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Letter from the Editor

Dear Reader,

After a period of transition, we are excited to share the latest issue of the Journal of Undergraduate International Studies. Over the past year, our team has stepped into new leadership roles while learning and working through the editorial and publication process. It has been a period of growth for all of us, and we are very grateful for the patience and commitment of our team along the way.

This cycle, we received excellent submissions from students across the country, reflecting the range and strength of undergraduate research in international studies. After careful consideration, we selected four pieces that offer thoughtful and engaging perspectives on important global issues. Each article represents some of the best undergraduate work being produced, and we are proud to share these contributions.

We would like to sincerely thank our writers for trusting us with their work. We are also incredibly appreciative of our editorial team, whose time, effort, and attention to detail made this issue possible, as well as our advisors for their continued guidance and support. We are proud to continue JUIS's mission of highlighting undergraduate research.

We would also like to recognize our founder and first Editor-in-Chief, David Coddon, whose vision continues to shape the journal today. In addition, we are very grateful to the Institute for Regional and International Studies (IRIS) for their support, patience, and guidance as we continue to grow.

We are proud to share this issue and bring this work to you. We hope you enjoy reading it as much as we enjoyed putting it together, and that it encourages you to think more deeply about the global topics explored within.

Best,

Norah Johnstone and Kiana Tu
Co-Editor-In-Chiefs

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Girls' Education in Afghanistan: Constraints and Opportunities

By: Alice Ross

Abstract

This paper examines the barriers to girls' education in Afghanistan following the Taliban's 2021 resurgence. Based on a narrow interpretation of Islam, these educational bans have intensified mental health crises, child marriage, maternal mortality, and economic decline. International efforts often fail due to poor coordination and cultural misunderstandings, while domestic initiatives face violent suppression. It also provides recommended solutions, including the establishment of school food programs to increase student enrollment and nutrition, and the pursuit of legal action through the International Court of Justice for violations of international law. To restore Afghan girls' right to education and autonomy, coordinated, culturally aware action must be taken.

"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world."

- Nelson Mandela¹

Introduction

Education provides not only knowledge but also the tools and skills that are essential to building a successful, prosperous future. A total of 2.5 million—or 80 percent—of school-aged girls have been denied education since the Taliban's 2021 edict banning girls over the age of 12 from attending school.² This ban strips them of opportunities for longer, healthier lives, higher income, and healthier, more educated children. In a country where 90 percent of people live at or below the poverty line, education provides the training for the skilled professional labor necessary to rebuild after decades of conflict.

A United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) study shows that, on average, each year of schooling increases future wages by 3.9 percent.⁴ A girl with 12 years of education would have a fighting chance to escape poverty and gain economic stability. Education provides economic stability to Afghanistan as a whole, in addition to lowering maternal mortality and improving overall healthcare.

Yet beyond the Taliban bans, girls in Afghanistan face food insecurity, infrastructure deficits, and gender-based violence. To secure their futures, their right to education must be restored. No girl should be denied the chance for financial, social, and personal success. Action must be taken to give these girls the education they deserve.

Position

Since 2021, the Taliban decrees preventing girls from attending secondary school and universities have drastically undermined women's rights and opportunities.⁵ When combined with pre-existing challenges, this suppression strips girls of economic autonomy and makes girls more vulnerable to physical, psychological, and sexual abuse.⁶

This paper will examine the religious and political influence of the Taliban, the effects of education bans on the lives and prospects of girls and Afghan society, and past and current efforts to improve education. These findings will be concluded with culturally sensitive policy proposals to support the educational rights of girls and women



Alice Ross

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Background

The Taliban, responsible for banning girls' education, are largely former refugees who grew up in religious seminaries during the Soviet-Afghan conflict in the 1980s.⁷ These institutions emphasized jihadist ideology, promoting the subjugation of all non-Muslims, the establishment of a single Islamic caliphate, and denouncing Western ideals.⁸ The Taliban took control in 1996 and began a strict and oppressive regime based on their interpretation of Islamic Law.⁹ Women were banned from universities, forced out of jobs, and confined to their homes.¹⁰ From 1998 to 2001, girls over the age of eight were not allowed to attend school.¹¹

The Taliban lost power after a U.S.-led intervention in 2001, but regained control in 2021.¹² They passed edicts banning girls from secondary school in September 2021 and from higher education in December 2022.¹³ However, many Islamic theologians argue that these bans run contrary to the teachings of Islam.¹⁴ Salam al-Marayati, the President of the Muslim Public Affairs Council in the U.S., confirms that Islam encourages education for everyone, including women and girls.¹⁵

Girls' education has historically been connected with secular modernization efforts, especially considering its record-high levels under Western influence.¹⁶ Popular opposition to the West and to secularization has allowed the Taliban to maintain control of Afghanistan today.



Findings

The Taliban: Support and Opposition

The Taliban currently rule the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan, and while many oppose them, their position in control of the country indicates enough support to maintain power. A study done on the Socio-Economic Outlook for Afghanistan in 2023 stated that 42 percent of female-headed households and 43 percent of male-headed households cited Taliban restrictions as the main reason that girls cannot go to school.¹⁸ To make a change within a system controlled by a group, it is essential to understand how that group works and the justifications for their actions.

The Taliban do command sympathy from some Afghans, especially those who share ethnic ties or those brutalized by the central government during the American

occupation.¹⁹ However, the same study that gave the previous data also shows that their support remained very much in the minority.²⁰ The Taliban maintains power through violence, making an example of anyone who stands out of line.²¹ Those who oppose them—often women, ethnic minorities, or those facing economic challenges—reported concerns for their safety, stability, and lack of ethnic representation.²²

The Taliban's interpretation of Islam is not widely accepted among Muslims, even in Afghanistan.²³ Supreme Leader Hibatullah Akhundzada emphasizes the role of one of the Prophet Muhammad's wives, Sawdah Bint Zam'ah, who chose to stay at home, while ignoring others, including Khadija, a successful businesswoman.²⁴ Notably, the first word of the Quran is "read,"

and contains the verse, “There is no compulsion in religion,” both of which run contrary to Taliban rhetoric.²⁵

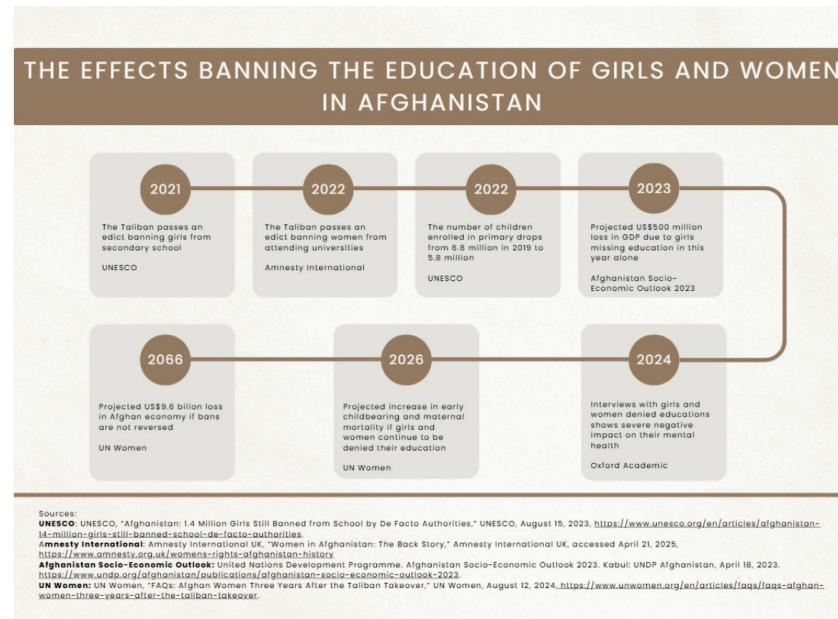
Though their ideology is claimed to be backed by religion, the Taliban’s legitimacy is widely disputed. Their power comes more from violence than consensus, supported mainly by a minority of ideological loyalists.

Impacts on Girls and Women

The impacts of the lack of education have been felt strongly by girls and women in Afghanistan, both psychologically and socially. A 2024 Journal of Public Health study of 426 girls and women barred from education found that 87.6 percent showed signs of depression, and 49.8 percent reported suicidal thoughts.²⁶ These figures are much higher than before the Taliban instituted the ban on education.²⁷

Many girls shared their restlessness, agitation, and overpowering sadness over their lost futures.²⁸ Princeton School of Public and International Affairs interviewed a girl, under the pseudonym “Zarina”, who mentioned her dreams of studying business.²⁹ Another, “Toba”, had her dreams of becoming a politician vanish in a matter of weeks.³⁰ For those who lost their education and aspirations, the bans still impact their mental health today.³¹

The psychological repercussions are accompanied by a rise in early arranged marriages.³² “Khadija,” another student, spoke about peers who married shortly after the bans: “They said that without going to school, what else could they do?”³³



Child marriage is banned under international human rights law because it opens children to physical and sexual violence and inhibits their educational, economic, and personal development.³⁴ Data from UN Women shows that by 2026, a lack of schooling for girls and women will increase early childbearing by 45 percent and the risk of maternal mortality by 50 percent.³⁵ These bans do not solely harm the future of these girls. They also pose a threat to their lives.

Implications for Afghan Society

The Taliban’s restriction of girls’ education, combined with pre-existing barriers, will have lasting consequences for the Afghan economy. A United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) report predicts the lifetime loss from underinvestment in education could total US\$1.3 billion.³⁶ Preventing half the population from becoming skilled workers severely undermines productivity and growth for Afghanistan as a whole, not just the girls who are kept from school.³⁷

Around the world, educated women are more likely to hold higher-paying jobs, and GDP increases significantly if women are employed at the same rate as men.³⁸ Firms with more women on the board of directors have 53 percent higher returns on equity, 24 percent higher returns on sales, and 7 percent higher returns on invested capital.³⁹ Nevertheless, ever since the Taliban’s laws have come into effect, Afghanistan has seen an exodus of highly educated people, especially women, and school-aged girls aren’t being educated to replace them.

Allowing women to return to school is not only a human rights issue—it is an economic necessity for Afghanistan’s recovery.

Domestic and International Intervention: Current and Previous

To propose effective solutions, it is important to understand both international and domestic efforts.

Many international aid programs faced problems with poor coordination and minimal cultural knowledge.⁴¹ Very few of the officials spoke local languages, and ineffective communication caused resource waste.⁴² In one case, paying ditch diggers US\$100 a month caused teachers—who were paid around US\$60-80 a month—to resign for higher-paying work.

These mistakes created public distrust and support for alternative groups such as the Taliban.⁴⁴ Today, international aid focuses on humanitarian relief.⁴⁵ Despite Taliban control, Afghanistan remains under the jurisdiction of the International Criminal Court, which in 2025, launched investigations into Taliban leaders for crimes against humanity.⁴⁶ The ICC's limited enforcement mechanisms have limited the effect of this judgment on Taliban operations.

Domestically, Afghan girls and women have continued their education online and in underground schools, while others disguise themselves as boys to continue attending in person.⁴⁷ However, access to these options is inconsistent

due to a lack of technology or internet, and the threat of heavy punishment from the Taliban places strict limits on efforts to continue education.⁴⁸

Moving forward, aid must be coordinated between groups with clear goals and guidelines. Local

Involvement at all levels of international and domestic operations would help provide valuable insight.⁴⁹ Working together, these groups have the opportunity to create meaningful and lasting change in Afghanistan.

Recommendations

A. Institute Meal Plans in Schools

School meal plans have been proven to improve test scores, boost attendance, and reduce malnutrition—especially in girls—in low-income countries such as Mozambique, Niger, and Yemen.⁵⁰ Pakistan, which shares cultural and religious similarities with Afghanistan, had a Tawana Pakistan Project (2002-2004), which provides a useful model.⁵¹

The project trained volunteer women to cook and distribute lunches to over 4000 girls' schools using locally sourced food.⁵² Each meal cost around 6.07 to 7.14 Pakistani rupees, which is about 10 US cents.⁵³ The project reached 417,665 girls, decreasing malnutrition and increasing enrollment by 40 percent.⁵⁴

“In one case, paying ditch diggers US\$100 a month caused teachers—who were paid around US\$60–80 a month—to resign for higher-paying work.”

A similar project is feasible in Afghanistan, although most of the funding would need to come from international donors or one of the hundreds of domestic non-governmental organizations (NGOs), such as the Afghan Institute for Learning and Women for Afghan

Women.⁵⁵ The programs could also help provide jobs for Afghan women, helping them earn an income that the Taliban mandates make hard to find.

With modest startup funding, the project could begin within the year, starting at a single or a small cluster of local schools over the course of a school year. Like the project in Pakistan, success would be measured in changes in body metrics such as stunting, weight, and wasting. If the initial trial proved successful, the project could be pitched to a wider variety of organizations for more funding to provide the services on a larger scale.

B. International Court of Justice Intervention

Although international interventions in Afghanistan have struggled, legal action remains an option. Afghanistan accepted the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) when it ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) in 2003.⁵⁶ This would allow a member state to bring a case against the Taliban.⁵⁷

While NGOs cannot appeal to the ICJ directly, they can pressure governments to do so and support the investigation by gathering testimony.⁵⁸ A favorable ICJ ruling—legally binding and backed by the UN Security Council—has the power to order the Taliban to repeal its discriminatory edicts and comply with international obligations under CEDAW.⁵⁹ The ruling would also

Signal to the world that violations of international law will not go ignored.

Historically, there is precedent for this type of intervention. In 2018, the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) Court of Justice ruled against Sierra Leone's ban on visibly pregnant girls attending school.⁶⁰ Like Afghanistan today, Sierra Leone had violated international policy with discrimination within the education sector.⁶¹ A similar ICJ case could establish a legal foundation for future action and sustain international attention.

Filing a case would require a state party to submit the complaint.⁶² If no successful arbitration occurs within six months, then the ICJ takes the case.⁶³ Though the length of the investigation and judgment could range from less than a year to over a decade, provisional measures—such as orders to preserve evidence—can be issued in weeks.⁶⁴ When inaction carries great consequences, legal action provides a spotlight and a signal of international resolve to defend the rights of Afghan girls and women.

Criteria for Implementation

A. General Similarities

Both recommendations listed above share two universal challenges for Afghanistan's education system: government corruption and the role of NGOs.

