

# **GREAT EXPECTATIONS**

**REJUVENATING THE NATIONAL  
DEBATE IN SCOTLAND**

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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# INTRODUCTION

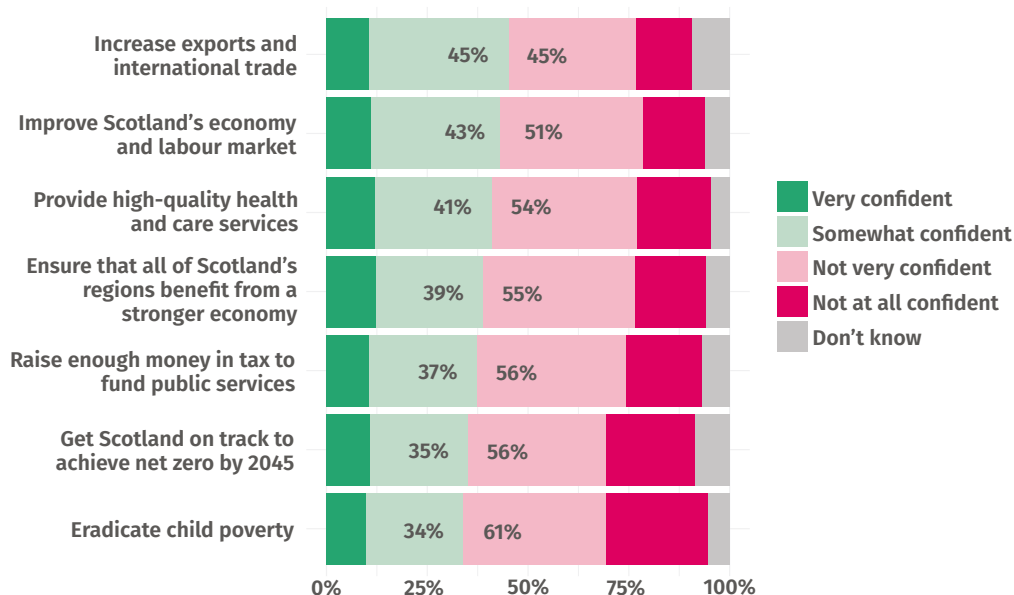
Fresh IPPR Scotland polling shows that politicians must raise their game if next year's election is a to be serious debate about the challenges facing Scotland and potential solutions. We find a worrying disconnect between voters' opinions and the reality of these challenges.

- Voters place great emphasis on the state of the NHS. But while the pandemic was a major shock for the health service from which it is still recovering, its capacity to meet expectations has been deteriorating for at least a decade, indicating funding has not kept up with increasing demands. Yet almost half of voters think taxes are too high.
- A political discourse pitting the cost of living against climate action has taken hold, and voters show much higher concern for the former than the latter. This despite the reality that deterioration in the climate system is already evident and is itself a driver of the rising cost of living. This takes various forms but is particularly clear in food price inflation.

If the next Scottish government is to make tangible progress on these major issues, it must win a mandate to do so. Alongside the need to set out a positive vision for the future, progressive politicians must engage seriously with the scale of the challenges facing the country. Scottish politicians should avoid the mistakes of the 2024 general election campaign, during which major issues – especially around tax and spending – were downplayed in what commentators described as a “conspiracy of silence” (Johnson 2024).

This will not be easy as Scottish politics is in a difficult place. While the balance of opinion tends toward a positive view of Scotland's future (40 per cent of citizens), one third (33 per cent) of people in Scotland feel negative. People are also generally pessimistic about the outlook for inequality, with 32 per cent anticipating even less economic equality over the course of the next Scottish parliament, as compared with just 14 per cent who think we will become more equal. These downbeat views are compounded by voters having little faith that the next Scottish government will be able to deliver.

**FIGURE 1: THINKING ABOUT THE NEXT SCOTTISH GOVERNMENT, HOW CONFIDENT ARE YOU THAT IT WILL BE ABLE TO DO EACH OF THE FOLLOWING?**



Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting does not factor likelihood to vote.

