

Electoral politics after the crisis: Change, fluctuations and stability in the 2021 Althingi Election

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Abstract

We present an analysis of the 2021 Althingi election in Iceland based on several key indicators obtained from the post-election voter survey of the Icelandic National Election Study (ICENES). The overall question we seek to address concerns the degree to which Icelandic politics have continued to move towards either recovery or transformation after the political and economic upheavals of 2008. The 2021 campaign and election were conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, when the government enjoyed high support across the political spectrum for its handling of the outbreak and its economic consequences. The election resulted in the coalition parties increasing their vote share by 1.5 percentage points. Based on the ICENES data, we find that 45% of voters switched parties in 2021, compared with 2017, which is slightly lower than in previous elections. On the issue dimensions of state–market and integration–isolation, we observe a sharp return towards more pro-market and pro-integration attitudes, respectively. Trust in politicians and satisfaction with



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how democracy works continued to increase from an all-time low in 2009. We also observe that the youngest age groups continued to be least likely to vote, spent less time following the campaign and were more inclined to follow news on social media. We conclude that Icelandic politics seem to have reached a balance after the crisis, albeit a new balance that is characterised by a more fragmented party system than before.

Keywords: Icelandic politics; elections; political behaviour; vote choice.

Introduction

Have Icelandic electoral politics weathered the political storm that followed the 2008 financial crisis? In many ways, the results of the 2021 Althingi election would seem to support such a conclusion. The majority government coalition of three established parties, the Left-Green Movement, the Independence Party and the Progressive Party, collectively increased their vote share, becoming the first coalition in 30 years—and only the fifth in the past 90 years—to benefit electorally from government status. For the first time since 2007, no new political party gained enough electoral support to enter parliament, and total electoral volatility was down to 14%, its lowest level in the post-crisis era. This could suggest that, 13 years on from the crisis, Icelandic politics have come full circle, with little material change. However, the success of new parties in recent years, and the increasing fragmentation of the party system (with more parties elected, each with less support), is evidence that the crisis may have acted as a catalyst, making the ground fertile for political change.

In Önnudóttir et al. (2021), we took up the task of analysing the extent to which politics in Iceland, in terms of voters' attitudes, behaviour and ties to the party system, were permanently transformed in the aftermath of the collapse of the Icelandic financial system, or conversely, the extent to which its effects were primarily transitory. Using data from the Icelandic National Election Study (ICENES) spanning from 1983 to 2017, we examined key aspects of democratic politics, including political trust, satisfaction with how democracy works, participation and engagement, policy preferences and the political allegiances of voters to parties, finding that the effects of the crisis differed substantially between domains.

In this paper, we re-evaluate our conclusions in Önnudóttir et al. (2021) in light of the 2021 Althingi election. We use preliminary data from ICENES 2021¹ to examine the extent to which the attitudes and behaviour of voters support the conclusions based on the data up until the 2017 election. We focus on the key areas that showed radically different trajectories in our previous study, namely party switching (transformative change), political trust and democratic satisfaction (transitory effect), participation and engagement (gradual change) and partisan sorting (transformative change). Furthermore, we examine voters' media use and how the youngest group of voters followed the 2021 campaign.

Overall, we find that the 2021 election showed signs of increasing stability in the electorate after the tumultuous post-crisis years. Our main findings are that party switching and partisan sorting seem to have dampened to some extent, that political trust and satisfaction with how democracy works, which have already recovered to pre-crisis levels,

have remained similar and even increased more in their recovery, and that participation and engagement have continued to gradually decline. We also see that a higher proportion of the youngest age groups spent no time following the campaign while at the same time being more likely to follow political news on social media, which may pose challenges for participation in the future. Before turning to our results, we now discuss the 2021 election campaign, the key issues of the campaign and issue ownership and relate them to the election results.

1. The 2021 election campaign

The electoral context of the 2021 election was quite unusual. After the 2017 election, which was an early one, a government coalition of three parties, the Left-Green Movement, the Independence Party and the Progressive Party, was formed after a month of intensive bargaining (Indriðason & Kristinsson 2021). The coalition consisted of a party far to the left (the Left-Green Movement) and a party to the right (the Independence Party), with the third party (the Progressive Party) placed in the middle of the left–right spectrum. Even if it might have been expected that this unlikely combination of ideologically heterogeneous parties would not last a whole term, the government started out with a favourable response and stable support basis from the electorate (Hardarson & Kristinsson 2018). The coalition survived the whole term and steered the country through the COVID-19 pandemic, which was still ongoing when the election took place in the autumn of 2021. However, regardless of the fact that the election was held under unusual circumstances, the pandemic and how it was dealt with did not turn out to be an important electoral issue. Icelanders were generally satisfied with how the government and healthcare authorities had handled the COVID-19 crisis, and opposition parties were also broadly supportive, leading to the non-politicisation of the pandemic (Ólafsson 2021a). Instead, the main issues of the campaign, according to voters, concerned the healthcare system, environmental issues and climate change, the economy and social welfare and living standards.²

Table 1. Althingi election result 2021

Parties	Vote share % (Change from 2017)	MPs (Change from 2017)
<u>Independence Party</u> (IP, i. <i>Sjálfstæðisflokkurinn</i>)	24.4 (-0.8)	16 (0)
<u>Progressive Party</u> (PP, i. <i>Framsóknarflokkurinn</i>)	17.3 (+6.6)	13 (+5)
<u>Left-Green Movement</u> (LGM, i. <i>Vinstri - græn</i>)	12.6 (-4.3)	8 (-3)
Social Democratic Alliance (SDA, i. <i>Samfylkingin</i>)	9.9 (-2.2)	6 (-1)
People's Party (PeP, i. <i>Flokkur fólksins</i>)	8.9 (+2.0)	6 (+2)
Pirate Party (Pir, i. <i>Píratar</i>)	8.6 (-0.6)	6 (0)
Reform Party (RP, i. <i>Viðreisn</i>)	8.3% (+1.6)	5 (+1)
Centre Party (CP, i. <i>Miðflokkurinn</i>)	5.4% (-5.5)	3 (-4)
Socialist Party (SP, i. <i>Sósíalistaflokkurinn</i>)	4.1 (+4.1)	0
Other parties	0.5 (-1.0)	0
Total	100	63

Note: Government parties 2017–2021 underlined. Source: Statistics Iceland.

The results of the election can be seen in Table 1, which lists vote share as a percentage, the number of elected members for each party and changes from 2017. The Progressive Party gained the most between elections (6.6 percentage points), earning it five more elected representatives. Overall, the most newsworthy outcome of the election was that the three government parties jointly increased their share at the polls by 1.5 percentage points, strengthening their majority from 35 to 37 out of 63 MPs. This is a rare event in Icelandic politics. Since the 2008 financial crash, all Icelandic majority governments have lost their parliamentary majority in the following election—until now. All of them started with high support (60–80%) in the opinion polls at the beginning of their terms, except for Bjarni Benediktsson’s 2017 government, which never reached 50% support. All suffered heavy losses in support early in their terms. Just before the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic, support for Jakobsdóttir’s government had fallen below 50%, and the combined support of the government parties was usually 40–45%. The government seemed to be on the same downward path as all the others in the previous decade. However, shortly after the fight against the pandemic started, government support increased to around 60% and stayed there, and the combined support of the government parties slowly rose to 45–50% (Gallup n.d.; Hardarson & Kristinsson 2022).

The unique popularity of Jakobsdóttir’s government at the end of its term—and the extraordinary satisfaction with the government’s handling of the COVID-19 crisis—is shown in Figure 1, which illustrates how voters have judged the performance of outgoing governments since 2009.