On the Corruption Index, Afghanistan ranks poorly (83/100), similar to Sierra Leone (67/100) and Pakistan (73/100), which were both used as comparative models.⁶⁵

This creates obstacles such as bribery demands and bureaucratic delays, which should be bypassed whenever possible. The Taliban government has likewise initiated strict controls on NGO activity within Afghanistan, preventing any human rights activism and forcing many organizations to limit their aid to short-term relief efforts.⁶⁶ Regardless, many NGOs—both international and domestic—still play a critical role in providing essential humanitarian aid to hard-to-reach communities.⁶⁷ Local NGOs, such as the Afghan Institute of Learning, hold both community trust and cultural understanding, making them valuable partners in implementing multi-step initiatives.⁶⁸ Coordination between local groups and international organizations will be key to success.

B. Institute Meal Plans in Schools

The recommendation of the institution of meal plans in Afghan schools has many strengths. 90 percent of countries in the MENA region have school meal programs that reach primary schools, which in Afghanistan is girls' only access to education.⁶⁹ Additionally, paying people, especially women, to prepare meals within their own homes and others to deliver them could be an effective way to skirt the laws limiting women's activities outside the home and help stimulate local economies.

Afghanistan is also home to major crop yields, such as wheat and whole grains, which are popular staples for school meal programs.⁷⁰ Using local food sources could help strengthen Afghan food culture with traditional

meals such as rice-based Yakhni Pulao and meat and vegetable-filled Potato Bolani.⁷¹

A weakness in this project is that the Pakistan program relied heavily on the work of female volunteers to buy and prepare the meals.⁷² This is not entirely feasible when low-income families must spend most of their time working, meaning that additional funds must be used to pay the volunteers.

Funding is an issue for such a project, but help could be found through international aid. Low-income countries get about 65 percent of their school food funding from international aid. This could offset some of the costs traditionally provided by the government.⁷³

Additionally, International NGOs (UN World Food Programme, Child Nutrition Foundation) fund similar programs all over the world and could be turned to for funding in Afghanistan.⁷⁴ If initially successful on a small scale, such as one school or a cluster within a community, this program can be extended to surrounding schools or communities, helping more people.

If, however, external aid could not be found, the project would face a considerable barrier. The incredible amount of funding needed for this project is subsidized by the government in the other MENA region countries, but Afghanistan's low government budget will constrain this.⁷⁵

C. International Court of Justice Intervention

The strengths of the recommendation to take a case to the ICJ are also many. The ICJ has the power to pass temporary orders to prevent further CEDAW violations and order the preservation of evidence for ICJ investigations.⁷⁶ ICJ judgments are also internationally binding for all countries that have accepted jurisdiction.⁷⁷ The decisions are backed up by the Security Council, which can levy targeted economic sanctions on specific members of the Taliban, freezing their assets, preventing them from traveling, and making it harder for them to raise money for their militant arm.⁷⁸ To provide further incentive, UN Resolution 2679 requires a government to uphold the international obligations of the state.⁷⁹ An ICJ decision forcing the Taliban to obey the CEDAW would count as one of these obligations.⁸⁰ In order to gain the legitimacy they currently lack, they would have to commit to following the CEDAW.

There are, however, weaknesses to this recommendation. Only countries that have accepted ICJ jurisdiction may submit a case before it, meaning that NGOs wouldn't be able to intervene directly.⁸¹ This leaves 149 countries other than Afghanistan, many of which have supported the ICC case against Afghanistan.⁸² Additionally, the ICJ does not have an executive arm to enforce its decisions, and must rely on the Security Council to step in, which has no significant enforcement power.⁸³

Historically, only about three-quarters of ICJ judgements have been followed.⁸⁴ Given, as well, the Taliban's strong anti-West, anti-secular stance, it is entirely possible that they would disregard any attempts at negotiation, drawing out the decision process.⁸⁵ Worst, perhaps, is the lengthy time-frame

"In one case, paying ditch diggers US\$100 a month caused teachers—who were paid around US\$60–80 a month—to resign for higher-paying work."

required by this recommendation. The ICJ can take up to 15 years to investigate and pass judgment.⁸⁶ This is countered by provisional orders, which can be passed within weeks of the submission of the case, potentially providing the alleviation of this issue.⁸⁷

There are also opportunities that come with an ICJ case. The case would set a legal foundation for future cases against the Taliban.⁸⁸ It would also put the Taliban's actions back in the spotlight, send a message of international strength, and prevent the Talibanization of other countries.⁸⁹ While NGOs cannot directly submit the case to the ICJ, they can be active in lobbying for government action.⁹⁰ They can also gather testimony from willing citizens of Afghanistan for the investigation.⁹¹

With reliance on the UN for aid, there also comes the threat of UN interference. Any of the five permanent members of the Security Council could veto the enforcement of an ICJ decision.⁹² This seems unlikely, however, given the international consensus of the

of the violation of women's rights in Afghanistan.⁹³

Conclusion

This paper examined policy options to address the political, social, and economic barriers preventing girls in Afghanistan from receiving an education. Both proposed strategies—school meal programs and the submission of an ICJ case—are drawn from successful precedents in similar situations and can be implemented in partnership with trusted NGOs.

Any intervention must be grounded in dialogue with Afghan communities, designed to address locally identified needs. Past failures have shown that external action without cultural understanding undermines both trust and effectiveness. Collaboration between involved groups is essential to achieving sustainable change.

At its most fundamental level, education is a human right. It provides a foundation for the long-term stability and prosperity of both Afghan girls and the nation as a whole. According to the US Department of State, "Restricting women's access to work is an attack on women today. Eliminating women's access to education is an assault on women tomorrow."⁹⁴ The only path forward begins with ensuring that every Afghan girl has the chance to learn—a right that no regime can erase.

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Ubiquitous Historical Role: The Obscured Narrative Behind the Globalization of Vanilla, the World's White Gold.

by: Mathilde Turpin

Abstract

Vanilla is one of the most cherished spices, yet its true history is often overlooked. This paper explores vanilla's history and aims to reclaim its Reunionese narrative. The paper will first explore the geography behind vanilla to understand the label 'Bourbon vanilla.' It then examines Edmond Albius's pivotal role, as the one who discovered the process of vanilla pollination in La Réunion -a process still used today. This paper finally explores the political, colonial and neo-colonial influences obscuring La Réunion, its inhabitants, or Albius's contribution to vanilla.

Introduction

Invisible on conventional world maps, a constellation of small yet historically remarkable islands—La Réunion, Mauritius, the Comoros, and the Seychelles—lies scattered across the Indian Ocean. They share a common and often unrecognized legacy: their soil grows the most beloved and second most expensive spice in the world:¹ vanilla. Under the label of 'Bourbon vanilla,' these islands are inextricably linked by a complex history of colonization, exploitative plantation systems, forced migrations, and enduring struggles for recognition. By focusing on La Réunion and by extension the Indian Ocean islands, this paper seeks to reveal the true history of vanilla, demonstrating how La Réunion singularly propelled its ascent to a lucrative commodity. By first exploring vanilla's history, this analysis will examine the factors justifying its price and challenges.

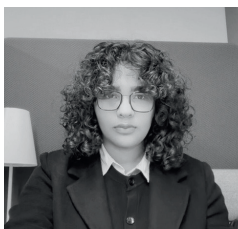
Finally, it will explore vanilla's intricate ties to other cultures on the island, historical trajectory, and lasting impact on La Réunion's. It will finally assess the region's path toward development, arguing for a more complete understanding of their global role.

Most available sources in history disproportionately represent the colonizer's perspectives of vanilla's history, effectively silencing the narratives of numerous key agents. Consequently, these crucial accounts are systematically overlooked. In vanilla history, France is relentlessly cited. Yet, few scholars critically examine the true provenance of French vanilla and the author of its pollination. This paper, therefore, begins the essential work of reclaiming these obscured narratives through the lens of the

Indian Ocean islands, particularly La Réunion.

Vanilla Origins

Vanilla's journey as a global commodity began with its indigenous use in an Aztec drink called "chocolatl," mixing cacao tree seeds and vanilla beans. The Aztec emperor used this drink as a rare tribute, and in 1520, offered it to Hernán Cortés, marking its entry into European culture. Before reaching the Indian Ocean, vanilla was already considered a 'white gold,' a highly valued commodity actively sought after by colonial powers aiming to expand their wealth, as exemplified by the 1678 order from the mayor of Verapaz to "seize from the poor, newly converted, their annatto, cacao and vanillas".² Later, *Vanilla planifolia* (the primary vanilla-producing orchid) and its pollinating bee were



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documented and studied in their native region. 1836 in Belgium, Charles Morren discovered a lengthy technique to pollinate the flower, which used a microscope and tools, but it was unsuitable for large-scale exploitation. Hence, to further their stake in the vanilla industry, French colons introduced vanilla to their Indian Ocean colonies: La Réunion in 1793, spreading it to Mauritius in 1827 (a British colony), and Madagascar in 1840.³ From this point, the history of vanilla took an unprecedented turn, as it became a commercial asset for colonial France.

Colonial Legacy

Following vanilla's arrival in La Réunion, the narrative shifted to the individual who propelled vanilla's ascent from a rare spice to a globally beloved commodity: Edmond Albius.² In 1841, the ingenious 12-year-old enslaved boy made the

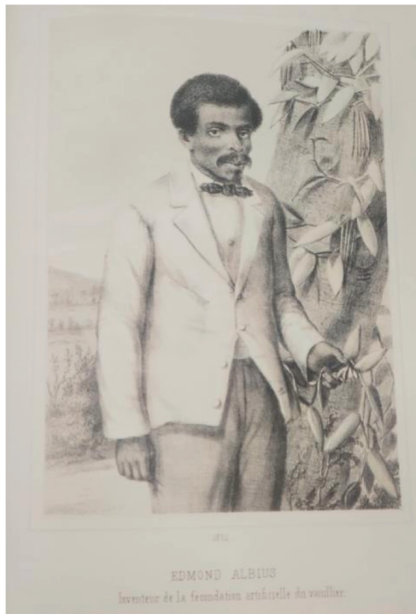
discovery of hand-pollination.⁴ Despite his owner publishing this discovery in "Moniteur de Bourbon," most readers failed to understand the process. Hence, Albius was sent around the island to demonstrate his discovery – "Edmond's gesture"- to other slaves, indentured workers, and vanilla owners.

Disturbingly, some white owners even attempted to take credit for the discovery, unwilling to acknowledge its enslaved creator. The technique was disseminated across the Indian Ocean, reaching Indonesia, the Pacific Islands, and its native land Mexico. Even though Albius' discovery allowed a great economic boost for the island who suffered crop-damaging cyclones in the late 1830s, Edmond nor the slaves themselves ever reaped the wealth generated by this billion-dollar industry. Instead, profits accrued to plantation and slave owners.

After slavery was abolished in La Réunion on December 20, 1848, Edmond was freed and adopted the name "Albius" in homage to the vanilla flower's white hue (alba in Latin).⁵ He then lived in terrible conditions: fatal encounters, prison time, and returning to work on Bellier-Beaumont's plantation. He died of misery in August 1880 as the vanilla industry was at its peak in La Réunion. To this day, Albius remains a forgotten figure in mainstream history. In 1918, Jean Lépervance's request for a marble or bronze statue fortune," was unanswered.⁶

Only a small stele was installed in 1982, followed by a minor statue in Le Bocage, Sainte-Suzanne in 2004. His lack of official recognition, even locally, furthers Albius' unfortunate fate and legacy. Vanilla is of undeniable popularity, unlike its godfather Albius, whose role remains silenced. Historical research papers such as Evans's 2006 "Vanilla Odyssey" erroneously acknowledge Albius' work: "Morren successfully simulated pollination by hand, and [...], Edmund Albus, perfected the process."⁷ This misrepresentation is twofold: not only is his name wrongfully spelled as "Edmund Albus," but Morren is disproportionately credited as the inventor of the pollination process, relegating Albius to only "perfecting" a detail.

Morren's technique required precise tools and a microscope, making it impractical and unprofitable for exploitation. However, Albius' method, discovered independently in Bellier-Beaumont's gardens, was distinct and wholly different from Morren's cumbersome process. Hence, despite gaining partial and often distorted credit, Albius remains unrewarded for his discovery that bloomed into the world's most beloved spice.



2. Edmond Albius – Inventor of the artificial pollination of vanilla

His pervasive lack of recognition is deplored by Donnelly in his "Hymn to Edmond Albius":

with nearly all vanilla produced today as Albius taught us, including the kind in Breyers since 1866, fourteen years before Albius died unrecognized, in poverty, in misery to be exact, while everyone white

around him grew rich with vanilla, adding it to candy, Coca-Cola, Chanel No. 5, and even in effigy to the air freshener dangling down in my Uber, its waves whispering Albius, Albius, but inaudibly.⁸

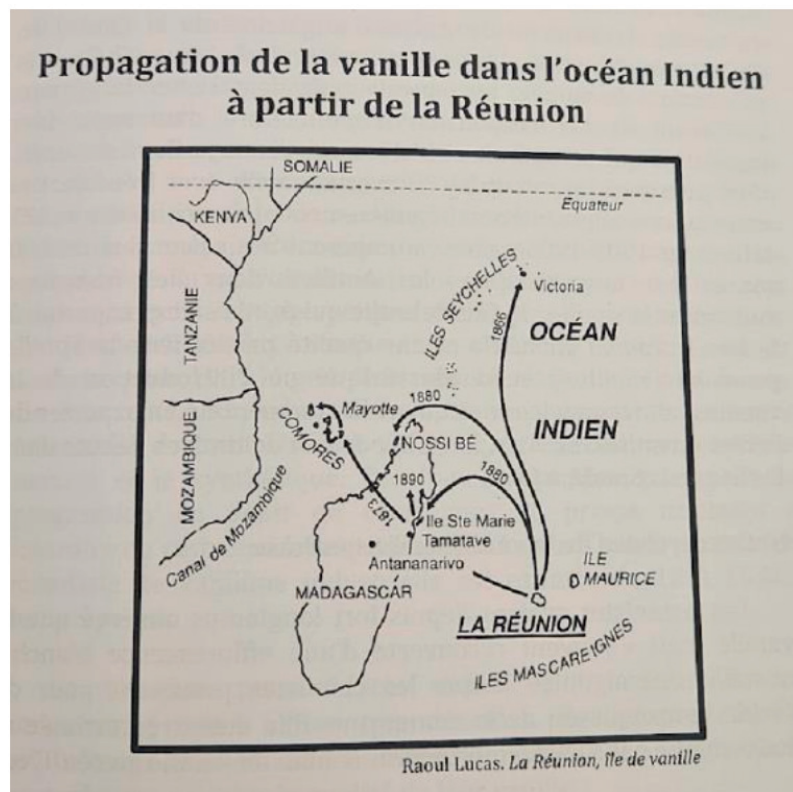
The silent echo from Albius highlights the deep neglect of his role in history.

