

A guide to making a decision on how to vote in the Scottish Independence referendum

By Democratic Audit UK

The Scottish independence referendum is drawing very close indeed, with the 'No' side holding a narrow advantage heading into the final straight. Here, **Paul Cairney** attempts to clear up how to make the decision as to how to vote for the minority who have not yet made up their minds.



Downsitting of the Scottish Parliament detail" by Châtelain and Gueudeville – Atlas Historique (Credit [Wikimedia Commons](#))

I often hear that people don't have enough information to help them make a decision about the independence referendum. Yet, there is too much information. Most people, starting now, would not be able to wade through all the literature. I stopped trying a long time ago.

I also hear that what we need is an 'objective' guide; someone to pull together all the evidence so that people can read it and make an informed decision. This will never happen. There is no objective guide. Indeed, the whole idea of objectivity is misleading. Anyone presenting 'evidence' on the debate is giving a partial story. This is clear when you hear people making the best, most optimistic, cases for or against evidence. If you want a well-rounded case, you don't ask Salmond or Darling.

It's less clear when alleged experts join in, but the biases are still there if you look hard enough. Everyone tells you some things and leaves out the rest; they describe to you one simple part of a complicated picture. Then, another expert will tell you the direct opposite. So, there will never come a point when you read enough to make a decision based on 'the evidence'.

What can we do instead? I suggest two strategies.

The first strategy is to engage critically with any information you receive. Don't take it at face value. Instead, consider:

- Who is giving me the information and to what extent can I trust them? This is relatively easy when you read a Yes or No pamphlet or listen to campaigners in debates. Set your trust levels to low (often, these messages simply reinforce what you believe, or tick you off). Or, at least, try to combine their accounts to see if there is any middle ground (which is not always possible). It's harder when people are brought in as 'experts'. For every business guru, lawyer or University professor on one side, there seems to be an equivalent on the other. It is not a good idea to assume that, just because Professor Something said something it is true. What you should think about professors is that they have excellent reputations based on research and scholarly excellence in a particular field – not that everything they say is gold. Beware, in particular, the Professor with expertise in one field (such as law or economics) trying to give you his/her views of another (such as economics or law).
- What do people really mean? What tends to happen in this debate is that no-one wants to give any ground. As a result, the debates tend to be very limited and partial, producing more heat than light. A simple example is the prospect of currency union: 'keeping the pound' can refer to using it as a means of exchange (simple enough) or agreeing to use the Bank of England as a lender of last resort. Or, NHS 'privatisation' can refer to anything from the use of private companies to deliver health services, to a less-well funded service, or the removal of a tax funded service. Or, people use '[Barnett formula](#)' to mean Scotland's budget rather than the means to adjust it.
- How much of the information is based on what they claim to know versus what they predict? Some problems are easy to spot: beware any prediction of Armageddon or a better world. If a prediction for a new world seems too good to be true, you know what to do. If someone says that everything will be sh*tte, you can dismiss them quite easily. It's harder to spot expert predictions based on one part knowledge and nine parts soothsaying. A good general rule is that a prediction becomes less useful for every year into the future it goes (my favourite example is the [fifty year economic prediction](#)). If the future involves people, it is not easily predictable.
- How does this information compare with other information? One way to deal with information from one source is to compare it with as many other information sources as possible. So, for example, if you hear a point made in a debate, or read it in a leaflet, you can compare it with the thoughts of, say, critical media commentators (boo!) and [academics](#) (yay!). Or, you can simply ask yourself: is this an assertion, with no evidence, or can they back up what they are saying?

Unfortunately, this is not a good enough strategy on its own, largely because:

1. Much of the relevant information is not available. We don't know how people will behave after the vote – how, for example, the negotiations would progress after a Yes vote, how businesses and 'the markets' would react, or how the political parties would react to demands for more devolution after a No vote.
2. There is too much information to process.
3. We have to trust some people to give us useful information; to give us an account of the evidence on which we can rely.

So, the second strategy is to find ways to simplify your decision, to make it 'good enough'. Forget that sexist crap about some people thinking with their hearts and other people with their heads. Forget the idea of staying awake from now until the 18th to make sure you've considered every indyref statement. Instead, we all use short-cuts to make sure that we pay attention to some information and ignore the rest – and, for all of us, those short cuts include our established beliefs (we tend to reject some information if it contradicts our beliefs) and our emotions. Don't feel bad if you feel passionately about something and can't quite explain why. Don't feel inadequate if someone else tells you that their decision is somehow more 'rational'. Instead, seek simple ways to combine emotions with 'rationality':

1. Work out your priorities. For some, it's about the future of the pound or the NHS. For some, it's about the environment or Trident. For others, it's about 'Westminster' and a desire to have policy decisions made within Scotland. For you, it may be about all of these things, but they may not be as important as each other. It is worth considering these priorities before you engage with the information.
2. Work out what you are willing to give up. There is no realistic scenario in which everyone will be better off after a certain vote, or that everything will improve in each area. Rather, we are making important choices about what we are willing to give up to secure something else. For some, the uncertainty about the pound seems to trump all else. For others, it is about a principle that is more important than a guaranteed outcome.
3. Identify your 'gut feeling' about which way to vote and ask yourself why you feel that way.
4. Don't be too annoyed. It is easy to decide to vote one way or another because someone in the Yes or No camp annoys you, or they appear to present misleading material, or give you a message in a patronising way. It's not about them – otherwise, I think that most of us would spoil our ballot papers.

Note: this piece originally appeared on Paul's blog and [can be found here](#). It represents the views of the author and not those of Democratic Audit or the LSE. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

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