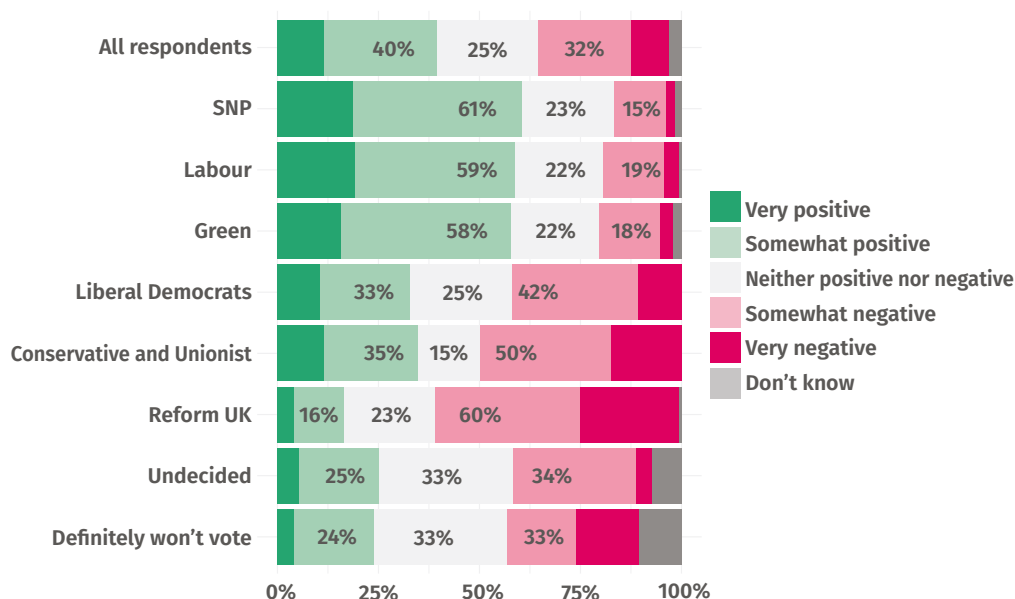
One strand of electoral strategy that political parties should consider is how to mobilise younger people to vote. Younger people make up a large share of currently-undecided and so persuadable voters. They have relatively balanced priorities across climate, poverty and the health service and importantly are much more likely to feel positive about Scotland's future. Parties that can inspire younger people to buck the trend of low turnout could significantly boost their vote next year.

## PEOPLE'S OUTLOOK ON THE FUTURE OF SCOTLAND

While the balance of people's attitudes toward the future is marginally more positive than negative, when we break this down by voting intention, a clear split is evident. Parties on the centre-left/left – SNP, Labour and the Greens – see their voters feeling on balance much more positive about the future than negative.

The cause of this association, and what it means for how parties approach the election is open to various interpretations. But it does suggest that campaigning in a positive mode and painting a credible, robust picture of Scotland's future may play well for progressive parties.

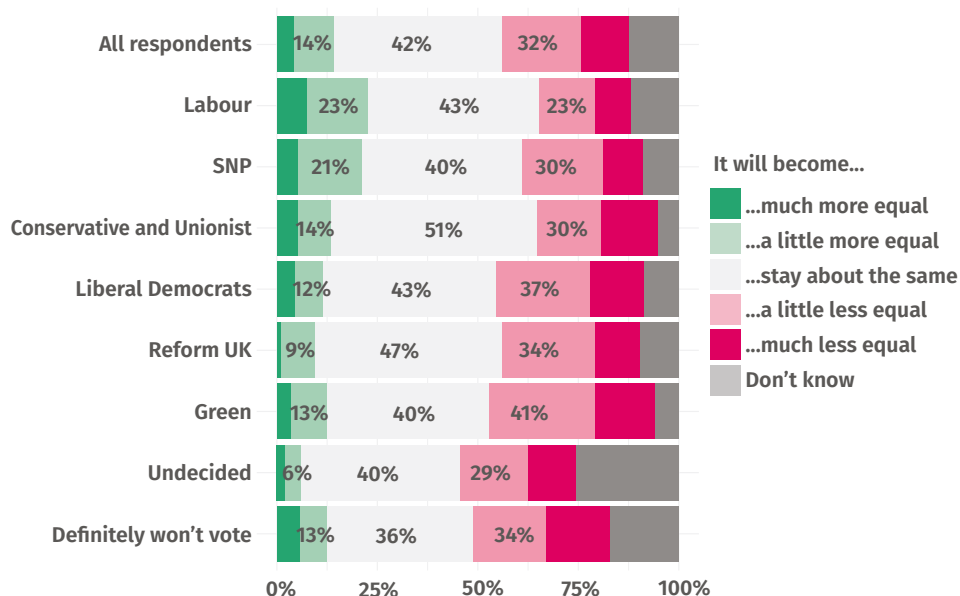
**FIGURE 2: OVERALL, DO YOU FEEL POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE, OR NEITHER POSITIVE NOR NEGATIVE, ABOUT SCOTLAND'S FUTURE?**



Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting does not factor likelihood to vote.

By contrast, across the parties we see a generally consistent pessimistic view on the future of inequality. Only Labour supporters are about as likely to say Scotland will become more equal (22 per cent) as less equal (24 cent).

**FIGURE 3: OVER THE COURSE OF THE NEXT SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT, HOW DO YOU EXPECT INCOME AND WEALTH INEQUALITY IN SCOTLAND TO CHANGE?**



Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting does not factor likelihood to vote.

## SPECIFIC ISSUES

### NHS

For many voters, the NHS is hugely salient. Voters currently say the issue that would most motivate them to vote for a specific party or politician in the next Scottish election is protecting and investing in the NHS (42 per cent). Eighty-six per cent of voters see improving the NHS as important and it is ranked as the second highest priority for the next Scottish government. Yet despite this strong emphasis, 54 per cent are not confident the next government will be able to provide high-quality health and care services (with 18 per cent not at all confident).