At this point, an intriguing puzzle emerges: the true provenance of "Bourbon vanilla." While this title originally designated vanilla produced in La Réunion following Albius' process - due to the island's former name "Bourbon"- its scope dramatically expanded. The name became common to all vanilla produced across the Indian Ocean, including the Comoros, Seychelles, Mascarene Islands, and Madagascar. Although no official cause justified this expansion, La Réunion's colonial subjugation and historical context indicate that inhabitants lacked the means to reclaim or restrict the title.

Today, products often use the label "French vanilla," despite the obvious lack of vanilla production in mainland France. France's association with vanilla derives entirely from its former colonies, with its control over the industry until Madagascar's independence. As a colonial power, France and its wealthy exporters were the primary beneficiaries of the vanilla trade.

Under the "French vanilla" label, these islands were stripped of the recognition for their role in vanilla production. With the name "Bourbon vanilla," they receive more recognition for their role in the industry, however, "Bourbon" is erroneously used. As a French colony,

La Réunion had no mechanism to reclaim this name, since its economy was controlled by rich owners from the mainland. Slaves and indentured workers-whose exploited labor was the industry's backbone-could not reclaim their work or identity against the imposed French narrative as hegemonic and good. Hence, the widely used term 'Bourbon vanilla' fails to fairly represent its geographical origins, leaving the Reunionese still unable to reclaim this appellation solely for the island's vanilla. A brief interview with Guy Guichard, a private vanilla owner, revealed that the Reunionese wish for the term 'Bourbon vanilla' to only be used for "the true original" one.⁹



Map: Propagation of vanilla in the Indian Ocean from La Réunion

The use of “Bourbon” to refer to vanilla from any part of the Indian Ocean illustrates the 21st-century legacies of colonization, deterring the Reunionese's ability to assert its historical “Bourbon” identity. The origins of the vanilla industry, Albius' discovery, or even the island's broader history's exclusion from the French history curriculum taught exacerbates this idea.¹⁰ Thus, a neocolonial force still seeks to erase the Reunionese history, actively preventing them from reclaiming their ownership of the ‘Bourbon vanilla’ heritage. This significantly differs in the case of Mexico, which despite Madagascar's 80 percent share of the world's supply, remains mainly credited in the vanilla history.

Costly Cultivation

Despite its obscured history, vanilla is the world's second most valuable spice after saffron. Average Malagasy beans can be purchased from 350€ to 620€ per kilogram, while La Réunion's vanilla commands luxury prices, ranging from 1575€ to 2625€.¹¹ This remarkable cost prompts a question: why is vanilla so prevalent despite its exorbitant prices?

The primary driver of vanilla's price lies in its biological grounds. The rare orchid only grows under precise conditions. The plant naturally grows as a climbing vine, for sun and wind protection.

On plantations, it is crucial to select trees to fulfill this need. The plants must grow separately, one by each tree, with a recommended distance of nine feet, to prevent any infection from spreading to the crop. This separation enhances long-term safety, decreasing short-term profitability but increasing workers' access during the blooming period. The others try to grow vines closer with a heightened risk of damage and

more substantial economic losses.¹²

Alongside these biological needs, vanilla also demands elevations of

250-750 meters above sea level, average temperatures of 25-28°C, and annual precipitation exceeding 1.5m. The 15th to 20th parallels of latitude generally offer these conditions, explaining Madagascar's prosperous vanilla culture.¹³ The plant produces flowers that only bloom momentarily—October to December in Madagascar—opening for only six hours. Under these favorable conditions, a plant can yield around 4,000 flowers.¹⁴ This plethora of biological requirements already constitute a strong justification for vanilla's premium price.

After braving the biological requirements of the vanilla plantation, its meticulous fecundation, harvest, and curing also justify a premium price. A plant needs two to three years of growth before it can bear flowers, reaching its peak output around its seventh year, and being retired around its ninth year.¹⁵ The workers monitor the plantation to ensure steady and safe growth.

They need constant care in the blooming period, each flower's six-hour bloom leaves little time for pollination. Workers need to remove undesirable pods, clip buds after reaching the desired number of pods, and prevent pollinators from searching for superfluous flowers. One worker can pollinate 1,000 to 20,00 flowers daily.¹⁶ Following Albius' process, the workers use

“This remarkable cost prompts a question: why is vanilla so prevalent despite its exorbitant prices?”

A splinter of bamboo and a toothpick-shaped piece of wood that is sharp on both ends. With these tools, they lift the rostellum between the male and female organs to press the pollen onto the lower stigmatic surface. Then, after reaching their full form, the beans are cured using sun heat (Mexico), boiling water (Bourbon Loupy process), or freezing (vanille givrée). The boiling curing process lasts from three to eight months, and it is only after that the beans can be prepared and conditioned for sale.¹⁷

Beyond its strict biological needs, vanilla's costs are justified by its vulnerability to climate and natural threats. This is even more relevant in the Indian Ocean, facing frequent cyclones and plant diseases. The scarce historical documentation on cyclones and their impact on the vanilla industry, largely limited to recent events, reflects these islands'

marginalized position, especially when requiring external help for recovery. Farmers who owned solid greenhouse survived the cyclones, but producers growing vanilla in a natural forest setting suffered devastating losses. For instance, in the March 2025 cyclone Garance, owners like Marie-Paule Pitou or Guy Guichard, had to hike to their plantations to observe the damages. They explained that the few remaining plants cannot be exploitable. Guy Guichard and Willy Boyer, president of the Coopérative Vanille, explained that the following sun exposure dried vanilla plants, making cultivation impossible for the current and subsequent two or three years. The Reunionese workers are still awaiting full compensation for these losses.¹⁸

In Madagascar, the 2022-episode Batsirai -the island's most violent storm in the past 25 years- greatly damaged vanilla crops, causing a significant price surge. Similarly, the 2017 cyclone Enawo ravaged Madagascar, destroying 30 percent of the vanilla crops (a substantial blow, given Madagascar produced 80 percent of the world's supply in 2016), worsening the island's economic crisis. In addition to cyclones, rising temperatures pose a great threat; La Réunion reported a +1.2°C increase in 2019 compared to normal, and +2°C in 2024.¹⁹ The vanilla plant displays poor adaptation to climate change, necessitating ongoing efforts to maintain genetic diversity for survival.

Furthermore, climate change accelerates the propagation of

diseases, caterpillars, and fungi plaguing vanilla plants; including the most destructive bug to vanilla crops (the trioza litseae)²⁰, which can be found in La Réunion²¹. Even workers face health risks, by a disease known as “vanillism.”²² It is undeniable that climate change furthers challenges for all agricultural sectors, but vanilla's inherent rarity and fragility render it exceptionally vulnerable, causing frequent increases in prices.

These prices are also driven by politics and the economy, who further complicate the vanilla market. First, vanilla beans face competition from cheaper substitutes like vanilla extract, artificial flavoring, and even local alternatives such as the Faham of Bourbon tea, or the “chica vanilla” which offer vanilla-like flavoring. The development of synthetic vanillin, sold for 12\$ an ounce, exerts additional pressure on the natural vanilla market.²³ In the 1920s, Madagascar and La Réunion saw a surge of “fakings” -low-quality vanilla with poor conservation.²⁴ These imitation vanillas pose a great threat to the original Bourbon vanilla, for it provides people with an illusion of authenticity-which they often have no knowledge of. This also leads to a depreciation of the original vanilla since the market demand for imitations is much higher, and the difference between high-quality vanilla and these imitations is not promoted. A simple supermarket spree would allow one to witness that products made of these imitation vanillas often claim to be made with

“true vanilla.”

However, reading the product's description cautiously, if available, would reveal no proof of ‘true vanilla’ being used, only vanilla extract or vanillin. Today, governance and corruption in Madagascar contribute to instability; leaders may strategically condone theft or trafficking while personally benefiting. In Madagascar and La Réunion, crop theft by fellow farmers or intermediaries is frequent; Guichard explained the impossibility of protecting vanilla forests, especially during nighttime. In Madagascar, human exploitation, particularly of women and children, is prominent in vanilla production.

The supply chain concentrates profits away from farmers: after passing through middlemen, vanilla reaches exporting hubs such as Antalaha. While the government levies export tax and exporters make the largest profit, growers receive meager compensation.²⁵ Therefore, Madagascar's vital role in vanilla production is not only tied to its favorable climate but also its abundant low-cost work labor. Hence, the political turmoil and insecurity surrounding the crop justify its price.

Island Development

While vanilla is undeniably linked to human exploitation inherited from colonial times, it has also contributed to the region's development. The development of the vanilla industry helped diversify

island's agriculture. In the 19th century, La Réunion was heading towards a sugarcane monoculture. It brought a need for an additional workforce, addressing a labor shortage on the island and leading to an inflow of slaves (until 1848) and indentured workers (until 1941). Although the island saw economic growth, it was partial since the generated wealth went mainly to wealthy producers and not the enslaved population who constituted a majority. Hence, the broader society did not see the benefits of this growth.

After departmentalization, La Réunion's vanilla industry experienced a steep decline (45t exported in 1964, to 26t in 1968), while Madagascar's considerably increased (628t in 1964 to 960t in 1968).²⁶ Today, vanilla remains a key economic resource for Madagascar, while for the Reunionese, it has transitioned to a historical and patrimonial landmark, as Guichard testified. Its emotional value can be seen through events such as the 1988 airplane competition named "La route de la Vanille,"²⁷ which concluded in La Réunion, or through popular culture, with the social media in vogue tune "Goût Vanillé" by DJ Tony 438. Unfortunately, as aforementioned, this emotional tie to vanilla contradictorily comes with a pervasive lack of information about its history. This obscured history ties back to one that is better known: that being one of the main Indian Ocean cultures,

sugarcane. Agriculture flourished in La Réunion in the second half of the 19th century; the sugar production shifted from 18,540 tonnes in 1849 to 68,469 tonnes in 1860,²⁸ while vanilla grew from less than a ton in 1856 to 200 tons in 1898, making La Réunion the first global producer.²⁹ However, it was quickly overtaken by Madagascar, which exported 300 tons in 1924. In the late 19th century, the colonial government established an act (in 1882) to incentivize culture diversification, notably to handle the lower arrival of indentured labor and persistent labor shortage.

To encourage this, peasants were given land if they grew a third harvest, facilitating additional vanilla production.³⁰ Then, Madagascar's vast area allowed a quick development of the vanilla industry, which led to its demise in La Réunion. Today only a few plantations remain, with a negligible quantity that are exported.

The decrease in production is also tied to the heavy regulations set around vanilla in 1941 in La Réunion. These were enacted to maintain the selective process, natural cultivation, presentation, quality, and value of the bean in the face of the previously mentioned "fakings,"³¹ thereby solidifying La Réunion's Bourbon vanilla as a rare luxury product.³² This directly ties to the sugarcane industry, since for instance, Reunionese plantation owners such as Casal (who owned vanilla and sugarcane), traded vanilla and sugarcane with the USA to

obtain dollars to purchase Linotype machines.³³ Later, the Reunionese agriculture shifted to a near-monoculture of sugarcane, particularly until the 1960-70s. Consequently, today most of the island's food is imported, as 55 percent of the island's agricultural land is dedicated to sugarcane. The Département of La Réunion's report after the cyclone Garance reveals significant losses for agriculture, on which part of the island's economy and food supply heavily rely. Hence, the sugarcane industry estimates heavy losses of 80M Euros (163M Euros in agriculture) for Garance, greatly threatening the island's economy.³⁴

Impacts

In the past, such economic setbacks in the vanilla and the agricultural industries in La Réunion generated considerable migrations. The heavy labor inflow (slaves from Africa, and indentured labor from Asia) led to a great population growth from 68,400 people in 1815 to 241,677 people in 1941.³⁵ Additionally in Madagascar, vanilla is grown by Malagasy, but often Chinese middlemen are involved in classifying, curing, and selling it to exporters. These migrations caused frequent travel in the region, directly leading to a great diversification of the population in La Réunion, which is the basis for its unique multicultural yet local mix today.

This is known as the “creolization” process, in which several cultures mixed, and from this resulted a new culture incorporating or transforming diverse elements of each culture.³⁶ With new human capital, La Réunion disposed of a big labor force to work in agriculture, notably vanilla.

However, unintended consequences of these past migrations include the introduction of diseases such as cholera (1820 and 1859 breakout), influenza (1890), plague (1864 and 1899), and ongoing epidemics like dengue fever.³⁷ Even if these migrations caused the economic development of La Réunion through agriculture, they fueled profound disparities between the white owners’ income and the workers’ negligible earnings- still visible in the Reunionese society. To this day, though mixed, society remains greatly unequal in terms of income: the white residents from the mainland are the wealthiest, followed by merchants of Indian and Chinese descent, while the local Creole and African- descended populations sit at the bottom of the economic hierarchy.³⁸ Similar patterns are visible in Madagascar as well. The manifold effects of these migrations are thus prominent today.

Beyond the happy childhood memory of the first time having ice cream, lies a history of suffering, colonization, exploitation, and environmental change. From its native land of

Mexico, the spice traveled to La Réunion, where Edmond Albius discovered a way to pollinate the flowers and turn it into a profitable crop and a global superstar. Due to its rarity, the refined climate conditions needed, the threats looming over the plant (such as cyclones, diseases, and climate change), and the political turmoil in the country hosting most of the production, vanilla’s price is high. Despite the complexities tied to its production, vanilla contributed to La Réunion and the region’s development, generating crop diversification to contrast with sugarcane, and participated in a whole population shift in the region due to labor migration. This latter point extends into today’s society: vanilla, sugarcane, and other crops in the colonial La Réunion, fostered a great mix of population from the labor coming from all over the Indian Ocean. And despite this painful history, they contributed to making La Réunion a uniquely diverse, local, and multicultural Creole society, where skin color or religion does not divide people. Beyond this, vanilla’s history today- along with the “Bourbon vanilla” label- is yet to be reclaimed by the Reunionese population, who remain dominated by post and neocolonial mindsets denying them a say in their history.

