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NICOLA STURGEON: A STUDY OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP IN SCOTLAND

Between Stereotypes and Independence

ABSTRACT: This paper provides a multidimensional analysis of Nicola Sturgeon's political leadership during her tenure as Scotland's first female First Minister. Drawing on leadership theories, it explores her influence on public policy in key areas such as healthcare, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, and transportation. The study also examines her pivotal role in advancing Scottish independence and how her media presence and electoral strategies shaped public perception. Additionally, the paper introduces the concept of a regional political leader, using Sturgeon's leadership style and policy decisions as a framework, particularly in the context of Scottish devolution and nationalist movements.

Keywords: Scottish politics, Nicola Sturgeon, first minister, political leadership, devolution, political persona, SNP

INTRODUCTION

Nicola Sturgeon made history on November 20, 2014, becoming Scotland's first woman to hold the office of First Minister. Following Alex Salmond's resignation as both party leader and First Minister after the failed independence referendum, Sturgeon, then his deputy, stepped into the leadership of both the party and the government. On March 28, 2023, after 3,051 days in office, Nicola Sturgeon, Scotland's longest-serving First Minister, resigned.¹ She formally submitted her resignation in writing to

¹ The article was completed and submitted before 1 March 2024 and does not include events that occurred after that time.

King Charles III, which was accepted. Sturgeon cited the relentless pressures of modern politics, including the 24-hour news cycle and the intensity of social media, as reasons for stepping down. She emphasised the difficulty of maintaining an everyday life under such scrutiny.²

However, her resignation also raised speculation that there were deeper reasons behind her decision. Four months later, Sturgeon was arrested and released without charge amid an investigation into the Scottish National Party's (SNP) finances. The inquiry centred on the alleged misuse of funds intended for a second independence referendum, caused significant controversy. It also implicated her husband, former SNP chief executive Peter Murrell, further unsettling the party and impacting public support.³

This moment offers a reflection on political leadership. The academic focus on Nicola Sturgeon's leadership has so far been narrow, repeatedly centred on her role as a female leader and how gender stereotypes influenced her public image.⁴ This study seeks to move beyond such simplifications by offering a multidimensional analysis of Sturgeon's leadership. Judging politicians as simply good or bad is too simplistic for the complex realities of the political world. Furthermore, the evaluation of political careers cannot be solely predicated on their conclusion—characteristically marked by a decline from power and perceived failure. Such simplistic metrics fail to encapsulate the complexities and nuances inherent in political trajectories.

This research explores several aspects of her governance: her leadership style within the party, her advocacy for independence, her policy agenda, and the broader political legacy she leaves behind. Sturgeon's extended tenure provides a unique opportunity to assess her immediate impact and long-term influence on Scottish and British politics.

Her case is particularly significant for three reasons:

1. Her long tenure allows for an in-depth analysis of both short- and long-term political impacts.
2. As a critical figure in the Scottish independence movement, her leadership sheds light on regional leaders' challenges within larger national political systems.
3. Her 'progressive revolution' in public policy offers a valuable case study for evaluating regional governance.

The study employs a systematic methodological approach, combining literature review, case study analysis, and thematic analysis to develop a framework for

² G. Campbell, "Nicola Sturgeon Says Time Is Right to Resign as Scotland's First Minister," *BBC*, 15 February 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-64647907>, 28 January 2024.

³ D. Jackson, S. Nicolson, "Nicola Sturgeon Arrested in SNP Finances Inquiry," *BBC*, 11 June 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-65871857>, 28 January 2024.

⁴ It is telling that in the *Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*, published in 2020, six years after she took up the most important political post in Scotland, the first mention of Sturgeon is only on page 59, in the chapter entitled "Women, gender and politics in Scotland", and in the book "Scottish National Party Leaders", the chapter on Sturgeon has attracted interest mainly because of the news of her miscarriage; M. Kenny, F. Mackay, "Women, Gender and Politics in Scotland," in M. Keating (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Scottish Politics*, Oxford 2020, pp. 59-77; M. Rhodes, "Nicola Sturgeon," in J. Mitchell, G. Hassan (eds), *Scottish National Party Leaders*, Hull 2016, pp. 349-366.

understanding regional political leadership. By examining Sturgeon's tenure through this lens, the research aims to identify key strategies that characterise leaders in regional movements for independence or autonomy, contributing to the broader theoretical framework of political leadership.

This research aims to address three primary questions:

1. How do Nicola Sturgeon's achievements and legacy impact the long-term trajectory of Scottish independence?
2. To what extent does Sturgeon's leadership style align with theories of political leadership, and how has she adapted to the changing dynamics of the Scottish political system?
3. What insights can be drawn from Sturgeon's leadership to develop a comprehensive model of regional political leadership strategies?

We explore these questions to contribute to the broader understanding of regional political leadership and its implications for governance and policy-making discourse.

This paper is structured to provide a comprehensive analysis of Nicola Sturgeon's political leadership from various angles. The first section outlines the theoretical frameworks that underpin the study, focusing on transformational and situational leadership theories. The paper also includes a synthesis of existing research on Sturgeon's leadership. Next, the analysis covers her policy achievements in critical areas such as health-care, education, gender equality, and environmental sustainability. A detailed discussion follows her role in the Scottish independence movement. Additionally, Sturgeon's media presence and electoral strategies are examined to understand how they shaped public perception. Finally, the concept of regional political leadership is introduced, using Sturgeon's tenure as a case study to outline the strategies that define successful leadership in movements for autonomy or independence.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The outline of the theoretical framework for the study of Nicola Sturgeon's political leadership will be based on a few selected concepts. Of the numerous approaches to leadership, two will first be described in more detail. Although distant from each other regarding their assumptions, they appear to be the most relevant to even a partial explanation and understanding of the First Minister's style and her successes and failures. These are transformational leadership and situational leadership. By applying these theoretical frameworks, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of Sturgeon's leadership style, its effectiveness in different contexts, and its impact on Scottish politics and governance.

