

The perception that an independent Scotland would be fairer could prove decisive in the independence referendum

By Democratic Audit UK

*ScotCen Social Research has been tracking attitudes towards the governance of Scotland since 1999, with numerous lessons for both the Yes and No campaigns. **Rachel Ormston** summarises some of the most important findings of that research, and concludes that the perception of whether independence would mean greater or lesser degree of fairness and equality could prove decisive.*



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As Scotland's referendum campaign enters its final stretch, it seems that every campaign advert, every statement by a politician, business person or celebrity, every new poll and every newspaper headline is loaded with heightened significance. Will this be the intervention that swings it for one side or the other? Of course, it is easy to ascribe too much significance to any one event, but there is no doubt that in the fortnight that remains the two campaigns are running out of time to convince voters of the case either for Scotland becoming independent or staying as part of the UK. With little time left to them, what does research tell us about where they might best focus their efforts?

The Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA), carried out by ScotCen Social Research, has been tracking attitudes to how Scotland should be governed since 1999 and has included questions on the referendum over several years now. Our data provides several key lessons for both Better Together and Yes Scotland about which groups of voters are likely to be key and what issues might make up people's minds.

First, as has been widely reported, a substantial group of voters have been taking their time making a decision about how to vote. SSA 2014, carried out between May and July, put undecided voters at around a third (although around half of these had a leaning to either Yes or No when pushed). Recent polls have indicated a lower level of still undecided voters (somewhere between 9% and 15%). In any case, given the recent narrowing of the gap between Yes and No, it is clear that the direction these undecided voters eventually take will determine the outcome Scotland wakes up to on September 19th.

Of course, there are undecided voters in every social and demographic group. However, [analysis](#) of who is

especially likely to say they have yet to make up their mind suggests that the campaigns should probably focus their final efforts on those who are less politically engaged in general. Sizeable numbers of those with no party political affiliation and those with low levels of interest in or knowledge about politics indicate that they do not know how they will vote (SSA 2014). Reaching out to this group may be challenging, but the data suggests that recent assertions by Alex Salmond about the importance of the 'missing million' who do not normally vote in elections in Scotland may be well founded (although [analysis of how they might vote](#) suggests that any assumption they will vote disproportionately for Yes is less well-evidenced).

Meanwhile, women remain less likely than men to have made up their minds – adding weight to the claim made by some commentators that women's votes may prove decisive on September 18th. Not that there is any consensus about how best to target women – who are clearly not a homogenous group – as evidenced by the criticism some have levelled at Better Together's 'The woman who made up her mind' advert.

What about the key issues that might help voters to make up (or change) their minds? Again and again, [evidence from Scottish Social Attitudes](#) has shown that the economy is the issue that matters most to voters. Put simply, if you think Scotland's economy will be better under independence, you are very likely to vote Yes; if you think it will be worse, you are very likely to vote No.

However, it is not clear that the economic issue that Better Together in particular has focused much of its campaign on – that of whether and under what terms an independent Scotland would be able to use the pound – is the one which matters most. Views on whether or not Scotland should keep the pound after independence do not vary much between Yes and No voters – most people on both sides would prefer this option. But perhaps more importantly, the most common expectation about which currency an independent Scotland would be using a few years down the line is that it would keep the pound, in agreement with the rest of the UK.

So in spite of repeated statements to the contrary, it appears that Better Together have failed to convince voters that a Yes vote would really remove the possibility of sharing a currency with the rest of the UK. In the fortnight remaining, both sides might gain more from focusing on wider issues of economic growth, job retention and creation (which has indeed been a focus this week), and the cost and standard of living that a Yes or No vote would deliver, rather than on the narrower issue of currency.

Meanwhile the Yes campaign has made much of its argument that an independent Scotland would be a fairer, more equal society. As recently as 2012, this argument appeared to have little traction – there was only a relatively weak relationship between thinking that an independent Scotland would reduce the gap between rich and poor and planning to vote Yes. However, SSA 2014 suggested that views on this issue and voting intention have become more closely aligned. Unfortunately for the Yes campaign though, more people appear to believe the gap would be bigger than that it would be smaller (and the most common view was that it would stay the same). Still, the fact that views on this issue are now more closely linked to voting intention suggest that pursuing this argument – alongside those around the economy – may well win the Yes side crucial votes in what is fast becoming a very tight race indeed.

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