

Three reasons why Brexit has failed to boost support for Scottish independence

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In the immediate aftermath of the UK's decision to leave the EU, several opinion polls showed a majority of people in Scotland would vote for independence in a hypothetical second referendum. However, as [Sean Swan](#) writes, the polling in recent months has shown a consistent majority of respondents opposing independence. He isolates three key reasons why Brexit has not resulted in the boost for independence that some observers had anticipated.

During the Brexit referendum campaign, David Cameron [argued](#) that a 'Leave' vote would result in Scotland leaving the UK. Voting 'Remain' was, he claimed, the 'patriotic' thing to do. Following the referendum, in which England voted Leave but Scotland voted Remain by almost two to one, Nicola Sturgeon, who no doubt hoped that Cameron's warning would prove prophetic, several times raised the possibility of a second independence referendum in reaction to Brexit, but has not, so far, committed herself to calling one.

The reason for the First Minister's reticence lies in the uncertainty of the outcome. Opinion polls taken since the Brexit referendum fail to show a substantial increase in support for Scottish independence above the 44.7 percent Yes vote in the 2014 Indyref. Support for saying in the UK is consistently higher in the polls than is support for independence. These results are not what was anticipated and Nicola Sturgeon is too canny to risk calling an Indyref2 unless she's sure it is winnable. A second No victory would kill off hopes of Scottish independence for at least a generation. But why have we not seen the anticipated swing toward support for independence following the Brexit referendum?

The data

Obviously the first factor to consider is whether or not the polls are accurate. The polling organisation BMG got the Brexit referendum almost perfectly wrong. In their final poll before the referendum, they [forecasted](#) a Remain victory by 52 percent to a Leave vote of 48 percent, which was off by 4 percent. This was a phone poll, they had a simultaneous online poll which *did* show Leave leading, 55 percent to 45 percent, but it was still off by 3 percent. YouGov's [final poll](#) prediction was also incorrect. They had Remain on 51 percent and Leave on 49 percent, again, an error of 3 percent. With regards to the Indyref, YouGov's [final poll](#) showed No leading by 52 percent to Yes's 48 percent. Once again an error of 3 percent. The record of polling organisations on calling the result of high profile referendums is therefore far from perfect.

Figure 1: Opinion polling on Scottish independence since the EU referendum (don't knows excluded)

Scottish Opinion Polls since the Brexit Referendum: Yes/No to Scottish Independence (DK/PNTS excluded)



	25-Jun	25-26 June	24-28 June	20-25 July	29-31 August	10 Aug-4 Sep	5-10 Sept	5-11 Sept	9-15 Sept	28 Sep-4 Oct	24-29 Nov	9-16 Dec	Aug-Dec
Yes	53.7	52	53.5	47	46	47	47	48	47	45	46	45.5	46
No	46.3	48	46.5	53	54	53	53	52	53	55	54	54.5	54

— Yes — No

Note: the 24-26 July and 29-31 August polls did not include 16 and 17-year-old voters in their samples. Polls conducted by Survation, Panelbase, TNS-BMRB, YouGov, Ipsos MORI, BMG Research.

But even if we allow a margin of error of 4 percent, the polling on Scottish independence since the EU referendum has shown a large enough lead for No that this should not come into play. As the figure above shows, apart from an initial surge of support for independence immediately after the EU referendum, there has been a consistent No lead of 4 to 9 percent across a variety of different polls. The fact this lead is consistent over time and across several different polling organisations lends it some credibility.

On the other hand, support for Yes, while lower than for No, is consistently higher than the 44.7 percent vote it attracted in 2014. Thus while No are clearly in the lead, guaranteeing a No vote in any future referendum would be premature. One often forgotten caveat which always applies to opinion polls is that they represent, at best, a snapshot of how people would vote at that particular moment. They may well have changed their minds by the day of the actual vote. This happens almost invariably during an election campaign, and there is currently no (official) referendum campaign taking place.

Apples and oranges

The results of the Indyref and Brexit referendums (shown in the table below) cannot be compared as easily as might first be assumed. This is because they were carried out under slightly different franchises. One result of this is that the Brexit electorate in Scotland was only 93 percent of the size of the Indyref electorate (3.99 million people in comparison to the 4.28 million people who had been capable of voting in 2014).

This resulted in something of a [twitter spat](#) between Alex Salmond and JK Rowling. Salmond had said on *Newsnight* on 24 January that more people by percentage had voted to stay in the EU than had voted to remain in the UK (which is correct); Rowling contradicted this, claiming that more people (in absolute numbers) had voted to stay in the UK than had voted to stay in the EU (which is also correct). The difference in the franchise, and resulting

difference in the size of the electorate in the two referendums is what gave rise to these confusing and apparently contradictory claims.

Table: Comparison between 2014 independence referendum and 2016 EU referendum votes in Scotland

	Indyref Yes Vote	Indyref No Vote	Indyref Turnout	Brexit Remain	Brexit Leave	Brexit Turnout
Total votes	1,618,000	2,002,000	3,623,000	1,661,000	1,018,000	2,679,000
Percentage of electorate	44.7	55.3	84.59	62.0	38.0	67.2

Note: Figures are rounded to the nearest thousand.

A further fallacy to avoid is the assumption that *all* Indyref Yes voters are automatically also Remain voters. The SNP supported leaving the (then) EEC in the 1975 referendum. It was not until 1983 that the SNP dropped its opposition to Scottish membership of the EU/EEC. However, a residual desire for independence outside the EU lingered in the party – and probably still does. In fact, Alex Neil, a former minister in both the Salmond and Sturgeon SNP Governments ‘[outed](#)’ himself as having voted Leave, claiming that several other SNP MSPs had done likewise. Lord Ashcroft’s [poll](#) after the referendum showed that 36 percent of SNP voters voted Leave – a figure almost identical to that of Labour voters. Neil’s reasons for voting Leave appear to have been broadly left-wing; on the other hand, it is possible to imagine that some percentage of Yes voters are Scottish isolationists and are likely to be Leave voters in addition to being Yes voters.

