

## Could Scotland buck the trend and vote 'Yes'?

By Democratic Audit UK

The polls have been narrowing in Scotland's independence referendum debate with the vote just over two weeks away. **Alan Renwick** reflects here on whether the 'Yes' campaign really could pull off an unexpected victory.



Could Alastair Darling's BetterTogether campaign be going down? (Credit: [Mark Hillary, CC BY 2.0](#))

I wrote a piece for the [Telegraph](#) a couple of weeks ago pointing out that, if Scotland's voters follow the patterns seen in most referendums around the world, they will vote 'No' to independence on 18th September. The polls have consistently shown a lead for 'No'. And opinion generally shifts in the direction of the status quo in the final stage of a referendum campaign. Since then, however, the polls seem to have shown the reverse pattern: opinion seems to be shifting towards 'Yes', not 'No'. So what is going on? Could Scotland really buck the trend?

The short answer to that is, yes, of course Scotland could buck the trend – it's only a trend. While opinion generally shifts towards the status quo in the weeks before polling day, there are also exceptions. The evidence that we have so far certainly doesn't show that Scotland definitely will buck the trend – the polls could easily shift again. Indeed, headlines about a narrowing of their lead are exactly what 'No' campaigners need to mobilise their supporters and remind voters that this is not a game.

But what are the mechanisms at play here? Are there plausible mechanisms that could generate a shift towards 'Yes' in these final weeks and an unexpected win for supporters of independence? Ever since [I first wrote on this subject back in January](#), I have argued that there are two key mechanisms to consider: reversion point reversal and the anti-establishment bandwagon.

Reversion point reversal relates to the fact that voters are generally risk-averse. The side of a referendum debate that can convince voters it can protect what voters most value about the status quo is likely to see its polling figures rise. In Scotland's case, it seems pretty clear to an outside(-ish) observer that the uncertainties associated with independence are greater than those linked to staying in the UK. But Alex Salmond and other 'Yes' campaigners have been increasingly effective in arguing that, actually, independence is the best way to protect

Scotland's social model and its position as an open, friendly society within the European Union. Independence, says Salmond, will protect the NHS from the cutters and privatisers in Westminster. Independence, say [pro-Yes businesspeople](#), will insulate Scotland from English isolationism in a future referendum on EU membership.

Though 'No' campaigners have counterarguments to these points, they seem to have the additional problem that voters have grown so familiar with their arguments as to have become partly inured to them. Better Together have been banging on the same drums about currency, oil, and so on for months. When Alistair Darling returned to them in the televised debates, he was greeted with audible groans.

Furthermore, what sets this referendum apart from most others is the intensity of the campaign. While precise measurement is impossible, it seems likely that the debate going on in Scotland today is the most active on any political issue in Great Britain since the Second World War. Many people who normally give politics little attention are deeply engaged. We know that, in past referendums around the world, the tendency to drift towards supporting the status quo has been strongest among voters who haven't thought much about the issue in question very much: if you don't know too much about the alternative, sticking with what's familiar is the obvious solution. But most Scots are hearing a great deal about this issue and are thinking about it very actively. All of this interacts with the possibility of an anti-establishment bandwagon. Back in January, I wrote:

*if unionist politicians seem to be doing Scotland down, they may provoke a counteraction. That will be especially so if it looks as though the Westminster establishment is united in disrespect for Scotland and its capacity to govern itself. Anti-establishment feelings run high in almost all democracies, but a visceral loathing of "posh boy" politicians such as David Cameron, George Osborne, and, for many, Nick Clegg is particularly intense in Scotland. The No campaign will therefore need to be careful to avoid any perception of sneering and to balance negativity with a positive vision of Scotland's future.*

Reactions to the "[Patronising Better Together Lady](#)" television advertisement pretty much sum up the competence with which 'No' campaigners have dealt with that challenge. They have singularly failed to set out a positive vision for Scotland's future within the Union and, as a result, they are widely seen as doing Scotland down. In consequence, many Scots are thinking, "Actually, we can do this. We're not going to kowtow to a Westminster elite that wants to frighten us. We're going to do something bold and positive for Scotland."

So a combination of a reaction against a relentlessly negative campaign by what looks like an arrogant establishment, some effective reversion point reversal by the Yes camp, and the fact that this is an exceptionally intense campaign in which few voters will plump for the status quo as a way of avoiding too much hard thought could just swing it for 'Yes'.

On the other hand, my money (for what it's worth) is still on a majority for 'No'. The momentum has been with 'Yes' since the second televised debate. But, as I suggested above, the idea that independence is a real possibility will encourage people to think afresh about the imponderables of going it alone. Few voters in this referendum will vote 'No' just as a way to avoid thinking. But many will nevertheless end up doing so because they are risk averse. So the 'No' side will probably win. But they could have made things a whole lot easier for themselves through a better campaign.

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*Note: This article was originally published on the University of Reading's [Politics blog](#) and gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Democratic Audit blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.*

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**Alan Renwick** is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and International Relations at Reading University. His research on international trends in referendums will be published in [Sex, Lies and the Ballot Box: 50 Things You Need to Know about British Elections](#), edited by Philip Cowley and Robert Ford, due out from Biteback next month. He tweets [@alanjrenwick](#).

