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Did Yes Win the Referendum Campaign?

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Introduction

One of the key features of the independence referendum in September 2014 is that there was a substantial increase in support for independence during the course of the campaign. One year out from polling day the opinion polls on average put support for Yes at 37%. In the event 45% voted for independence, a level of support that, if anything, had been more than anticipated by the polls by the time referendum day arrived. Meanwhile, polling conducted since the referendum has not uncovered any diminution in support for independence. Rather, as Eichhorn et al show, most of those who voted Yes in the independence referendum went on to reassert their support for the nationalist cause by supporting the SNP subsequently.¹

We might anticipate, therefore, that this seemingly significant change in the balance of public opinion on how Scotland should be governed would be reflected in the pattern of responses to other questions that might be thought to be of relevance to how people voted in the referendum. We would, for example, anticipate that more people are now convinced of the practical benefits of independence than proved to be the case when the referendum campaign began. Equally, if we now pose questions about how Scotland should be governed we would expect to find a notable increase in the proportion choosing independence. Certainly, if that were not the case we might wonder how the Yes campaign managed to increase its support and quite how solid are the foundations upon which the increase in support for independence rests.

In this paper we address these two questions using the survey in which those who were first interviewed face to face as part of the 2013 or 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes were re-contacted in the autumn of 2015, either via the internet or by phone². First, we assess how far the increase in support in independence was accompanied by a reassessment of some of the perceived consequences of Scotland being in the Union and/or becoming an independent state. Second, we examine the extent to which people's decision to vote independence is reflected in their answer to other survey questions about Scotland's constitutional future – and consider any mismatch that we find.

Trends in Support for Independence

The first thing we should note is that the increase in support for voting Yes to independence identified by the polls is reflected in the results of the recall survey. When they were first interviewed in either 2013 or 2014, respondents to this survey were asked:

*In the referendum, you will be asked, 'Should Scotland be an independent country?'
If you do vote, will you vote 'Yes' or vote 'No' - or haven't you decided yet?*

¹ Please refer to the main briefing published for this project: Eichhorn, J., Kandlik Eltanani, M. & Kenealy, D. 2016. Understanding the General Election 2015 in Scotland. Published by AQMeN: [\[URL HERE PLEASE\]](#)

² Please refer to the methods note published for this project for full details of the project design.

And if they said they had not yet decided, they were asked:

At the moment, which way do you think you are most likely to vote, Yes or No?

If we regard as a Yes voter anyone who said, 'Yes', in response to one or other of these questions, and as a No voter anyone who stated 'No' in reply to either one, we find that when those who participated in the recall survey were first interviewed (2013 or 2014), just 32% were Yes voters while as many as 55% were No ones. Twelve per cent were unwilling to state a preference in response to either question or else insisted that they would not vote. If this group is left to one side, the figures pointed to a 37% vote for Yes and 63% for No.

When, however, these voters were asked in 2015 how they actually voted in the referendum, then leaving aside those who did not vote (some 7% of the sample), as many as 47% said that had opted for Yes while just 53% stated that they voted No. Not only are these figures only a little adrift of the actual outcome, but they also represent a 10 point shift to Yes between the first and second interview. In short the substantial movement towards Yes identified by most polls is also apparent in our recall survey.

Yet despite this quite marked shift in support for independence, we cannot identify an equally marked change in the balance of opinion when it comes to respondents' views of the likely consequences of independence. Two of the key claims in favour of independence put forward by the Scottish Government were that it would (a) help make Scotland a more prosperous country, and (b) create an opportunity to make it a more equal country.³ Yet, as Table 1 shows, on balance at least, our respondents are not necessarily more likely to accept the validity of these claims now than they had been before the referendum took place.

