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Who supports and opposes independence – and why?



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Summary

Now that the date of the independence referendum has been announced, the debate about Scotland's constitutional future is in full swing. It is proving to be a strongly contested affair. But how deep are the differences and divisions within the Scottish public on this subject? Do different sections of Scottish society take sharply differing views? What appears to motivate people to back one side or the other? Is it primarily because they wish to express their sense of national identity or are they primarily concerned about whether independence would strengthen or weaken Scotland's economy?

We use the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) to address these questions – and indicate how far its results are reflected in recent opinion polls on referendum voting intention.¹

¹ The 2012 SSA interviewed face to face a random probability sample of 1,229 adults aged 18 plus between July and November 2012. Data are weighted to reflect known patterns of non-response and the age and gender of the adult population in Scotland. Previous SSA surveys were conducted using a similar methodology. The polls to which reference is made here were conducted by a variety of methods including: face to face using quota sampling, over the telephone using random digit dialing, and via the internet using previously recruited samples of respondents.

Demographic differences

Some sections of Scottish society are keener on independence than others. As shown by Rachel Ormston in the first briefing in this series, men are noticeably more likely to support independence than women.² In the most recent SSA, for example, 27% of men but only 20% of women indicated that independence was their preferred constitutional option.³ A similar difference has been found repeatedly in opinion polls.

But this is not the only demographic difference of note. There is also an age gap. As Table 1 shows, all recent SSA surveys have uncovered a rather lower level of support for independence amongst those aged 65 and over. This pattern has been evident ever since the early years of devolution. In contrast, support tends to be higher amongst younger people.

The relative reluctance of older people to support independence is also to be found in opinion polls that have posed the question that will appear on the referendum ballot paper. For example a TNS-BMRB poll conducted in March 2013 found that only 23% of those aged 55 and over would vote Yes compared with 35% of those aged 35-54 and 33% of those aged between 16 and 34.

Maybe older people are more likely to worry about the practical consequences of what they regard as a big change from the constitutional arrangements they have known all of their lives. However, perhaps we should also bear in mind that most of those aged sixty and over will have voted for the first time before the SNP became a significant force in the 1970s. Perhaps they are still carrying with them the outlook and sympathies of a more unionist era.

Table 1 Support for Independence by Age Group

% support independence	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
2000	44	44	31	23	28	17
2010	29	22	24	25	27	16
2011	40	31	30	36	28	24
2012	31	27	27	25	20	14

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

There is also something of a class difference. Those in middle class occupations are somewhat less likely to be supportive of independence than those in more working class ones. For example, in the 2012 SSA only 19% of those classified by government statisticians as being in professional, managerial or intermediate white collar occupations

² Ormston, R. (2013), *Why Don't More Women Support Independence*. Edinburgh: ScotCen Social Research. Available at: <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/study/scottish-social-attitudes-2012>.

³ These figures are based on responses to a question that has appeared regularly on SSA that asks people to choose between independence, either within or outwith the European Union, a devolved Scottish Parliament, either with or without taxation powers, and no Scottish Parliament at all. In this briefing the level of support for independence refers to the combined proportion choosing either of the two independence options.

said they preferred independence compared with 28% of those in routine and manual occupations. Similarly, the TNS-BMRB poll conducted in March found that 27% of those in a ABC1 white collar occupation would vote in favour of independence compared with 33% of those in a C2DE blue collar one.

For the most part better off, middle class people may need more convincing that independence would not have an adverse impact on the country's economy - and thus on their own material wellbeing. Still, while statistically significant and worthy of an attempt at explanation, none of the gaps by gender, age and class are very large. The debate about independence does not appear to pit one part of Scottish society diametrically against another.

