

What have Holyrood and Senedd campaigns looked like?

Economy, education, and health dominate election campaigns. Negativity remains prominent. [Caitlin Milazzo](#) and [Siim Trumm](#) discuss previous Holyrood and Senedd election leaflets using data from the [OpenElections](#) project.

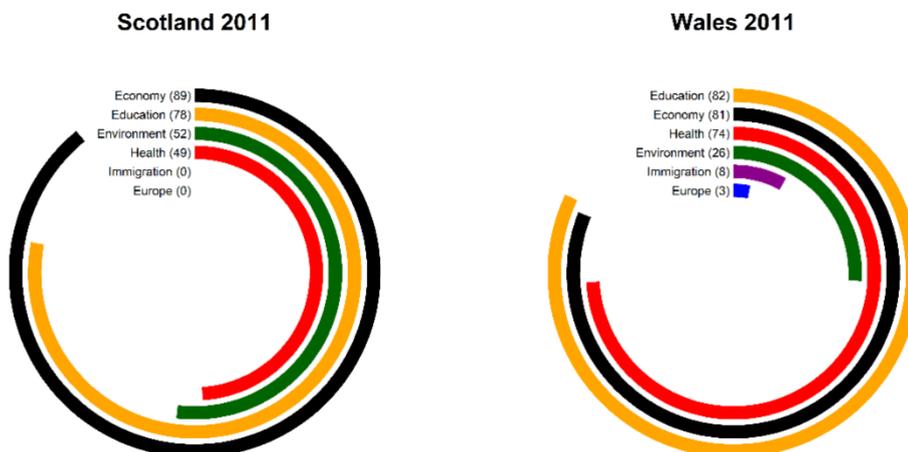
‘Super Thursday’ is just around the corner. Among the elections taking place across the country, voters in Scotland and Wales will be going to the polls to elect their representatives to Holyrood and the Senedd. Will the SNP and Greens have a pro-independence majority in Scotland after May 6th? Will Labour lose its hold on power in Wales? There is a lot at stake in May.

With parties’ election campaigns just getting underway, we thought it would be interesting to take a look back in time and see what Holyrood and Senedd campaigns looked like in 2011 and 2016. What were parties talking about in their leaflets? How often did their leaflets attack opponents? We rely on new data from the [OpenElections](#) project to explore answers to these questions.

What did parties talk about?

The picture that emerges in 2011 is rather similar in Scotland and Wales. In Scotland, it was economy (89.3%) and education (77.7%) that dominated the discourse, with more than three-quarters of leaflets talking about these issues. They were followed by environment (51.5%) and health (48.5%) that featured in approximately half of election leaflets we have in the OpenElections database. Immigration and Europe were not mentioned at all in 2011. This pattern is not too dissimilar in Wales. Here, three issue areas stood out – education (82.3%), economy (80.7%), and health (74.2%). A notable minority of leaflets also featured environment (25.8%), while immigration (8.1%) and Europe (3.2%) remained in the periphery of parties’ campaigns just like they did in Scotland.

Figure 1. Issue areas at the 2011 elections

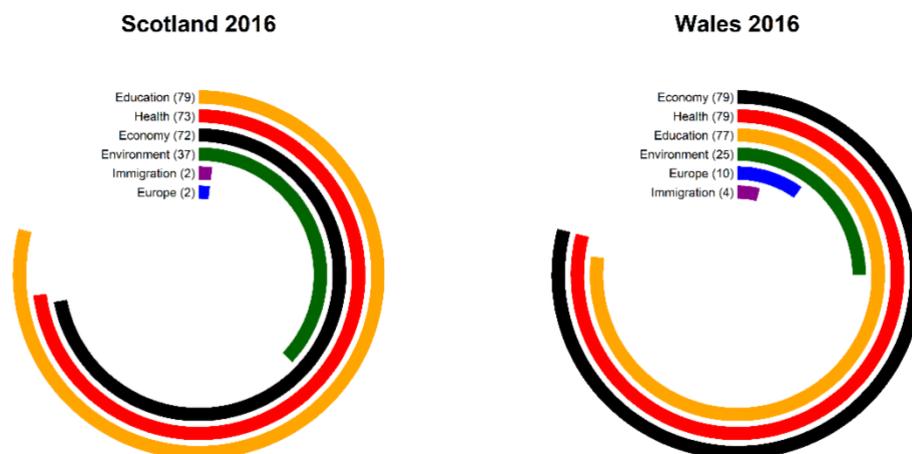


What about 2016? The devolved elections took place just over a month before the EU referendum. Europe was prominent on people’s mind and UKIP was doing well in polls, particularly in Wales. Did we see more attention paid on immigration and Europe? The answer appears to be ‘not really’. The only double-digit frequency we witness is for Europe in Wales (10.4%). This is a real success story for

devolution and devolved elections. The 2016 EU referendum was one of the most important votes in decades. Yet, Europe and immigration remained in the periphery of parties' election communication.

