

Scottish national identity: why the question of Europe could actually keep the UK together

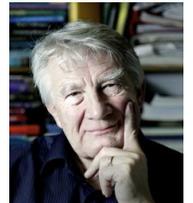
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Scotland's continued membership of and access to the EU is at the forefront of a possible second independence referendum. Together with the political and economic arguments that are often debated, the question of national identity is also worth considering, write [Charles Pattie](#) and [Ron Johnston](#). They explain why a majority of Scots could reject independence once more.



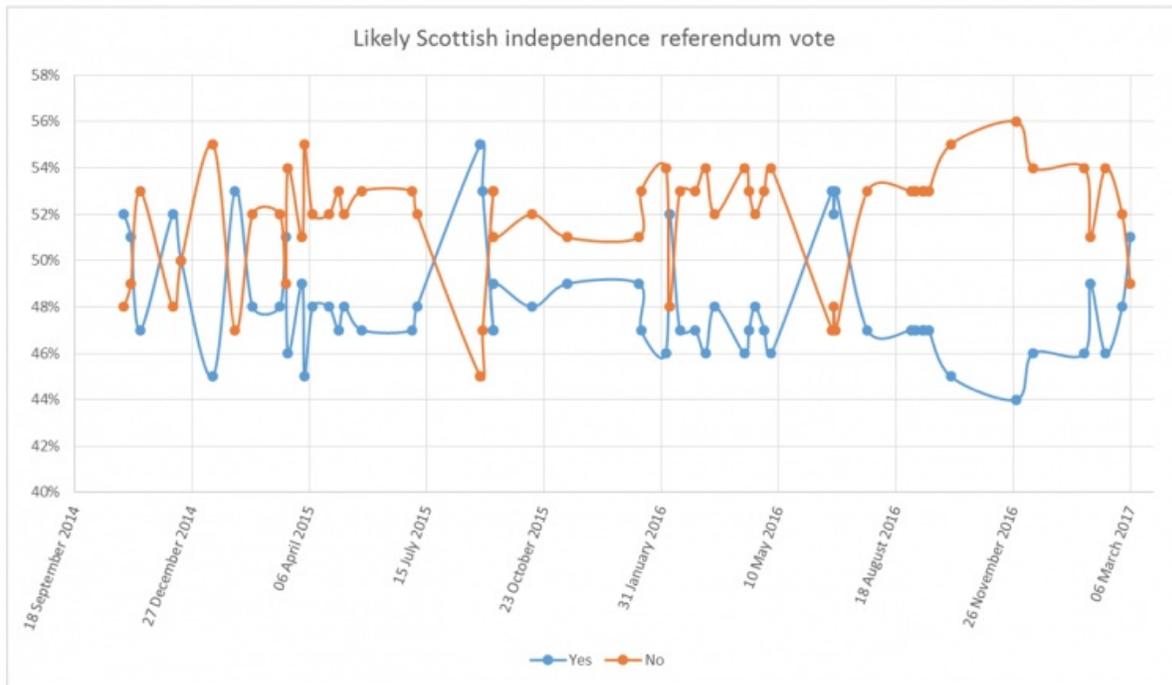
When the UK voted for Brexit, it took a large step into the unknown. There has been much speculation on the likely consequences of Brexit but, in most policy areas, no real consensus. Yet one prediction did achieve something closer to general agreement: Brexit would dramatically increase the chances of a second referendum on Scottish independence. That prediction took a large step closer to being fulfilled on 13 March 2017, when Nicola Sturgeon announced her intention to demand [a second independence vote](#) in late 2018 or early 2019.



It is not hard to see why so many predicted that the Brexit vote would lead to a second independence vote, even though a clear majority (55%) rejected independence in 2014. 'Independence in Europe' has been a core part of the SNP's platform since 1988; Scots are generally less Eurosceptic than their English and Welsh counterparts (62% voted to remain in the EU in 2016, compared to 48% in the UK as a whole); and during the 2014 referendum, the anti-independence campaign argued that only by remaining in the UK could Scotland's future in the EU be guaranteed – an argument considered by many to have swung the vote away from independence. Moreover, during the 2015 UK General Election campaign, Sturgeon argued that a second vote would be called for if there was a '[material...change in the circumstances or public opinion](#)', and it was widely understood that a change in the UK's relationship with the EU might constitute just such a condition.

As Parliament's vote on invoking Article 50 neared, Sturgeon upped the ante with her 13 March announcement. Indyref #2, as it was quickly dubbed, is now on the agenda (though Westminster has to grant the referendum). A battle of wills is now developing between the Holyrood and Westminster governments over quite when IndyRef#2 might be held. The timing and nature of the vote must be controlled by the Scottish government, and happen before Brexit, [Sturgeon insists](#). Theresa May [is equally adamant there will be no new independence vote](#), at least not before Brexit is complete.

The stakes are very high for both Sturgeon and May. Nicola Sturgeon is under pressure from her own pro-independence activists but she also knows polls in Scotland since the first independence referendum have [generally shown](#) a fairly clear majority for remaining in the UK. This does fluctuate, and some polls have reported majorities for independence. Even so, a majority for independence cannot currently be guaranteed, and a second failure to achieve one would probably put an end to further attempts for the foreseeable future (although that was said in 2014 too!).