Transformational leaders are not just managers or coordinators but, first and foremost, inspirers or visionaries. Their leadership style is characterised by ideological motivation, personal determination, and political will to implement ideas. These leaders seek to mobilise support from the government, their parties, and the public to realise their vision. Transformational leadership is based on two-way communication between

the leader and the public. It is an essential condition for initiating and carrying out systemic transformation.⁵ At the same time, the collective character means that the community to which the leadership message is addressed exists as a cultural and political entity. The effectiveness of this leadership depends on the extent to which the public understands and accepts the leader's 'narrative'. Transformational leaders aim to rally support for their vision, and some argue that their focus on the people links this leadership style to populism.⁶ The foundation is the vision of leadership as an agent of change and adaptation of the individual. One can also point to the co-development of actors entering into leadership relationships.⁷

Situational leadership in politics refers to the ability of leaders to adapt and respond to changing conditions and demands of the electorate, which is crucial in the face of dynamic political change. Situational leadership in politics requires flexibility, openness to change and the ability to manage the tensions between public expectations and political structures effectively.⁸ Situational leadership in politics is intrinsically linked to the context in which the leader operates, and the leader's practices are inextricably linked to the specific situation or events in the social order. Situational leadership in politics requires flexibility and adaptation, considering the dynamic and interactive characteristics of the leader's relations.⁹ At the same time, it should be remembered that there is a tendency *for attributers to underestimate the impact of situational factors and to overestimate the role of dispositional factors in controlling behaviour*.¹⁰ The distinction of leadership types, such as transformational and situational, can be seen as linked to the distinction that categorises leaders into 'adaptive' leaders, who make marginal changes in response to challenges, and 'innovative' leaders, who aim for significant transformations and redefine societal approaches to problems.¹¹

⁵ A. Kasińska-Metryka, "Przywództwo transformacyjne – teoria i praktyka polityczna," *Krakowskie Studia Małopolskie*, vol. 14 (2010), pp. 47-56.

⁶ J. Stewart, "Transformational Leadership: An Evolving Concept Examined through the Works of Burns, Bass, Avolio, and Leithwood," *Canadian Journal of Educational Administration and Policy*, vol. 54 (2006), pp. 1-29.

⁷ J. Szczupaczyński, "Normatywne wzory przywództwa politycznego w ponowoczesnym świecie," *Studia Politologiczne*, vol. 34 (2014), p. 294.

⁸ N.U. Stręć, "The Idea of Situational Leadership in Political Parties," *Annales Universitatis Mariae Curie-Skłodowska*, vol. 25, no. 2 (2018), pp. 41-52.

⁹ M. Iszatt-White, "Methodological Crises and Contextual Solutions: An Ethnomethodologically Informed Approach to Understanding Leadership," *Leadership*, vol. 7, no. 2 (2011), pp. 119-135.

¹⁰ L. Ross, "The Intuitive Psychologist and His Shortcomings: Distortions in the Attribution Process," in L. Berkowitz (ed.), *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology*, vol. 10, New York 1977, pp. 173-220; quote from: R. Elgie, *Political Leadership: A Pragmatic Institutional Approach*, London 2017, p. 42.

¹¹ J. Masciulli, M.A. Molchanov, W.A. Knight, "Political Leadership in Context," in *The Ashgate Research Companion to Political Leadership*, London 2016, pp. 23-48.

Wanna's analysis of political leadership in different geographical contexts provides a framework for assessing Nicola Sturgeon's legacy.¹² His observations on political leadership suggest a geographical segmentation into three distinct approaches, each characterised by unique concerns. This segmentation reflects two fundamental dimensions: leaders' ability to influence political change within their systems and their broader aspirations to do so. The United States has an overarching positive perspective on both dimensions. It's commonly assumed that American leaders aim to do what they believe is 'best for America' and are generally capable of significant achievements. In contrast, in some nations, particularly in parts of Africa, there's a perception that while leaders can achieve great things, they often prioritise personal or close-knit interests over national welfare. This tendency is highlighted in discussions of their governance's 'neo-patrimonial' or 'clientelistic' nature. In Western Europe, the dominant belief is that leaders strive to achieve within the confines of what is possible for the polity, but their capacity for impactful change is limited. The influence of socioeconomic factors is so significant that leaders can only effect change marginally.

Contemporary electoral success is increasingly shaped by mediatisation, where the media serves as a platform for political discourse and actively frames the political agenda itself. This shift necessitates recalibrating political communication strategies, highlighting the importance of sophisticated communication skills among politicians. As elucidated in the works of Rovisco and Lunt,¹³ Birkner,¹⁴ Craig,¹⁵ Hutchens,¹⁶ and Baugut,¹⁷ the intersection of performance, citizenship, and media in the political arena demands that politicians are not only adept in policy and governance but also in managing their public personas and engaging effectively with both traditional and new media platforms. The mediatisation of politics challenges politicians, where success hinges on their ability to connect with the electorate, articulate their messages clearly, and manage their media image. Some researchers link this fact to the struggle of government parties to reconcile the demands of party responsiveness (to voter preferences) with party responsibility (for the state), leading to the rise of presidential-style politics where individual leaders dominate electoral campaigns.¹⁸

¹² J. Wanna, "Regional Political Leadership," in R.A.W. Rhodes, P't Hart (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of Political Leadership*, Oxford 2014, pp. 564-579.

¹³ M. Rovisco, P. Lunt, "Introduction: Performance and Citizenship," *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, vol. 22, no. 5 (2019), pp. 615-629.

¹⁴ Th. Birkner, "Mediatization of Politics: The Case of the Former German Chancellor Helmut Schmidt," *European Journal of Communication*, vol. 30, no. 4 (2015), pp. 454-469.

¹⁵ G. Craig, *Performing Politics: Media Interviews, Debates and Press Conferences*, New York 2016.

¹⁶ M.J. Hutchens, "Learning to Straddle the Fence," *Political Communication*, vol. 35, no. 4 (2018), pp. 662-664.

¹⁷ Ph. Baugut, "From Interactions to the Mediatization of Politics: How the Relationships between Journalists and Political Actors Explain Media Influences on Political Processes and the Presentation of Politics," *Journalism Studies*, vol. 20, no. 16 (2019), pp. 2366-2385.

