike scales
Motivations for joining	Q3basic1	First response to open-ended question, coded into multiple categories