For Theresa May, meanwhile, the gamble is over whether and when to allow a second independence vote. An outright refusal seems unlikely: the politics of doing so are potentially catastrophic for those arguing to keep Scotland in the UK, as it would present a golden opportunity to argue that Scotland’s wishes were not taken seriously in London.

Timing has become the issue, with Sturgeon pushing for a vote before Brexit negotiations are complete, and May wanting to prevent a vote until after the UK has left the EU; both argue that their timetable is sensible. Sturgeon argues that once the terms of Brexit are known (probably in late 2018) Scotland should be able to express its opinion before it is forced to leave in spring 2019. But May is reluctant to have two major constitutional issues to deal with simultaneously, and is almost certainly calculating that, the longer the independence vote is delayed, the more time there will be for the SNP administration to begin to suffer the setbacks and losses in popularity that all governments eventually face.

So the debate over Europe seems to be pushing Scotland ever closer to the UK exit. But, should Indyref #2 take place, it is not inevitable that voters will opt for independence, the country’s rejection of Brexit notwithstanding.

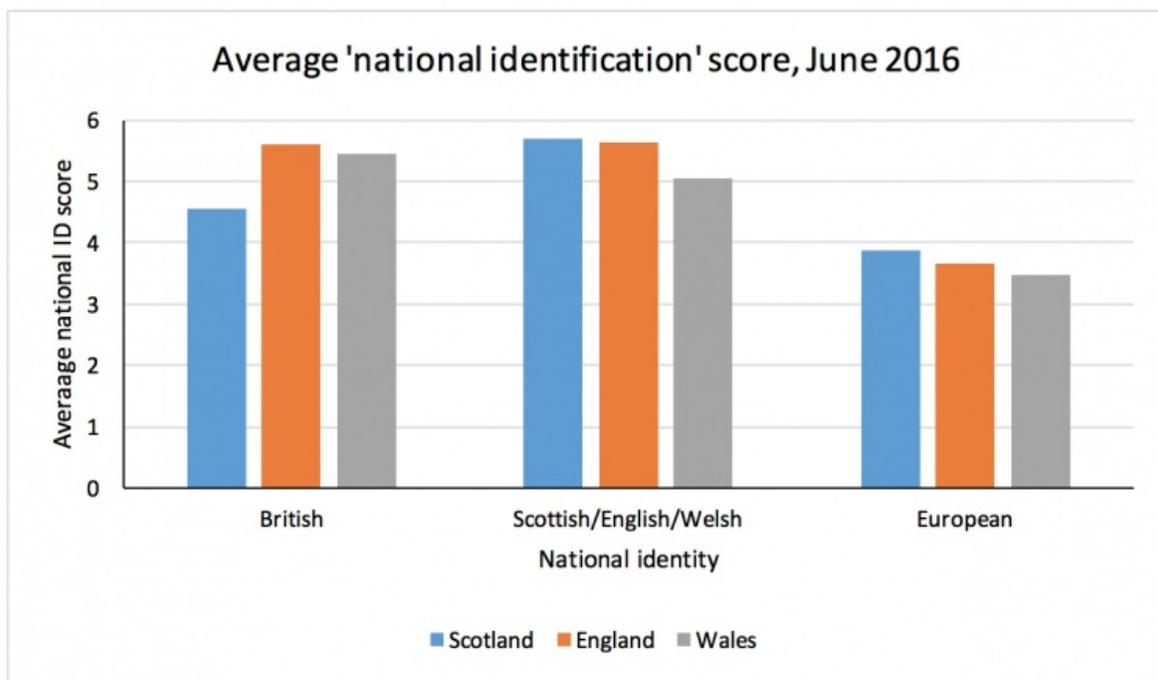
This isn’t just a matter of the polls. There are continued worries over the state of the Scottish economy. North Sea oil is an important contributor to the Scottish economy (SNP claims that it is now a ‘bonus’, not a basis for the economy were recently challenged... [by a senior member of the party](#)). But [oil prices have tumbled](#) since the first independence vote. Then, Brent crude was selling for around \$100 a barrel: now, it is trading at around \$50 – better than its \$38 low in 2016, but still well short of 2014 levels. Scotland’s ‘[national deficit](#)’, meanwhile, is a substantially higher share of Scottish GDP than the UK’s deficit is of UK GDP. Of course, things might look rosier economically for independence come Indyref#2, while the economic fallout of Brexit is as yet unknown. But at the moment, the economic prospects of an independent Scotland do not look comfortable.

But, when all is said and done, Indyref #2 will turn on issues of the heart as well as on those of the head. Questions of identity, sovereignty, and self-determination will loom large – as they did in 2014. And it is here, paradoxically, that Europe, having been the catalyst for Indyref #2, might yet provide some of the glue that keeps the UK together.