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Best Served Cold: Operation Coldstore 1963 and the Reasons for the Singapore Government's Decision

Why did the Singapore government launch Operation Coldstore in 1963?

by: Jiansheng Zhang

Abstract

Operation Coldstore, launched in 1963 by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and resulting in the arrest of 113 Singaporean left-wing figures, cemented the People's Action Party's dominance in Singaporean politics—a position it holds to this day. Given its political and symbolic significance, Operation Coldstore remains one of the most hotly contested episodes in Singaporean historiography. Drawing on a wide range of primary sources, including declassified British documents, newspapers, and political memoirs, this essay evaluates competing interpretations and argues that the Singapore government's principal motivation was to satisfy Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaya and secure Singapore's merger with Malaya. By emphasizing the international dimension of the operation, this essay moves beyond the traditional binary in Singaporean scholarship—between “security” and “political” motivations—and places Coldstore within the broader dynamics of Cold War decolonization in Southeast Asia.

Introduction

On 2 February 1963, the Singapore government, led by Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew and his People's Action Party (hereafter abbreviated as the PAP), launched a covert operation codenamed “Coldstore.”¹ The operation was authorized by Singapore's Internal Security Council (ISC), which included officials from the governments of Singapore, Britain, and the Federation of Malaya.² A total of 113 left-wing Singaporean figures were detained without trial. Among them were 24 members of the Barisan Sosialis (hereafter abbreviated as the Barisan), the largest opposition party to the PAP, including its leader Lim Chin Siong.³

Operation Coldstore effectively dismantled the political left in Singapore.⁴ In the general election held on 21 September 1963, the PAP won a landslide victory with 37 parliamentary seats, compared to the Barisan's 13.⁵ Five years later, the Barisan boycotted the 1968 election and subsequently lost all its seats, giving the PAP undisputed control over Singaporean politics—a position it has maintained to this day.⁶ In another major development, Singapore merged with Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963.⁷ The merger was short-lived, however, and Singapore separated from Malaysia in August 1965, becoming an independent nation.⁸

This paper investigates the question: Why did the Singapore government launch Operation Coldstore in 1963? This is a significant question in historiography, given Operation Coldstore's lasting impact on the PAP's political dominance in Singapore, the Singapore–Malaysia relationship, and the Cold War in Southeast Asia during the 1960s. Historians hold divergent views on this issue. Some, aligning with the Singaporean government's official position, argue that the Barisan was plotting subversive activities against constitutional rule, and that Lee launched Operation Coldstore to safeguard Singapore's internal security.



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Others, associated with the revisionist school, contend that Lee primarily used Operation Coldstore to eliminate his political opponents and secure a PAP victory in the upcoming election.

This essay offers a novel perspective by arguing that the primary reason for the Singapore government's decision to launch Operation Coldstore was to fulfill the Tunku's demand and facilitate the merger with Malaya. The Barisan did not pose a security threat to the Singapore government, although it was a source of serious concern for the Malayan government—concern that translated into pressure from the Tunku on Lee to arrest Singapore's leftists. Lee's electoral interests contributed to Operation Coldstore by increasing the number of detainees, but they were not the root cause of the arrests. By highlighting the international dimension as the driving force behind Operation Coldstore, this essay moves beyond from the traditional dichotomy in Singaporean scholarship, which attributes the operation either to Lee's "political" or "security" considerations.⁹ It draws attention to the significance of the political maneuvering among Singapore, Malaya, and Britain within the broader context of the Cold War and the decolonization process of the 1960s, wherein the merger formed part of Britain's geopolitical strategy to contain communism in Southeast Asia.

This paper draws on a wide range of primary sources, some of which have received little attention from previous researchers. These include the meeting minutes of the Internal Security Council; telegram and letter exchanges among Singaporean, Malayan, and British officials; reports by British colonial officers; articles from *The Straits Times*; and the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew and Poh Soo Kai (Assistant Secretary-General of the Barisan). It also engages with secondary scholarship by historians offering diverse perspectives on the issue, including Kumar Ramakrishna (Nanyang Technological University), Geoff Wade (Australian National University), Matthew Jones (University of London), Thum Ping Tjin (National University of Singapore), and T. N. Harper (University of Cambridge), among others.

Historians have referred to the detainees of Operation Coldstore as "communists," "pro-communists," or the "Progressive Left." This essay will use the term leftists consistently, as it carries fewer political connotations and avoids the ideological assumptions embedded in other labels.

Operation Coldstore as Protecting Singapore from Communist Subversion

The first theory regarding the cause of Operation Coldstore suggests that the Singapore government arrested leftist politicians with the intention of protecting internal security against communist subversion. This has been the Singapore government's official narrative on Operation Coldstore—a position it maintains to this day. According to this view, the Barisan Sosialis had long modeled themselves on communist movements in Malaya and China and were planning to overthrow constitutional rule in Singapore. This essay, however, will argue that this explanation is not grounded in historical reality.

To explain the alleged violent tendencies of the Singapore left, scholar Kumar Ramakrishna contends that it formed part of a "Communist United Front" seeking to stage a communist revolution.¹⁰ He notes that, in the 1950s, Singaporean leftists were active behind the scenes in several anti-colonial protests and strikes that turned violent, such as the 1954 National Service riots and the 1955 Hock Lee bus riots.¹¹ During the latter, ABL (and later Barisan) leader Fong Swee Suan proclaimed, "Bloodshed was inevitable in a revolution." During the Hock Lee bus riots, ABL (and later Barisan)

leader Fong Swee Suan proclaimed, "Bloodshed was inevitable in a revolution."¹² Lim Chin Siong stated, "Bloodshed is necessary for the betterment of the livelihood of all the workers in the colony."¹³ In Ramakrishna's view, these remarks imply that the Singaporean left "were fully alive to the use of violence" as a means of achieving their goals—thereby justifying, in his argument, a security operation by the Singapore government.¹⁴

A more direct sign of militant action emerged in December 1962. On 8 December, an anti-colonial rebellion broke out in Brunei.¹⁵ The Barisan issued a statement in support of the Brunei revolt, with Lim expressing hope that "the people in Kalimantan Utara will soon achieve their national aims."¹⁶ Some historians believe this gave the ISC grounds to suspect that the Barisan was plotting a similar uprising in Singapore. In a telegram to Duncan Sandys (Secretary of State for the Colonies) dated 14 December 1962, Lord Selkirk (UK Commissioner to Singapore) wrote, "[T]here had been indications that the communists might resort to violence if the opportunity occurred."¹⁷ By "indications," Selkirk was referring to the "recent statements by the Barisan Sosialis" in support of the Brunei revolt.¹⁸

The Barisan's militant potential as an emerging labour movement, combined with the suspicions raised by the Brunei uprising,

forms the basis of the argument made by historians who believe Operation Coldstore was launched on security grounds. On the eve of the operation, the Barisan "demonstrated potential for fomenting violence," claims Ramakrishna, making it a "serious threat to Singapore's established order."¹⁹ Therefore, these historians conclude that the Singapore government arrested leftist leaders to prevent a violent uprising.

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"On the contrary, ample evidence suggests that Lim was committed to the use of peaceful methods to achieve the Barisan's aims."

The remarks by Lim and Fong during the Hock Lee bus riots must be understood within the specific context of the time and are insufficient to reflect the Barisan's overall ideology. Rather than openly advocating violent revolution, it is more accurate to interpret these statements as expressions of solidarity with student protesters in response to the police's violent repression.

The Barisan's support for the Brunei revolt does not constitute sufficient evidence of an attempted communist coup. As Barisan leader Poh Soo Kai clarified in The Straits Times on 12 January 1963, the Barisan supported the Brunei revolt

"because it is a nationalist movement against colonialism," but "that does not mean that their political ideology is the same as ours."²¹ This position, which Poh reaffirmed in his 2016 memoirs, appears reasonable.²² Expressions of solidarity among anti-colonial movements across different regions were common practice. Notably, on 24 January 1962, the PAP itself backed a motion expressing Singapore's "wholehearted" support for the anti-colonial rebellion in West Arian.²³ That the Barisan supported the armed uprising in Brunei does not, in itself, imply that they were planning a similar one in Singapore.

On the contrary, ample evidence suggests that Lim was committed to the use of peaceful methods to achieve the Barisan's aims. At an internal party meeting in September 1962, Lim stated, "We will persist in the peaceful constitutional method of struggle."²⁴ This remark came in response to complaints from some Barisan members who felt that the constitutional path was futile and asked whether there was "another way forward."²⁵ Lim responded firmly, affirming that the Barisan's objective was to "defeat the government in a general election."²⁶ Seeking to calm his impatient colleagues, he urged them to "persuade the people slowly" but "absolutely never be irritated to attack."²⁷ On 31 December 1962,

Lim reiterated this position in *The Plebian*, the Barisan's party newspaper: "If peaceful constitutional methods are available, only a maniac or a fool would seek a road of bloodshed."²⁸

These statements are valuable sources for addressing this essay's core question for two reasons. First, since they were directed at fellow Barisan members, Lim had no incentive to conceal his true intentions. This suggests that neither he nor the Barisan had any immediate plans to launch a violent coup. Second, these materials were readily accessible to members of the Internal Security Council (ISC), including Lee Kuan Yew's government. The Barisan meeting cited above was recorded by British intelligence, while *The Plebian* was a publicly available newspaper. Therefore, Lim's rejection of violent methods would have been known to the Singapore government and should have informed its decision-making.

Lim's commitment to non-violence is further corroborated by documents in the British archives. In a telegram to Duncan Sandys on 18 July 1962, Phillippe Moore (UK Deputy Commissioner to Singapore) wrote, "Our impression is that . . . [Lim's] primary objective is not the communist millennium but to obtain control of the constitutional government of Singapore."²⁹ Moore emphasized that "in Singapore today we have a political and not a security problem," meaning that the Barisan posed an electoral challenge

to the PAP government rather than a security threat.³⁰ Similarly, the British report *Singapore Political and Security Situation*, dated 10 April 1962, stated explicitly that "there can be no question of Barisan Sosialis literally seizing power by force."³¹ While the report acknowledged that the Barisan might pressure the government through "strikes, demonstrations and communal disorders," it also noted that the Barisan "fully realise[d] the difficulties and danger of such a course."³² With clear and well-documented reasoning, these sources demonstrate that a communist coup in Singapore was highly unlikely.

These British accounts shed light on how the colonial administration viewed the Barisan's intentions. The fact that these assessments came from the British government—an institution that was by no means sympathetic to Lim or the Barisan—lends them greater credibility than if the claims had come from Lim himself. Moreover, it is well-documented that the British communicated this view to Lee. In April 1962, Lee visited the British Colonial Office in London, where they discussed the security situation in Singapore.³³ The Colonial Office report titled *Visit of Mr. Lee Kuan Yew* noted that Lee had "shown sympathy" with the British view of the security situation.³⁴ The implication is clear: the Singapore government was aware that the

Barisan Sosialis was unlikely to seize power through unconstitutional means.

The narrative advanced by historians like Ramakrishna portrays Singapore's leftists as an emerging communist insurgency. However, the available evidence indicates that the Barisan was committed to pursuing power through constitutional means—a fact known to both the British and Singaporean governments. It is therefore implausible that the Singapore government launched Operation Coldstore to preempt a communist revolution that did not, in reality, exist.

Operation Coldstore as Facilitating the Merger between Singapore and Malaya

The primary reason behind the Singaporean government's decision to launch Operation Coldstore was Lee Kuan Yew's desire to appease Tunku Abdul Rahman of Malaya and secure the formation of the Federation of Malaysia. The Tunku pressured the Singapore government to arrest the leftists, making it a precondition for the merger. With Britain's endorsement of this approach, Lee proceeded with the arrests.