Table 1: Perceived Consequences of Independence before and after the Referendum

<i>As a result of independence would Scotland's economy become better, worse, or would it make no difference?</i>				
	Better	No Difference	Worse	Don't Know
First interview %	26	16	42	16
Recall interview %	31	15	47	7
<i>As a result of independence, would the gap between rich and poor in Scotland be bigger, smaller or would it make no difference?</i>				
	Smaller	No difference	Bigger	Don't know
First interview %	17	40	30	13
Recall interview %	27	34	34	5

True, the proportion that thought that independence would make Scotland's economy better was five points higher after the referendum than beforehand. However, there was just as big an increase in the proportion who said they thought the economy would be worse. What did decline between the two periods was the proportion who said they did not know or could not choose an answer, a drop that may reflect the fact that more people had made up their mind on the issue by the time the referendum had come around, but which may also reflect differences between the two waves in the way in which the opportunity to say, 'Don't Know' was afforded to respondents. In

³ Scottish Government (2013), *Scotland's Future – Your Guide to an Independent Scotland*, Edinburgh: Scottish Government

any event what this means is that not only was it the case before the referendum that the proportion who said the economy would get worse under independence was 16 points higher than the percentage who believed that it would get better, but this remains the case now that the referendum is over. It is thus not immediately obvious how people's views on this issue could have been responsible for the decision of some of them at least to change their minds and vote Yes.

That said, the Yes side appear to have made some progress so far as its argument that independence would help bring about a more equal Scotland is concerned. The proportion thinking that the gap between rich and poor would be smaller after independence rose by as much as ten points between the two waves of interviewing. The proportion who thought the gap would get bigger also increased, but by a more modest four points. That might appear to leave open the possibility that some of the movement in favour of Yes could be accounted for by the apparent success of the Yes campaign in persuading people of the merits of its argument that an independent Scotland would be a more equal country, but it still leaves us wondering quite why there was such a big movement towards backing independence.

Little further light is cast by the pattern of responses to questions about how well or badly Scotland currently does out of the Union. As Table 2 shows, while there was a six point increase in the proportion who think that England's economy does best of the Union, there was just as big an increase in the proportion who felt that Scotland's economy does best. Meanwhile, when it comes to Scotland's share of public spending in the UK, the balance of opinion actually shifted towards the perception that Scotland gets more than its fair share of public spending, albeit that this remained very much a minority view. The proportion backing that stance increased by five points, while the proportion believing that Scotland secured less than its fair share actually fell by four points.

Table 2: Perceived Consequences of Scotland's membership of the Union before and after the Referendum

<i>On the whole, do you think that England's economy benefits more from having Scotland in the UK, or that Scotland's economy benefits more from being part of the UK, or is it about equal?</i>			
	England's	About equal	Scotland's
First interview %	28	48	16
Recall interview %	34	42	22
<i>Would you say that compared with other parts of the United Kingdom, Scotland gets pretty much its fair share of government spending, more than its fair share, or less than its fair share of government spending?</i>			
	More than fair	Pretty much fair	Less than fair
First interview %	12	41	42
Recall interview %	17	38	38

Accounting for the increased support for independence

How then can we account for the increase in support for independence if for the most part the balance of public opinion did not shift in favour of the arguments for independence? An initial clue can be found by reminding ourselves of one feature of the pattern of support for independence that was evident in Scottish Social Attitudes surveys conducted before the referendum. As Table 3 shows before polling day the relationship between perceptions of the consequences of independence and

referendum vote intention was an asymmetric one. Rather than being evenly divided between the Yes and the No camps, those who felt that independence would not make any difference either way were not only, as we might anticipate, less likely to have any idea of how they might vote, but also, if they did have some idea, they were more likely to say they anticipated voting No than Yes. It appeared that voters need to be positively convinced of the benefits of independence before they were likely to be recruited into the Yes camp.

Table 3: Relationship between Referendum Vote Intention and Perceptions of the Consequences of Independence, 2013 and 2014

<i>Referendum vote intention</i>	<i>Perception of Consequences of Independence for Economy (%)</i>		
	Better	No difference	Worse
Yes	78	29	5
No	14	49	87
Not decided yet	8	17	5
<i>Referendum vote intention</i>	<i>Under Independence Gap Between Rich and Poor Would Be (%)</i>		
	Smaller	No difference	Bigger
Yes	68	32	14
No	25	51	77
Not decided yet	6	13	7

Sample: All respondents to the 2013 and 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