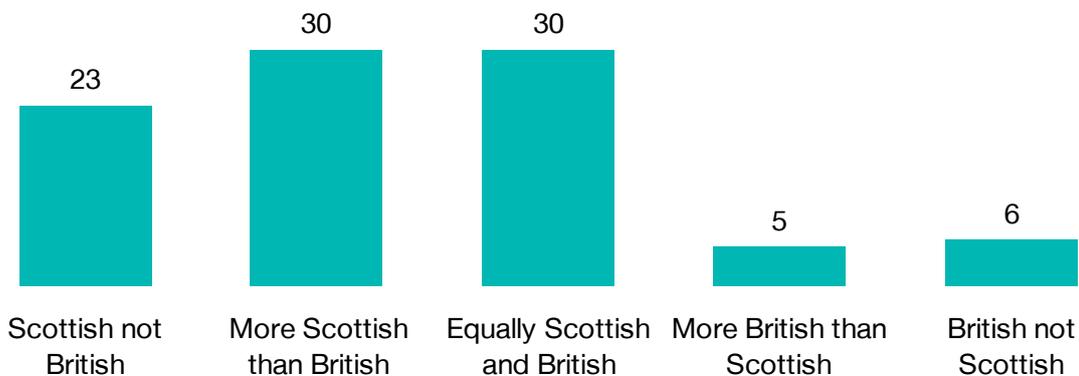
A question of heart?

The central argument of many nationalists in favour of independence is simple and straightforward. Scotland is a nation whose people have a distinct sense of identity. Most nations are governed by their own separate, independent state, and can take decisions for themselves. Therefore, Scotland should be independent. Indeed, but for the fact that Scotland is a distinct nation the debate about independence would probably not be happening at all.

At the same time, however, during the course of the last 300 years the United Kingdom has forged a British identity. Maybe adherence to that identity is a key reason why some people would prefer to remain part of the United Kingdom.

The so-called 'Moreno' question about national identity assumes most people feel either Scottish or British – or some combination of the two.⁴ People are asked to choose whether they are 'Scottish, not British', 'More Scottish than British', 'Equally Scottish and British', 'More British than Scottish' or 'British, not Scottish'. As Figure 1 shows, most people's sense of Scottish identity is stronger than their British identity.

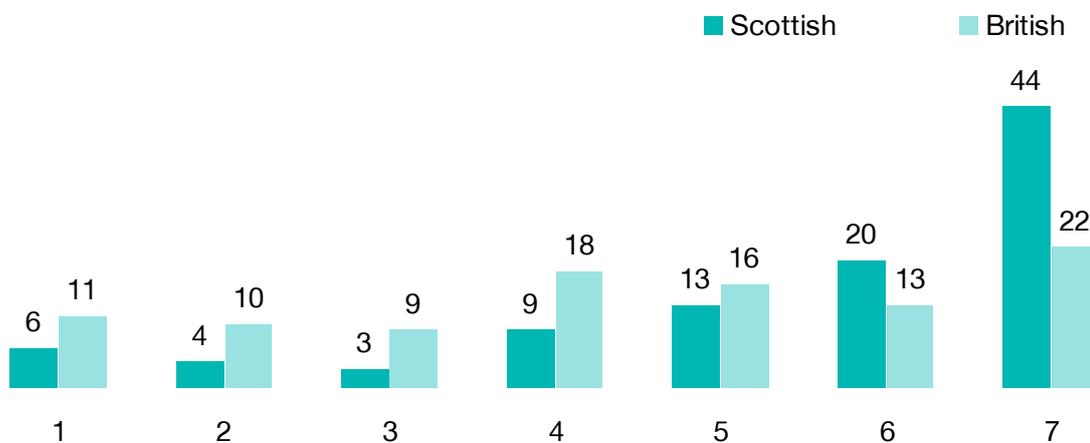
Figure 1 Moreno National Identity



⁴ Moreno, L. (1988). 'Scotland and Catalonia: The Path to Home Rule', in McCrone, D. and Brown, A. (eds.), *The Scottish Government Yearbook 1988*, Edinburgh: Unit for the Study of Government in Scotland.

We can also ask people to say separately - on a scale from 1 (low) to 7 (high) - how Scottish they feel and how British they feel. As Figure 2 shows, this confirms that most people do feel strongly Scottish. Nearly two-thirds give their sense of Scottish identity a score of six or seven. What varies much more is how British people feel. Only just over a third give a score of six or seven to their British identity, while almost as many, three in ten, put it at three or less.

