

The impact of Scotland's independence referendum continues to unfold

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With the Scottish referendum fading behind us, we have yet to fully understand the effects of the Scottish referendum vote on the political character of Britain, on political engagement by the British electorate, on the standing of the different parties, and on how opinion regarding the EU will evolve. [John McCormick](#) explores the referendum's continuing impact.



The fuss over the Scottish independence referendum has died so suddenly that it is almost as though it never happened. But of course it did, and even though the political spectacle of the referendum campaign is over, we will now have many months – even possibly years – to watch the more leisurely effort to give substance to constitutional reforms arising from the vote.

Detailed proposals for reform are due by the end of October, and a draft Scotland Bill is due in January; these will have broad implications for the personality and character of the UK, but they will also have more specific implications for a possible referendum on continued British membership of the European Union.

In terms of constitutional reform, it cannot be forgotten that 45 per cent of Scottish voters backed independence, that there remains substantial residual bad feeling in the wake of the campaign, and that there are many concerns and needs that must be addressed in the interests of the future good health of the union.

Whatever is decided for Scotland, there will be new [pressures for devolution](#) in England and Wales. The long-term effect will be to transform the UK from a quasi-federation (federal powers for everyone except England) to a full-fledged de jure federation. The f-word has so far tended to appear only on the fringes of the post-referendum debate, but if David Cameron's idea of English MPs for English laws is to happen, the logical conclusion is more local powers for everyone. Westminster is not going to come out of this well.

The story of the Scottish referendum also gives us new insight into the manner in which a referendum on continued UK membership of the EU might develop. There is no certainty that there will be such a referendum, it must be said, because in order for it to go ahead the Conservatives must win an outright victory at the 2015 general election. And ironically, the chances of them winning such a victory are reduced by the new higher levels of support for UKIP.

But let us assume for the sake of argument that David Cameron wins a majority next spring, and fulfils his pledge to hold a referendum on the EU in 2017. The Scottish referendum is instructive for several reasons. First, it emphasised the potential educational benefits of an EU referendum. The debate about the EU has long been diverted by high levels of misunderstanding and misinformation, and British voters are urgently in need of a reality check. Many business leaders have already come out of the woodwork to talk about [the economic costs](#) of the UK leaving the EU, and the pro-EU side has been more actively addressing the more persistent myths. Although it must be said that the Scottish case left many questions unanswered, at least they were being asked; if this carries over to the debate about the EU, it will surely be good.

Second, the remarkably high turnout at the Scottish referendum offers pause for thought. Of course, a vote on EU membership will never be quite as emotionally-charged as a vote on independence was for Scotland, and there seems to be a lot more anger in the British anti-EU camp than there ever was on either side in Scotland. But this is all the more reason why the Scottish referendum campaign could be studied for what it tells us about the best ways to engage and mobilize voters. Otherwise the EU referendum will become what it was in similar votes in France, Ireland, and the Netherlands: a comment on the government of the day rather than on the issues at stake.

Finally, the chances of UK remaining part of the EU have grown with the Scottish 'No' vote, because the EU is more

popular north of the border than it is to the south, and UKIP is all but irrelevant in Scotland. But it should also be said that the EU has generally been more popular of late in the UK: where YouGov polls held since 2010 have consistently shown majorities (sometimes large ones) in favour of the UK leaving the EU, polls since the summer have found majorities in favour of staying. Scottish voters are a significant pool of pro-Europeans, and the unanswered questions about the place of an independent Scotland in the EU may even have helped build the 'No' vote.

It will take time for us to fully understand the effects of the Scottish referendum vote on the political character of Britain, on political engagement by the British electorate, on the standing of the different parties, and on how opinion regarding the EU will evolve. But clearly things can never be the same again, and that is good.

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