On 27 May 1961, the Tunku delivered a speech to the Southeast Asia Foreign Correspondents' Association, announcing his interest in pursuing closer "political

and economic cooperation" between Malaya and Singapore—in other words, a merger into a "Greater Malaysia."³⁵ Within weeks, it became publicly known that negotiations for the merger were underway between the Singaporean, Malayan, and British governments.³⁶

The Tunku's announcement and subsequent developments came as a welcome surprise to the British and Singaporean governments, both of which had long been lobbying him to support the formation of Malaysia.³⁷ As early as 1946, British Commissioner-General Malcolm MacDonald had proposed the "Greater Malaysia" scheme—a plan to unite Singapore, Malaya, and the Borneo territories into a single federation—as the framework for Britain's postcolonial arrangement in Southeast Asia.³⁸ Lee, in particular, was a vocal proponent of merger, writing in his memoirs: "All my life I have believed in merger and the unity of these two territories."³⁹

Prior to his May 1961 announcement, the Tunku had shown little enthusiasm for merger, largely because he viewed Singapore as a hotbed of leftist activism that could destabilize his rule.⁴⁰ Moreover, incorporating a Chinese-majority Singapore into the federation risked altering the ethnic balance in a way that could undermine Malay political dominance and the privileges enjoyed by the Malay community in Malaya.⁴¹ Eventually, however, the British succeeded in bringing the Tunku to the negotiating table by persuading him that an independent Singapore might, in the long term, pose an even

greater "communist threat" to Malaya's internal security.⁴²

It soon became clear to both the British and Singaporean governments that the Tunku's support for the merger was not unconditional. In March 1962, Dr Ismail, the Malayan representative on the Internal Security Council (ISC), informed his British and Singaporean counterparts that the Singapore government must first arrest the leading members of the Singapore left as a precondition for merger.⁴³ Throughout the negotiations, the Malayan government consistently maintained that the elimination of the Singapore left was essential before unification could proceed.⁴⁴ On 9 September 1962, Malayan Deputy Prime Minister Tun Razak told the British that Malaya "were not prepared to go through with merger unless the communists were removed."⁴⁵ On 31 January 1963, the Tunku himself warned the UK High Commissioner in Kuala Lumpur: "In the event of the operation against the communists and their sympathizers in Singapore not taking place as planned, my government would feel compelled to abandon the proposed merger with Singapore."⁴⁶

What made the Tunku so adamant about the removal of Singapore's leftists? First, he feared that the Barisan would align with leftist parties in Malaya after the merger, thereby threatening his dominance in Malaysian politics. In particular, the Tunku was concerned that Lim Chin Siong's "frightening" organizational

abilities and "extremely skilful, successful and devoted" leadership would transform the Barisan into a formidable challenger to his United Malays National Organisation (UMNO) party.⁴⁷ Claude Fenner, Inspector General of the Malayan police, told Lord Selkirk that the Tunku wanted the Barisan politicians removed lest they "appear in the House of Representatives in Kuala Lumpur."⁴⁸ In his memoirs, Barisan leader Poh Soo Kai acknowledged that the Tunku had good reason to be concerned: "Indeed the Barisan would have been dangerous political opponents of the Tunku in Malaysia," Poh recalled. "We envisaged working closely with [the Labour Party and Parti Rakyat]."⁴⁹

Second, the Tunku believed—somewhat irrationally—that the Barisan was plotting a communist insurrection, despite the lack of concrete evidence. This mindset can be understood in light of Malaya's bitter experience with the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM). From 1948 to 1960, the CPM, led by Chin Peng, waged an armed struggle against British colonial rule in what became known as the Malayan Emergency.⁵⁰ Unwilling to repeat the mistakes of that era, the Malayan government adopted a hardline stance toward Singapore's leftists. When British officials attempted to reassure their Malayan counterparts that the Barisan did not pose a security threat, the Malaysians drew parallels between Singapore and

“the situation in Malaya in 1948 immediately before the Emergency,” arguing that “tough actions at that moment would have saved the country 12 years of insurrection and five more of subversion.”⁵¹ As a result, the Malayan representatives refused to be persuaded by the British “after all these years of experience, to accept the same argument again.”⁵² They insisted that Singapore’s leftists must be arrested before they could further “enlarge and strengthen their organisation.”⁵³

Both the British and Singaporean governments were initially reluctant to agree to the Tunku’s proposed arrest program. The British government feared that mass detentions would damage Britain’s international reputation, particularly in the wake of recent revelations about atrocities committed in Kenya and Nyasaland.⁵⁴ Moreover, the arrests risked provoking political backlash, potentially providing the Barisan with a powerful rallying point and triggering protests and strikes.⁵⁵ In a telegram to Duncan Sandys on 18 July 1962, Philippe Moore (UK Deputy Commissioner to Singapore) warned that “nothing could provide a more effective rallying point” for the left than the arrest of “leading members of the main Opposition party without adequate cause.”⁵⁶ Lee shared the British concern that the arrests would carry significant political risks for the PAP government.⁵⁷ He also

feared that the Tunku might renege on the merger once the Singapore left had been neutralized and Malaya no longer needed to incorporate Singapore for security reasons.⁵⁸ Until May 1962, Lee remained hesitant about the arrests, reportedly telling the Tunku that “actions should be deferred until merger was assured.”⁵⁹

Eventually, both the British and Singaporean governments yielded to the Tunku’s pressure, as their initial reservations were outweighed by a strong, shared desire to bring about the formation of Malaysia. For the Singapore government, merger with Malaya was seen as the only viable path forward. The Malayan hinterland offered an indispensable common

“Eventually, both the British and Singaporean governments yielded to the Tunku's pressure, as their initial reservations were outweighed by a strong, shared desire to bring about the formation of Malaysia.”

market for Singapore’s exports and a foundation for its industrialization.⁶⁰ Additionally, Singapore relied on Malaya for essential resources such as fresh water.⁶¹ As Lee later recalled, in the 1960s the notion of an independent Singapore capable of surviving on its own “was not yet something that had widespread currency.”⁶² Moreover, merger with Malaya promised to be politically popular for the PAP. The party had been voted into power in 1959 when the British government

granted Singapore self-governance.⁶³

By the time of the merger talks, however, the PAP government was grappling with a range of domestic challenges: rising crime and unemployment, along with worsening housing shortages.⁶⁴ As public dissatisfaction grew, the PAP suffered two consecutive by-election defeats in 1961—first in Hong Lim, then in Anson.⁶⁵ Historian Thum Ping Tjin noted that “Lee needed a subject which was universally popular . . . : the reunification with the rest of Malaya.”⁶⁶ Merger had been one of the PAP’s central campaign promises in the 1959 election. Delivering swift and tangible progress on this front would help restore public confidence in the PAP’s leadership.⁶⁷

Not only the Singaporean government, but also the British government—which retained considerable influence over Singapore during the decolonization process—had a vested interest in bringing about the merger.⁶⁸ In the context of the Cold War, communist movements were actively threatening to overthrow capitalist regimes across Southeast Asia. According to historian Geoff Wade, the British sought to create an “anti-communist bulwark” in the region for strategic purposes.⁶⁹ An independent Singapore was considered too vulnerable to communist influence, given its ethnic Chinese majority and sizeable working-class population.⁷⁰

(The Chinese diaspora in Southeast Asia was often associated—albeit reductively—with communism, due to perceived ties to the People’s Republic of China.)⁷¹ In contrast, the Tunku’s ethnocratic rule in Malaya ensured that communism would not gain traction there.⁷² By incorporating Singapore into Malaya, Britain could help contain communism and safeguard its strategic interests in Southeast Asia.⁷³

In the lead-up to the merger, the power dynamics among the Singaporean, British, and Malayan governments were clearly asymmetrical: Singapore desperately needed the merger; Britain strongly supported it; Malaya, by contrast, did not need the merger but could be persuaded to accept it. This imbalance gave the Tunku considerable leverage over both Lee and the British. He was in a position to look beyond immediate concerns and shape the terms of a post-merger Malaysia to his advantage.⁷⁴ On one hand, he could demand that Lee arrest Singapore’s leftists as a precondition for merger. On the other, he could count on the British members of the Internal Security Council not to oppose this ostensibly repressive measure. The Tunku’s intransigence became a headache for the British government, which struggled to construct a credible “security case” to justify the arrests.⁷⁵ In a telegram to Duncan Sandys on 15 May 1962, Philippe Moore complained that the Tunku was “trying to over-insure” despite “the lack of evidence of subversion.”⁷⁶

et this over-insurance was precisely the logic behind the Tunku’s strategy: he was unwilling to take any risks. If the arrests were carried out before the merger, he could “start off Malaysia with a harmonious atmosphere.”⁷⁷ If they were not, he was equally prepared to exclude Singapore from the new federation.

The outcome of these political maneuvers was the acquiescence of both the Singaporean and British governments to the Tunku’s demand for arrests.⁷⁸ With the successful execution of Operation Coldstore, Lee was able to reassure the Tunku, who formally accepted Singapore into the Federation of Malaysia on 16 September 1963.⁷⁹ At the expense of the Singapore left, Lee, the Tunku, and the British each secured their respective objectives—at least for the time being.

Operation Coldstore as Eliminating the PAP’s Political Opponents

In addition to external pressure, Lee Kuan Yew’s desire to eliminate his political opponents was a contributing factor in the Singapore government’s decision to launch Operation Coldstore. It was not the primary reason, however, as Lee had other means at his disposal to suppress the Barisan Sosialis and secure a PAP victory in the next election.

The Barisan Sosialis was established in July 1961 by 13 leftist PAP parliamentarians who split from Lee’s right-wing faction.⁸⁰

These Barisan members retained their seats in the Singaporean parliament and became the main opposition party.⁸¹ As many of them were prominent grassroots leaders, they controlled a significant portion of the trade unions and commanded strong support among the working class.⁸² As a result, political commentators speculated that the Barisan could potentially win the 1963 Singapore general election.⁸³

Lee was clearly concerned about the electoral challenge posed by the Barisan, as evidenced by multiple accounts in declassified British documents. On 28 April 1962, Lord Selkirk observed that Lee was “quite clearly attracted by the prospect of wiping out his main political opposition before the next Singapore elections.”⁸⁴ Similarly, Duncan Sandys noted that, in discussions with Lee, the latter appeared “attracted to the idea of eliminating the most powerful section of his political opposition.”⁸⁵ That Lee expressed this sentiment to two different British officials underscores the strength of his intention. It is therefore highly likely that Lee’s electoral interests played a significant role in his decision to launch Operation Coldstore in 1963.

Nevertheless, electoral concerns were not the decisive factor in Lee’s decision to launch Operation Coldstore. First, there were alternative—and arguably more politically prudent—methods available for dealing with the Barisan and its supporters.

In a telegram to Duncan Sandys dated 15 June 1962, Philippe Moore outlined various strategies he had discussed with Lee for exerting pressure on the Singapore left. These included revoking the editorship of left-wing journalists, harassing Barisan-affiliated publications, and banning trade union meetings.⁸⁶ Such measures were designed to curtail the Barisan's influence on public opinion and weaken its ties to organized labour. If these tactics provoked the Barisan into violent retaliation, the PAP government would then have a "good reason" to justify a more severe crackdown.⁸⁷ This strategy, therefore, posed fewer political risks than a mass arrest operation.

Second, Lee should have good reason to believe that the PAP could retain power without resorting to mass arrests. In the merger referendum held on 1 September 1962, the PAP backed a proposal for Singapore to become a federal state within Malaysia with a high degree of autonomy, while the Barisan urged its supporters to cast blank ballots.⁸⁸ The outcome was a decisive victory for the PAP's position, which received 71 percent of the vote, compared to only 25 percent supporting the Barisan.⁸⁹ The referendum highlighted the PAP's dominance over the media and its superior organizational and fundraising capacities.⁹⁰ In the view of British officials, the results suggested that the Singapore government was capable of containing the Barisan through political means,

without the need for repressive action.⁹¹

Nevertheless, Lee's electoral interests influenced Operation Coldstore in one crucial respect: they led to an expansion of the list of detainees. Initially, the Tunku had envisioned the arrest of approximately 25 of Singapore's most prominent leftist leaders. Lee, however, sought to use the opportunity to eliminate as many political opponents as possible, reportedly proposing "about one thousand" arrests.⁹² This overreach angered the Tunku, who felt that Lee was exploiting the "atmosphere of urgency" to serve his own political agenda, while attempting to shift responsibility onto Malaya.⁹³ As a result of the fallout between the two leaders, the first planned execution of Operation Coldstore—scheduled for 16 December 1962—was aborted.⁹⁴ The operation resumed only after both parties made concessions, ultimately fixing the number of detainees at 113.⁹⁵ The final list included not only the Barisan's top leadership, but also trade unionists, public intellectuals, and three members of the United People's Party (UPP), the PAP's other opposition party.⁹⁶

Conclusion

Operation Coldstore was not simply a domestic crackdown on leftist dissent but the outcome of intricate geopolitical maneuvering. The Singapore government's decision to proceed with the arrests in 1963 was

driven above all by external pressure from Malaya, especially Prime Minister Tunku Abdul Rahman's insistence on the removal of leftists as a condition for merger. British endorsement, grounded in Cold War imperatives and regional anti-communist strategy, further enabled the operation. While Lee Kuan Yew's desire to neutralize political opponents played a role in expanding the list of detainees, it was not the decisive catalyst for the arrests.

This case complicates conventional binaries in Singaporean historiography that frame Operation Coldstore as either a necessary security measure or a cynical political purge. Instead, it reveals how postcolonial state formation was shaped by a triangulated dynamic: local political rivalries, regional anxieties about communism, and imperial geopolitical agendas. It also raises important questions about how states narrate violence and suppress dissent under the banner of national security — narratives often shaped and legitimized by colonial frameworks.

By foregrounding the merger as the linchpin of Coldstore, this essay situates a pivotal moment in Singaporean history within the broader transformations of Southeast Asia in the early 1960s. In doing so, it invites further inquiry into how decolonization, Cold War strategy, and elite political survival intersected in the making of modern nation-states.

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A Shift in Discourse:

The Effects of the Scottish Independence Movement on Broader United Kingdom Politics

by **Connor Christopher Sale**

Abstract

This study seeks to understand the impact of the Scottish independence movement on party politics in the United Kingdom (UK). Parliamentary speeches and polling data shed light on the movement and the shift of the political landscape. This study uses quantitative approaches to understanding the independence movement. Competition theories, alongside empirical evidence suggest the impact of a historic rivalry rather than the influence of Scottish National Party (SNP) polling on discourse of mainstream parties. When the Conservative party is down in polls, Scottish independence is discussed less, whereas when the Labour party is down in polls, it discusses Scottish independence more.

1. Introduction

Nationalist movements around the globe have been gaining significant traction, with some movements gaining their true desire - independence. The most recent success in independence referendums across the globe is in Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Strong movements with failed referendums are all too common in the world. Scotland, Catalonia, and Quebec are a few of the most recent cases of faltering movements. The success of these movements is not solely based on a strong campaign that encapsulated voters hearts and minds but rather on the success of niche and regional parties in a broader party system. A party system is a multi-faceted and complex institution that relies on various studies to help explain the impact of the parties that lie within. Parties, especially within

the guise of independence movements, have a strong influence on both the success of the movement and the publicity that the issue may be given. Furthermore, these movements are not independent standalone positions. These issues are often accompanied by a single, or a handful, of parties that backs this issue alongside the merging of other issues that allow voters to further identify themselves with the party.

As one of the most robust and well supported independence movements around the world, the Scottish independence movement has been on the rise for centuries because of its long history as part of the UK. Since the Union with England Act of 1707 united Scotland and England under the English crown, Scotland sought out greater autonomy in the form of

devolved parliament. Beginning in the late 19th century, the Scottish independence movement is one of the oldest independence movements around the world. Its impact is far reaching and the unique nationalist rhetoric that SNP uses has sparked a nationalist resurgence and a desire for many regions of larger European players to seek greater autonomy and even independence.