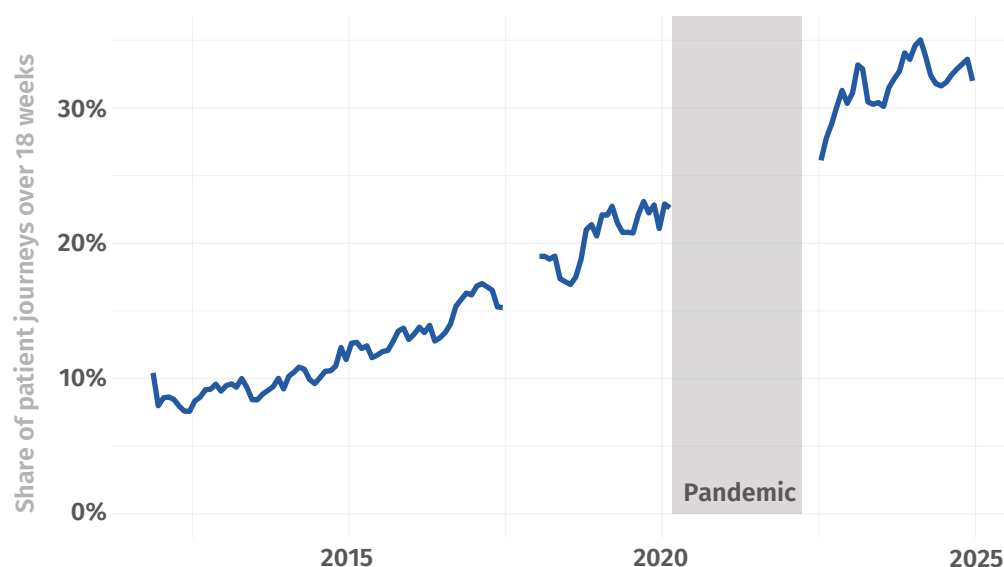
As we enjoy longer lifespans in Scotland, we spend longer needing healthcare. The Scottish Fiscal Commission (SFC) projects that public spending will grow continuously over the next 50 years, mainly because of health spending (SFC 2025). While readers of the SFC's authoritative reports may be in a minority, concern about the ability of government to manage the consequences of our ageing population is widespread, with 76 per cent of respondents either somewhat or very (29 per cent) concerned.

Nonetheless, the priority placed on the NHS and awareness of the growing demands on it does not translate into a consensus about taxes needed to fund it. Forty-seven per cent of respondents consider taxes to be already too high and think the government should focus on using existing resources more efficiently. Reluctance to see tax increases *even if public services need more funding* is rooted in a lack of trust in government to spend additional tax wisely (44 per cent of respondents). Just 23 per cent would be willing to pay higher taxes if it meant better public services. Forty-five per cent think those on higher incomes should pay higher taxes to fund better public services.

This disconnect is concerning. The process of demographic change is an ongoing process, not some distant issue. While the pandemic exacerbated the pressures on the NHS, these are long standing pressures as can be seen in indicators like waiting times in which deterioration long pre-dates 2020 (figure 4). In this context of tax-reluctance and growing pressures, it is perhaps unsurprising that voters are pessimistic that the next government will raise enough in taxes to fund public services (56 per cent not confident against 37 per cent who are confident).

If politicians are to deliver on the NHS, they need a mandate for higher funding as a response to increasing pressures. While there will always be opportunities to improve the efficiency of the NHS, the increase in health needs across the population means it is not credible to expect standards to recover without higher spending. Technological change tends to increase costs in the NHS as it complements rather than replaces humans and because there is high demand to pay for expensive new treatments. The message that the NHS likely will need more funding just to stand still has not reached enough voters to build stronger support for the higher taxes that will be necessary if the service is to improve.

**FIGURE 4: THE UPWARD TREND IN PATIENTS NOT BEING TREATED WITHIN 18 WEEKS OF REFERRAL STARTED LONG BEFORE THE PANDEMIC**



Source: Public Health Scotland 2025

Note: Gaps due to missing PHS data.