This suggests two possibilities. First, in so far as by the end of the campaign people were more likely to say that independence was more likely to make a difference one way or the other, coming to a positive view of independence might have been more likely than coming to a negative view to have been associated with a switch of referendum vote choice. That is, when someone was persuaded of the merits of independence they were quite likely to change their minds and decide to vote Yes, whereas if they came to the conclusion that it would be disadvantageous they were not as likely to switch to voting No. Second, perhaps it is also the case that this asymmetry largely disappeared by the time that polling day came around. Perhaps those who after all of the campaign debating reckoned that independence would not make much difference either way proved to be evenly divided in their referendum choices. Unless they were sceptical about the merits of other aspect of changing Scotland's constitutional status or simply felt that the idea was too risky to make a leap into the apparent unknown, that, after all, is what one would expect them to do.

Both patterns are indeed found in the evidence. In Table 4 below, we divide those who responded to the recall survey into two groups. The first comprises those who before the referendum had not stated that the economy would be better under independence but in the recall wave did so. The second consists of those who beforehand had not felt that the economy would be worse off under independence, but by the time the referendum was over reckoned it would be. As can be seen, although they were already relatively inclined to vote Yes, there was a marked swing towards Yes amongst those who came to the view that independence would make the economy better. When they were first interviewed, 39% of this group were inclined to vote Yes, whereas in the event no less than 72% did so. In contrast amongst those who came to the conclusion that independence would make Scotland's economy worse, the balance of Yes and No support hardly altered at all. For this group their eventual feelings about the economic consequences of independence largely seemed to do no more than reinforce an existing inclination to back the Union.

Table 4: Referendum Vote Choice Amongst Voters Who Became Convinced that Independence would make Scotland's Economy Better/Worse

<i>Referendum vote choice</i>	<i>Voters Who Became Convinced that Independence would make the Economy Better (N = 107), %</i>	
	First Interview	Recall Interview
Yes	39	72
No	42	24
DK/abstained	19	3
<i>Referendum vote choice</i>	<i>Voters Who Became Convinced that Independence would make the Economy Worse (N = 109), %</i>	
	Smaller	No difference
Yes	21	28
No	67	71
DK/Abstained	12	1

Much the same pattern is to be found if we look at those who came to a view one way or the other about the consequences of independence for the gap between rich and poor. Beforehand Yes support amongst those who eventually decided that independence would reduce the gap between rich and poor stood at 44%, but in the event no less than 71% reported having voted Yes. In contrast the level of support for No only rose from 63% to 68% amongst those who eventually decided that the gap between rich and poor would widen in the wake of independence. Similar results obtain if we look at those who came to the conclusion that Scotland secured less than its fair share of spending. However, there was even some movement towards Yes amongst those who came to the view that Scotland's economy benefitted more from the Union, let alone those who came to the conclusion that England's economy did, suggesting that this particular issue did not play a big role in changing the balance of opinion.

On its own, though, the asymmetric impact of coming to a positive view of the consequences of independence cannot fully account for the ten point increase in support for independence evident in our data. The increase in the proportion who came to such a view during the course of the campaign and the strength of the relationship with referendum choice are both too small to account fully for the ten point increase in support for independence in our sample. What we also have to note is that by polling day much of the asymmetry in the link between perceptions of the consequences of independence and vote choice had largely disappeared. Amongst those who in the recall interview said that independence would not make any difference to Scotland's economy, rather more said they had voted Yes (45%) than indicated that they had chosen No (35%). In the case of the impact of independence on the gap between rich and poor on the other hand, the balance amongst those who thought it would not make any difference was still somewhat in the other direction, but even so 40% backed Yes while 50% supported No.

