

# If the 'Yes' campaign can shift the debate from the head to the heart, support for Scottish independence will grow

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In the fourth of [our series](#) of articles looking ahead to the Scottish independence referendum, **Arno van der Zwet** discusses the question of whether the 'Yes' camp can make gains amongst so-called 'closet nationalists' by shifting the debate for independence from instrumental to sentimental reasons. However, recent theoretical work in the field of nationalism and national identity has suggested that a heightened sense of national identity is time limited.



There are just over 9 months left until the people of Scotland will go to the polls to take one of the most important political decisions in a generation – not just for Scotland but also for the UK. The polls appear to be clearly favouring the Better Together campaign and have done so (with a few exceptions) for the past decade. However, as Craig McAngus and I have [previously argued on this blog](#), there is reason to believe that Scots are not wholly unsympathetic towards the idea of independence. However, they are not necessarily willing to translate this into an actual 'yes' vote. For a large part, the question in the next few months will be whether the Yes camp can make gains amongst so-called 'closet nationalists'.

Academic research and media commentaries have explored whether Scots are more likely to support independence for instrumental or sentimental reasons. Survey evidence appears to suggest that it is largely the former (economic factors) that drive support for independence. In other words, if people think that Scotland, and more importantly themselves, will be better off under independence, they tend to be in favour. However, others have stressed that the 'heart' plays a crucial role; e.g. the extent to which people feel Scottish or are proud of their Scottishness. In this context, it is interesting to note that 2012 was a very British year (the Olympics and Diamond Jubilee) which may have had an the reason for the slight dip in support for independence and a weaker sense of Scottishness (in favour of an increased sense of Britishness) amongst the Scottish public.

Whether this is part of a lasting trend remains to be seen. The heart versus head debate has important implications in terms of strategy. Gaining ground on the economic argument is important for the Yes campaign whereas the No campaign may need to make a positive case for the British identity, particularly if the Yes camp can shift the debate in the direction of sentiment. Appealing to people's national sentiment is for example thought to have been a key element in the 1995 Québec referendum where the Sovereignists closed the gap on the Federalists in the final months by appealing to a Québécois identity.

Recent theoretical work in the field of nationalism and national identity has suggested that a heightened sense of national identity is time limited. Such ideas of 'time-bubbles of nationalism' have been empirically explored in highly volatile and violent contexts (such as the Arab Spring) but such concepts could also apply to the Scottish case (as perhaps the Québec case demonstrates). This again has quite important consequences for campaigning strategies. If a heightened sense of national sentiment leads to increased support for independence but is time-limited, then the last few months of campaigning can turn out to be decisive, especially taking into consideration events such as the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow and the 700<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn. The question is will such a 'bubble' be enough to shift the debate from the head to the heart and persuade the 'closet nationalists'.

*Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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