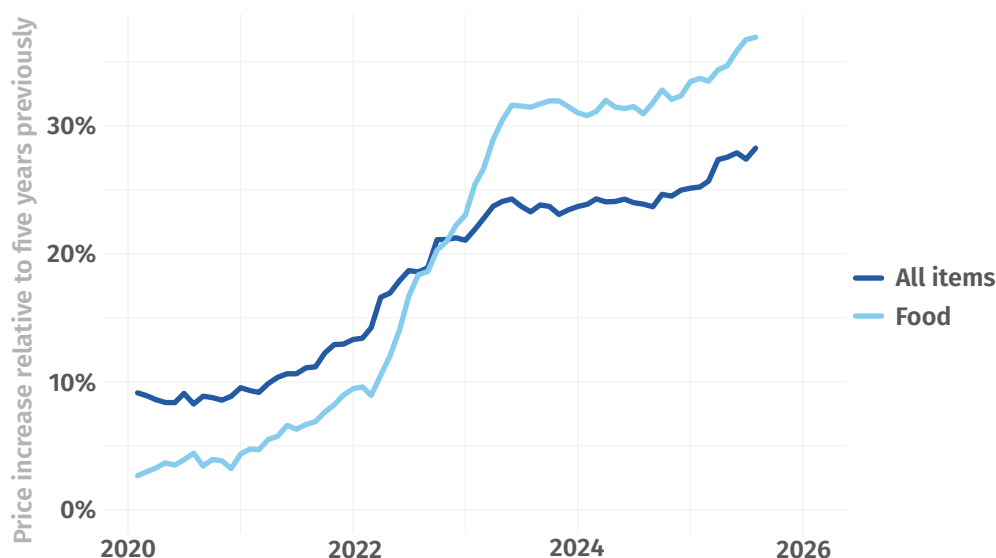
### **COST OF LIVING, POVERTY AND INEQUALITY**

Poverty and inequality also feature strongly among voters' concerns. We asked voters which outcomes matter most to them when thinking about a better Scottish economy. Reduced poverty and inequality was the top-ranked response (38 per cent) coming ahead of higher wages (31 per cent). Seventy-five per cent see reducing poverty and inequality as important to Scotland's future. Tackling the cost of living was most frequently (23 per cent) selected in our poll as the main priority for the next Scottish government.

However, as with the NHS there is a generally downbeat view as to the ability of the next Scottish government to address this network of issues, and particularly their manifestation as child poverty. While the Scottish government remains committed to its target to cut child poverty to 10 per cent by 2030 -- and the First Minister has spoken of his intention to eradicate, not just reduce child poverty -- the public does not have confidence this will be achieved. Just 34 per cent are confident the next government will be able to eradicate child poverty, with 61 per cent not confident. Of the issues we polled, this has the lowest confidence rating.

One of the most salient cost-of-living pressures is the cost of food. While food price inflation tended to be lower than general inflation before 2022, it has since been much higher. As lower income households spend a larger share of their income on food than richer households, this inflation is felt most acutely by those who have the least. While global food systems are complex, one increasing driver of food price inflation is climate, leading to reduced crop yields both at home and in countries we import food from (ECIU 2025).

**FIGURE 5: FOOD PRICE INFLATION HAS OUTPACED GENERAL PRICE INCREASES IN THE CURRENT HIGH-INFLATION PERIOD**



Source: ONS (2025)

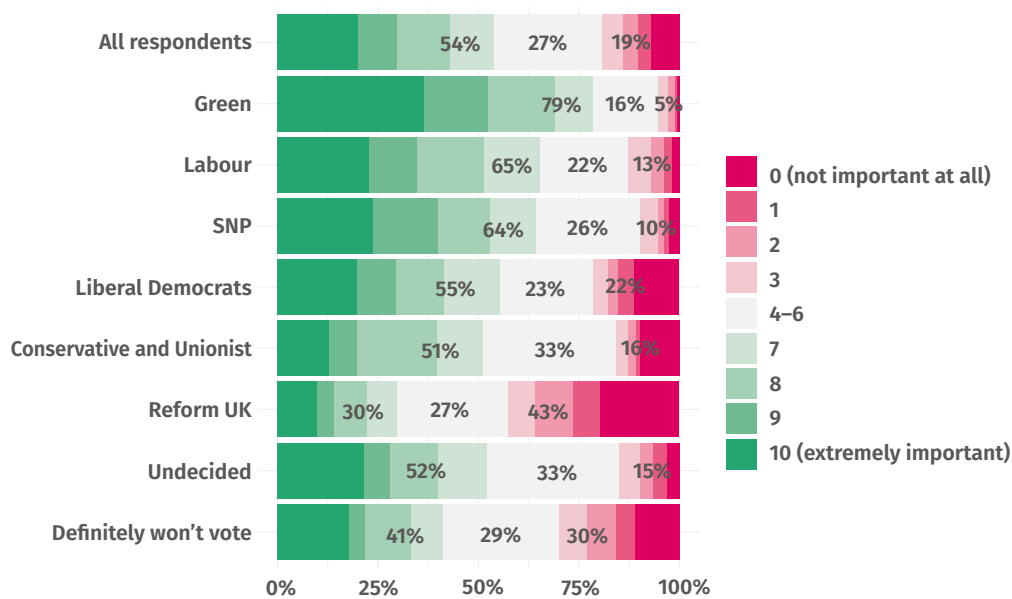
It is therefore concerning that our polling found climate to be a relatively lower salience issue. Just 3 per cent of respondents chose addressing climate change as the top priority for the next government and only 8 per cent said it would motivate them to vote for a specific party or politician. This is not to say voters find climate unimportant, though relative to other issues a small share (54 per cent) rated it at seven or above on a 10-point importance scale. Almost one in five (19 per cent) think tackling climate change is unimportant to Scotland's future.