¹⁸ F. Müller-Rommel, M. Vercesi, J. Berz, *Prime Ministers in Europe: Changing Career Experiences and Profiles*, Cham 2022, p. 182.

Winning an election, either individually or with their party, is a crucial factor in assessing the performance of a political leader. It is a clear signal that the electorate endorses their leadership, agenda, and approach to governance. Success in elections often translates into political capital that helps a leader to advance their agenda, influence policy, and initiate reforms. While electoral success is essential, it should be considered alongside other factors, such as the leader's effectiveness in governance, policy implementation, ethical standards, and impact on society and the economy. Some studies have indicated that office achievement is prioritised over electoral success when evaluating the performance of political leaders. Intrinsic goals (such as holding office) are prioritised over purely instrumental ones (like votes), suggesting that the impact of electoral performance on party leader survival is conditional on office achievement.¹⁹ Strong leaders who can gather the majority of votes can also negatively affect their parties after departure. However, this adverse consequence tends to be lesser than these leaders' overall positive influence across multiple elections.²⁰

SYNTHESIS OF RESEARCH ON NICOLA STURGEON

Studies on Nicola Sturgeon have primarily focused on her position as a female leader. One notable study examined her rise from SNP Deputy Leader to First Minister, highlighting how early media portrayals framed her with gendered stereotypes, such as the label 'nippy sweetie', before evolving into a more nuanced depiction that emphasised her political skill and professionalism. Throughout, media narratives frequently focused on gender, using stereotypical nicknames and descriptions for women leaders. Over time, Sturgeon balanced assertiveness with empathy and approachability, facing ongoing challenges from the media's gendered perspectives despite her political successes.²¹ In the 2015 campaign, Nicola Sturgeon, despite her commendable debate performance, was subjected to gendered criticism and portrayed as a threat by sections of the media, reflecting the broader issue of sexist media representations of female politicians.²² Using the case of Nicola Sturgeon, Pedersen highlighted the double standard in public and media treatment of male versus female politicians, where fatherhood generally enhances a male politician's image. Still, motherhood or the lack thereof, subjects female politicians to scrutiny and biased assumptions about their capabilities

¹⁹ L. Ennser-Jedenastik, G. Schumacher, "What Parties Want from Their Leaders: How Office Achievement Trumps Electoral Performance as a Driver of Party Leader Survival," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 60, no. 1 (2021), pp. 114-130.

²⁰ D. Alexiadou, E. O'malley, "The Leadership Dilemma: Examining the Impact of Strong Leaders on Parties," *European Journal of Political Research*, vol. 61, no. 3 (2022), pp. 783-806.

²¹ M. Higgins, F.M. McKay, "Gender and the Development of a Political Persona: The Case of Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon," *British Politics*, vol. 11 (2016), pp. 283-300.

²² D. Cameron, S. Shaw, "Constructing Women's 'Different Voice': Gendered Mediation in the 2015 UK General Election," *Journal of Language and Politics*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2020), pp. 144-159.

and priorities.²³ Morrison and Gibbs emphasise Sturgeon's embodiment of feminine leadership's distinctiveness and contradictions in Scotland's devolved governance. Her leadership emphasises gender representation and inclusive politics, a legacy of the devolution campaign and the Women's Liberation Movement, with significant involvement from third-sector feminist groups.²⁴ Robinson and Kerr demonstrate Sturgeon's approach to leadership, characterised by a focus on consensus-building and inclusivity, and her impact on promoting feminist policies and gender equality within the Scottish political sphere and the implementation of feminist policies under Sturgeon's leadership, including efforts towards achieving gender balance in political representation and addressing women's issues.²⁵

Sturgeon's leadership as Scotland's First Minister and leader of the SNP was seen to play an essential role in the increasing number of women and minority representatives in UK politics.²⁶ Investigations into the perceptions of young individuals regarding female politicians in Scotland indicate a notable perception of Sturgeon as a strong leader, reflecting a shift in the coding of traditionally feminine characteristics from 'weak' to 'strong'.²⁷

The study of Diers-Lawson adopts a highly positive perspective on Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, emphasising her roles as an effective crisis leader and change agent in Scotland by examining her eloquence, trustworthiness, and engagement with social media and historical contexts.²⁸ Nicola Sturgeon's leadership during the COVID-19 pandemic showcased a distinct approach from UK Prime Minister Boris Johnson, emphasising direct communication and careful governance. While initially aligned with the UK's broader strategy, Sturgeon's policies evolved in response to changing health scenarios, reflecting adaptability. Her handling of the crisis, marked by higher public approval than Johnson's, underlines her pragmatic crisis management.²⁹ Graham has researched Nicola Sturgeon's ministerial diaries, which reveal a leadership style that prioritises climate change, health, COVID-19, and economic issues through extensive engagement with stakeholders yet indicates a potential misalignment between publi-

²³ S. Pedersen, "Press Response to Women Politicians: A Comparative Study of Suffragettes and Contemporary Scottish Parliament Leaders" *Journalism Studies*, vol. 19, no. 5 (2018), pp. 709-725.

²⁴ J. Morrison, E. Gibbs, "Feminist Institutionalism and Women's Political Leadership in Devolution Era Scotland," *British Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2023), pp. 384-400.

²⁵ S. Robinson, R. Kerr, "Women Leaders in the Political Field in Scotland: A Socio-Historical Approach to the Emergence of Leaders," *Leadership*, vol. 14, no. 6 (2018), pp. 662-686.

²⁶ M. Kenny, "Who Runs the World? Gender and Politics in the UK and Beyond," *Political Insight*, vol. 8, no. 2 (2017), pp. 30-33.

²⁷ M. Barty-Taylor, *Gender, Leadership and Online News: How Scottish Young People Perceive Constructions of Women Political Leaders and Digitally-Mediated Politics*, Lancaster 2020, PhD thesis.

²⁸ A. Diers-Lawson, "'She's Played a Blinder': Nicola Sturgeon as a Crisis Leader and Change Agent in Scotland," in M. Topić (ed.), *Towards a New Understanding of Masculine Habitus and Women and Leadership in Public Relations*, London 2022, pp. 228-246.