Figure 2 Separate Measures of Scottish and British Identity



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2012

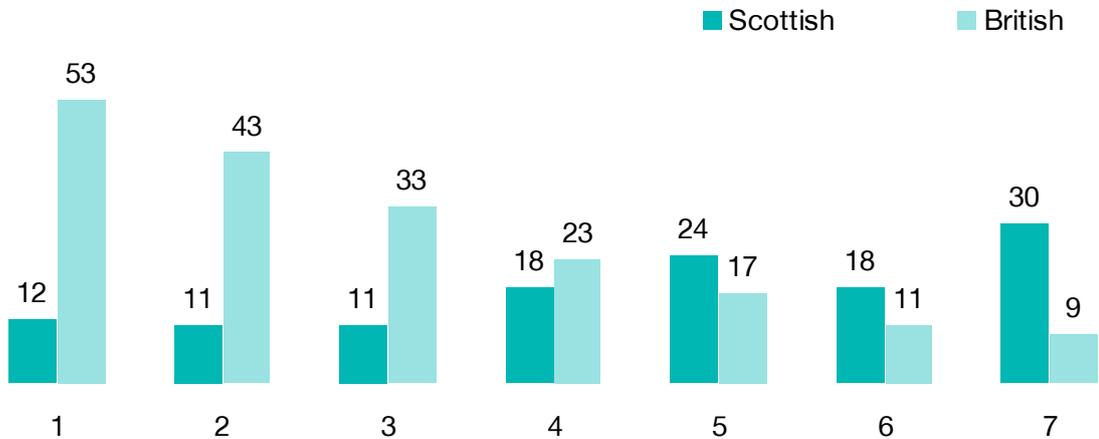
National identity does make a difference to people's views about independence. Those who, on the Moreno scale, say they are Scottish and not British are much more likely to support independence than are those who put themselves at the other end of the spectrum. According to the 2012 SSA, 46% of those who say they are Scottish and not British support independence, compared with just 4% of those who say they are British and not Scottish. Similarly, a poll conducted by Ipsos MORI in May, found 56% of those who indicated that they were Scottish and not British would vote Yes in the referendum, compared with only 13% of those who said they were British and not Scottish.

However, if little more than half of those with a strong sense of Scottish identity back independence then evidently for many people having a strong Scottish identity is not a sufficient reason to favour that course of action. This message is underlined in Figure 3, which shows how the level of support for independence varies according to how Scottish and how British people feel on our two separate measures.

How Scottish someone feels makes remarkably little difference to the likelihood they back independence. Even amongst those who give their sense of Scottish identity the highest possible score, only 30% support the idea, while amongst the remainder of the population the strength of their Scottish identity seems to make very little difference to their opinion. In contrast, how British people feel is closely and consistently linked with their level of support for independence. Among those who feel very little sense of British identity (1 on the scale), 53% support Scottish independence. Thereafter, the more strongly British someone feels,

the less likely they are to support for independence – with just 9% of those with the strongest sense of British identity (7 on the scale) backing the idea.

Figure 3 Support for Independence by Separate Measures of Scottish and British Identity



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2012

Figure 3 thus suggests that, in so far as the independence debate is about identity, it is the intensity of people’s British identity that matters, not that of their Scottish identity. Scottish identity is a near ubiquitous attachment that unites rather than divides most people in Scotland. It is how British they feel that divides them, and is reflected in different attitudes in the independence debate.

Even so, the independence debate is still clearly not just about identity. Even amongst those with no feelings of Britishness at all, only around half support independence. We evidently need to look at more material considerations too.

Perceptions of the Union

One set of possible material considerations that might be expected to influence people’s views on independence is how well they think Scotland is doing out of the Union. The more Scotland is thought to be getting a rough deal from the UK, the more likely it would seem that people would want to leave it.