With the rhetoric of the SNP at the forefront of the debate, there is something to be said about its influence over the broader political and party system of the UK. Political party research predominantly focuses on the maneuverability of mainstream or “larger” parties as they relate to one another, opening a new domain of political party research focusing on the approach t



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mainstream parties take when faced with a niche party challenger. By exploring the impact of the SNP, the largest and furthest reaching niche party in the UK, one can examine the impact that niche parties have on the broader political framework of a country. With a long history of spatial theory research and the impact of niche parties on the broader political climate of a particular country, using a large movement like the Scottish example can allow for a widely applicable result that has similar visualizations in various other movements around the globe.

2. *Theory and Hypotheses*

Political parties are the first level of connection when it comes to the relationship between citizens and leaders. Hence, to facilitate an understanding of the dynamics of political parties, democracy, and the representative system, therewithin, an understanding of the public-party dynamic must first be realized. To create this understanding, utilizing public opinion, voting trends, and party policy positions is essential. The analysis aims to evaluate hypotheses that utilize party dynamics and the reactions parties may have to the positions of other actors in the system, including polling trends, policy positions, and parliamentary speech. It also recognizes that numerous additional factors influence a party's position within the party system and its relative success, such as the voting s

system, the policy preferences of political activists, socio-economic links to party membership, the state of the national economy, results from past elections, leadership changes, and party dynastic status (the long-term dominance of a single party in a specific region). Past research has proven that there are mitigating factors to these factors though.¹ This study utilizes longstanding research surrounding the presence of niche parties² in a broader party system.³ Niche party successes in Western Europe have been influential for some time now. The manner in which mainstream parties react have begotten a plethora of research about the impact of niche parties on the broader political climate of a country. Spatial theory⁴ literature provides a solid baseline of gauging how and why a voter votes. However, spatial theory also provides the simple fact that parties are not isolated agents in the scheme of a party system, but rather they adapt and maneuver their policy positions as a reaction to other parties and the performance of their own party in recent elections.

Meguid (2008) describes the three strategies that parties employ to adapt to the emergence of new, niche, and competing party competitors in their party system. According to Meguid, these strategies are accommodative, adversarial, and dismissive strategies.⁵

Accommodative strategy is a form of policy convergence employed by mainstream parties in order to

decrease the distinctiveness of a niche party's issue and give the voters a higher level of party choice on the issue.⁶ Adversarial strategy is a form of policy divergence that encourages voter flight to the competing party by declaring opposition to the niche party's policy stance.⁷ Dismissive strategy, a strategy that Meguid claims is often overlooked when discussing party's strategic models, a non-action strategy that deliberately ignores the niche party's policy issue as a way of diminishing the importance of the issue.⁸ The accommodative strategy is considered, by Meguid, the most effective strategy, reducing niche party vote percentage by 1.5 percentage points compared to dismissive strategy's decrease of 1.32 percentage points, and adversarial strategy's increase of 6.54 percentage points.⁹

Meguid's work was a gateway for many scholars to explore the field of niche parties and in many ways opened the debate on the implications of niche parties in a broader party system. Niche party successes have been documented on account of various niche party interests, including immigration, regional autonomy, environmental politics, and more.¹⁰ This display of niche party success is, in part, due to the mainstream accommodative strategy that facilitates a shift towards the position of the party that poses the greatest threat on their issue salience and ownership figures.¹¹ While

mainstream parties are able to adopt the issues and votes of niche parties using accommodative strategy, there is a heavy question on their ability to maneuver in a short period of time. Allen and Weeks (2023) demonstrates the differences in the ability for mainstream parties to accurately adapt to niche parties that are on opposite sides of the left-right scale that the mainstream party is.

Literature utilizing spatial theory present compelling arguments that parties affected by losses in vote share should be more likely to shift their policy positions so as to follow the party that took their share away.¹² In a system by which parties are cognizant of one another, there is strong evidence to support the shift in party policy platforms based upon the success of another. Party issue emphasis is an ever-changing situation that has different levels depending on the period that is analyzed, i.e. election cycle vs. everyday parliamentary debate.¹³ Issue emphasis and competition is key when analyzing party competition. Parties often use a flexible form of issue emphasis that ebbs and flows based on public opinion. These methods include, but are not limited to, daily press releases, party manifestos, and parliamentary speeches.¹⁴ The growth of research in party competition and issue emphasis provides dual concept research in party competition amongst mainstream and niche parties. Both of Meguid's works on niche party competition and success opened the door for a growing literature base of niche party influence accompanied by the well-established literature base of party competition research.¹⁵

Adams et al. (2006) finds that there is support in the "costless spatial mobility" assumption in respect to mainstream parties, while niche parties do not have this same luxury.¹⁶ Furthermore, Adams et al. (2006) finds that niche parties can shape the political agendas of mainstream parties by shaping the "terms of the political debate".¹⁷

Research on niche party success demonstrates that parties do not operate as isolated actors but instead actively respond to one another through shifts in policy positions. Far-right party success is a model in which spatial theory sees its effects. As far right parties have emerged, there has been strong correlation to the creation of a "more ethno-cultural and restrictive position on immigration," by mainstream parties.¹⁸ As niche party success grows, mainstream parties are all but forced to adopt new policy positions in order to remain relevant and hold vote support during future elections. These mainstream cannot utilize a dismissive strategy because of the newfound successes of the niche party. This success makes it important that the mainstream parties recognize the niche party and thus, recognize the issue that they are fighting for so as to properly respond to the issue and the party itself. This recognition provides the niche party with a manner to which they are able to give their issue more 'air-time'. This 'air-time' has two-forms. Direct discussion of this issue refers to debate between the niche party and mainstream parties,

encompassing engagement with the primary issue advocated by the niche party. Indirect discussion of the issue provides mainstream parties with a method to coopt the key issue area of a niche party, allowing the mainstream party to exclude niche party perspectives on a broader scale, thus taking the teeth out of the niche party's message.

Even as competition with an emerging niche party intensifies, party competition frequently continues to be dominated by long-standing rivals. Somer-Topcu and Tavits (2023) reveals that competition between rivals manifests in the form of message distortion, changing the representation of the rival party's policy position, and selective representation of the rival party's messages.¹⁹ The manifestation of rival party competition provides a strong foundation for evaluating the longstanding relationships amongst the mainstream parties. Somer-Topcu and Tavits (2023) also provides evidence that rival parties will shift their strategies according to each other rather than that of another party.²⁰ They do this by adapting discussion of various issues to adapt their platforms to reflect the political landscape during an election rather than ignoring an issue that may be picked up by a rival party and risk the rival putting word in their mouth. Rival competition literature

provides a significant method for evaluation within the context of the adoption of issues that were typically reserved to niche parties, i.e. environment, regional autonomy, and more. Party messaging is important to the discussion of the impact that niche parties have on the broader political climate of a nation. Partisan motivations provide more evidence that rival party messaging between each other provides voters with an argument or message that more closely aligns with their party identification. Rival competition is a key component when analyzing the impact of these different theories and their intertwined nature.

While theoretical justifications provide many important facets to analyze party policy positions, it is important to note that there are significant external factors that can contribute to party policy changes. Schumacher et al. (2013) provides analysis on how each external factor

may contribute aside from niche party interests.²¹ They specifically analyzed how mean voter change, party voter change, and office exclusion affect the shift in policy positions, finding that, “both the change in the party voter’s position and the change in the mean voter’s position have a positive effect on party position change while defeat is not significant.”²² Despite these external factors, the analysis examines the impact of the SNP and the Scottish independence movement on the broader political climate of the UK. In order to analyze the impact of this movement, first analyzing, the status of SNP, Labour, and Conservative and the history that surrounds these parties in the UK is essential.

2.1 The U.K context

The Scottish Independence movement has a large impact on the UK party system with the SNP polled at 3.9 percent in Westminster at the 2019 general election and 47.7 percent in Holyrood at the 2021 Scottish parliamentary election. This

profound impact on politics, both at the regional (Scotland) and national (United Kingdom) level proves to be important when analyzing the strategies that the mainstream UK parties (Labour and Conservative) employ when mitigating losses in Scotland. For decades, Labour dominated the political landscape in Scotland, over the span of 51 years from 1964 – 2015. Labour dominance was marked by a vote share that did not drop below 35 percent during its reign.²³ Figure 1 displays this dominance; no party comes close to overtaking Labour in the polls until the 2015 general election. As illustrated on the opposite side of Figure 1, the SNP exhibits a markedly weaker initial performance. From its inception in the 1929 general election and the nearly half a century following, the SNP polled very low in Scotland. The dominance of Labour was a contributing factor to this. As the SNP was able to find its footing in Scotland, they got their first polling above 10 percent in the 1970 general election. SNP was set to do well in polls as it gained support from the same base as Labour. SNP has been growing in every election since with fluctuation in vote share but never falling below the 10 percent threshold. Around the time of the 2015 general election SNP significantly improved its polling percentages in the Scottish parliament in the wake of the Scottish

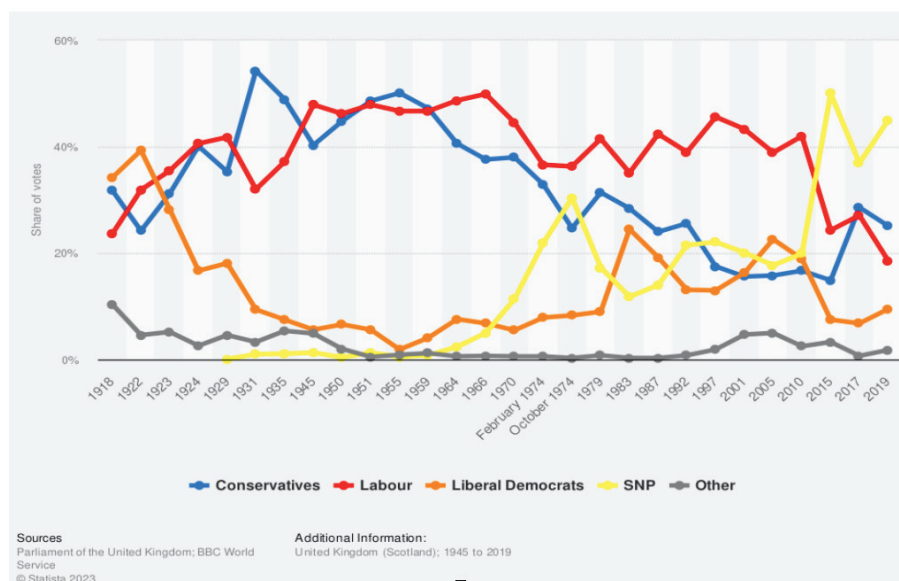


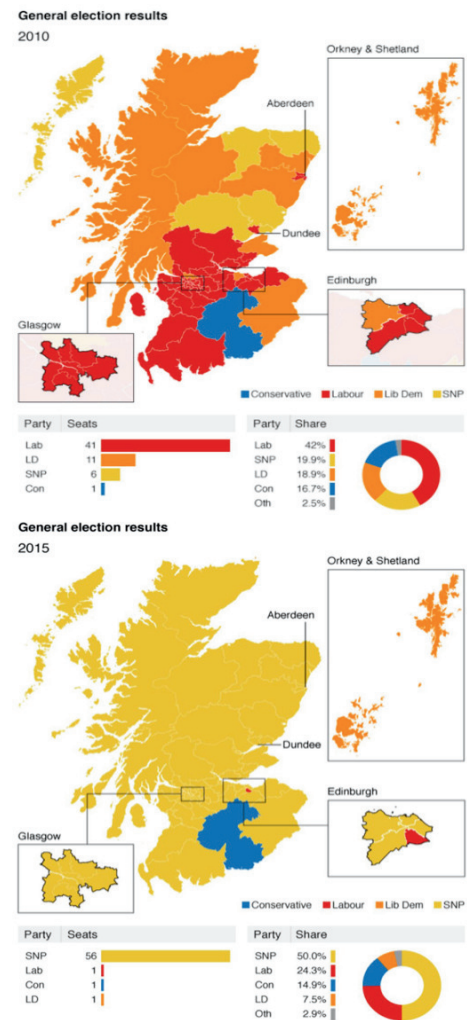
Figure 1 - Share of votes in general elections in Scotland from 1918 - 2019 (Statista 2023)

independence referendum. SNP was and still maintains as being the party for Scottish independence. The voter turnout in the Scottish independence referendum displayed the power of SNP and their ability to bring Scotland together for a common goal.

In the lead up to the 2015 election, SNP had strong support in the southern Highlands, the Outer Heybrides, and Speyside. This support spread in the lead up to the 2015 election that disrupted the significant majority that Labour had held for so long. Labour support shrunk by 17.7 percent to 24.3 percent and the SNP raising their vote share percentage to 50 percent, an increase of 30.1 percent from the 2010 election as shown in Figure 2. During the Scottish parliamentary elections of 2015, SNP was able to gain an astounding 50 seats raising their seat share from just 6 up to 56 seats leaving the other three major parties with one seat each, as displayed in Figure 2. SNP won in every single district except for three districts, Edinburgh South, Orkney and Shetland, and Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale, and Tweeddale. In the three losing districts, each of the three mainstream parties were able to secure one seat. This election saw the beginning of a new dominance of SNP in Scottish politics, a party that has held onto their power in every election since, even sending the largest share of UK MPs from Scotland to Westminster.

After the 2015 elections, SNP saw further success during the Brexit referendum in which voters were galvanized in their support for remaining within the EU and Leaving the UK.²⁴

When looking at the UK parliamentary elections, one must look at the strategies that Meguid addresses in her work to distinguish the policy shifts that have been done by the two mainstream parties to manage loss of votes to niche parties like SNP. As SNP has been succeeding, there is a marked increase in the need for accommodative tactics by the Labour party because of shared policy stances on issues that affect both parties irrespective of the location that the party caters to. The SNP is a nationalist party and thus, does not run candidates outside of Scotland. YouGov polls suggests that if the SNP were to run as a UK-wide party, they would be the third largest party in the UK, just passing up the Liberal Democrats, with 11 percent of the vote share.²⁵ Party leadership considered this change in 2016.²⁶ While the SNP is limited to Scotland, mainstream parties do little to adopt similar positions to the SNP. If ran on a UK-wide level, the SNP would force mainstream parties to shift focus onto smaller, more niche issues like Scottish independence.



2.2 Hypotheses

Based on the theory articulated above, the following four hypotheses were created to accurately articulate the theoretical and empirical evidence into measurable statements. These three hypotheses are crafted to serve as guides to explore possible shifts, impacts, and consequences that may arise because of the successes of the Scottish independence movement.