²⁹ R. Garland, D. Lilleker, "From Consensus to Dissensus: The UK's Management of a Pandemic in a Divided Nation," in P. Van Alst, J.G. Blumler (eds), *Political Communication in the Time of Coronavirus*, New York 2021, pp. 17-32.

cised policy priorities and her time allocation on matters such as rural affairs and criminal justice.³⁰

Although much attention has been given to Sturgeon's gender and leadership style, limited analysis exists of her broader policy achievements beyond gender equality. Furthermore, the connection between her political ideology and her responses to key issues like poverty and inequality has yet to be thoroughly examined.

NICOLA STURGEON'S LEADERSHIP AGENDA: DEFINING PRIORITIES AND POLICIES IN SCOTTISH POLITICS

Nicola Sturgeon's political stance was marked by her support for Scottish independence from the UK, a central aspect of her political narrative. Alongside independence, Sturgeon prioritised gender equality and women's rights, as reflected in her policies and public actions. Her political philosophy aligned with progressive and social democratic values, focusing on social welfare, equality, and inclusive policymaking. Her administration prioritised improvements in public health and education.

Sturgeon's handling of the COVID-19 pandemic became a defining aspect of her leadership. While her policies primarily aligned with those in the UK, her more cautious tone and empathetic communication style, especially on early lockdowns and vaccination campaigns, set her apart.³¹ This approach, which emphasised early lockdowns, vaccination campaigns, and public health initiatives, was presented with a clarity and urgency that contrasted sharply with the more freewheeling approach of Prime Minister Boris Johnson.³² Sturgeon was praised for her clear communication and seemingly more prudent stance during the crisis, which resonated with many Scots. However, despite the differences in messaging and public perception, the overall impact of her policies on health and economic outcomes ultimately paralleled those in the rest of the UK. It was not significantly better when compared to European counterparts.³³

Under Nicola Sturgeon's administration saw increased investment in Scotland's healthcare system, leading to improved facilities and services. This funding aimed to enhance patient care and reduce NHS waiting times, a challenge further exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Notable progress was made in mental health services, including hiring more professionals and introducing mental health first-aiders in

³⁰ H. Graham, "Diary of an SNP First Minister: A Chronopolitics of Proximity and Priorities," *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4 (2023), pp. 547-555.

³¹ K. Paterson, "Nicola Sturgeon: 'My Chief Regret Is Not Starting Covid Lockdown Sooner,'" *Holyrood*, 1 February 2024, at <https://www.holyrood.com/news/view,nicola-sturgeon-my-chief-regret-is-not-starting-covid-lockdown-sooner>, 30 September 2024.

³² M. Landler, "In Tackling Coronavirus, Scotland Asserts Its Separateness from England," *The New York Times*, 10 July 2020, at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/10/world/europe/coronavirus-scotland-england.html>, 30 September 2024.

³³ R. Cuffe, "How do Covid Death Rates Compare across the UK?," *BBC*, 17 January 2024, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-67981188>, 29 January 2024.

schools and workplaces. However, Scotland faced a significant crisis with one of Europe's highest drug-related death rates, which drew criticism about the government's response. Sturgeon's approach to this crisis notably involved leveraging the constitutional arrangement to shift responsibility to Westminster. She argued that the UK government's refusal to allow supervised drug consumption rooms and its control over drug laws hindered effective Scottish responses. This tactic of emphasising the limitations of devolved powers served a dual purpose: it deflected some criticism from her administration while bolstering arguments for increased Scottish autonomy or independence.

During Nicola Sturgeon's tenure, her social welfare policies reflected a shift towards progressive reforms, influenced by the negative perception of Scotland's socio-economic changes during the rule of the Conservative Party, especially Margaret Thatcher's era.³⁴ Under her leadership, the SNP introduced significant tax and social security reforms that set Scotland apart from the rest of the UK.³⁵ These changes increased contributions from the wealthiest 10% while providing financial benefits to the poorest 10%. Key initiatives included the Scottish Child Payment, aimed at reducing child poverty, and enhanced benefits for disabled people and carers, reflecting a commitment to social justice.³⁶ Housing and homelessness remained challenging, with critics advocating for more decisive action.³⁷

Nicola Sturgeon's tenure as Scotland's First Minister included a strong focus on gender equality and women's rights. Her achievements included increasing female representation on public boards to the highest level, introducing the Gender Representation on Public Boards Bill, and establishing a National Advisory Council on Women and Girls.³⁸ Sturgeon also emphasised the importance of female role models and mentored young women to develop their leadership potential. She consistently integrated gender equality and fairness into policy-making, addressing critical issues like gender discrimination and challenging stereotypes. Gender-related policies created significant controversy and internal party conflict, especially the Gender Recognition (Reform) Bill. It aimed to simplify the process for legally changing one's recognised sex in Scotland. It proposed reducing the required time to live in the acquired gender and removing medical report requirements. However, the UK government vetoed the bill, citing conflicts with equalities law, and later, the Scottish government's legal challenge to this veto was rejected by the court. Moreover, the Isla Bryson case presented a significant

³⁴ T. Czapiewski, "The Political Myth of Margaret Thatcher in Scotland," *Polish Political Science Yearbook*, vol. 45, no. 1 (2016), p. 89.

³⁵ T. Waters, T. Wernham, *Analysis of Scottish Tax and Benefit Reforms*, 2023, pp. 3-4.

³⁶ A.M. Gray, "The Conservative Governments, Devolution and Social Policy," in H. Bochel, M. Powell (eds), *The Conservative Governments and Social Policy*, London 2024, pp. 298-316.

³⁷ "Nicola Sturgeon – Don't Ignore the Housing Emergency," *Shelter Scotland*, at https://act.scotland.shelter.org.uk/Email_First_Minister, 30 September 2024.