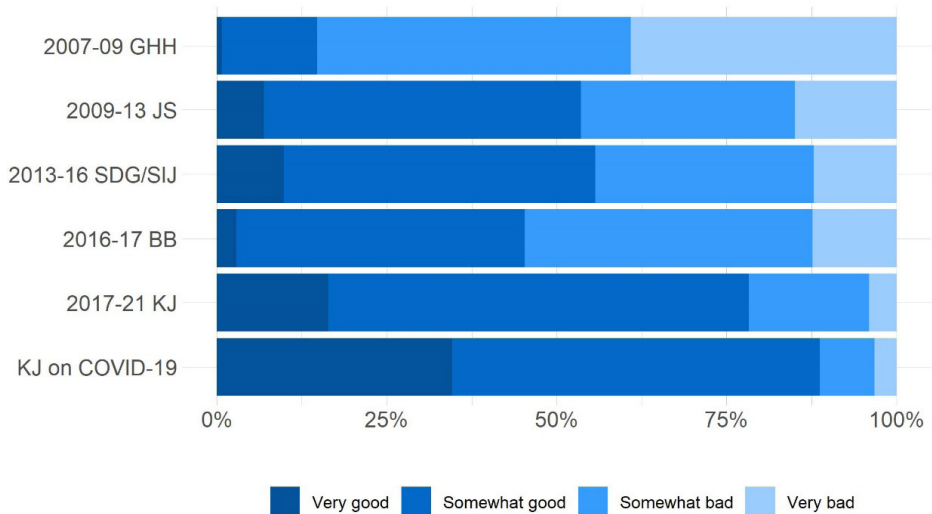


Figure 1. Voters’ evaluation of government performance (2009–2021)

Note. Question for 2017–2021: ‘How good or bad do you consider the performance of the government of the Left-Greens, the Independence Party, and the Progressive Party to have been for the last four years? Has its performance been very good, somewhat good, somewhat bad or very bad?’ Similar wording was used in prior years. Question for the bottom row (KJ on COVID-19): ‘But how good or bad do you consider the government’s performance during the last year and a half in dealing with the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic?’ Prime ministers: GHH – Geir H. Haarde, JS – Jóhanna Sigurðardóttir, SDG – Sigmundur Davíð Gunnlaugsson, SIJ – Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson, BB – Bjarni Benediktsson, KJ - Katrín Jakobsdóttir.

As can be seen in Figure 1, 78% of voters considered Jakobsdóttir's government to have done a very or somewhat good job during its time in office from 2017 to 2021. The corresponding figures for governments from 2009 to 2017 were substantially lower, ranging from 15% to 56%. Jakobsdóttir's government clearly stands out. Even more striking is that 89% of voters considered that government to have done a good job on COVID-19 in the last year and a half before the election. That success is likely to have contributed to the overall popularity of the government.

Another striking result in the election was the victory of one of the government parties, the Progressive Party. In the election campaign, the Progressive Party promoted itself heavily with a new slogan: 'Wouldn't it just be best to vote for the Progressives?' (i. Er ekki bara best að kjósa Framsókn?). The slogan could have come across as substantially meaningless, since it did not refer to any policies. However, it can also be argued that the slogan highlighted the centrist position of the Progressive Party—its leaders claimed that it had rejected extremes both to the right and the left—and showed that the Progressives were a party of sensibility and fairness. In any case, the party enjoyed substantial success.

As it is commonly claimed that the Progressive Party did not really present any substantive policies, it is interesting to observe the results in Figure 2. Respondents were asked which political party had the best policies across several issue areas. It is noteworthy that, contrary to *The American Voter's* expectation that partisan preferences largely determine voters' attitudes (Campbell et al. 1960), many voters did not mention their own party as having the best policies in the various issue areas. Indeed, the number of voters mentioning the party on top in a particular issue area always exceeded the number voting for that party—most often to a great extent. The question used here on issue areas (or similar ones) is the most common measurement of short-term 'issue ownership' (similar to what Petrocik (1996) called 'issue lease'); in this way, parties are expected to emphasise the issues on which they are perceived by many voters to be competent. Electoral research in the last two or three decades has indicated that issue ownership does indeed impact voting behaviour (Stubager 2018).

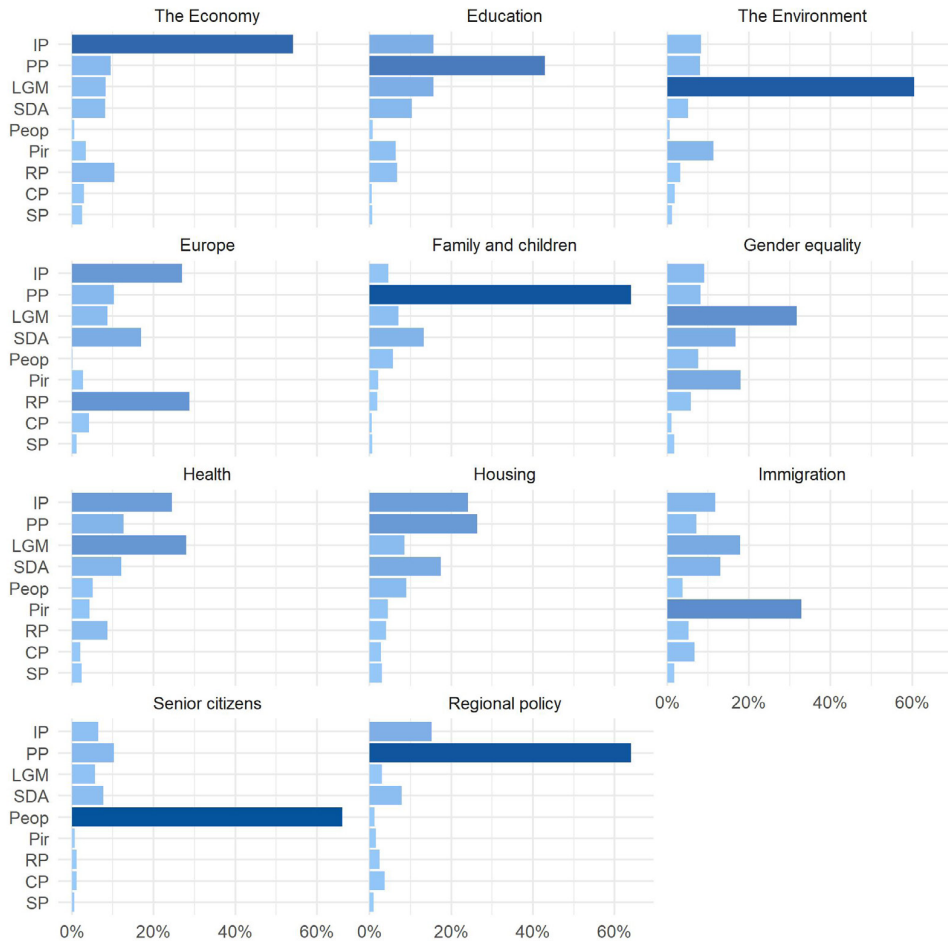


Figure 2. Voters' evaluation of party with best policy by issue area (2021)

Note: Question: 'Now I want to ask you about the parties and individual issues. Which party do you think has the best policy in the following issue areas? The economy, immigration ... etc.' This question was only put to part of the sample (N = 442–620). See table 1 for party name abbreviations.