Devolved election campaigns in 2016 were built on three pillars: economy, education, and health. In Scotland, economy was featured in 72.1% of the leaflets in the OpenElections database, education in 79.1% of the leaflets, and health in 72.9% of the leaflets. In Wales, it is 79.2% for economy, 77.1% for education, and 79.2% for health. These three issue areas stand out from the rest. Environment also received attention – 37.2% of leaflets mentioned it in Scotland and 25% of leaflets did so in Wales –, but it was clearly of secondary relevance.

Figure 2. Issue areas at the 2016 elections



It will be interesting to see what happens in the next couple months. One would expect the response to Covid-19 pandemic to feature heavily in election campaigns, continuing the salience of health and economy in leaflets. However, we might also see a growing focus on constitutional issues, particularly in Scotland, and environmental concerns have steadily risen in saliency.

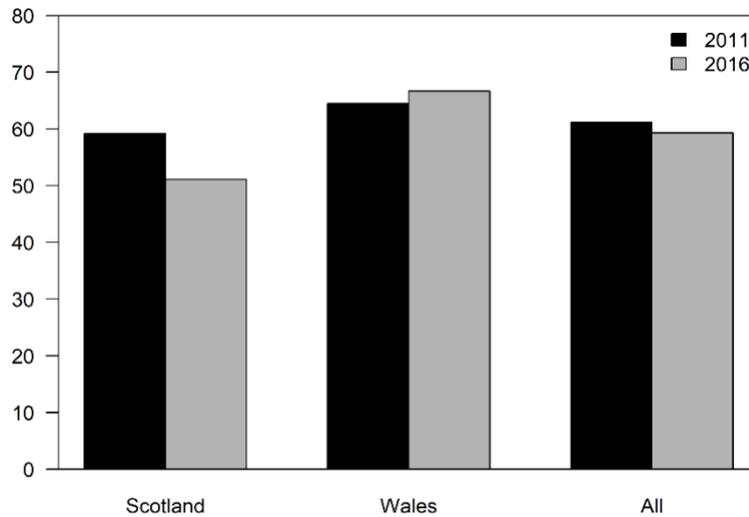
How much negativity was there?

The OpenElections data also allows us to explore how often leaflets referenced an opponent in 2011 and 2016. Discussing one's competitor can take many forms, such as referring to their qualifications, policy positions, or previous record, but the content of this is almost always negative as it is designed to highlight the perceived weakness(es) of the opponent. Figure 3 shows the percentage of leaflets in the OpenElections database from 2011 and 2016 that contained at least one mention of an opposing party or candidate.

Parties in Scotland and Wales do like to talk about their competitors. The percentage of leaflets that featured an opponent was [slightly lower than it is at general elections](#), but negativity is not uncommon. 61.2% of leaflets from the 2011 devolved elections included a reference to an opponent, and 59.3% of leaflets from the 2016 devolved elections did so. The 'scores' are somewhat higher in Wales than they are in Scotland. The percentage of leaflets referencing an opponent was higher in Wales than it was in Scotland both in 2011 (64.5% versus 59.2%) and in 2016 (66.7% versus 51.1%). We should not overstate the extent of negativity though. Discussing one's opponents is

common, with [around 70% of leaflets across the last four general elections in Britain containing one \(or more\) of such messages](#), and it can potentially help voters contrast between different parties and their candidates.

Figure 3. Percentage of election leaflets including at least one negative message



Upload 2021 election leaflets!

OpenElections project aims to increase the transparency of elections in Britain by archiving election literature and allowing users to search for and explore leaflets from previous elections.

Please contribute to the project by uploading any leaflets you receive ahead of the May 6th elections. You can do so easily using the [online upload tool on our website](#) or by emailing us at openelections@nottingham.ac.uk.

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