³⁸ P. Cairney, E. St Denny, S. Kippin, "Policy Learning to Reduce Inequalities: The Search for a Coherent Scottish Gender Mainstreaming Policy in a Multilevel UK," *Territory, Politics, Governance*, vol. 9, no. 3 (2021), pp. 412-433.

challenge to Nicola Sturgeon's policies on gender reform.³⁹ This incident, which garnered considerable attention, involved a convicted rapist who was sent to a women's prison in Scotland, where he committed two more rapes. This happened after Bryson identified as a woman and led to widespread controversy and debate about gender identity and prison policies, particularly concerning the safety and rights of women in prison.

The energy and climate policy under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership in Scotland represents a significant shift from traditional hydrocarbon dependence to a focus on renewable energy and climate action. Initially, the SNP used Scotland's oil resources as a cornerstone of its campaign for independence. This perspective was encapsulated in the SNP's slogan in the 1970s: 'It's Scotland's oil', signifying a direct link between natural resources and sovereignty. However, in the face of global oil price collapses and growing concerns about climate change, the SNP, under Sturgeon's leadership, gradually shifted its focus towards renewable energy and stringent climate targets. Sturgeon's administration set ambitious goals, including reaching net-zero carbon emissions by 2045, five years ahead of the UK target. The government's Green New Deal aimed at transitioning to a sustainable economy, heavily investing in renewable energy sources like wind, wave, hydro, and tidal power.⁴⁰ Critics have pointed out that the renewable energy sector has not created as many jobs as the fossil fuel industry, leading to concerns about employment transitions for those working in traditional energy sectors. Moreover, the SNP faced criticism for its perceived policy inconsistencies, especially its continued support for offshore oil and gas production, which contradicted its commitments to climate goals.⁴¹

Sturgeon's tenure witnessed significant challenges in transport, particularly in ferry procurement and rail services. The Glen Sannox ferry project, launched in 2017, became emblematic of these issues. Hailed as a milestone for Scottish engineering and economy, the project faced severe delays and budget overruns, symbolising criticisms of Sturgeon's public infrastructure management.⁴² Moreover, Scotland's rail services also faced problems, including delays, cancellations, and infrastructure concerns, further highlighting the difficulties in managing transport policies effectively during her administration.⁴³

Sturgeon's education policies were centred on fair access and funding, focusing on increasing university opportunities for students from deprived backgrounds. Her

³⁹ M. Rosie, "After the Fall...", *Scottish Affairs*, vol. 32, no. 4 (2023), pp. 387-396.

⁴⁰ J. Foley, B. Wray, N. Davidson, *Scotland after Britain: The Two Souls of Scottish Independence*, Edinburgh 2022, pp. 65-68.

⁴¹ E. Camp-Pietrain, "The Scottish National Party and the Economics of Nationalism: From Oil to Renewables?," *Revue LISA*, vol. 21, no. 56 (2023), para. 43.

⁴² M. Dickie, L. Myanda, "Nicola Sturgeon Leaves behind 'Mixed' Legacy for Scotland and SNP," *Financial Times*, 24 March 2023, at <https://www.ft.com/content/14b1c6e7-2711-42d5-9642-5fcf783fffea>, 20 January 2024.

⁴³ K. Murray, C. Atkinson, "This Service Terminate Here? Politics, Practitioner Perspectives, and the Future of Railway Policing in Scotland," *Policing*, vol. 14, no. 3 (2020), pp. 752-765.

government set enrolment targets for these demographics and conducted a review on student income, proposing a Minimum Student Income and revising maintenance arrangements.⁴⁴ Scotland maintained its policy of free university tuition for Scottish students, contrasting with tuition fees in other parts of the UK.

However, Sturgeon's famous invitation to 'judge me on education'⁴⁵ ultimately highlighted significant challenges and shortcomings in her education policy. Despite efforts to narrow the educational attainment gap, progress was limited and fell short of the government's targets. The persistence of this gap, particularly between students from affluent and deprived backgrounds, became a major point of criticism.⁴⁶ In higher education, challenges persisted while access improved for some underrepresented groups. Funding gaps and pressures on Scottish universities led to greater dependence on international student fees, raising sustainability and ethical concerns.⁴⁷ Critics argued that the free tuition policy, while popular, did not adequately address issues of equal access and may have contributed to funding constraints.⁴⁸ Sturgeon's administration expanded free early years education, providing more childcare hours, supporting child development and assisting working families. However, the implementation of this policy faced delays and logistical challenges.⁴⁹

Nicola Sturgeon's leadership agenda combines transformational and situational leadership theories. Her commitment to progressive reforms in healthcare, social welfare, education, and gender equality aligns with transformational leadership, where a leader seeks to inspire significant change and mobilise followers toward a shared vision. For instance, initiatives like the Scottish Child Payment aimed at reducing child poverty and the ambitious climate targets set for net-zero carbon emissions by 2045 reflect efforts to address systemic issues and promote long-term societal transformation.

At the same time, Sturgeon's approach demonstrates elements of situational leadership characterised by adaptability and responsiveness to evolving circumstances. Her handling of the COVID-19 pandemic, marked by a cautious tone and empathetic communication, showcases her ability to adjust strategies based on immediate public health and societal needs. Additionally, her response to the drug crisis, including leveraging

⁴⁴ S. Minty, *Where to Study and Where to Live? Young People's Higher Education Decisions in Scotland and the Role of Family, Finance and Region*, Edinburgh 2021, PhD thesis, p. 13.

⁴⁵ S. Macnab, "Nicola Sturgeon: Judge Me on Education Record," *The Scotsman*, 19 August 2015, at <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/nicola-sturgeon-judge-me-on-education-record-1497298>, 30 April 2024.

⁴⁶ J. Cook, "What Is Nicola Sturgeon's Political Legacy?," *BBC*, 15 February 2023, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-64652688>, 25 January 2024.

⁴⁷ D. Kernohan, "Nicola Sturgeon's Higher Education Legacy," *Wonkhe*, 15 February 2023, at <https://wonkhe.com/wonk-corner/nicola-sturgeons-higher-education-legacy/>, 28 January 2024.

⁴⁸ L. Blackburn, *Fairest of Them All? Comparing the Reproduction of Inequality in Student Funding in Scotland and Wales*, Edinburgh 2021, PhD thesis, pp. 275-279.