Concerning issue ownership in 2021, the Progressive Party was on top in four issue areas, namely *family and children* (64%), *regional policy* (64%), *education* (43%) and *housing* (26%). The leader of the Progressive Party, Sigurður Ingi Jóhannsson, had served as Minister of Transport and Local Government in Jakobsdóttir's government. The party has always emphasised the concerns of rural communities and enjoyed strong support among rural voters (e.g. Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2018). Deputy leader Lilja Alfreðsdóttir had been Minister of Education, Science and Culture. A third Progressive, Ásmundur Einar Daðason, had been Minister of Social Affairs and Children; housing was among his responsibilities, and he had been unusually vocal on children's rights. Whatever the impact

of the party's slogan, voters obviously had no difficulties in finding issue areas for which they preferred the Progressives over other parties.

The Left-Green Movement came out on top in three issue areas, *the environment* (60%), *gender equality* (32%) and *health* (28%). In recent elections, the Left-Greens have repeatedly been considered to be the party with the best policies on the environment, and deputy leader Guðmundur Ingi Guðbrandsson had served as Minister for the Environment and Natural Resources in the outgoing government. Gender equality had been the task of Prime Minister Katrín Jakobsdóttir in the government. Svandís Svavarsdóttir had been Minister of Health and led the successful fight against COVID-19 in close cooperation with experts. When it came to the third government party, the Independence Party, 54% of respondents said that it presented the best policies on *the economy*. Party leader Bjarni Benediktsson had been Minister of Finance and Economic Affairs in the outgoing government. Thus, the government parties were on top in eight out of eleven issue areas, but the opposition on only three: the People's Party on *senior citizens* (66%), the Pirates on *immigration* (33%) and the Reform Party on *Europe* (29%). All three issues had been strongly prioritised in the respective parties' programmes during the election campaign.

Most importantly, the government parties came out on top on the issue areas that voters considered to be the most important, as already mentioned: issues covering social welfare and living standards, the environment, the economy and healthcare. In all cases, the most relevant government minister came from the respective party. Thus, the government coalition not only managed to survive due to its performance during the COVID-19 pandemic, but its three parties also managed to be on top as the best parties to deal with the most important political issues of the election. Additionally, they increased their joint vote share. In the following section we analyse, among other things, party switching, through which the different government parties managed to gain (or lose) support.

2. Party switching in 2021

In 2021, 45% of voters changed their party choice from 2017, which is a somewhat lower percentage than in the previous two elections (see Figure 3). As has been the case in Iceland, so too has party switching tended to increase in many Western European countries in the last four decades, despite some fluctuations. Issue-orientated theories expect that party switching in multi-party systems mainly takes place between parties that are ideologically close to each other. In Scandinavia, party switching within the 'red block' or the 'blue block' is much more common than movement between blocks (Bengtsson et al. 2014; Hansen & Stubager 2021). In Iceland, where there are no blocks, the left-right positions of the parties have been clearly related to the extent of party switching between them. For instance, switching between the Independence Party and the Progressive Party has historically been quite common (Hardarson 1995; Önnudóttir et al. 2021).

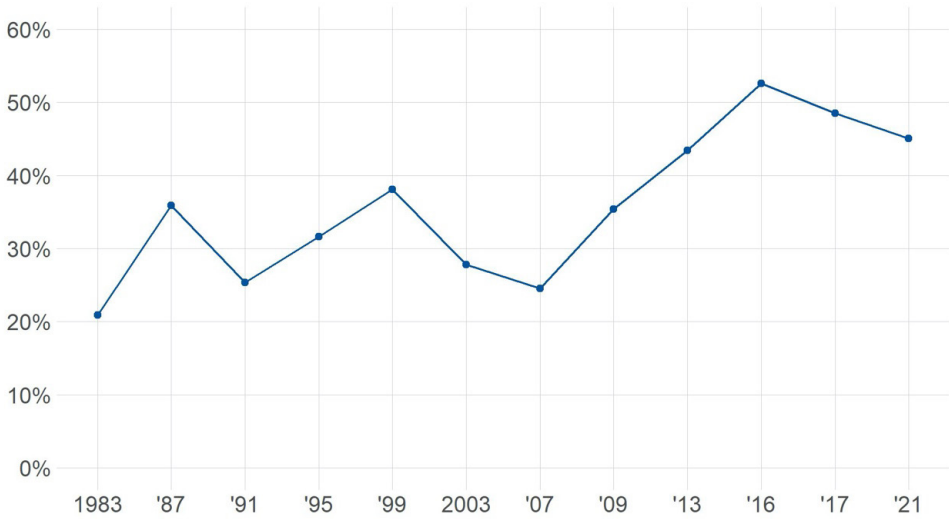


Figure 3. Share of party voters changing their party choice in successive elections (1983–2021)

Note: The proportion of all parties' voters revealing different party choices between the current and prior elections. Weighted by age, gender, district and party voted for in the current election.

Table 2 shows how party voters moved between parties and the proportion of the electorate that stayed loyal to their old party. In most cases, each party was both winning votes from other parties and losing votes to them. The net gain of parties (i.e. the proportion of voters gained from a specific party minus the proportion lost to the same party) was mostly in favour of the Progressive Party in the 2021 election, which made its largest net gains in its exchange with the Centre Party (+3%). The strongest *total flow* between parties (i.e. the proportion of voters gained from a specific party plus the proportion lost to the same party) was 5% between the Independence Party and Progressive Party. Most of the larger total flows between parties corresponded neatly to the left–right spectrum.

Table 2. Vote switching between parties (2017 to 2021; total percentages)

2021	2017								Total
	LGM	SDA	Pir	PeP	PP	RP	CP	IP	
SP	1	1	1	1	-	-	-	-	4
LGM	7	1	1	-	1	1	-	1	13
SDA	2	6	1	-	-	-	-	-	10
Pir	2	1	B	-	-	-	-	-	9
PeP	1	1	1	4	-	-	1	1	9
PP	2	1	-	-	7	1	3	3	17
RP	1	1	1	-	-	4	-	1	8
CP	-	-	-	-	-	-	4	1	6
IP	-	-	-	-	2	1	2	20	25
Total	17	12	9	7	11	7	11	26	100

Note: The percentages in the cells refer to the proportions of all party voters (N = 1903) who revealed party choice both in 2017 and 2021. A dash (-) indicates less than 0.5% of voters switched from one party to the other. Weighted by both party voted for in 2017 and party voted for in 2021. See table 1 for party name abbreviations.

Table 3 shows more clearly the importance of vote switching for each party in the 2021 election, showing the composition of parties' voters in 2021 in terms of vote choice in 2017. The only government party increasing its total vote in the 2021 election was the Progressive Party. Only 41% of the Progressive Party's voters in 2021 had voted for the party in 2017, as the party was gaining strongly from other parties. A total of 19% of the party's vote came from the Centre Party, 16% from the Independence Party, and 12% from the Left-Greens. Thus, the Progressive Party mainly gained votes from the two other government parties and the Centre Party, which split from the Progressives in 2017.

The other two government parties lost votes in the election. More than half (59%) of those who voted for the Left-Greens in 2021 came from their 2017 stock. More of the party's voters (26% combined) came from the Social Democrats, the Reform Party or the Pirates than came from its coalition partners (11% combined). The Independence Party received 79% of its 2021 vote share from its own voters in 2017, while 7% of its votes came from the Centre Party and 6% from the Progressive Party. The party gained very few voters from other parties.