There was a significant difference in turnout in both referendums: 84.6 percent for the Indyref against 67.2 percent for Brexit. People were more highly engaged in the Indyref than in the Brexit referendum. Obviously, it is possible that this is a product of the length and controversial nature of the Indyref campaign, but similar long campaigns, such as US presidential elections, do not yield similarly high turnouts (even the highly controversial 2016 US Presidential election had a turnout of a mere 55.3 percent).

The Indyref touched on a *first order question* – that of nationality and independence. National identity is a particularly tricky factor to take account of. It is not something about which people change their minds – or, more correctly, hearts – easily. This ‘emotional’ element might partly explain why a YouGov [poll](#) taken in late July showed that when given the binary choice, 54 percent of people opted for Scotland being in a UK outside the Single Market (a ‘hard’ Brexit) compared to 46 percent who favoured an independent Scotland within the Single Market.

There is also the interesting question of the extent to which a ‘European’ identity exists in Scotland. There are probably layered identities involved, with ‘Scottish’, ‘British’ and ‘European’ identities at play – and there is no reason why an individual could not feel an affinity with, or alienation from, each in different degrees and contexts. The positions taken by people on these issues in 2014 are likely to be ‘sticky’ and fundamental, and thus resistant to change. This picture becomes even more complex if we take on board the notion put forward by Linda Colley in her [influential study of British identity](#) that ‘Britishness’ was historically founded on an Anglo-Scottish opposition to a hostile continent. If this is true, then an intransigent or hostile EU may actually buttress ‘Britishness’ in Scotland.

Brexit may yet, however counter-intuitive this may seem, bolster the Union.

Scotland's EU membership

Leaving the UK does not guarantee Scotland EU membership – at least not quickly and smoothly. Immediately following the Brexit referendum, Nicola Sturgeon sought EU [support](#) for Scotland remaining in the EU but 'she drew a rebuff from Spain and a mixed response from European officials'. An Indyref2 may well offer Scots the choice between being outside the EU or being outside the UK *and* outside the EU, at least in the short to medium term.

There would be, at the very least, a hiatus. Trade deals and markets have been central in the entire Brexit debate, both pre and post referendum, and many of the arguments as to the difficulties a UK outside the EU would face in terms of trade potentially apply also to an independent Scotland. The prospect of Scotland finding itself outside of both markets is an alarming one, and the additional uncertainty of independence, coming off the back of the general uncertainty in European and global politics at present, could prove too daunting for some Scots. Some may choose to cling to nurse for fear of something worse.

Trump and the special relationship

As illustrated in the figure above, polls taken in the days immediately following the Brexit referendum did show a majority in favour of Scottish independence. However, the referendum was in June last year. A significant amount of time has now elapsed in which nothing particularly disastrous has occurred. The result may be becoming 'normalised' among many Scots. Life goes on. The fact that the UK's exit from the EU has not actually happened yet may be overlooked from this perspective.

On the other hand, the very fact that Brexit has not happened yet may be having a reassuring effect on others, who might hold on to the lingering hope that it may yet be avoided. Even if Brexit does happen, the geopolitical situation has now changed. During the Brexit referendum campaign president Obama [warned](#) the UK that it would be 'at the back of the queue' in any future trade negotiations with the US were it to leave the EU; Trump's election and the rise of a sort of 'Anglo-Saxonism' (in the sense de Gaulle would have used the term) has potentially [changed](#) the balance of power between the UK and the EU somewhat. As one commentator in *The Herald* [put](#) it "the US endorsement of Brexit has huge implications and will act as a game changer" – it will put the UK "on the front foot in negotiations with the EU" and "will also encourage other countries to do bilateral trade deals with the UK".

Blair's subservience to George Bush over Iraq was cited by Tom Nairn as a factor driving support for Scottish independence – nobody really wants to be a satellite of a satellite. The difference between then and now is that the Trump/May relationship has the appearance of the US coming to the UK's rescue against the EU, rather than London being subservient to Washington, as was the case with Bush/Blair. Inevitably a 'special relationship' with Trump may alienate many Scots, but it could nevertheless have a tangible impact on the Brexit negotiations.

The dog that didn't bark?

Ultimately, Brexit has not been a game changer for Scottish independence for three distinct reasons. First, because independence, unlike (or at least more so than) the EU issue touches more readily on questions of national identity. The national identity of voters is both an emotional and deep-rooted phenomenon, which was set to a large extent during the 2014 referendum and is not easy to shift.

Second, the EU has so far failed to meaningfully reach out to Scotland following the EU referendum. Faced with an uncertain situation, some Scottish voters are opting for the safety of the status quo by staying within the UK. The recent support of the United States may further bolster this perspective. Finally, Brexit is becoming normalised, either because the country is now moving on from the referendum, or because certain voters believe Brexit will never be implemented in practice. As events move on, the desire to rock the boat by pushing for independence may diminish among some Scottish voters.

With all this said, however, Yes support remains higher than it was during the Indyref and we live in volatile and unpredictable times. The future is unwritten and Brexit is not the only issue that will shape the views of voters. The extent to which the current polling reflects attitudes toward Brexit, as opposed to other factors such as the large drop in the oil price since 2014, is an open question, and it remains to be seen how opinions will shift in the coming months.

Note: This article was first published on our sister site, [EUROPP – European Politics and Policy](#).

About the Author

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