Confidence in the next Scottish government's ability to get back on track for net zero by 2045 is correspondingly low, and similar to the lack of confidence in eradicating child poverty. Just 35 per cent of respondents are confident the next government will do this, compared with 56 per cent who are not confident.

A dangerous opposition has been allowed to brew in political discourse, pitting climate against the cost of living. It is unavoidable that the transition to net zero requires front-loaded costs, albeit with much of this cost being offset in future savings. But the costs people in Scotland will face over time, and across the rest of the world, from a degraded climate are far more significant. Scottish politics has so far failed to produce a plan for the transition to net zero, adequately funded and with a clear policy for fairly sharing the costs. Without such a plan, we risk leaving growing problems for our children to deal with. Political leaders must cut the Gordian knot and engage voters in an honest debate about how to fairly deal with the transition to net zero.

While tackling climate change received the lowest importance scores across the issues we polled, the breakdown by vote intention shows the issue carries different resonance across voter groups. In particular, while around one in five say tackling climate change is not important, this opinion is less significant among supporters of the SNP, Labour and the Greens. Making a bolder proposition on climate, one that leans into the role of environmental protection in our wellbeing, is unlikely to backfire for these parties.

**FIGURE 6: HOW IMPORTANT ARE THE FOLLOWING ISSUES TO YOU WHEN THINKING ABOUT SCOTLAND'S FUTURE: TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE**



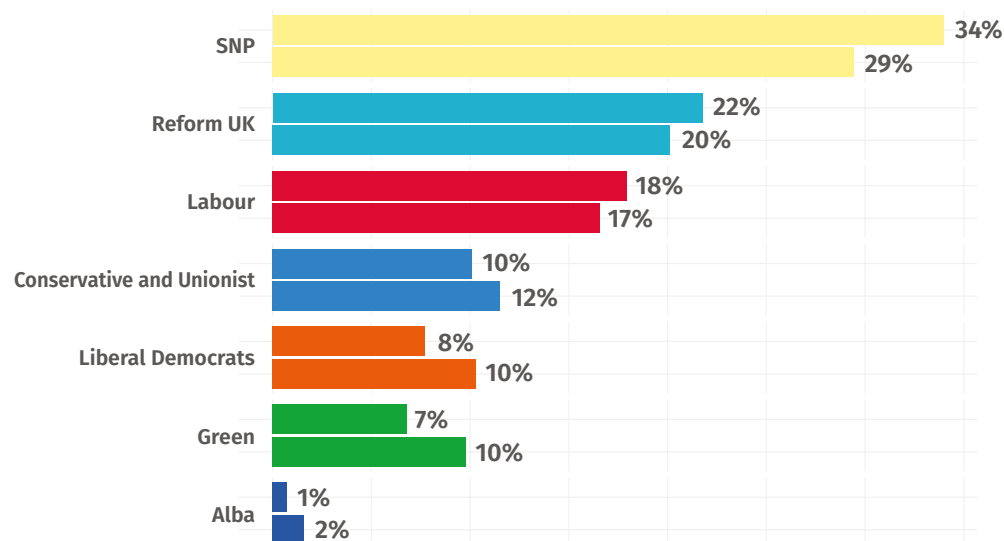
Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting does not factor likelihood to vote.

## THE RISE OF REFORM

Our voting intention polling sees Reform in second place on both constituency and regional list votes. This is the first time Reform has reached second place and reflects its steadily growing vote share since last year's election.