Table 3. Where did the 2021 vote come from? (row percentages)

2021	2017								Total
	LGM	SDA	Pir	PeP	PP	RP	CP	IP	
SP	32	17	25	17	4	1	3	1	100
LGM	59	11	7	3	5	8	1	6	100
SDA	22	58	10	2	2	4	-	1	100
Pir	22	15	53	3	1	3	-	3	100
PeP	12	9	9	42	5	1	17	7	100
PP	12	4	2	3	41	3	19	16	100
RP	11	18	8	5	4	45	2	8	100
CP	1	-	-	6	7	-	75	12	100
IP	2	1	0	1	6	3	7	79	100
Total	17	12	9	7	11	7	11	26	100

Note: The percentages in the cells are row percentages, showing how the voters of each party in 2021 voted in 2017 (N = 1903). A dash (-) indicates less than 0.5% of a party's voters came from another party. Weighted by both party voted for in 2017 and party voted for in 2021. See table 1 for party name abbreviations.

Three of the opposition parties lost votes in the election. Almost 60% of those who voted for the Social Democrats in 2021 also voted for the party in 2017, while 22% of the party's voters came from the Left-Greens and 10% from the Pirates. Very few voters of other parties in 2017 voted for the Social Democrats in 2021. Just over half of the Pirates' votes in 2021 came from their 2017 voters, while 22% came from the Left-Greens and 15% from the Social Democrats. Thus, 90% of the Pirate vote came from three parties (Pirates, Social Democrats, Left-Greens), while very few came from other parties. The Centre Party—the biggest loser in the election—gained relatively few voters from other parties, with only 12% of its 2021 votes coming from the Independence Party, 7% from the Progressive Party and 6% from the People's Party.

Three opposition parties gained votes in the election. Just under half of the Reform Party vote came from its 2017 voters, while 37% came from three parties (Social Democrats, Left-Greens, Pirates) and just 8% from the Independence Party. Only 42% of the People's Party voters in 2021 had voted for the party in 2017. The party seems to have had a wide appeal among the electorate—both on the left and right spectrum—as 30% of its vote came from the Left-Greens, the Social Democrats or the Pirates, while 17% came from the Centre Party and 12% from the Independence Party or the Progressive Party. The new Socialist Party obtained one third of its 2021 votes from those who voted for the Left-Greens in 2017, 25% from the Pirates, 17% from the People's Party and 17% from the Social Democrats. The Socialist Party's voters thus came almost exclusively from left-wing and/or challenger parties.

3. Political trust and democratic satisfaction

Following the Great Recession, trust in political institutions and satisfaction with how democracy works decreased substantially in Iceland as well as in other countries (e.g. Hellwig et al. 2020; Vilhelmsdóttir 2020; Vilhelmsdóttir & Kristinsson 2018). Later research has shown that political support, including political trust in parliaments and political parties, and satisfaction with how democracy works, have recovered to pre-crisis levels. This path of recovery has mainly been explained by the strengthening of the economy and the strength of the different welfare states through which the blow of the financial crisis was to some extent dampened (e.g. Hellwig et al. 2020; Hooghe & Okilikj 2020; Pennings 2017). In Önnudóttir et al. (2021), we found a similar pattern for Iceland. Distrust in politicians and parliament, as well as dissatisfaction with how democracy works, increased considerably after the onset of the financial crisis in 2008, but following the economic recovery, political distrust and dissatisfaction decreased again to pre-crisis levels. We argued that the impact of the economic crisis on political distrust and dissatisfaction with democracy in Iceland were examples of a transitory effect, and that even if citizens temporarily lost faith in the performance of the political system, they continued to believe or have faith in how the system worked, at least to the same extent as before the crisis.

The question raised here is if political distrust and dissatisfaction with how democracy works continued to decline in the 2021 election. However, instead of examining the levels of distrust and dissatisfaction, as done in Önnudóttir et al. (2021), we examine here the levels of trust in politicians and satisfaction with how democracy works. As shown in Figure 4, satisfaction with democracy had already recovered to a pre-crisis level in 2013, and trust has been slowly increasing since 2013. As the figure shows, both trust and satisfaction seemed to increase further in the 2021 election (2 percentage points for trust and 7 percentage points for satisfaction). Even if this increase could be a random fluctuation, it might very well be explained by the increase in (possibly temporary) trust in authorities due to satisfaction with how the COVID-19 pandemic was handled (Ólafsdóttir et al. 2020; Ólafsson 2021a; Kristinsson & Skúlason forthcoming). That would be in line with the perspective that public trust, trust in political institutions and political support in terms of satisfaction (or dissatisfaction) with democracy are impacted by the policy performance of authorities (e.g. Norris 2011; Önnudóttir & Harðarson 2011; Vilhelmsdóttir 2020)—in this instance, the performance of authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Similar developments regarding higher trust in authorities were seen in other countries at the onset of the pandemic (Lilleker et al. 2021).

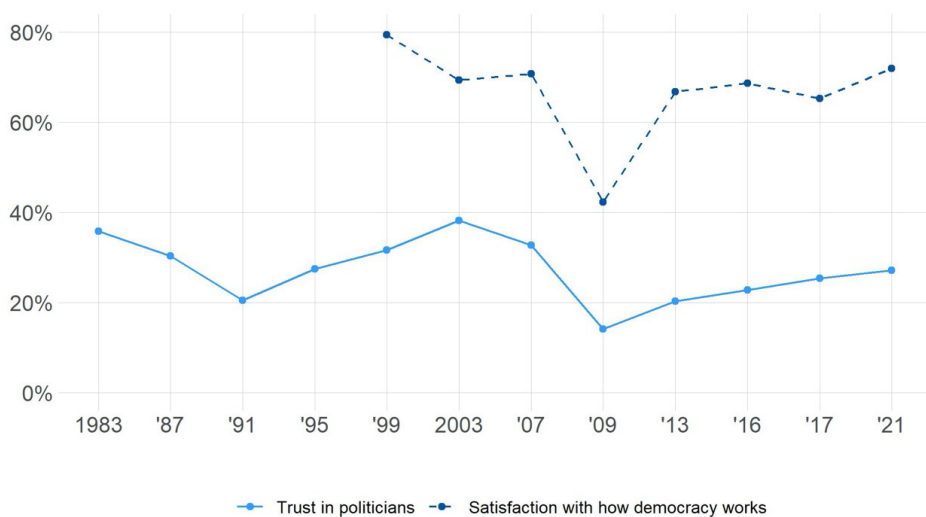


Figure 4. Trust in politicians and satisfaction with how democracy works (1983–2021)

Note: Question on trust: ‘Do you think that politicians are generally trustworthy, that many of them are trustworthy, some are trustworthy, a few, or perhaps none?’ (Most or many classified as trusting.) Question on democracy: ‘On the whole, are you very satisfied, fairly satisfied, not very satisfied, or not at all satisfied with the way democracy works in Iceland?’ (Very and fairly satisfied classified as satisfied.)

Electoral outcomes and partisanship are two other commonly considered explanations of political trust and satisfaction with the performance of democracy (Blais et al. 2017; Holmberg 1999). Those who vote for or support government parties are more likely to express more trust and satisfaction with democracy. This has been termed the home team hypothesis (Holmberg 1999). Voters of ‘insider’ parties, which are parties that either are or have been in government, also express higher levels of political trust when compared with voters of other parties (Petrarca et al. 2020). In line with this, we found in Önnudóttir et al. (2021) that voters of new parties or challenger parties in Iceland have throughout the years expressed less trust and more dissatisfaction with how democracy works, compared with the four long-term established parties (the Left-Green Movement, Social Democratic Alliance, Progressive Party, Independence Party). We also found clear indicators that voters of government parties do express more trust and satisfaction, which is in line with the home team hypothesis.

