

The gendered dimensions of constitutional change: Women and the independence referendums in Scotland and Catalonia

 democraticaudit.com/2015/12/01/the-gendered-dimensions-of-constitutional-change-women-and-the-independence-referendums-in-scotland-and-catalonia/

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2015-12-1

*Constitutional debates around independence claims present various gendered dimensions and implications for women and gender equality policy issues more broadly. In this article, **Tània Verge** and **Alba Alonso** challenge the idea that differences between women and men's voting patterns can be simply reduced to risk aversion, and write that the public debates largely suffered in both countries from the absence of women's voices and gender equality discussions. However, they highlight that while the women's movement engaged actively with the campaign in Scotland, women's groups in Catalonia generally remained distant from the territorial debate.*



In the past few years, independence claims have reached the top of the political agenda in the UK and Spain. In 2014 sovereignty referendums were held in both Scotland and Catalonia – albeit not recognised in this case by the Spanish government. As has been pointed by [Meryl Kenny](#), constitutional debates of this sort present various gendered dimensions and implications for women and gender equality policy issues more broadly. In this blog we discuss the following questions: Has there been a differential support by sex for constitutional change? To what extent have women and gender issues been present in the debates and what position have the women's movements adopted?

In Scotland, [pollsters](#) consistently indicated that women were more undecided and less supportive of independence. In Catalonia, the initial gender gap in constitutional preferences gradually disappeared with the increasing salience of the territorial debate. This gap was rather simplistically associated by some political analysts to women's higher risk aversion, which needs to be problematised. Firstly, risk aversion might well be a rational reaction to the

uncertainty underpinning constitutional change, especially where debates on legality and process are more prominent than discussions about the – relatively unfamiliar to citizens – economic and political implications of the different constitutional options, as [Christine Bell and Fiona Mackay](#) argue. Secondly, the gendered impact of risk has been found to be conditional upon the type of hypothetical conjunctures about the future of the independent country individuals are confronted with. As shown by [Tània Verge, Marc Guinjoan and Toni Rodon](#), it is only under hypothetical negative scenarios (like being expelled from the European Union or suffering from acute economic problems) that risk-averse women are significantly less likely to vote in favour of independence than men with similar risk-taking attitudes. In addition, as highlighted by [Rachel Ormston](#), the women's vote in sovereignty referendums is less expressively based than men's and relies to a larger extent on instrumental reasons – such as maximizing the standard of living of the population.

Thirdly, as demonstrated by [Meryl Kenny and Tània Verge](#), for a long time the public debates suffered in both countries from the absence of women's voices and gender equality discussions, with all-male or majority-male panels found in media debates as well as in working groups appointed by the Scottish and Catalan governments. Why should it matter? When women are visible in the public debates, female voters may feel more “present” in the political discussions and be incentivised to acquire more information, a crucial element for decreasing levels of risk aversion. The increasing role of Nicola Sturgeon in the Scottish campaign may have thus contributed to mitigate [Salmond's so-called “women problem”](#). In Catalonia, the fact that most of the social organisations specifically created to galvanize support for independence – like the Catalan National Assembly, Òmnium Cultural, and Constituent Process – were led by women during the referendum campaign might have also eroded the gender gap.

Therefore, gender differences in risk aversion should not be overemphasised. Indeed, in Catalonia [post-electoral surveys](#) showed that there were no significant differences between men and women's votes in the 2015 regional elections (September 27) that were contested by pro-independence parties as a plebiscite on Catalonia's future. In Scotland, [gender differences were significant](#) – 53% of women and 43% of men voted No in the referendum – but it should be noted that age strongly intersected with gender. In line with Verge, Guinjoan and Rodon's findings, this suggests that the Better Together camp managed to shift risk aversion to its advantage through negative discourses – such as the issue of the viability of pensions in an independent Scotland.

We now turn to the women's movement. Civil society was outstandingly involved in the referendum campaigns in both countries but the engagement of the women's movement was substantially different. In Scotland, the women's movement experienced a remarkable boost both in terms of number of women involved and structures created. Women's groups were actively engaged by organising events, generating briefing papers on the potential consequences of constitutional change and running campaigns to encourage women to vote. [Women for Independence](#) (with over a thousand members) and [Women Better Together](#) were created within the frame of the Yes and the No campaigns respectively to mobilise women voters and to incorporate women's voices in discussions about the future of Scotland – as illustrated, for example, in the “Women for Independence, Independence for Women” motto. Conversely, in Catalonia women's groups have largely been reluctant to engage with territorial issues. [Feminists for Independence](#) is the main group aiming at engendering the process and the political agenda – by organising events, drafting policy briefs as well as seeking to build linkages among pro-independence female public officials beyond partisan alignments. Yet, most women's groups remain focused on other priority topics such as reproductive rights (to counteract the restrictive reform on abortion the Spanish government sought to approve), gender-based violence or anti-austerity policies.

Some key elements explain this dissimilar reaction, as identified by Alba Alonso's research. On the one hand, issues of process and legality were more rapidly solved in Scotland than in Catalonia. Spanish institutions have repeatedly voted down the formal petitions to allow some form of consultation to Catalan citizens and the very same process is still an unresolved issue. On the other hand, in Scotland equality and welfare made it to the core of the political debates about what a (non)independent country should look like and very prominently to the Yes camp, thus resonating with more traditional feminist demands. The referendum campaign was no exception to the historical alignment of the nation-building process with social-democratic values. In Catalonia the largest party leading the

process at the institutional level, the centre-right Democratic Convergence of Catalonia (*Convergència Democràtica de Catalunya*), is not seen as particularly women-friendly by the feminist movement and is strongly associated to austerity policies. The Republican Left in Catalonia (*Esquerra Republicana de Catalunya*) has also traditionally suffered from a “women problem” due to its largely masculinised membership. Lastly, the Scottish women’s movement could take stock of its [successful influence](#) in the 1990s devolution process. In sharp contrast, the last occasion where constitutional issues were discussed in Spain dated back to the late 1970s transition to democracy, with pacts basically crafted by elites, despite the preceding social mobilisations – including those of the women’s movement to gain basic social and political rights for women.

Overall, without factoring women’s descriptive (presence) and substantive (gender equality policy issues) representation in constitutional debates, we are left with at best partial knowledge, and with troubling explanations that essentialise gender differences. Furthermore, we miss out relevant insights about the consequences of gender-blind debates on high-stake processes and decisions that affect the well-being of all citizens.

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Note: this piece 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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