SNP has been the backer of Scottish independence since its inception. The recent move towards support of SNP has grown support for the Scottish independence movement. This stark increase in support has made the Scottish independence movement a salient issue within the politics of Scotland and the UK at-large. The first peak of this movement being in the 2014 referendum has begotten a response from the mainstream parties attempting to maintain their voting base. The profound successes of SNP have created a space in which the mainstream parties must adopt a strategy that does not simply ignore SNP or the issue at hand.

Continued reliance on dismissive strategies would likely shift the issue debate further in favor of the SNP, as the party would become increasingly vocal and assertive in its pursuit of Scottish independence. The electoral successes of the SNP, discussed in the preceding section on the UK context, provide strong incentives for Labour and the Conservative Party to adopt new strategies to regain relevance in Scotland. The era of sustained Labour and Conservative dominance has given way to one characterized by SNP ascendancy, necessitating adjustments in mainstream party policy positions to address the challenges posed by a successful niche party. As Meguid demonstrates, niche party success can significantly undermine mainstream parties and is most effectively countered through direct engagement and adaptation of party platforms.

By elevating Scottish independence as a salient issue, the SNP has compelled mainstream parties to respond within a discourse shaped by the movement, measuring success less through immediate electoral gains than through the normalization of its core issue within UK-wide political debate.

***Hypothesis 1:** As SNP support increases, there is more discussion of the Scottish independence in the House of Commons.*

The Labour party, a mainstream party that derives support from a similar voting bloc as SNP, is the party that one would expect the most discussion of the Scottish independence movement from in the House of Commons. In the polling displayed in The UK Context, Labour's polling percentages took a drastic turn for the worse when SNP was able to secure their majority in 2015. This majority came largely from the voting base of Labour. One would expect the Labour party to speak more about Scottish independence to shift votes from SNP back to the Labour party. If Labour is seen as an alternative to the SNP for Scottish independence, the possibility of experiencing higher levels of success on the national level seems more likely. This is due to the possibility of large swaths of SNP voters returning to their previous positions within the Labour party of Scotland.

When looking at polling of the Labour party, there is likely a correlation between that of Labour successes and the voting base of SNP jumping ship to join a party that creates higher success for the Scottish independence movement. As the SNP is discussing more, they will keep their rival, the Conservative party, in mind to ensure that they can beat Conservative by regaining votes lost to SNP. Scottish independence is a hotly debated issue in the Labour party which has an official stance against the movement. Making the movement an ambiguous issue could aid their case in regaining their vote share prior to the 2015 election.

***Hypothesis 2:** As SNP support increases, there is more discussion of the Scottish independence in the House of Commons by Labour Party.*

Rival competition theory helps emphasize the impact that Conservative polling has on the actions of the Labour party. The historic rivalry between Labour and Conservative provides strong support that Labour will adopt SNP positions to regain any support lost in previous election cycles. The movement that was previously used to destroy the Labour's dominance is also seen by the Labour party as a mechanism to regain their dominance over Conservative. Scotland, a historic stronghold for Labour, is the primary battleground for what could be the resurgence of Labour over the reign of conservative for the past decade in Westminster.

Labour sees Scottish independence as method to undermine the power of the Conservative party. Simultaneously, Labour views SNP as being a party subordinate to the power of Labour. Thus, Labour utilizes the movement that SNP has bolstered for so long to their possible benefit. They have the ability to spin the discourse by PMs and by the public to enhance the stance of the Labour party in polling. They can do this by channeling their centuries long rivalry with the Conservative party into co-opting the Scottish independence debate to their side to absorb voters of SNP and to gain an extra edge over the Conservative party. The Labour motivation is often rooted in the desire to defeat Conservative on the national level.

Hypothesis 3: *Labour should talk more about Scottish independence as Conservative party is polling better in Scotland.*

The Conservative party, on the other hand, has two options when it comes to victory against their rival on the discourse of the Scottish independence movement. The first option would be for the Conservative party to speak more on the issue, likely in an adversarial manner, to get more emphasis on the issue and to divide the Labour party. As the Conservative party discusses Scottish independence, more radical members of the party will likely switch to SNP thus, dividing the Labour vote. This adversarial speech would likely be used to maintain SNP's hold on Scotland

but would give Conservative the edge in national elections in which Scotland is not a battleground for control of Westminster. With a strong SNP and a weak Labour in Scotland, Conservative would likely find themselves polling 2nd in Holyrood, but 1st in Westminster.

On the other side of the coin, the Conservative party can wholeheartedly ignore the issue and diminish the issue importance of Scottish independence. This strategy is used to destroy the importance of Scottish independence as a voting issue and undermine SNP's mission as a party. As seen in the past, the SNP holds power when the Scottish independence debate is at the forefront of the minds of voters. In order to remain relevant, SNP needs recognition from mainstream parties to increase issue importance and create an opportunity for the Scottish independence movement to become a voting issue. Without the recognition of SNP and the movement at large, the Conservative movement benefits from a faltering SNP that cannot maintain competition with the larger mainstream parties because of funding and voting base. Without the SNP, the Conservative can likely gain votership by both competing with their rival in Labour and by regaining votership lost to SNP in the 2015 election. To do this, Conservative would deemphasize the Scottish independence movement in their broader political plans, while simultaneously emphasizing the different issues that SNP voters care the most about.

Furthermore, revoking recognition of the issue can be used to undermine the authority of Labour. They can do this by deemphasizing the issues that Labour was attempting to use to their benefit. With Labour attempting to use Scottish independence as a mechanism to increase vote share, Conservative would undermine their work by simply not discussing the issue that they so desired to use. With two very likely implications to discussion of Scottish independence, there is a strong argument for testing both of these hypothesis in the context of this study.

Hypothesis 4:

1. *Conservative should talk more about Scottish independence as Labour party is polling better in Scotland.*
2. *Conservative should talk less about Scottish independence as Labour party is polling better in Scotland.*

3. Research Design

The ParLEE plenary speeches data set has 3 versions, all of different sizes, that contain full-text sentence level annotations of parliamentary speeches in 20 EU states from 2009-2019. The version employed is the first iteration of a dataset containing 21.6 million sentence-level parliamentary speeches from eight EU states (Austria, Belgium, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Portugal, and the United Kingdom).²⁷

The authors of the ParLEE plenary speeches data sets articulated their data by utilizing date, agenda, speaker, party, and text of the speech (on a sentence level) to delineate between the different lines of speech. This segmentation allows for ease of use when finding specific words or phrases that are important to the research. Of the eight states, the analysis draws exclusively on data focused on parliamentary debate within the UK. The time frame that the data uses is also a key time frame for evaluating Scottish independence debate because it accounts for the tail end of the Labour dynasty in Scotland, the rise of SNP in Scotland, and the voting on the Scottish independence referendum and the results of the referendum therewithin.

However, with 6.7 million data entries for UK parliamentary speeches from 2009-2019, a dictionary was needed to create a functional assessment of the data. The first phrase that was included was “Scottish Independence,” an obvious inclusion for the topic at hand. The phrase provided specific instances where the Conservative and Labour parties discussed the consequences of Scottish Independence and the implications that surrounded both the union and an Independent Scotland. The secondary phrase measured was “Independence Referendum,” because of the referendum that was held in 2014. This phrase was used to gauge the amount of discourse still took place surrounding the 2014

referendum, and any future referendum therewithin, after 2014. Additionally, it was used to gauge the discussion of the referendum by the two parties in the months and years leading up to the vote. Using RStudio, the dataset was narrowed to focus on two specific keywords and on discourse produced by the two mainstream parties, Labour and Conservative. The phrase “Scottish independence” was used by the Conservative Party 180 times during the time period provided, whereas the Labour party used the phrase 74 times. The mention of “Scottish independence” by the Conservative and Labour parties added to be 254. “Independence Referendum” was mentioned 290 times by the Conservative party and 99 times by the Labour party, culminating in a total of 389 mentions of an Independence Referendum in the time period.

In addition to the included words for analyzing the data, certain words were excluded for certain reasons as well.

The words and phrases “independence,” “Scottish,” and “SNP” were excluded for similar reasons, as they lacked the degree of specificity required to accurately measure the impact of the Scottish independence movement on broader UK politics. The term “independence” was most frequently associated with discussions of the independence of federal agencies rather than the independence movement itself. Similarly, references to “Scottish” tended to reflect broader discussions of Scottish issues rather than the movement. While “SNP” presented a distinct case, it was nevertheless excluded to maintain analytical consistency. “SNP” or “Scottish National Party” produced too many results that were just about the broad governance of the SNP and did not narrow the focus onto the interactions of the SNP and the independence movement as it pertained to the broader UK parliament and party system.

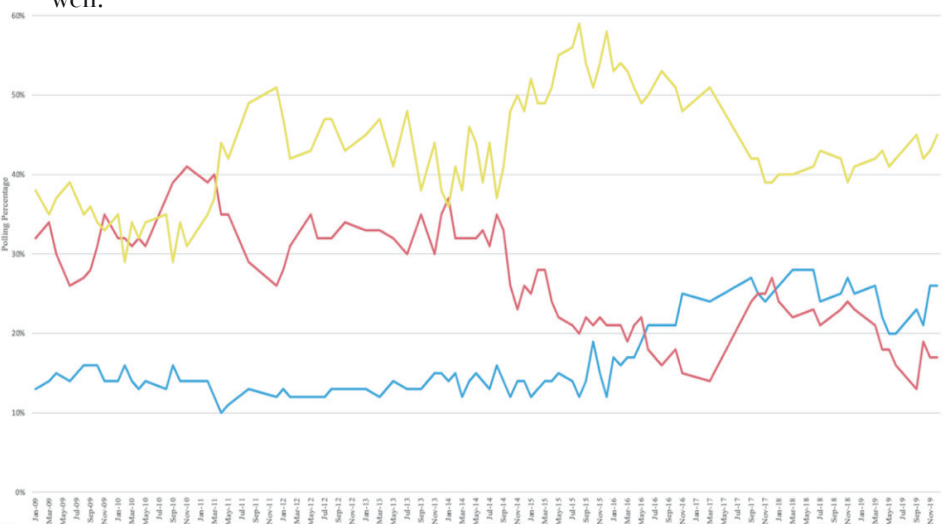


Figure 3 - A graph showing the polling data of the Conservative (blue), Labour (red), and SNP (yellow) from 2009 – 2019 (Polling data from What Scotland Thinks, up to 2016 poll and 2016-2021 poll)

This parliamentary speech data is key to the analysis of my four hypotheses. The data is used consistently in the testing in all four of the hypotheses. Each hypothesis begets the use of the speech data to measure the rate to which each party speaks on the issue. For hypothesis one, this is used in a general manner to measure the level overall that the House of Commons discusses the Scottish independence movement. For hypotheses two, three, and four, party-specific data corresponding to each hypothesis were utilized.

The party polling data comes from various polling companies in Scotland. This polling data was compiled and averaged out by me, then analyzed using statistical analysis to determine trends in the rise and fall of the Labour, Conservative, and Scottish National Parties. This polling data comes from a question posed to residents of Scotland on “How would you use your constituency vote in a Scottish Parliament election?” from 2009 – 2019.²⁸ Figure 4 visualizes the polling data provided and demonstrates the rise of the SNP in Scotland as the Conservative and Labour parties decline. The SNP demonstrates a strong ability to adapt to public opinion and utilize current trends in public discourse to their advantage in terms of the Scottish independence movement. The SNP is able to adapt to shifts in public knowledge and awareness of issues that affect Scotland and the movement to leave the union.

Following data collection and refinement, ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were employed to identify interactions across the different datasets and to appropriately attribute observed effects to the hypotheses under examination. Both the left and right graphs in Figure 5 shows an OLS regression model in which there are two independent variables and one dependent variable. The graph shows a model in which SNP and Conservative polling are the independent variables, and Labour’s discussion of Scottish independence represents the dependent variable. The opposite can be said for the right graph, in which the SNP and Labour polling make up the independent variables and Conservative’s discussion of Scottish independence.

An important aspect of this study is that it does not test the impact of the different strategies for responding to niche parties as outlined by Meguid. Nor does it test, or seek to test, the effects of adversarial versus accommodative strategies identified in her framework. This limitation stems from the study’s focus on broader discourse surrounding the Scottish independence movement rather than on the specific positions or sides advanced within that debate. The objective is instead to measure the impact that Scottish independence has had on the wider UK political system, operationalized through analysis of how the movement is discussed by mainstream parties rather than through the use of dismissive strategies.

3. Results

Hypothesis 1, a strongly supported hypothesis by both the OLS regression models and an overlaid graph model, demonstrates the fact that there is strong impact by the Scottish independence movement on the discourse of the House of Commons. In both of the regression graphs presented in this section, the impact of the discourse is witnessed through the discussion of the movement in the House of Commons. The discussion by both parties is outlined in specifics in the research design section, but Figure 4 shows further the development of the discussion over time. In Figure 4, the increase in SNP polling is seen as the issue importance of the movement grows higher as well. This further demonstrates the support for hypothesis 1 because of the success of the movement in the discourse of House of Commons. While all is well and good in the discourse overall, it is important to note that the discourse of the movement by other parties is what gives SNP their issue importance and thus their polling.

Hypothesis 2 however does not find the same success as hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 may seem, on surface, supported by Figure 5, however, the regression coefficients display the opposite of this. With increased polling, a small correlation becomes evident, with the conversation of the two parties. However, the Conservative party talks more about the movement in the House of Commons than the Labour party.