Table 4. Trust in politicians and satisfaction with how democracy works by party choice (2017 and 2021)

Party	Trusts politicians % (Change from 2017)	Satisfied with how democracy works % (Change from 2017)
<u>Independence Party (IP)</u>	42 (+8)	90 (+3)
<u>Left-Green Movement (LGM)</u>	36 (+15)	83 (+24)
Reform (RP)	35 (+10)	70 (-4)
<u>Progressive Party (PP)</u>	31 (+3)	81 (+2)
Centre Party (CP)	29 (+5)	62 (0)
Social Democratic Alliance (SDA)	24 (-12)	62 (+8)
Socialist Party (SP)	14	31
Pirate Party (Pir)	11 (-11)	56 (+12)
People's Party (PeP)	9 (+3)	41 (+3)
Total	25 (+3)	73 (+6)

Note: Parties ordered from most to least trusting voters. Government parties 2017–2021 underlined. A negative (-) change indicates less trust/satisfaction from the 2017 election, and a positive (+) change more trust/satisfaction. See Figure 4 for question wording.

By comparing the levels of trust and satisfaction with how democracy works among the voters of the three government parties, the Left-Green Movement, the Progressive Party and the Independence Party, with other parties in both 2017 and 2021, we see the biggest positive change in trust and satisfaction among the voters of the Left-Greens and smaller increases among the voters of the other two government parties (see Table 4). These big improvements in political trust and satisfaction with democracy among the voters of the Left-Greens could indicate at least two interconnected things. First, that the Left-Greens' government participation boosted the levels of trust and satisfaction among the voters of the party in the 2021 election. Second, distrusting and dissatisfied voters of the party in 2017 may have left it in the 2021 election and voted for other parties.

Contrasting the voters of the four established parties with the four new post-crisis parties in parliament, we see that the voters of two of the new parties, the Pirate Party and the People's Party, together with the Socialist Party that had no MPs elected, are in general both less trusting of politicians and less satisfied with how democracy works. The voters of the other two new parties, the Centre Party and Reform, express political trust and satisfaction with democracy on a similar level with voters of the established parties, which is in line with our findings in Önnudóttir et al. (2021). Of the new parties, there has been a notable change in satisfaction with democracy between 2017 and 2021 (12 percentage points) among voters of the Pirate Party. This improvement can be taken as an indicator that the voters of the Pirate Party are moving closer to agreement (or at least not as dissatisfied) with how the political system works. At the same time, satisfaction among voters of the Centre Party has stayed the same between elections, together with a slight increase among voters of the People's Party (+3).

A general conclusion could be that the increase we see in trust and satisfaction (Figure 4), specifically concerning satisfaction with how democracy works, is associated with strong approval of the performance of authorities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Given that there was a bigger pool of satisfied and trusting voters in the 2021 election, compared with the 2017 election, it could mean that voters of all parties have become more trusting and more satisfied with democracy. The differences in the changes in trust and satisfaction between voters of different parties could also be explained by the smaller pool of dissatisfied and distrusting voters who opt for voting for opposition parties or new challenger parties. Supporting this is the uneven changes in the levels of distrust and dissatisfaction among the voters of different parties, whether those are government parties versus opposition parties or between new parties versus established parties.

4. Political participation and engagement

Political participation has historically been relatively high in Iceland, with turnout hovering close to 90% from around 1950 until 1991 (Önnudóttir et al. 2021). Since the 1990s, however, turnout in parliamentary elections has been on a gradual decline, following a trend that had begun about a decade earlier in most Western countries (Vowles 2018). As documented in Önnudóttir et al. (2021), the economic recession did not affect the long-term trend of diminishing turnout in any discernible way.

The 2021 election was held during the middle of the COVID-19 pandemic. Research has found that turnout was negatively impacted by COVID-19 in regions and countries where there had been a high number of positive cases during the time of the election (Picchio & Santolini 2022). In Iceland, during election time, the country had experienced a lull in infections rates, all willing adults had received at least one dose of a COVID-19 vaccine and the country was still three months away from a rise in infections due to Omicron. There were, however, a few restrictions on social gatherings in place, making it hard for political parties to hold large rallies. In addition, as already mentioned, the election campaign did not revolve around the pandemic response, nor were there any hot-button issues that dominated the discourse. Based on a combination of the pandemic and lack of strong discourse on political issues, we would expect a decrease in turnout, although the high trust in the government and satisfaction with the way it had handled the pandemic could have counteracted that trend.

According to Statistics Iceland (2022), turnout in the 2021 parliamentary election was 80.1%. This is very much in line with turnout in all elections since 2013 (2013 = 81.5%, 2016 = 79.2%, 2017 = 81.2%) but a substantial decrease from the first election of the Millennium in 2003, in which turnout was 87.7%. Absentee voting has been increasing in Iceland. In 2003, around 9.7% of all votes were absentee votes, rising to 18.6% in 2017. Although final numbers for absentee voting have still not been released by Statistics Iceland, a record number of voters cast their vote that way in 2021. At mid-day the day before the election, a news outlet reported that 45,000 people had voted as absentees, which was already an increase from 38,000 in total in 2017 (Jonasdóttir 2021). This means that at least 22% of all votes were absentee votes, reflecting a combination of the ongoing trend and an effect of the pandemic.

In Önnudóttir et al. (2021), an analysis of self-reported turnout from the ICENES surveys since 1983 showed that declining turnout had a very clear generational profile, with each generation voting in slightly lesser numbers when compared with the one before it (see also Halldórsson & Önnudóttir 2019). The most dramatic change was observed in the youngest age cohort, composed of people born between 1984 and 1999. This mirrors the pattern found in other countries where decreases in turnout have primarily been explained by a large generational shift. In almost all Western countries, younger generations are less likely to vote, compared with older ones (Franklin et al. 2004; Vowles 2018).

Figure 5 shows turnout by age for the 2016, 2017 and 2021 elections (Statistics Iceland 2022; breakdown by age is not available for earlier elections). Turnout by age is highly similar in 2021 when compared with both 2017 and 2016. The exception is an uptick in turnout among young people in 2017 that did not continue in 2021.

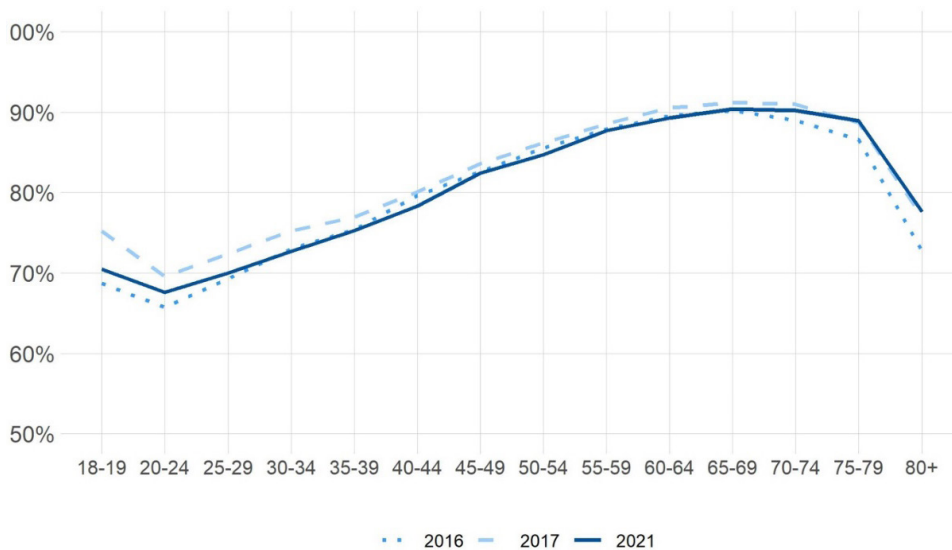


Figure 5. Voting by age group in 2016, 2017 and 2021

Source: Statistics Iceland, 2022.