To see why, consider the question of national identity. Thus far, most attention has been given to the relative balance of Scottish and British identities. Most Scots feel a strong sense of Scottish identity, and a somewhat weaker –

though still appreciable – sense of Britishness (though a substantial minority feel Scottish and not British). But – given Indyref #2 is likely to come down to a choice of remaining in a Union with the rest of the UK, or applying to (re)join a Union with the EU – it seems legitimate to compare how much Scottish voters identify with Britain to how much they identify with Europe.

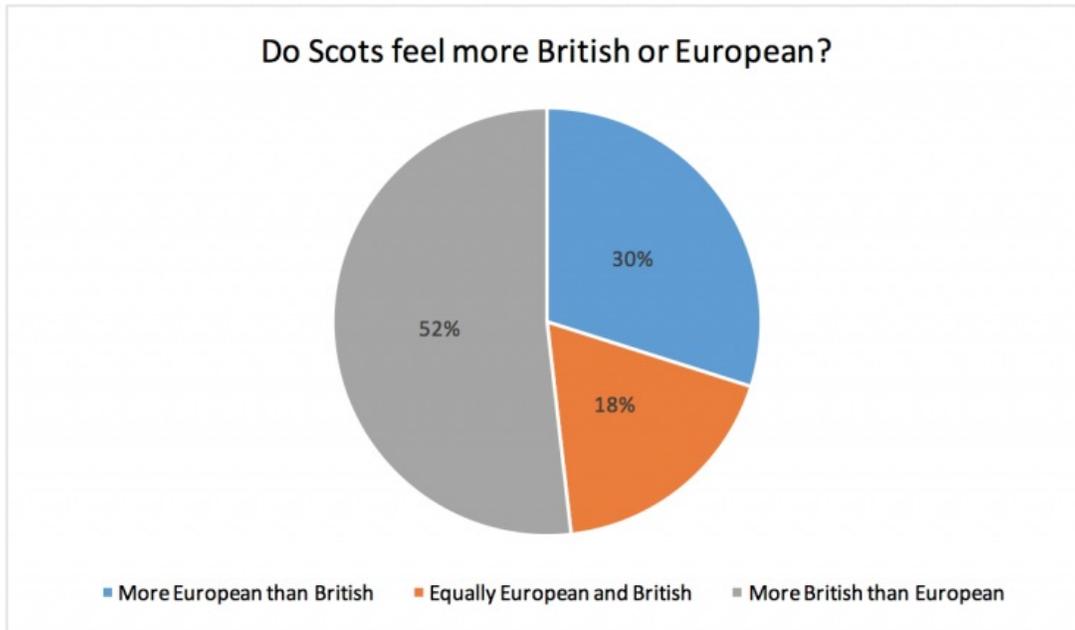
Data from the [British Election Study](#)'s Brexit referendum internet survey help us do so. Immediately after the Brexit vote, respondents were asked to rate how Scottish, British, English, or European they felt. Their answers were recorded on a 7-point scale, from 1 for those who feel no identification at all with each identity to 7 for those who identify with it 'very strongly'. Not surprisingly, Scottish respondents reported feeling noticeably less British and more European than did English or Welsh respondents (Northern Ireland residents were not surveyed). Most also felt strongly Scottish (the average Scot scored 5.7 on this – very high considering that 7 is the highest score possible), and substantially more Scottish than British (the 'Britishness' average for Scots was only 4.54).



On the face of it, this might seem to support the claim that Europhile Scots might choose independence over remaining in the UK. After all, the average Scottish voter feels substantially more Scottish than British, and is noticeably more 'European' than the English or Welsh.

But look more closely. The average Scottish voter, even in the immediate aftermath of the Brexit shock, scored over half-way up the Britishness scale (with an average of 4.54: the mid-point is 4). Only 15% of Scots reported feeling not at all British, while 56% scored 5 or higher on the scale. A sense of Britishness is the majority feeling among Scots.

What is more, Scots' average Britishness' score was rather higher than their average 'Europeanness' score (which was 3.87). If we look at individual respondents, we can get a more detailed idea by subtracting their 'European identity' score from their 'British identity' score. This gives us a scale that runs from a minimum of -6 for someone who feels very strongly European (scoring 7 on that scale) but not at all Scottish (scoring 1 on that scale), through to +6 (someone who feels not at all European, but very strongly Scottish). That scale tells a striking story.



A majority of Scots (52%) reported feeling more British than European. For just under half (24% of all respondents), the gap was small (with British identity beating European identity by just one or two points). But this is a majority nonetheless. And less than a third of Scots (30%) felt more European than British. If Indyref#2, whenever it happens, turns into a choice between a European or a British future, therefore, the emotional landscape of identity might well push a majority of Scots to choose the UK. Leaving the EU has increased the risk that the UK will break apart. But, paradoxically, it might also be one of the things that eventually keeps the country together.

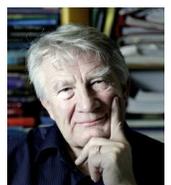
But there are many unknowns (both known and unknown) that will come into play before that referendum is held. The result of the March 2017 Northern Ireland Assembly elections show that, for the first time, the parties supporting the Union no longer have a majority there and it could well be that the Irish government could offer the Northern Ireland electorate an attractive future within a united Ireland, within the EU. Should that happen, would some Scottish opinions be changed?

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