People in Scotland do not necessarily think their country gets a particularly advantageous deal out of the Union. But in recent years they have become less likely to think that they get a raw deal – and ironically especially so since the SNP first came to power in 2007. Now, only slightly more people (28%) think that England’s economy benefits most out of the Union than feel that Scotland’s does (22%). By far the most widespread perception nowadays is that both countries derive equal economic benefit. In the early days of devolution, in contrast, the view that England’s economy benefited most from having Scotland in the UK was quite widespread.

Table 2 Perceptions of Whose Economy Benefits More from the Union

	1999	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England benefits more	36	42	38	30	36	27	28	23	29	28
Scotland benefits more	22	16	18	24	21	25	24	26	22	22
Equal	36	36	39	40	34	39	40	45	44	45

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

These perceptions are indeed quite closely linked to people’s attitudes towards independence. Those who think that England’s economy benefits more out of the current constitutional arrangement are much more likely to want to leave the Union. Forty-eight per cent of this group support independence, compared with just 17% of those who think that the two countries benefit equally and only 6% of those that feel that Scotland benefits more.

Moreover, who is thought to benefit matters irrespective of people’s feelings of national identity. For example, amongst those who rate their British identity at no more than three on our seven point scale, as many as 62% are in favour of independence if they think England’s economy benefits most from Scotland’s presence in the Union. But only 27% of this group of weak British identifiers support independence if they think Scotland’s economy benefits from the Union at least as much as England’s does. National identity needs to be linked to positive economic perceptions before most people are willing to back independence.

Expectations of Independence

Still, whatever people may think of the benefits or otherwise of the Union, voters may still be disinclined to back independence unless they think that leaving the UK would be to Scotland’s economic advantage. But how many people expect this would be the case?

Table 3 suggests that attitudes towards the economic impact of independence are quite evenly balanced. In recent years consistently around one third have felt the country’s economy would be better, a third have reckoned it would be worse, while some one in four or so believe it would not make much difference. It would seem that the economic argument has so far not been won or lost by either side in the independence debate

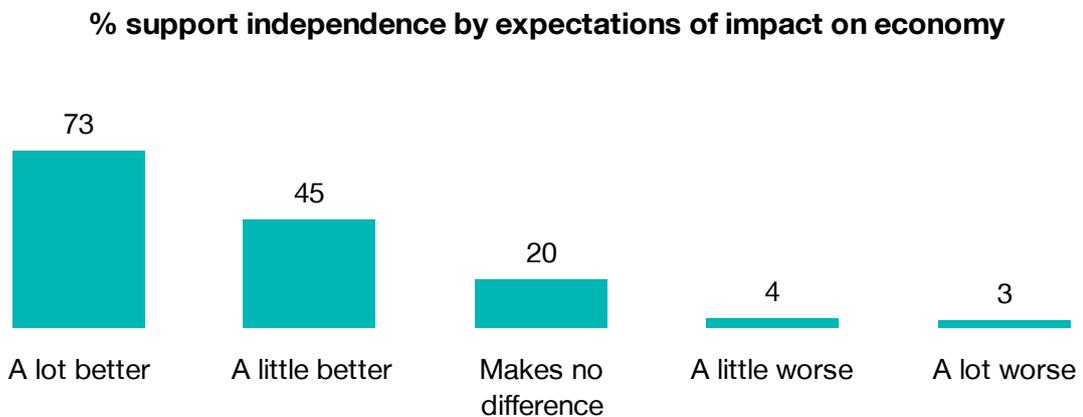
Table 3 Expectations of How Scotland’s Economy Would Fare Under Independence

Scotland’s economy would be:	2009	2011	2012
	%	%	%
A lot better	6	10	6
A little better	25	25	28
Make no difference	22	26	23
A little worse	19	17	21
A lot worse	13	13	13

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

The polling company, Panelbase, has also reported not dissimilar findings. In January 2012 it found that 36% thought that Scotland would be financially better off as an independent country, 39% reckoned it would be worse off, while 25% either felt it would not make much difference or said they did not know. A year later, the same company reported that 40% agreed with the proposition that ‘an independent Scotland would be financially worse off than the rest of the UK’, while almost as many, 37%, disagreed.⁵