The rapid decline in party support and membership that began with the recession in 2009 seems to have reached a nadir in 2016 but now remains stable, possibly with a small increase. In 2021, the percentage of respondents in the ICENES survey who said that they considered themselves to be supporters of a party was 31%, which is slightly higher than at its lowest point in 2016 (29%). Membership of a political party, according to ICENES, now stands at 23%, which is about the same, or possibly a little higher, compared with 2016 and 2017, when it was just below 20% in the ICENES survey. Of all respondents who said that they were members of a party, a total of 37% were members of the Independence Party. No other party came close to this, with the second most common response being the Progressive Party (15%).

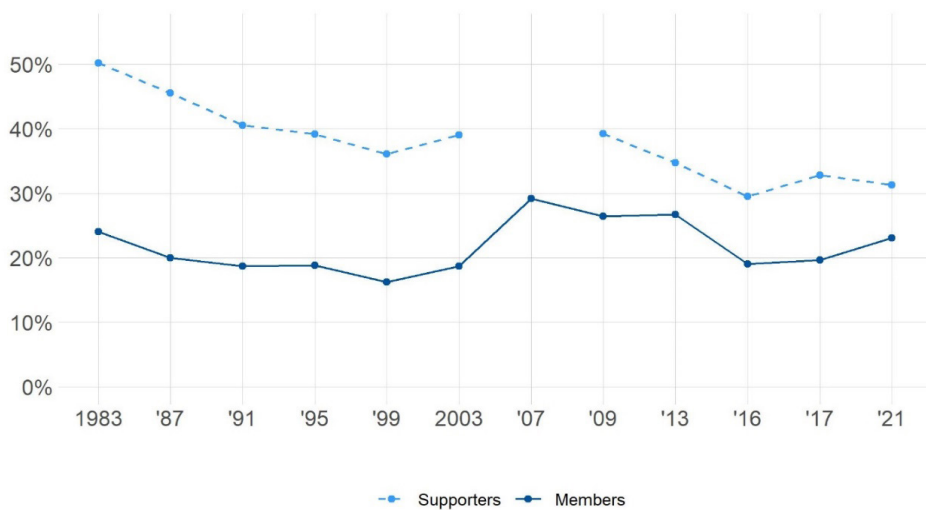


Figure 6. Supporters and members of political parties (1983–2021)

Note: Membership question: ‘Are you a member of a political party?’ (Yes/no answer). Supporter question (from 1999; not asked in 2007): ‘Some people consider themselves to be supporters of specific parties or organisations, while others do not experience such support. Do you, in general, consider yourself to be a supporter of a party or organisation?’ (Yes/no answer). From 1983 until 1995, only those who first answered that they supported a party were asked if they were members of that party.

Political interest was reported by Önnudóttir et al. (2021) to have been slowly increasing since 1983, with little or no generational difference in interest reported. In 2021, 29% of respondents reported they had very much or much interest in politics. That year, we see a clear generational difference between the youngest generation and all others. Only around 23% of respondents in the youngest generation (born 1984–2003) reported having very much or much interest in politics, compared with 30%–38% for the four older generations (1923–1946, 1947–1959, 1960–1972, 1973–1983).

5. Voters and their media use

Generational differences have also been found concerning how voters pay attention to the election campaign. Following the financial crisis, the party system has become increasingly fragmented, and recent developments have shown that the media environment has likewise become more fragmented, with people receiving political information from a much wider range of news sources than before. It used to be the case that most voters received similar types of information from political coverage in newspapers, on the radio and by nightly news programmes on television. Nowadays, election campaigns take place in a high-choice media environment (Van Aelst et al. 2017), with voters being able to pick and choose what type of coverage to follow. Many argue that in this type of media environment, it is now easier to simply avoid political coverage than it was before (Skovsgård & Andersen 2020).

For the 2021 election, a media component was added to ICENES that focused on

examining how voters had followed the election campaign. The post-election voter survey found that 48% of respondents spent half an hour or less following news or news-related reporting about domestic politics on an average day during the election campaign. Moreover, 8% of respondents reported spending no time whatsoever following news or related political coverage on an average day during the campaign. The percentage of those who spent no time following the campaign was much higher among younger respondents, with 16% in the 18–25 years old age group reporting having spent no time following domestic political coverage during an average day in the campaign.

In the current fragmented news media environment, people commonly receive their news online, and recent studies have shown that the same applies in Iceland (Jóhannsdóttir 2021), where much of the political coverage takes place on social media and online news sites (Ólafsson 2021b). Respondents in the 2021 ICENES survey were asked which news outlets they used most frequently during the election campaign. Around half (49%) said that they used online news sites the most, with television coming in second place (33%) and social media in third (8%). Again, there is a generational difference when it comes to media consumption, with younger respondents being much more likely to use social media most frequently. In the 18–25 years age group, 20% used social media most frequently during the election campaign, while 15% used television most often. Older voters were much more likely to use television as their primary source, with much less social media use. These findings echo what international comparative media consumption studies have shown, with younger people being much more likely to receive their news online and on social media when compared with older groups (Newman et al. 2021). This is a trend that needs to be examined in the years to come in Iceland, since studies have shown various democratic problems with political content online, particularly on social media. Social media content is often unfiltered and not fact-checked, and it is much easier to spread false or misleading information online as opposed to in the more traditional media outlets, where journalists commonly act as watchdogs and gatekeepers and are expected to verify the information they use in their reporting. The traditional news media plays an important role in countering the misinformation that spreads online (Mayerhöffer et al. 2022), but in order for the news media to be able to do this, voters have to pay attention to its coverage. As the ICENES findings from 2021 showed, the youngest group of voters appears to be less likely to do so than older voters.

6. Partisan policy sorting

There are two main dimensions of issue preferences, both of which have historically been politically relevant in Iceland and especially likely to have been affected by the Great Recession (Önnudóttir et al. 2021). The first dimension revolves around the extent of state involvement in the economy (‘state-market’ dimension), which has dominated domestic politics in advanced democracies for much of the 20th century and continues to be structurally important for political competition in Iceland (Bengtsson et al. 2014). The second dimension focuses on the extent to which a country is integrated into the international system (‘isolation-integration’ dimension); it is one that has long affected

competition in Icelandic politics and has also become increasingly important across countries in a globalising world (Häusermann & Kriesi 2015; Hooghe & Marks 2018).

Analysing developments before and after the crisis, Önnudóttir et al. (2021) found contrasting patterns of change in average attitudes for each dimension. In terms of the state–market dimension, there were no significant changes immediately following the 2008 crisis. However, in the 2016 and 2017 elections, there was a strong shift towards a stronger preference for state involvement, which is suggested to be evidence for a ‘thermostatic’ response in public opinion due to the right-wing incumbent governments at the time—a theory that argues that a government’s ideology drives the public mood in an opposite direction (Soroka & Wlezien 2010). Contrasting the apparently muted effects of the Great Recession on the state–market dimension, a much stronger—and more immediate—change can be observed on the international dimension. Indeed, from 2007 to 2017, the average Icelandic voter became progressively more isolationist in attitude. While this pattern is not readily associated with changes in government ideology, it may have been driven by the number of ‘negative’ shocks related to the international dimension during the period—most importantly, the prolonged Icesave dispute (Helgadóttir & Ólafsson 2021).

