

The independence referendum gave plenty of reasons to be optimistic about Scotland's democratic future

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By Democratic Audit UK

2014-10-10

*The Scottish independence referendum was the first wide-scale election in the UK to allow 16 and 17 year olds the vote, with turnout consistent with other groups. One of those first-time voters in the youngest age bracket, **Duncan McEwan**, thinks that the referendum gives reasons to be optimistic about Scotland's democratic future, with the younger, largely pro-independence generation set to come to the fore.*



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The referendum on Scottish independence wasn't about nationalism, it was about sovereignty and democracy. From 7am to 10pm on the 18th of September, despite being part of the United Kingdom, Scotland was independent, because it enjoyed absolute power over its own future. Scotland was sovereign, and in exercising that sovereignty the people opted to retain their ties with Westminster. It would have been unthinkable for the UK Government to reject a 'Yes' vote, although it was theoretically within its power to do so.

The campaign may now have passed, but the independence issue is still at the forefront of Scottish and UK politics. Regardless of the outcome, the campaign shed a favourable light on Scotland and its citizens. People the length and breadth of the country showed their delight at being consulted about such a huge issue by turning out in their droves. The referendum has had the immediate legacy of bringing to the fore the notion of direct democracy, with many suggesting its use be expanded.

The referendum has also been good for Scottish democracy in a broader sense. The SNP and the Scottish Greens – those parties that backed independence – have seen their membership expand exponentially, with the former now the third biggest in the whole of the UK, boasting over 75,000 members, and the latter surpassing 5,000 members for the first time. The message to Westminster is clear: the pressure for more devolved power, as promised by the main Westminster parties as the price of a No vote, isn't going to let up.

The haste with which the now infamous 'vow' was conjured from thin air is already coming back to bite the Westminster parties. Although Ed Miliband, the Leader of the Labour Party has now publicly distanced himself from the Conservatives 'English Votes for English Laws' plan, his initial support for Cameron in the run-up to the referendum has led to what the Unite General Secretary Len McCluskey has described as a 'near-death experience' for the party north of the border. Online grassroots campaigns with the aim of defeating the party with names like 'Labour out of Scotland in 2015' are picking up momentum and also illustrate growing political engagement.

The referendum campaign has also created a new found resolution to hold political decision makers accountable for their decisions. Despite the fact that Labour were campaigning to 'save the Union', the association of that campaign with the Conservatives upset scores of voters in their former heartlands, with seats in Glasgow and Aberdeen for example voting in their droves for separation. Labour may see their backing for a 'No' vote hurt them come 2015's General Election.

Scotland's democracy will also benefit from the decision to include 16-17 year olds like myself in the referendum. That the turnout was high amongst all age groups isn't a surprise, and speaks to the difference that giving voters a real decision to make can make. The fact that an estimated 110,000 16-17 year olds turned out to make a decision on the future of their country shows that trusting young people with the responsibility was not folly. Indeed, Alex Salmond has pointed out that approximately 71% of 16-17 year olds voted 'Yes', compared with 73% of the 65+ age group voting 'No'. In twenty to thirty years time, on current trends, there could be a majority in favour of independence.

It is difficult to disagree with Salmond, when one factors in the strong support for independence amongst those in their 20's and early 30's. If you equate support for independence with a willingness to least question Scotland's current set of political arrangements, there is reason to suspect that as one generation replaces the other, the prospects for change will become stronger. Add in my generation's willingness to engage with political issues on social media, and there are further reasons to suspect that a more vibrant Scottish democracy may not be far away.

Regardless of the outgoing First Minister's underlying political motives in making the decision to lower the voting age, the referendum did attract the attention of 16 and 17 year olds, contradicting the widely held but erroneous belief that all teenagers are disinterested in the world beyond themselves. For the first time, my generation's involvement in politics made a difference, and made us true citizens. Teenagers have now benefited, and benefited from, democracy in Scotland, and it is important that steps are taken to cement this change. The younger generation's preference for change shows that the independence question hasn't gone away. Perhaps the Scotland of my generation will be better placed to answer the question.

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Duncan McEwan, 17, is in his final year at Fettes College in Edinburgh. He hopes to read politics at university and writes with the aim of increasing the political engagement of young people in Scotland and around the UK.

