

Scotland's Independence Referendum: Autonomy and Social Justice

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Executive Summary

On 18 September 2014, voters in Scotland went to the polls in vast numbers (85%) to decide whether Scotland should become independent. A clear majority (55%) rejected the proposal. However, as a result, the UK's constitutional arrangements will change. Scotland has been promised greater autonomy, but English, Welsh, and Northern Irish populations have also begun to demand fairer and clearer relations with London. Moreover, the Scottish debate demonstrated the centrality of social justice to voters. European governments still pressing austerity measures and concerned about the rise of radicalism would do well to take notice.

Issues

The referendum was the culmination of a long campaign for Scottish autonomy spearheaded by the Scottish National Party (SNP). Since the 1970s, there have been rising political demands for autonomy. The success of the North Sea oil and gas industry accelerated these demands. A referendum on devolution in 1979 saw an insufficient number of voters supporting the proposals of the time. The Conservative party dominated UK politics in the 1980s and '90s but became increasingly marginal in Scotland, highlighting the UK's own 'democratic deficit', Thatcher's unpopular policies and style of governing added to pressure for change. The New Labour government of 1997 delivered on devolution in the hope that, as former Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary General George Robertson put it, it would 'kill nationalism stone dead'. A 1997 referendum supported a Scottish Parliament with some tax varying powers. That parliament opened in 1999, and although the electoral system was designed to marginalise autonomist claims, the SNP slowly grew in strength, forming a minority government in 2007, and achieving a majority in 2011.

This success opened the door to the independence referendum. The SNP separated the issue of independence from its other largely social democrat policies – emphasising that support for the SNP was a vote to protect Scottish interests – and attempted to make independence more palatable, suggesting that an independent Scotland would cooperate closely with the rest of the UK, continue to use its currency, and keep the Queen as Head of State. The long campaign began with the signing of the Edinburgh Agreement in October 2012. The UK government imposed a simple yes/no referendum question as opposed to the SNP's preference for a third option – greater autonomy. This refusal was motivated by confidence that voters backing autonomy would reject independence. However, while historically public opinion solidly supported the Union, this lead gradually declined: ten days before the referendum the vote became too close to call. UK party leaders rushed to promise vaguely-defined greater autonomy in the event of a No vote. This unedifying scramble accelerated the debate in other UK nations about their relation to the central government. It now seems inevitable that the UK's overall constitutional arrangements will be reviewed.

Keywords

Scotland, EU, Democracy, Elections, Independence, Economic Reform

Quotables

- Despite the 'no' vote, the UK's constitutional arrangements will change

- Scotland has been promised greater autonomy, but English, Welsh, and Northern Irish populations have also begun to demand fairer and clearer relations with London

- The campaign showed high levels of public engagement, the participation of 16-17 year olds in a UK national election for the first time, record levels of voter registration (97%), and a massive final turnout of 85%

- Ethnic nationalism was notably absent from the debate

- Scottish voters suggest radicalism is best dealt with via healthy representation and a focus on social justice

Abstract

The referendum on Scottish independence was an excellent example of democracy. The issues it raised – social justice, economic security, and the inadequacy of mainstream politicians' response to popular demands – are salient across Europe, and beyond. Moreover, to address the UK's own, democratic deficit, Scotland has been promised greater autonomy, but English, Welsh, and Northern Irish populations have also begun to demand fairer and clearer relations with London: despite the 'no' vote, UK constitutional arrangements will change.



The debate concentrated on the viability of an independent Scotland's economy. Issues like the currency, economic prosperity, and the lifespan of the oil industry dominated the campaign. The SNP's insistence that Scotland could continue to use the UK pound despite opposition from all other pro-Union parties, proved unconvincing. When the polls narrowed, the threat of business flight and rising retail prices also worried voters. Some interpreted this as evidence of the inescapable power of global, neo-liberal forces and the unequal distribution of influence and wealth. Indeed, issues relating to fairness, equality and poverty were a potent part of the debate: the 'Yes campaign' emphasising that independence would be the best route to social justice, including defending the NHS from the partial privatisation ongoing in England and Wales. Others countered that Scotland already had control of the NHS via devolution. Also important was the place of Scotland in the world. What would be Scotland's relationship with the EU and NATO? Would Scotland be able to defend itself militarily? The SNP argued Scotland would remain in the EU and be an important partner, but practicalities were unclear. Some, including the Spanish Prime Minister, with an eye on Catalonia, argued membership would not be automatic. On NATO, the SNP argued that Scotland could rid itself of nuclear weapons but remain part of the alliance. The proposal to reject Trident was popular amongst pro-independence supporters, who wanted money better spent fighting domestic problems like poverty. The SNP's plans for a small-scale defence force were less well-received. Ultimately, the Yes campaign emotionally appealed to voters to improve democracy by placing 'Scotland's future in Scotland's hands'.

But the campaign was not only about the SNP. The Yes campaign brought together many groups, including Greens, the radical left, and many sectional interests (e.g. artists, women, and business groups). The No campaign also generated multi-party and multi-group cooperation, although to a more limited extent. The Yes campaign was particularly good at grassroots organisation, with thousands of volunteer activists and a remarkable voter registration drive. The level of civic engagement was exceptional, seeing the mobilisation of people who had previously been disengaged and disconnected from politics. Scottish people's participation in this debate was unprecedented in contemporary politics, extending to intense conversations between friends, colleagues, and complete strangers, with high levels of attendance at public meetings, the participation of 16-17 year olds in a UK national election for the first time, record levels of voter registration (97%), and a massive final turnout of 85%, the highest recorded in a national election in Scotland. In all these respects, the referendum was an extraordinary event.

Notably absent from the debate was ethnic nationalism. The electorate comprised all people living and working in Scotland, including 400,000 England-born residents. Passions ran high, but the debate was a wonderful example of the best aspects of democracy. In an address in the early hours of Friday morning, Salmond stated that the election had been 'a triumph for the democratic process', while David Cameron said the referendum had 'electrified politics'.

Implications & Recommendations

The Scottish independence referendum has emphasised that it is not just issues of 'identity' that energise political debate in Europe today, but that social justice is a crucial issue for most of the electorate. Political representatives across Europe, where both autonomist claims and the rise of extremist politics are of increasing concern, would do well to learn from the best aspects of the Scottish experience.

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