How should we expect preferences on these two issue dimensions to have shifted from the 2017 to the 2021 election? Given the post-crisis pattern in Iceland outlined above, as well as recent developments in other countries, there are two overriding factors that may be theoretically relevant for potential changes in preferences on the two dimensions. First, the government of the 2016–2017 electoral term was composed of centre and centre-right-wing parties, while the 2021 incumbent government was a left–right grand coalition led by the leader of the left-wing Left-Green Movement. From a thermostatic perspective, this should produce a swing in the direction of more market liberalism among the public. This is both because the overall ideology of the government has shifted leftward and because the leader and most visible member of the government is Katrín Jakobsdóttir, the chairperson of the left-wing Left-Green Movement.³

Second, one simply cannot disregard the COVID-19 pandemic, which dominated politics and society for almost half of the electoral term. Much like the Great Recession, the pandemic was of such proportions that it had the potential to fundamentally shift beliefs and attitudes about the role of the state and international cooperation. Thus, for example, Burchardt (2020) argued that the pandemic may have affected the state–market dimension akin to World War II, an all-encompassing crisis that led to increased social solidarity and galvanised support for the expansion of the welfare state. Adam-Troian & Bagic (2021) argued that this sense of solidarity may even extend across borders due to the global nature of the pandemic. The implications for the international dimension could be that overall sentiment towards cooperation and integration becomes more positive.

That being said, emerging research into the effects of the pandemic on attitudes has mostly found no relationships. This applies to both issue dimensions, as well as across country contexts. On the state–market dimension, a repeated cross-sectional study in the United Kingdom (de Vries et al. 2021) and longitudinal panel studies in the United

States (Rosenfeld et al. 2021; Stern & Axt 2021), Netherlands (Reeskens et al. 2021), Germany, Sweden and Spain (Ares et al. 2021) found overwhelming attitude stability. On the international dimension, Drouhot et al. (2020) found no changes in xenophobic attitudes using German panel data, while Dennison et al. (2021), using panel data from the UK and Germany and repeated cross-sectional data from the US and 28 European countries, reached a similar conclusion on the relationship between immigration preferences and the severity of the outbreak.

So what, if any, changes have we observed in Iceland? Figure 7 shows the development of average attitudes on the two issue scales from 2007 to 2021, with 2007 set as the reference year (both variables are standardised to have a mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1). Turning first to the state–market dimension, we clearly see that the electorate in 2016 and 2017 was relatively more in favour of state involvement when compared with 2007, being about -0.3 and -0.2 standard deviations below the 2007 average, respectively. However, in 2021, there was a substantial rebound right back to the 2007 level. A similar pattern emerges for the isolation–integration dimension. After having trended towards more isolationism from 2007 to 2017, in 2021, there was a large rebound back to the 2007 level. Overall, it thus seems as if the effects of the post-crisis turmoil on the attitudes of the Icelandic electorate have subsided, at least on average.

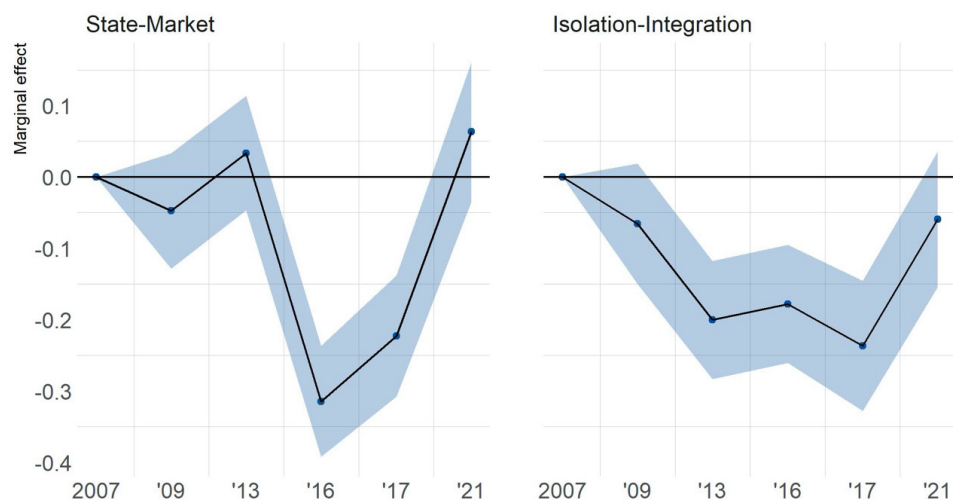


Figure 7. Attitudinal change on the state–market and isolation–integration dimension among the Icelandic public (2007–2021)

Note: Points show average change from 2007, grey areas show 95% confidence intervals. The variables are standardised to ease interpretation of substantive significance. When the area does not overlap with the x-axis, the difference from 2007 is statistically significant. Negative numbers signify more statist or isolationist attitudes, while positive numbers suggest more market-orientated or integrationist attitudes. The state–market scale is formed from three questions on preferences in terms of taxation, income redistribution and the private provision of healthcare. The isolation–integration scale is formed from four questions on preferences in terms of EU membership, agricultural tariffs, immigration and rural prosperity. See Chapter 4 in Önnudóttir et al. (2021) for details on the construction of the issue scales and question wording.

However, while we may see such a development of *average* changes in attitudes, their *distribution* among the electorate may still be substantially different to before. Indeed, in Önnudóttir et al. (2021), we argued that the Great Recession transformed electoral competition and party choice among voters, among other things, by increasing partisan sorting based around these two issue dimensions. In particular, we showed that voters have become increasingly homogenous within parties with respect to these issue positions so that the political space has ‘exploded’, with greater divergence between party voters on both dimensions. That is to say, because the attitudes within parties are more homogeneous, attitudes between parties have become more heterogeneous.

Visually inspecting the issue preference configurations of party voters is one way to gauge whether such sorting has persisted. In Figure 8, we show the constellation of parties in the issue space for 2021 in comparison with 2007 and 2017. On the x- and y-axes, we see the average issue preferences of the voters of each party on the state-market and isolation-integration dimension, respectively. We also show the average level of political trust of party voters, with larger points signifying more trusting voters.⁴ A comparison of the 2007 and 2017 data reveals the aforementioned ‘explosion’ of the party space. While politics in 2007 were ideologically muddled, at least with respect to issue preferences, in 2017, sorting along both dimensions was stronger. The figure also shows increasing sorting occurring based on trust, with newer, post-crisis parties attracting sceptical voters while the established parties tend to find support among the most trusting voters.

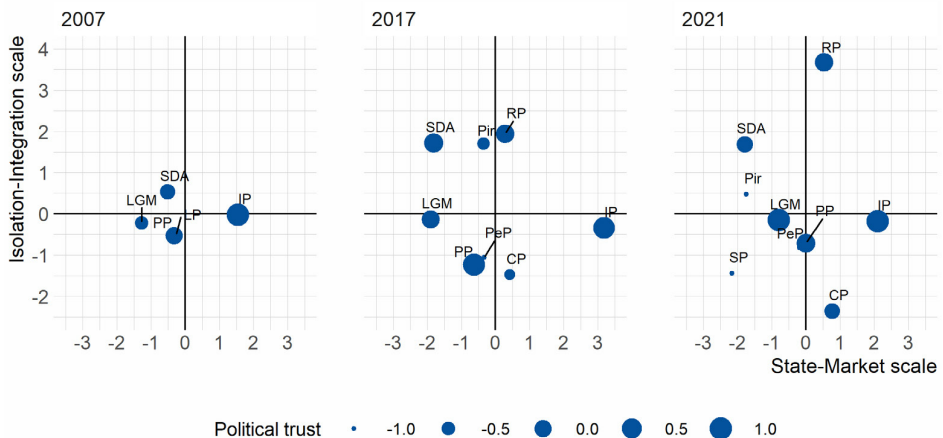


Figure 8. Issue preference configurations, political trust and party choice (2007, 2017 and 2021)

Note: Points on the graph show the average position of voters for each party. Entries are odds ratios (ORs) shown for one standard deviation change in each variable. Following Häusermann & Kriesi (2015), ORs under 1 have been transformed by the formula $-1/OR$ to make them comparable to odds ratios over 1. Data weighted by gender, age, electoral district and party choice. See table 1 for party name abbreviations.