⁴⁹ "Coronavirus: Sturgeon 'Deeply Regrets' Free Childcare Delay?," *BBC*, 8 July 2020, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-53336492>, 5 October 2024.

constitutional arrangements to highlight limitations of devolved powers, demonstrates a practical handling of political and legal boundaries.

BETWEEN ASPIRATION AND REALITY: STURGEON'S INDEPENDENCE BID

Under Nicola Sturgeon's leadership, the SNP has consistently advocated for a second referendum on Scottish independence. Despite her efforts, Sturgeon did not achieve her primary goal of Scottish independence.

Nicola Sturgeon's strategy extended beyond Scotland, aiming to cultivate and maintain international support for Scottish independence. Her leadership focused on framing independence as a strategic response to immediate challenges, such as Brexit, while presenting it as a forward-looking plan for Scotland's future. A defining feature of Sturgeon's governance has been her handling of the delicate and often adversarial balance of power between Edinburgh and London.⁵⁰ Her leadership has involved balancing the pursuit of Scottish national interests, particularly regarding independence, with the legal and political constraints imposed by the UK government. Brexit has been a significant factor in Sturgeon's leadership strategy, as Scotland's vote to remain in the EU conflicted with the UK's decision to leave.⁵¹ This divergence has bolstered the SNP's argument for a second independence referendum, as Brexit could be presented as a fundamental change in circumstances that justifies revisiting the question of independence.⁵²

At the same time, Nicola Sturgeon was very cautious in calling for a second Scottish independence referendum post-Brexit and demonstrated strategic patience. She concentrated on comprehending Brexit's total impact on Scotland, aiming to secure Scotland's interests in Brexit negotiations. Despite not yielding to immediate calls for a referendum, Sturgeon kept her supporters' aspirations for independence alive.⁵³ Her strategy involved waiting for more favourable conditions expected to arise from negative Brexit repercussions. However, these good conditions for a more vigorous independence campaign never materialised.

One of the critical challenges under Sturgeon's leadership has been securing a legal and mutually agreed pathway to a second independence referendum.⁵⁴ Legal and constitutional constraints are primary, as the UK Parliament reserves the authority to

⁵⁰ J. Bone, "Scotland and England's Colliding Nationalisms: Neoliberalism and the Fracturing of the United Kingdom," *British Politics*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2023), pp. 401-419.

⁵¹ T. Czapiewski, "Między niepodległością a Unią Europejską. O paradoksach postawy Szkockiej Partii Narodowej wobec Brexitu," *Politeja*, vol. 14, no. 46 (2017), pp. 65-83.

⁵² I. Docherty, "On Surprises, Strategy, the Economy and What Comes Next for Scottish Independence," *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4 (2023), pp. 565-574.

⁵³ Oxford Analytica, *Sturgeon Will Ensure Scottish Independence Vote: Expert Briefings*, 2018.

⁵⁴ S. Stark, R.N. Fasel, "How (Not) to Break Up: Constituent Power and Alternative Pathways to Scottish Independence," *University of Cambridge Faculty of Law Research Paper*, no. 1 (2023), pp. 1-27.

authorise such a referendum, a power not devolved to the Scottish Parliament by the Scotland Act 1998. This limitation requires the UK government's consent, which has been particularly withheld following the 2014 referendum where Scottish independence was rejected. The UK government's refusal to grant a Section 30 order (twice by May and Johnson), which would allow such a referendum. Nicola Sturgeon's advocacy for Scottish independence and her unsuccessful handling of the constitutional debate will be a significant part of her political legacy.⁵⁵

However, when analysing Sturgeon's legacy, the current possibilities for winning independence, and falling SNP support results, it is important to remember that while the previous perception of the SNP's invulnerability may have been overstated, the same can be said for the current forecasts of its rapid decline. The party's future success hinges significantly on its ability to formulate an independence strategy that inspires enthusiasm among its supporters, particularly as approximately half of the voting population and two-thirds of Scottish citizens under 30 favour independence.⁵⁶

Nicola Sturgeon's pursuit of Scottish independence and a second referendum faced various obstacles other than constitutional ones. Economic uncertainties concerning Scotland's currency, fiscal policy, and EU membership post-independence, particularly in the aftermath of Brexit, added to the debate's complexity. Political opposition within Scotland and the UK further complicated the matter, with significant parties like the Conservative Party, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats opposing a second referendum. Despite growing support for independence in some polls, public opinion remained divided, accentuating the challenge of achieving a decisive majority. Additionally, global issues like the COVID-19 pandemic and international conflicts have diverted the Scottish government's focus, potentially delaying independence efforts.

Nicola Sturgeon's pursuit of Scottish independence exemplifies the relationship between transformational and situational leadership. As a transformational leader, she endeavoured to inspire significant change by advocating for independence as a forward-looking solution to challenges like Brexit, aiming to reshape Scotland's future and mobilise international support. Her vision sought to galvanise supporters around the idea of self-determination and a distinct national identity. However, her situational leadership is evident in her cautious and strategic patience in calling for a second referendum. Aware of the legal and political constraints imposed by the UK government, as well as economic uncertainties and divided public opinion, Sturgeon adapted her strategies to the prevailing circumstances. She balanced maintaining momentum for independence with the pragmatic need to consider the constitutional limitations and external events like the COVID-19 pandemic. This dual approach highlights the challenges of leading transformative initiatives within rigid structural confines, demonstrating

⁵⁵ A. Thiec, "The SNP's Conundrum over a Second Independence Referendum: Scotland's Future in Westminster's Hands," *Textes & Contexts*, vol. 18, no. 2 (2023), paras 53-54.

⁵⁶ L. Riddoch, "Staying Power: The Resilience of the Scottish Independence Movement," *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4 (2023), pp. 583-591.

how both visionary aspirations and practical adaptability characterised Sturgeon's leadership.