**FIGURE 7: VOTING INTENTION FOR THE NEXT SCOTTISH PARLIAMENT ELECTION**

Constituency vote = first bar, regional list vote = second bar

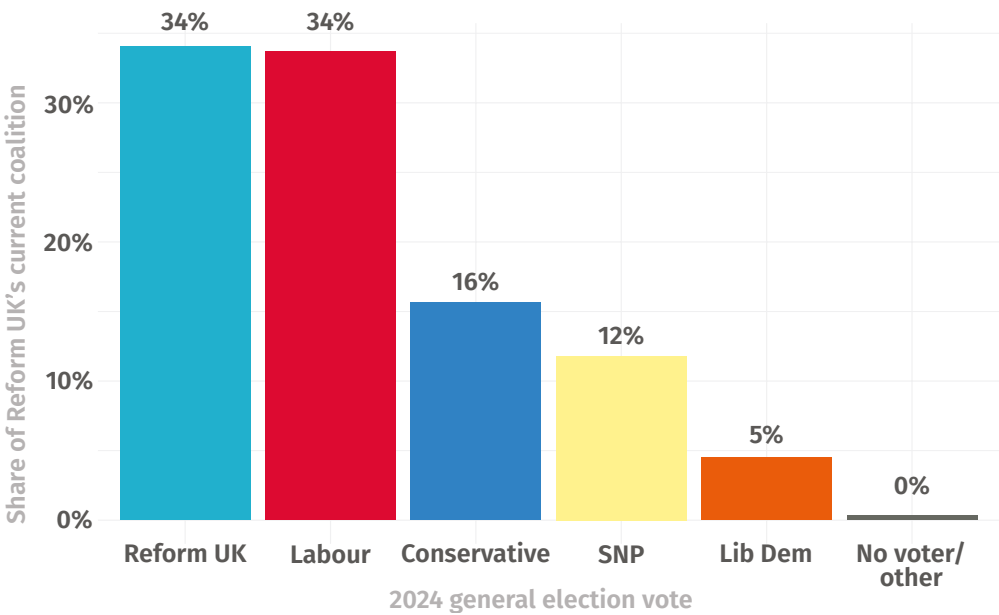


Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting factors likelihood to vote.

This is a huge increase on Reform’s 7 per cent vote at the 2024 general election. Labour and the Conservatives have seen a sizeable chunk of their 2024 vote now intending to vote Reform (18 per cent and 19 per cent respectively), while 15 per cent and 8 per cent of Liberal Democrat and SNP 2024 voters now intend to vote Reform. Because Labour won the largest share of the vote in 2024, Reform-Labour switchers now make up about one-third of Reform’s current voter coalition in Scotland.

**FIGURE 8: REFORM HAS TAKEN VOTES FROM ALL PARTIES IN SCOTLAND, BUT PARTICULARLY FROM LABOUR**

2024 general election vote of respondents who currently intend to vote Reform at the 2026 Scottish Parliament election



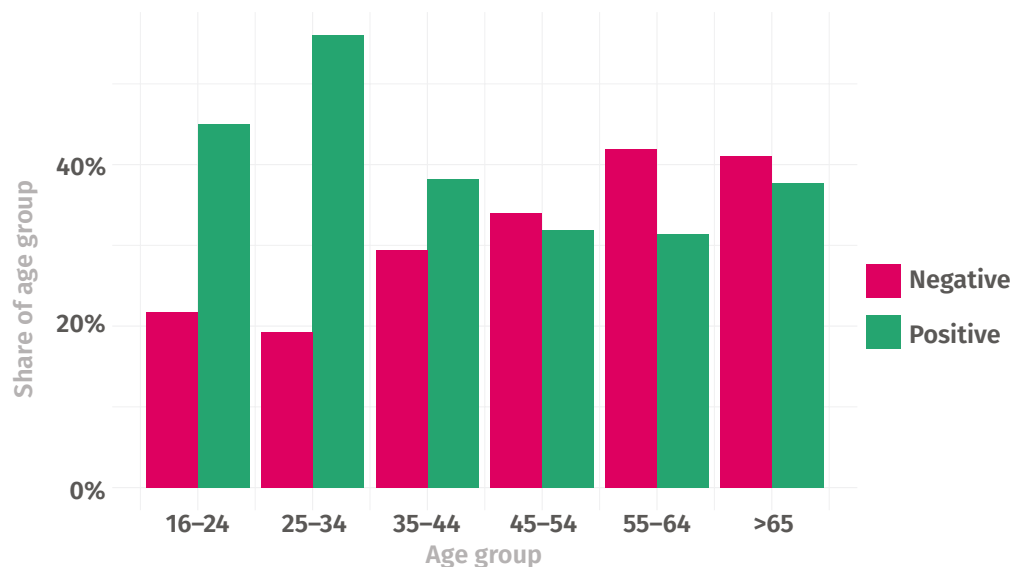
Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting factors likelihood to vote.

**YOUNG PEOPLE**

While many of the results of our polling paint a gloomy picture, when asked about the future, young people stand out as having far more positive an outlook than older people.

**FIGURE 9: YOUNGER PEOPLE HAVE A MORE POSITIVE VIEW OF THE FUTURE OF SCOTLAND**

Overall, do you feel positive or negative, or neither positive nor negative, about Scotland's future?