The gains made by the Yes campaign during the referendum were then made despite rather than because it was especially successful in changing the balance of opinion on the merits or otherwise of independence and the Union. However, in so far as the referendum campaign as a whole did result in more voters coming to the conclusion that independence would make a difference – in one direction or the other – the consequences were asymmetric. Coming to the view that independence would be beneficial after all was often associated with a decision to switch to Yes. In contrast

coming to the conclusion that independence would have deleterious consequences seems in many cases simply to have affirmed voters in an initial scepticism about the idea. At the same time, whereas earlier in the campaign the feeling that independence would not make much difference was apparently associated with an inclination to stick with the status quo, that tendency was much less in evidence by the time polling day came around. The referendum afforded the Yes campaign to make its case for independence anew and thus win converts, whereas the No campaign seemingly had to spend most of its time defending what perhaps was in some cases little more than a hitherto little considered and largely instinctive support for the constitutional status quo.

The Consistency of Support for Independence

So far we have focused on how people's answer to the referendum question that was put before them in September 2014 evolved during the campaign. In so doing, we have affirmed the large increase in support for independence identified by the opinion polls. But what about the answers that our respondents gave to other questions about Scotland's constitutional future? Do these also indicate a marked change of mood in favour of independence?

One such question that has appeared regularly on the Scottish Social Attitudes survey ever since its inception in 1999 (Curtice, 2014a) asks respondents to state which of five options comes closest to their view. The first two of these options refer to independence (either inside or outside the European Union), two to devolution (either with or without tax powers), and the final one to the *status quo ante* under which Scotland was governed from Westminster. The options read in full as follows:

- *Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union*
- *Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union*
- *Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **some** taxation powers*
- *Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **no** taxation powers*
- *Scotland should remain part of the UK **without** an elected parliament*

The distinctions between the two possible forms of independence are now largely redundant (no mainstream political party currently advocates independence outside the EU or having a Scottish Parliament that does not have tax powers), and thus we can collapse these so that we simply identify the proportion to express support for independence, devolution or no parliament at all.

When the respondents to our recall survey were first interviewed, 32% said that they preferred independence, a figure that matched exactly the proportion who said that they were at least inclined to vote Yes. The correspondence between the two measures was, of course, not as perfect as the similarity of these totals implies, but, nevertheless, 79% of those who expressed support for Yes also chose one of the two

independence options. However, whereas in the recall survey 43% stated that they voted Yes (here including in the denominator those who said they did not vote), the proportion who chose one of the independence options was, at 33%, barely any different from what it had been beforehand. Now only 72% of those who said they voted Yes now also backed independence on this further question.

This is not an isolated pattern. It is also to be found when we look at the responses given by participants in the recall survey to a second question that has also been asked regularly on the Scottish Social Attitudes survey in recent years. This question reads:

Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?

- *The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland*
- *The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else*
- *The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest*
- *The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland*

The four descriptions are intended to refer to independence, 'devolution max', the devolution settlement prior to the implementation of the Scotland Act and no devolution at all, albeit the question deliberately eschews the use of such technical terms.

When they were first interviewed, 36% of participants in our recall survey chose the first option, again very similar to the 32% who at the same time expressed support for Yes. No less than 85% of those inclined to vote Yes also chose the Scottish Parliament 'make all the decisions' option. However, when they were re-interviewed, the proportion who said that the Scottish Parliament should make all decisions actually fell back slightly to 33%. Less than two-thirds (64%) of those who said that they voted Yes in the referendum now picked the option that described independence.

Of course, one possible reason for this discrepancy is that people's attitudes might have changed since the referendum. We were after all asking respondents their views about how Scotland should be governed some twelve months after they had actually cast a vote in favour of independence. However, given that, as we noted earlier, opinion polls conducted in the intervening period have failed to register any decline in the proportion saying that they would vote Yes to independence in a second referendum, it seems highly unlikely that this is the explanation. It appears that we need to look a little more closely at this apparent divergence between having voted Yes in the independence referendum and expressing support for independence in response to other questions.

For this purpose we can define as an apparently 'inconsistent' supporter of independence someone who said that they voted Yes in the referendum, but who in response to the first of our two additional questions failed to choose one of the two independence options in our recall survey (of whom there are 85 such respondents in our sample). Note that members of this group may still have expressed support for

independence, either when they were first interviewed or in response to our second alternative question. As many as 40% chose one of the two independence options in the initial interview, while equally 40% said in the recall survey that the Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland. Even so, these figures are markedly lower than the equivalent figures for Yes supporters as a whole. Moreover, members of this group are more likely than other Yes supporters to have made up their mind to vote Yes during the course of the campaign. Only 46% indicated when they were first interviewed that they were at least inclined to vote Yes, compared with no less than 73% of those Yes voters who on the first of our alternative questions also chose (in the recall interview) one of the two independence options.