ELECTORAL SUCCESSES AND POLITICAL STYLE

The electoral successes of Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP under her leadership have been a significant aspect of her political legacy, building upon a surge of support that began even before she took office. Sturgeon assumed leadership in the wake of the 2014 independence referendum, a pivotal moment that, despite resulting in a 'No' vote, catalysed unprecedented growth in support for independence and SNP membership. Research by Bennie and others highlights that SNP membership surged from around 25,000 before the referendum to over 100,000 by 2015, creating a robust grassroots foundation for Sturgeon's leadership.⁵⁷

Leveraging this momentum, Sturgeon consolidated the SNP's position as a dominant political force in Scotland. The 2015 general election marked a watershed moment, with the SNP capturing an unprecedented 56 out of 59 Scottish seats in the UK Parliament. This remarkable performance highlighted Sturgeon's effective political strategy and the SNP's growing appeal among Scottish voters, capitalising on the post-referendum political scene.

Subsequent elections to both the House of Commons and the Scottish Parliament reflected sustained support for the SNP under Sturgeon's tenure. The party consistently secured its position as the largest party in the Scottish Parliament, with Sturgeon effectively translating the post-referendum surge into enduring electoral success.⁵⁸ The electoral data from this period demonstrate Sturgeon's political understanding and ability to maintain and expand upon the momentum of the independence movement

Table 1. Scottish National Party election results (UK parliamentary elections)

Election (year)	%Scottish Votes	No of votes	+ - % Votes	Seats in Scotland
1997	2.0	621,550	+0.1	6 / 72
2001	1.8	464,314	-0.2	5 / 72
2005	1.5	412,267	-0.3	6 / 59
2010	1.7	491,386	+0.2	6 / 59
2015	4.7	1,454,436	+3.0	56 / 59
2017	3.0	977,568	-1.7	35 / 59
2019	3.9	1,242,372	+1.9	48 / 59

Source: own compilation based on data from House of Commons Library.

⁵⁷ L. Bennie, J. Mitchell, R. Johns, "Parties, Movements and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum: Explaining the Post-Referendum Party Membership Surges," *Party Politics*, vol. 27, no. 6 (2021), p. 1188.

⁵⁸ M. Petrie, "Politics, the Constitution and the Independence Movement in Scotland since Devolution," *The Political Quarterly*, vol. 94, no. 4 (2023), pp. 521-523.

Table 2. Scottish National Party election results (Scottish Parliament elections)

Election (year)	Constituency		Regional		Total seats	Seats +/-
	Votes %	Seats	Votes %	Seats		
1999	28.7	7 / 73	27.3	28 / 56	35 / 129	*
2003	23.7	9 / 73	20.9	18 / 56	27 / 129	-8
2007	32.9	21 / 73	31.0	26 / 56	47 / 129	20
2011	45.4	53 / 73	44.0	16 / 56	69 / 129	22
2016	46.5	59 / 73	41.7	4 / 56	63 / 129	-6
2021	47.7	62 / 73	40.3	2 / 56	64 / 129	1

Source: own compilation based on data from House of Commons Library.

Sturgeon's political *modus operandi* was marked by a pragmatic outlook and a capacity to adjust to the changing political environment. Her communication skills were a standout feature, enabling her to articulate her policies clearly and connect with audiences across various platforms. She has often sought practical solutions to complex issues, balancing ideological goals with the realities of political and economic constraints. This pragmatism has been evident in her cautious approach to a second Scottish independence referendum, especially in the situation of Brexit and its uncertainties.

The most crucial relationship in Nicola Sturgeon's political career is with Alex Salmond. For years, he was her protector, who, to some extent, enabled her to become party leader and government leader without rivalry; after years, he has become her greatest enemy. The conflict centres around the handling of sexual harassment allegations against Salmond.⁵⁹ Sturgeon, succeeding Salmond as First Minister, was cleared of breaching the ministerial code in an independent report yet faced criticism for the government's 'deeply flawed' actions by a separate MSP inquiry.⁶⁰ Their political alliance deteriorated following Salmond's allegations that Sturgeon's circle, including her husband, plotted against him, which they deny. Salmond was acquitted of all charges, but the fallout led Salmond to establish the Alba Party, creating further division within the SNP and impacting the broader political system in Scotland.⁶¹ Despite his acquittal, Salmond's public standing and political influence collapsed due to these allegations, which he never fully recovered.⁶² That demonstrates an aspect of Sturgeon's leadership. Initially, she benefitted from her close association with Salmond, a prominent figure in Scottish politics, as a platform to raise her political standing and influence.

⁵⁹ Ch. Julios, *Sexual Harassment in the UK Parliament: Lessons from the #MeToo Era*, Cham 2022, pp. 127-156.

⁶⁰ "Salmond and Sturgeon: What Is the Controversy All about?," *BBC*, 23 March 2021, at <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-55996021>, 18 January 2024.

⁶¹ A. Forrest, "Salmond vs Sturgeon: Your Complete Guide to the 'Whole Sorry Story,'" *The Independent*, 26 March 2021, at <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/salmond-sturgeon-snp-row-explained-b1806714.html>, 18 January 2024.

⁶² J. Eichhorn, "Is Salmond's Unpopularity Definitely a Barrier to Alba's Chances of Success?," *What Scotland Thinks*, 29 March 2021, at <https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/2021/03/is-salmonds-unpopularity-definitely-a-barrier-to-albas-chances-of-success/> 30 September 2024.

However, as circumstances evolved and Salmond became embroiled in controversies, she distanced herself from Salmond, prioritising her leadership position and the interests of her party and policy goals over personal loyalties. At the same time, Salmond's once-formidable political career waned significantly.

In summary, she employed elements of transformational leadership by mobilising support from within the government, her party, and the public to promote her vision of Scottish independence. This reflects her ability to communicate effectively with the electorate, aligning her message with the collective identity of the Scottish people. In doing so, she catalysed a shift in Scottish politics, presenting a vision that gained significant public backing. At the same time, her leadership exhibited situational traits, marked by pragmatism and adaptability in response to voter expectations in changing political circumstances.