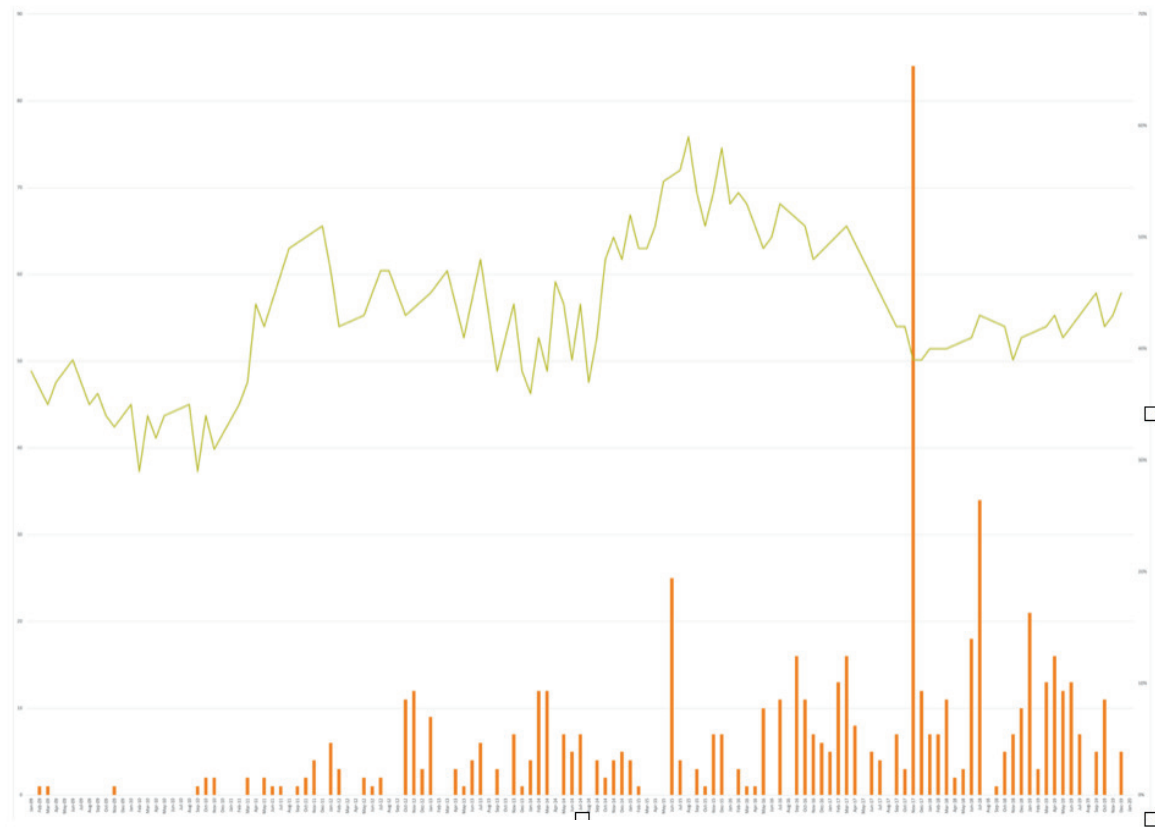


Figure 4 - SNP polling alongside the overall discussion of the Scottish independence movement by both mainstream parties

On the same accord, the correlation is fairly weak and do not see the support for this hypothesis in the regression models presented below alongside the overlaid double-bar graph. In Figure 5, a significant increase in the discussion of Scottish independence in the year 2017 is seen. This increase among other would make it easy to assume that SNP successes would beget higher rates of discussion. However, because of the regression modelling displayed in Figure 6, these slight trends do not indicate the presence of a correlation between SNP polling and discussion by Labour about Scottish independence. Rather, the regression models reveal the importance of Conservative polling in the rates of discussion by the Labour party, which will be discussed in hypothesis 3.

Hypothesis 3 is strongly supported by the regression models because of the fact that there is a statistically significant correlation between the discussion of Labour and the polling of Conservative. This further proves the importance of rival competition theory in the modeling of this thesis and creates an important facet in the discussion of hypothesis 4 later. In the modeling, instead of being affected by SNP polling, which does not have a statistically significant effect on the discussion by Labour, Labour chooses to monitor the polling of Conservative and adapt their conversation so as to create a rival competition between the mainstream parties in the system. In specifics, the coefficient with standard errors do not cross the red line zero displaying that there is statistically

significant support to prove the effectiveness of hypothesis 3. The support for hypothesis 3 provides us with great context when analyzing the impact of rival party competition on the development of a political system. Hypothesis 3 is thus supported by a strong positive correlation. With strong support of hypothesis 3, discussing the support of hypothesis 4 becomes essential, because of the different paths that the Conservative party could take in terms of adjusting to the polling of Labour and SNP in the polls. Similarly, hypothesis 4b is supported by the OLS regression models in Figure 6. This is shown in the graph on the right in Figure 6 that shows the impact of Labour and SNP polling on the discussion by Conservative on Scottish

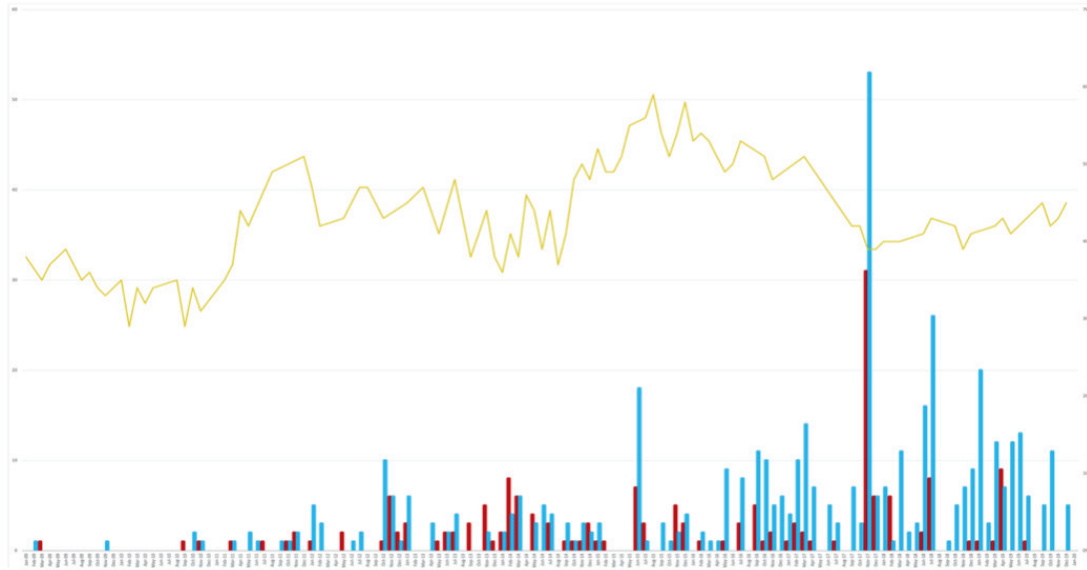


Figure 5 - Overlaid bar graph of SNP polling (yellow line) compared to Conservative (blue bars) and Labour (red bars) discussion

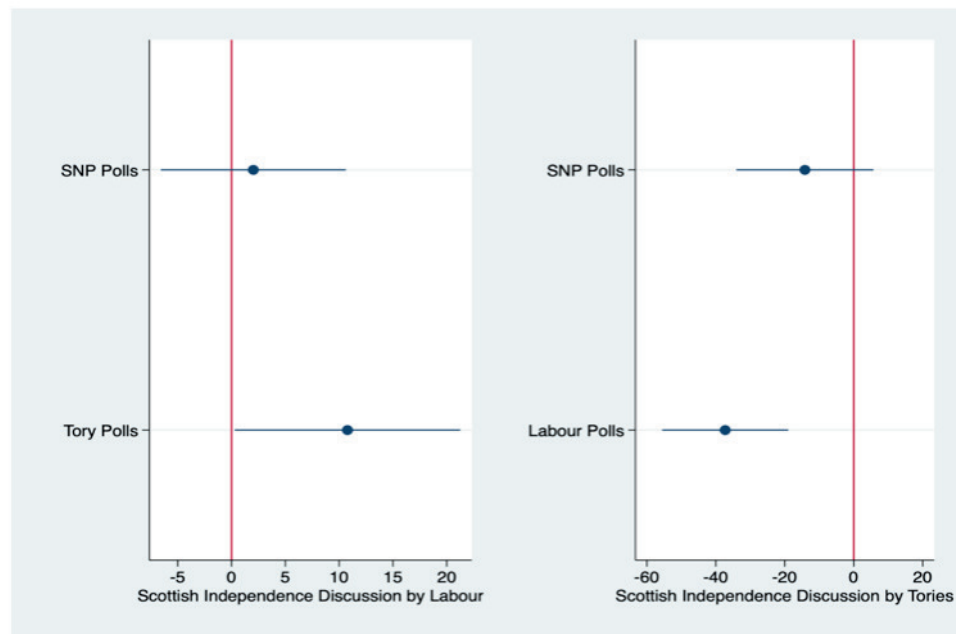


Figure 6 - OLS regression modelling for Scottish independence discussion by Labour and Conservative as compared to SNP and Labour/Conservative polling.

independence. This support stems from the fact that the Labour coefficient and standard errors do not cross the red line zero. A strong negative correlation is thus displayed by hypothesis 4b. This hypothesis emphasizes that as Labour is polling better, Conservative party will deemphasize the Scottish independence issue so as to focus on the issues that everyday Conservative or swing voters care about to regain a voting base. As stated in the analysis for hypothesis 3, this emphasizes the importance of rival competition theory in engaging mainstream parties with voters. Mainstream parties are more focused on adapting to one another than with adapting to emerging threats. These two hypotheses display the desire for mainstream parties to maintain a select few parties that represent the largest portion of the population rather than the emergence of smaller parties that can compete with the mainstream. While hypothesis 4b is able to maintain support for itself, hypothesis 4a does not. The negative correlation that exists in 4b proves 4a to be false, because 4a would require a positive correlation in which Conservatives talk more about the movement to be proven true.

Though the results of this study do not provide a statistically significant impact of SNP polling, there is a display that spatial theory does in fact maintain its impact on mainstream party dynamics.

A long-standing dispute between rivals, Labour and Conservative, is shown to still maintain its polarization on the discussion of Scottish independence. Simultaneously, there is a large impact on the discussion in the House of Commons just by the existence of SNP in the party competition sector. Rival competition is still the main motivating factor for the mainstream parties to adjust their discourse on the issue and to adapt their positions to better reflect the polling of their opposing party.

3. Conclusion

This study provides various theoretical and empirical explanations that show broader UK politics and the party system therewithin are greatly influenced and affected by the presence and successes of the Scottish independence movement. While SNP polling may be a non-factor in the spatial considerations of the Labour and Conservative parties' changes, there is something to be said for the impact that discourse has on the scale of party policy positions. The study demonstrates the impact of spatial theory on policy shifts. While niche parties polling may not have an impact on the overall success of a movement, they do provide a

measurable impact on issue emphasis, salience, and ownership by each of the mainstream parties. The ability to steer the conversation and to dictate a new area of policy positioning are given to the niche party because of the adaptation of their issue to the mainstream party issues. This is seen in this study through the SNP, Labour and Conservatives. While the SNP does not exert a significant influence on mainstream parties through polling dynamics, it has been highly effective in shaping the debate on Scottish independence by steering mainstream parties toward the aspects of independence it seeks to foreground in public discourse.

This research sheds light on nationalist movements and their impacts on the broader political systems of the countries that they desire independence from. The case study of the Scottish independence movement, guided by SNP, provides compelling reasoning of how a niche

“While niche parties polling may not have an impact on the overall success of a movement, they do provide a measurable impact on issue emphasis, salience, and ownership by each of the mainstream parties.”

or regional party can influence the conversations that mainstream parties have amongst the mainstream parties. The findings of this research project affirm the fact that nationalist and regional independence movements can

dictate the conversations that mainstream parties have and the issue importance that mainstream parties like Labour and Conservative emphasize.

This project also affirms the statement that parties are not independent actors, but actors that adjust their focuses, positions, and their conversations based on those around them; environmental conditions affect the conditions of the party. The research, guided by spatial theory, highlights how niche parties can shape the discourse of other parties and the issues that mainstream parties adapt and spread on the national level. This is especially seen in the Labour party which accommodates SNP positions so as to demonstrate that they are a party for the same common goal as SNP which is able to further compete with the Conservative party. The success of movements like that of Scotland demonstrate the effectiveness of niche parties, like the SNP, to dictate and spark mainstream accommodative strategies to mitigate losses.

The hypotheses that are formulated to analyze the impact of Scottish independence are supported by empirical evidence. The Scottish independence movement without a doubt influences broader UK politics, shaping the rhetoric and policy positions of mainstream parties. The historic rivalry between Labour and the Conservative party is evident in their opposing positions on Scottish independence, proving the rival competition hypotheses, true.

However, the study fails to establish a statistically significant impact of SNP polling on either Labour or Conservative party discourse, leading to an unsupported hypothesis for 2 and 4a.

By utilizing wide reaching theoretical frameworks such as spatial theory, niche party analysis, and the impact of polling, this research is able to emphasize the impact of national independence movements globally, not simply in Scotland. This study creates avenues for further research surrounding the impact of regional autonomous movements, nationalist independence movements, and niche parties, by emphasizing the interconnectedness of niche parties and mainstream parties and the unique ability of these movements to shape and dictate the party dynamics, discourse, and policy positions in a complex party system.

In terms of policy applications, the research provided can be used to help mainstream parties better adapt to the prospect of new parties that threaten their “dynastic status.” If Labour was able to accurately predict the direction that the movement was going, they may have been able to adapt and properly adjust their rhetoric so as to diminish the impact at the polls that SNP had over them at the 2015 election. Being able to accurately adjust based on one another rather than a new competing niche party would provide mainstream parties like Labour and Conservative enhanced maneuverability when it comes to a

shifting dynamic like that of the Scottish independence movement. By combining intersections of spatial theory and niche party analysis, one can accurately determine the momentum and direction that a movement is going, especially a movement like that of Scottish independence, a movement with profound support of a niche, regional party that rivals the “dynastic status” of the mainstream parties. In essence, the Scottish independence movement serves as a microcosm, allowing us to delve into the interplay between mainstream and niche parties, providing important insights into how nationalist movements can influence, and redefine, the political sphere of a nation, in this case within the UK. As nationalism resurges all over the globe, it is important to evaluate the impact that these movements and the parties that come with them have on the broader dynamics within a nation-state.

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2. Niche parties, as defined by Meguid are political parties that reject the traditional class-based orientation of party politics, raise novel issues that do not coincide with traditional party lines, and limit their issue appeals often to a one or a few issues. Often environmental and radical right parties are the most common niche party.
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5. Ibid, 348-9
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7. Ibid, 349
8. Ibid 349
9. Ibid 355
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