In short, on all measures this group does indeed look as though its support for independence was relatively soft. Although most of them apparently want a strong Scottish Parliament – apart from the 40% who say that the Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland, another 31% indicate that it should make all of the decisions apart from defence and foreign affairs – it appears that they are not necessarily strongly committed to independence. So what persuaded them to vote Yes in the referendum?

Table 5 supplies much of the answer. Before the referendum only around a quarter (26%) of this group believed that the economy would be better as a result of independence. Subsequently this figure doubled to around a half (51%). In contrast it only increased by six points amongst those classified as ‘consistent’ supporters of independence, that is they both voted Yes and chose one of our two independence options. And unsurprisingly, very few of those who did not back independence at all felt on either occasion that Scotland’s economy would be better under independence.

Table 5: Evaluations of the Implications of Independence for the Economy by Consistency of Support for Independence

<i>Economy would be...</i>	<i>Support for independence (%)</i>		
	Consistent	Inconsistent	Neither
Better	59	23	7
No difference	15	26	14
Worse	10	15	60
Can't choose	14	31	13
<i>Economy would be...</i>	<i>Support for independence (%)</i>		
	Consistent	Inconsistent	Neither
Better	65	51	9
No difference	16	15	15
Worse	12	29	69
Can't choose	4	4	5

Consistent: Voted Yes in the referendum and chose either of two independence options as their preference for how Scotland should be governed.

Inconsistent: Voted Yes in the referendum and did not choose either of two independence options as their preference for how Scotland should be governed.

We have already seen that those who came to the view during the campaign that independence would make Scotland’s economy better were especially likely to switch to Yes. Meanwhile, on none of the other evaluations of independence or of the Union to which we made reference earlier is there any evidence of such a distinctive change of mood amongst our ‘inconsistent’ supporters of independence. It appears that the success of the Yes campaign in persuading some voters during the course of the

campaign that independence would be economically beneficial was especially important in winning over a group of voters whose support for independence seemingly represented something less than a firm commitment.

Our research on what was influencing voters' choices in advance of polling day⁴ consistently suggested that whether people would vote Yes or No was related above all to what they perceived to be the economic consequences of independence. Its importance is now seemingly demonstrated once again. It appears that much of the advance that the Yes side made amongst less committed supporters of independence to back their side of the argument rested on its success in persuading them of the economic benefits of independence.

Conclusion

It is frequently asserted that although the Yes campaign lost the referendum it won the campaign. And in one sense our recall survey confirms the validity of this claim. Some people did either change or made up their mind during the course of the campaign and vote Yes, while rather fewer made the journey in the opposite direction. Yet in another crucial sense the Yes side apparently did not win the campaign. On balance Scotland is for the most part no more favourably inclined towards independence and no more critical of the Union than it had been before the referendum campaign. What does appear to be the case is that Scotland is now somewhat more polarised on these issues in the wake of the referendum.

That polarisation, however, proved to be to the advantage of the Yes side. It has resulted in a larger body of voters who are persuaded of the instrumental benefits of independence and who thus are willing to back the idea. This apparently even includes some whose commitment to independence appears to be less than 100%. But if it is to have any prospect of winning any possible second independence referendum the SNP are going to have to persuade significantly more voters that an independent Scotland would be a better, more prosperous country. For so far, at least that argument has still not been won.

⁴ Curtice, J. (2014a), *Has The Referendum Campaign Made A Difference?*, Edinburgh: ScotCen Social Research. Available at <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading>
Curtice, J. (2014b), 'Independence Referendum: A question of identity, economics or equality?', in Park, A., Bryson, C. and Curtice, J. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 31st report*, London: NatCen Social Research. Available at <http://www.bsa.natcen.ac.uk/latest-report/british-social-attitudes-31/independence-referendum/introduction.aspx>