REGIONAL POLITICAL LEADERSHIP: PROPOSED THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section introduces a theoretical model characteristic of regional political leadership. It focuses on six key strategies employed by such leaders. The development of the regional political leadership framework in this study is grounded in a qualitative methodological approach that combines a comprehensive literature review, thematic analysis, and case study examination. By systematically analysing Nicola Sturgeon's leadership in Scotland's political system, the framework identifies vital strategies characteristic of regional political leaders pursuing independence or greater autonomy. The study employs a single-case study approach, focusing on Nicola Sturgeon's tenure as First Minister of Scotland. A thematic analysis was conducted to identify recurring patterns and strategies in Sturgeon's leadership. Based on the themes identified, the regional political leadership framework was constructed, comprising six key strategies. Each strategy was supported by evidence from the case study. A brief comparative analysis with other regional leaders (e.g., leaders in Catalonia or Quebec) was conducted to strengthen the framework's applicability.

These strategies include advocating for independence or enhanced autonomy, building on regional identity and culture, positioning themselves as defenders against central government policies, shaping internal politics to reflect local values and needs, utilising national political crises to strengthen their leadership, and engaging in international cooperation for broader influence and support. Each element of this model highlights regional leaders' different strategies for achieving their goals and strengthening their positions. This framework may offer insights into regional political leaders' various roles and tactics.

1. Advocating for independence or greater autonomy: This focuses on shaping political visions and goals reflecting the region's independence aspirations. Examples in Scotland demonstrate how leaders can mobilise support by clearly communicating the goal of independence and involving citizens in decision-making (e.g. through

a referendum). Sturgeon's persistent efforts to secure a second independence referendum highlight her commitment to this strategy. By framing independence as a solution to challenges like Brexit, she sought to mobilise public support and international sympathy

2. **Building on a strong regional identity:** A vital element of this model is the use of 'regional' identity and culture as a social glue and political tool. Leaders can strengthen regional patriotism and unity by highlighting the region's unique characteristics and values. Emphasising Scotland's unique cultural heritage and identity, Sturgeon strengthened regional patriotism. Initiatives promoting Scottish history, language, and arts reinforced a collective identity essential for the independence movement
3. **Defender of the region against the central government:** Regional leaders can build their leadership by presenting themselves as the voice of opposition to central government policies. This approach is often based on criticising central government decisions that are perceived as unfavourable to the region. Positioning herself as a champion of Scottish interests, Sturgeon frequently criticised Westminster policies that were perceived as detrimental to Scotland. This adversarial stance resonated with voters who felt marginalised by central government decisions
4. **Distinct internal politics** This aspect focuses on the leader's ability to shape the region's internal politics to meet local needs and aspirations. Leaders can effectively manage critical areas such as education or healthcare and consolidate their position and legitimacy. It is also fundamental to emphasise differentiation from central government policies based on key values. Sturgeon's administration pursued policies that differentiated Scotland from the rest of the UK, such as free university tuition and progressive social welfare programs. These policies reflected local values and needs, enhancing her legitimacy
5. **Leveraging national political crises:** Effective regional leaders can use political crises as opportunities to strengthen their position and promote the regional agenda. Skilful crisis management, as in the case of Sturgeon during Brexit or Covid-19, can increase public trust and leadership legitimacy. Her handling of these crises increased public confidence and highlighted the perceived benefits of autonomous decision-making
6. **Utilising international cooperation:** Leaders can strengthen their position by engaging in dialogue and alliance-building on the international stage. Sturgeon sought to build support for Scotland's interests. This global engagement enhanced Scotland's profile and highlighted aspirations for EU membership post-independence

SUMMARY

Nicola Sturgeon's tenure as First Minister of Scotland exemplifies the complexity of assessing political output. She will be remembered as a political figure who authored numerous SNP electoral successes but was, at the same time, incapable of achieving

the primary goal of independence, sustaining institutional ties with Europe, and, in the view of many, ineffective in implementing a progressive revolution.

Addressing our first research question on Sturgeon's achievements and legacy, her impact on the long-term trajectory of Scottish politics and the independence discourse is multi-layered. While her electoral successes strengthened the SNP's position, her inability to secure independence or maintain EU ties may have complicated the movement's path forward. She couldn't secure a legal and mutually agreed pathway to a second independence referendum. At the same time, Sturgeon's leadership style and personal charisma played a significant role in shaping the SNP's public image and attracting new supporters.

Addressing our second research question on leadership approach, Nicola Sturgeon's early tenure exemplified transformational leadership. She energised the Scottish political sphere with her ambitious vision, championing both independence and progressive policy changes. Her early tenure was marked by a robust and ideologically driven agenda aimed at systemic change, inspiring her followers with a compelling narrative of Scottish identity and self-determination. However, over time, her leadership style evolved, becoming predominantly situational. She demonstrated a heightened responsiveness to changing political and social settings, particularly during crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. This transition revealed a conflict between her transformational aspirations and her inherent predisposition towards caution, as she increasingly focused on adaptability and media image.

Sturgeon operated in a Western European context where leaders strive to achieve what they can for the polity but face significant limitations, particularly evident in the case of a non-independent Scotland. Her ambitions for Scottish independence and progressive social policies symbolise a leader trying to push the boundaries of what is achievable within these constraints. Her leadership style was defined by strategic crisis response, clear and effective communication, and a nuanced understanding of media dynamics.

In response to our third research question on insights into regional political leadership, this article contributes to the existing literature by enriching discussions on how regional political leadership impacts national movements while combining leadership theory with case-specific analysis. It identifies various strategies that regional leaders like Sturgeon employ, including advocating for independence or greater autonomy, building on a strong regional identity, defending the region against the central government, distinct internal politics, leveraging national political crises and utilising international cooperation. This approach deepens our understanding of Sturgeon's specific case and offers a framework for examining similar leadership roles in other regions seeking greater autonomy or independence.

While Nicola Sturgeon's role as a prominent female leader in British politics is noteworthy, it is crucial to evaluate her leadership beyond the lens of gender, as previous studies rarely have done. The analysis in the article demonstrates that Sturgeon's leadership style, policy decisions, and impact on British and Scottish politics should be the primary focus of research and discussion.

Most importantly, Sturgeon's legacy will be assessed based on whether her tenure will ultimately advance the cause of Scottish independence or prove to be a constitutional dead end in the future. This assessment will be crucial in understanding the long-term impact of her leadership on Scottish and British politics, addressing the core of our research questions.

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