What, then, about the 2021 landscape? Several points bear highlighting. First, the divergence between party voters on the isolation–integration dimension has reached new heights, with the Reform Party and Centre Party becoming even more polarising in terms of partisan sorting than before. Second, sorting on the state–market dimension has slightly decreased, primarily because the issue profiles of Left-Greens and Independence Party voters have moved towards the centre of the spectrum. The shift for the Left-Greens can surely be attributed to their participation in the left–right coalition government, unpopular amongst a part of their base. These voters seem to have found new homes in the Pirate Party, which has moved sharply to the left, and the newly formed Socialist Party of Iceland. Lastly, sorting based on political trust has remained high, with a clear demarcation between the trusting voters of the older established parties and distrusting voters of the post-crisis parties. The only exception to this pattern is the Reform Party voter base, which is more similar to the established parties than other post-crisis parties.

7. Discussion

Here we have offered an analysis of the 2021 Althingi election in Iceland based on several key indicators obtained from ICENES 2021. The overall question we have sought to answer concerns the degree to which Icelandic politics have continued their track to recovery or transformation after the political and economic upheaval in 2008 that was reported in detail in Önnudóttir et al. (2021). The 2021 election and the campaign leading up to it were those of stability and continuity. The long shadow cast by the COVID-19 pandemic makes it hard to separate the temporary influence of the pandemic from any other long- or short-term trends we have or, more speculatively, might have observed. For the first time in 30 years, the coalition parties increased their vote share in the election (by 1.5 percentage points). The results thus gave the coalition of the Left-Green Movement, the Independence Party and the Progressive Party a clear mandate to form a government for another four years.

Overall, we find that party-switching and partisan sorting slowed somewhat in 2021, compared with the post-crisis elections. Around 45% of voters reported having changed their party choice in 2021, compared with 2017, which is less than in previous elections. Trust in politicians and satisfaction with how democracy works has continued to increase from its all-time low in 2009. We also observe that the youngest age groups continue to be least likely to vote, spend less time following the campaign and are also more inclined to follow news on social media.

The three government parties entered the 2021 election campaign enjoying the highest public support that any government has had since 2008. This high trust can be attributed in part to widespread satisfaction with the handling of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the government coalition did not only survive due to its pandemic performance. Our analysis of the ICENES 2021 data shows that the three government parties were most often named as the parties best suited to dealing with the four issues that

voters rated as most important, namely social welfare, the environment, the economy and healthcare.

Political distrust and democratic dissatisfaction increased considerably following the economic crisis but had already started to recover by 2013; ten years after the crisis, they were more or less the same as prior to the crisis. In 2021, we see that trust in politicians and satisfaction with how democracy works has increased since 2017. We will have to wait to find out whether this reflects short-term satisfaction due to the handling of the pandemic or a more robust change. A great increase in trust and satisfaction among voters of the Left-Greens (by 15% and 24% respectively) may be explained by their government participation or, alternatively, by disgruntled voters who voted for the party in 2017 but left it in 2021.

Membership and support for political parties was stable compared with 2017. Voter turnout was 80.1% in the 2021 election, which is very similar to turnout in 2013, 2016 and 2017. Absentee voting reached an all-time high of at least 22% of total votes. This can most likely be attributed both to a long-term trend and the COVID-19 pandemic. Turnout was much lower among younger voters when compared with older ones—a trend observed since 1983. Political interest was also noticeably lower among the youngest group of respondents, which contrasts our previous findings (Önnudóttir et al. 2021) where we did not identify any clear generational differences in political interest. Along those lines, we now find that people below 25 years old were much more likely, compared with older respondents, to report having spent no time following political news or events on any given day during the campaign. Younger people were also more likely to use social media, compared with older ones, in following election coverage, a trend observed in international studies but confirmed here for the first time in Iceland.

Finally, an analysis of voters' issue preferences reveals that, overall, attitudes on the state–market and isolation–integration dimensions have returned to 2007 levels after a clear turn towards more state intervention and isolation in past elections. A further inspection of partisan sorting on those issue dimensions for the 2021 election shows that two parties (the Reform Party and the Centre Party) now form clear endpoints on the isolation–integration axis, increasing polarisation on that axis. On the other hand, polarisation on the state–market axis has decreased due to voters of both the Independence Party and the Left-Greens moving closer to the middle.

The 2021 election and the campaign leading up to it were marked by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Iceland, the crisis resulted in increased trust in the government and pushed many political issues to the background—issues that might under other circumstances have forged sharper party lines and served as political motivators. We will, of course, never know how 2021 would have looked without the pandemic. What we can conclude, based on our analysis of the 2021 ICENES post-election survey, is that it appears that Icelandic politics have reached a new balance after the tumultuous period following the 2008 economic crisis. The party fragmentation that started with a bang in 2013 seems to be permanent. In 2021, eight parties are represented in Althingi, which is the same as in 2017. In contrast, before 2013, the number of parties was usually five. Trust and satis-

faction with democracy continue to increase, but so does political disengagement among young people. Partisan sorting, or where voters of different parties stand on political issues, does not seem to be very stable. That may mostly reflect whether parties are in government or opposition and, thus, reflect ‘politics as usual’ rather than an aftermath of the largest political earthquake in Iceland’s history.

Notes

- 1 The ICENES 2021 post-election voter survey was fielded after the September 25 election, from September 27 until March 19. The sample consisted of 6000 voters selected randomly from the national registry and a sample of 1391 respondents from the post-election voter survey in ICENES 2017 who had agreed to participate in a follow-up survey (from a randomly selected sample). A mixed mode design was used, with 1576 respondents answering the questionnaire by phone, 585 answering a shorter version of the questionnaire sent to them by email (those who could not be reached by phone or refusals via phone who were invited to respond to an electronic version) and 596 respondents from the 2017 post-election voter survey. Response rate (gross) was 37.5%. All analyses reported in the paper are weighted by age, gender and electoral district, unless otherwise noted. The Social Science Research Institute of the University of Iceland carried out the fieldwork. ICENES 2021 was funded by the Infrastructure Fund of the Icelandic Research Council, grant number: 200247-6301. See more about ICENES at www.wiskos.hi.is
- 2 See data from ICENES (in Icelandic) at <https://fel.hi.is/is/fylgisrakning-fyrir-athingiskosning-ar-2021>. In a rolling cross-section campaign survey fielded in the final month before the election, 22% of the respondents said that the healthcare system was the most important issue Iceland was facing, 19% stated the economy, 18% environmental issues and climate change, and 17% social welfare and living standards (N = 2436).
- 3 As pointed out by an anonymous reviewer, it is not straightforward to classify Jakobsdóttir’s government on a left-right axis, and as such, it might be difficult to create clear expectations of changes in policy preferences. While it is clearly not a left-wing government, we simply argue that it is substantially more left-wing than the previous two centre-right governments. From a thermostatic perspective, such relative changes are what matters for policy opinion change.
- 4 The figure is based on a series of logistic regressions of vote choice, one for each party. Vote choice for each party is regressed on the two issue dimensions, as well as controls for gender, age, residence, education and employment. We record the odds ratios for each of the issue dimensions, which roughly show the relationship between each dimension and the probability of voting for each party. We run the same model specification including political trust, rather than the issue dimensions, to establish the relationship between trust and the probability of voting for each party.

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