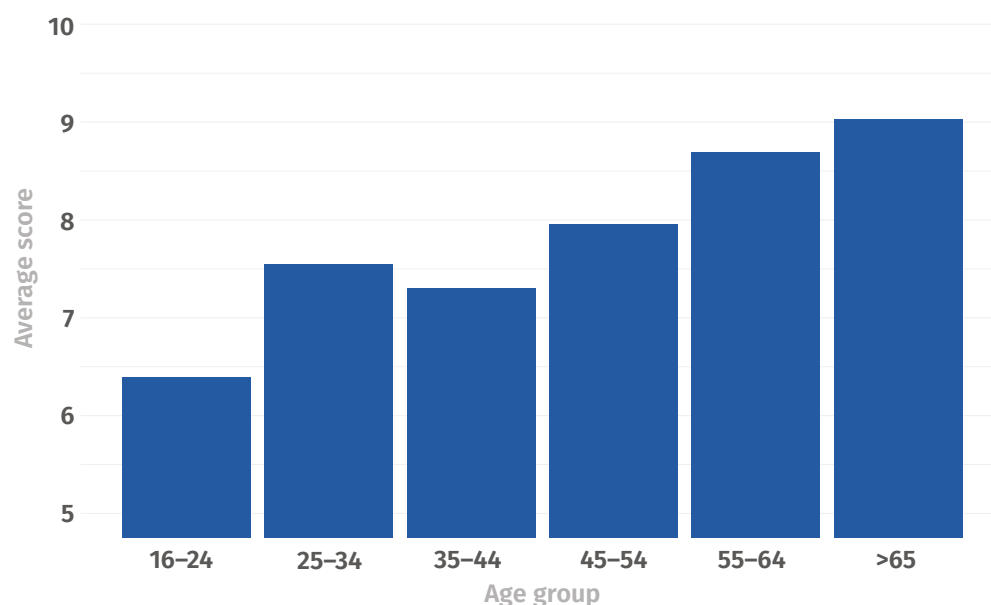


Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults).

However, this positive attitude does not translate into an intention to participate in elections. The familiar pattern of younger people being less engaged in politics is evident in how likely they say it is they will vote.

**FIGURE 10: YOUNGER PEOPLE ARE LESS LIKELY TO VOTE**

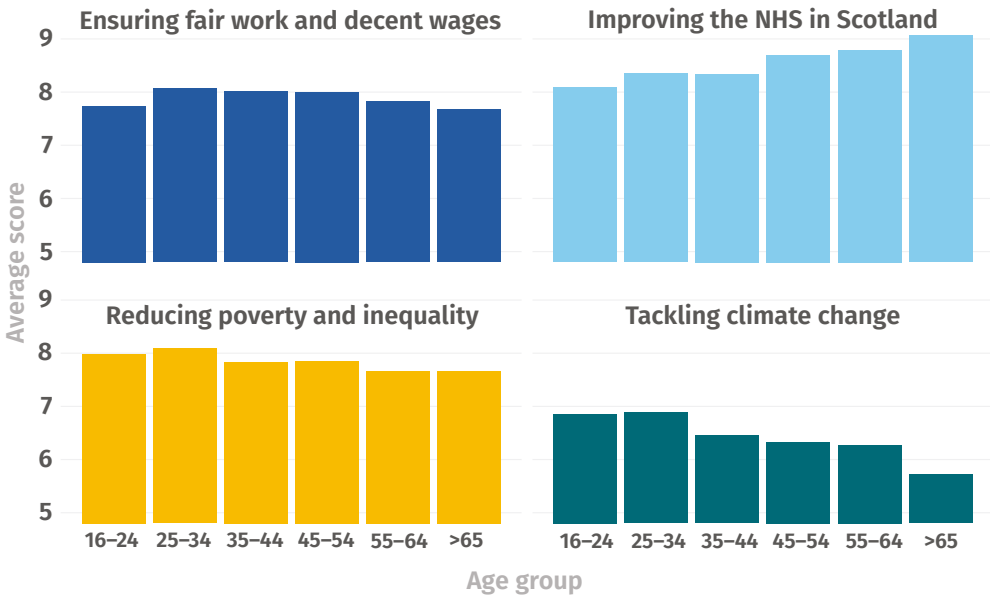
If there was to be an election for the Scottish Parliament tomorrow, on a scale of 0-10, where 0 is definitely won't vote and 10 is definitely would vote, how likely would you be to vote in these elections?



Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults).

We found younger and older people tend to share the same general order of priorities for Scotland’s future. However, while improving the NHS is rated as important by votes of all ages, it is rated more important by older than younger voters. Conversely, importance scores in relation to tackling climate change are lowest for older voters and highest for younger voters.

**FIGURE 11: YOUNGER AND OLDER PEOPLE HAVE SIMILAR PRIORITIES, BUT WHERE THE NHS GAINS IMPORTANCE AMONG OLDER VOTERS, TACKLING CLIMATE CHANGE LOSES**  
With 0 being not important at all and 10 being extremely important, how important are the following issues to you when thinking about Scotland’s future?