Figure 4 Support for Independence by Expectations of its Economic Consequences



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2012

These expectations of the economic consequences of independence clearly matter. As Figure 4 shows, amongst those who think Scotland’s economy would be a lot better, nearly three-quarters are in favour of independence. In contrast there is hardly any support for independence amongst those who think the economy would be worse. A close link between

⁵ In contrast, during the course of 2012 YouGov twice found far more people stating that Scotland would be worse off ‘if Scotland became independent from the rest of the UK’ than claiming it would be better off. However, perhaps this is because the question focused on independence as involving being apart from the rest of the UK, thereby casting it in a negative light.

expectations of the impact of independence on the economy and people's willingness to vote Yes in the referendum is also to be found in Panelbase's poll of January this year.⁶

Moreover, expectations matter above and beyond identity. Amongst those with a weak British identity (that is whose score on our British identity scale is no more than three out of seven) and who also think Scotland's economy would be better if the country left the UK, support for independence stands at 69%. But the equivalent figure amongst those weak British identifiers who believe the economy would be worse is just 10%.

Indeed, expectations of the economic consequences of independence probably matter more than identity. The difference between the level of support amongst those at one end of the spectrum of our question on economic expectations and those at the other (70 percentage points) is far greater than the equivalent gap between those at either end of our 7-point measure of British identity (44 points) or on the Moreno question (42 points). The independence debate is quite clearly more than just an issue of the heart.⁷

So what about those demographic differences?

Armed with this knowledge, can we now gain some further insight into why older people and those in more middle class occupations are less likely to back independence?

The age gap seems to be primarily a question of identity. Older people are much more likely to have a strong sense of British identity; over half of those aged over 65 give themselves a score of six or seven on our Britishness scale, compared with just 14% of those aged 18-24. They do indeed seem to be still to be carrying the outlook and sympathies of a more unionist age. True, they are in also a little more pessimistic about the economic consequences of independence, but in this case the difference is nothing like so stark.

In contrast, much of the class difference appears to be a result of differing economic expectations. Those in professional and managerial occupations at least are more likely to take a pessimistic view; no less than 42% of them feel the economy would be worse under independence. While they are also a little more British than average, this distinguishes them much less from their fellow Scots than does their economic pessimism.

⁶ Three-quarters of those who disputed the claim that an independent Scotland would be financially worse off indicated that they would vote Yes to the referendum question, whereas just 5% of those who agreed with that view stated they would place their cross in the Yes box.

⁷ We should though bear in mind that some people may say that the economy would be better because they are in favour of independence rather than vice-versa, whereas probably no one says they are Scottish because they are in favour of independence. However, when people are asked about other possible consequences of independence, such as whether it would strengthen Scotland's voice in the world or result in less inequality people's responses are not as close a reflection of their attitudes towards independence as is true of their expectations of the economy. This suggests that the economic issue is indeed particularly important in people's minds. Equally, the link between the expected economic consequences of independence and support for the idea was stronger in the Panelbase poll than it was with respect to other possible consequences of leaving the UK.

Conclusion

For many nationalists, the independence referendum is an opportunity to ensure that their country's distinctive sense of nationhood is translated into statehood. Yet, paradoxically it appears that the independence debate is not about how Scottish Scotland feels – of that there is little doubt – but rather about how British is still regards itself. So far as identity is concerned, it is the degree to which people in Scotland still share some sense of fellow feeling with those living elsewhere in the UK that seems to be central to the choice they are inclined to make.

At the same time, the argument is not just about identity. People's views also reflect their perceptions and expectations of the economic implications of different constitutional options. Even for those whose sense of British identity is not strong, leaving the Union is only to be contemplated if they are inclined to believe that Scotland gets a raw deal out of the Union and/or that independence would deliver a stronger economy than the country enjoys now. In the absence of such perceptions most Scots appear inclined at present to stick with the deal they have currently got. The Yes side have to persuade people – of all ages and all classes - not only to leave aside their feelings of Britishness but also that the British Union is no longer capable of delivering.

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