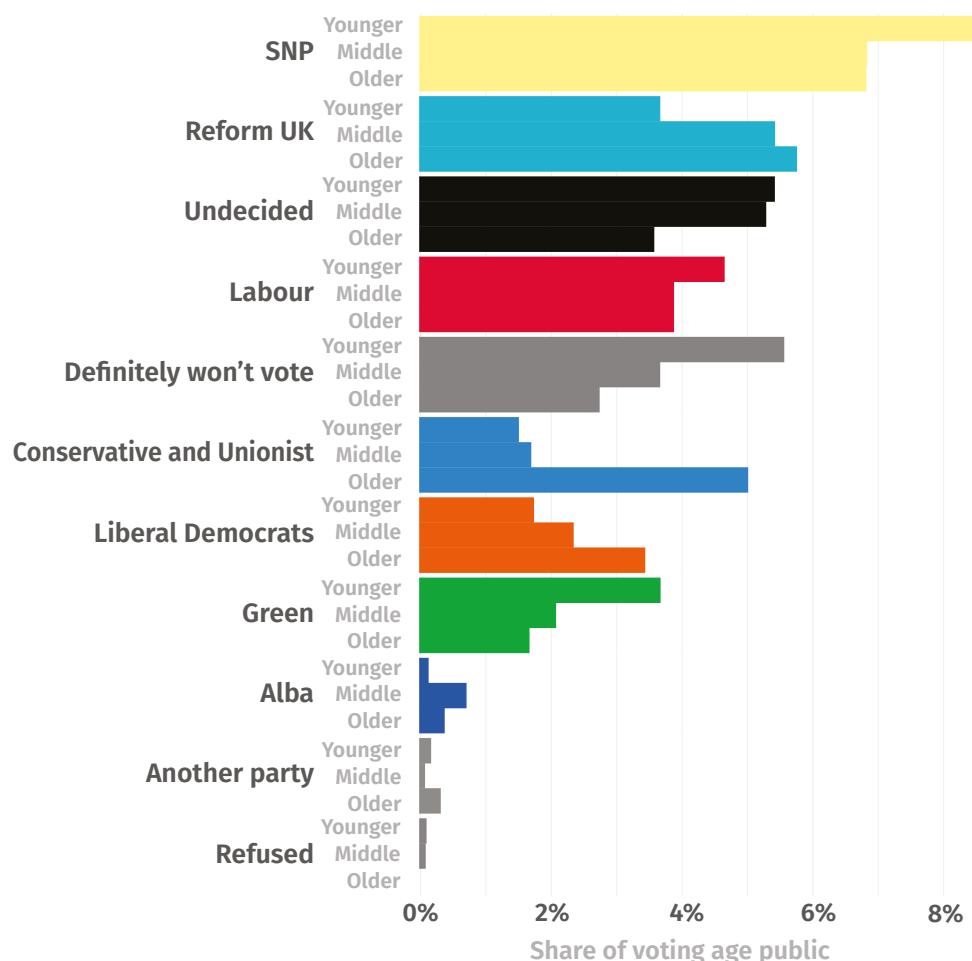
Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults).

As has been often noted, the lower turnout of younger people at elections risks creating a feedback loop of disconnection. On this hypothesis, parties see more potential in older voters and tailor policies accordingly, which in turn makes younger voters feel left out from the political discourse, leading them to get more disillusioned and less likely to vote.

Figure 12 splits voting intention by age, and includes all voting age adults, not just those likely to vote. The younger part of the electorate is more likely to plan on not voting, but more importantly, many younger voters are undecided, and if ‘undecided’ were actually a party it would come third.

**FIGURE 12: VOTING INTENTION SPLIT BY AGE**

Age groups split voting age population into three equal sized groups. Younger = 16 to 38, middle = 39 to 58, older = 59+



Source: Survation polling for IPPR Scotland (22 Sept-14 Oct 2025, 2,043 adults). Weighting does not factor likelihood to vote.

This means younger people are a potentially powerful part of the electorate if they can be mobilised. Many voters remain undecided, making them key targets for parties seeking to win support. At the very least, parties should aim for a balanced prospectus, rather than following the emphasis of those parts of the electorate currently more likely to vote.

Although a dispiritingly high (38 per cent) of those intending not to vote say “nothing would make me vote”, almost a third (30 per cent of younger people intending not to vote indicate a receptiveness to better engagement from political parties. (These respondents, when asked what would make them more likely to vote, chose at least one of “A party that better represents people like me”, “Better access to clear, unbiased information”, “More engagement from parties or candidates in my local area”, and “Clearer understanding of what each party stands for”). Parties committed to rejuvenating Scottish democracy must not write off those who currently say they won’t vote. Rather, they should work tirelessly to present voters – especially younger voters – with compelling reasons to participate in the election.

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**IPPR Scotland shapes public policy in pursuit of a fairer, greener, more prosperous Scotland.**

Through policy, research, and communications, we work to create tangible progressive change, and turn bold ideas into common sense realities. We are cross-party and neutral on the question of Scotland's independence – but not on the question of Scotland's future.

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**IPPR, the Institute for Public Policy Research**, is an independent charity working towards a fairer, greener, and more prosperous society. We are researchers, communicators, and policy experts creating tangible progressive change, and turning bold ideas into common sense realities. Working across the UK, IPPR, IPPR North, and IPPR Scotland are deeply connected to the people of our nations and regions, and the issues our communities face.

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