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## Online discussion and the 2014 Scottish independence referendum: Flaming keyboards or forums for deliberation?

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### ABSTRACT

Referendums often fail to live up to a deliberative standard, with many characterised by low levels of knowledge, disinterest and misinformation, negativity, and a focus on extraneous issues to which voters are voting. But social media offers new avenues for referendums to incorporate a greater deliberative dimension. Through a content analysis of BBC discussion forums, we test whether online discussion of the Scottish independence referendum has deliberative characteristics. Results suggest a mixed picture with conversation displaying some deliberative features (low incidences of flaming/discussion of referendum issues). However, low levels of discussion intensity, dominance by a few, little knowledge exchange, and high gender inequality illustrate that online referendum discussion lacks deliberative characteristics, implying that social media are not a panacea for referendum deliberation.

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### 1. Introduction

In recent years, the use of referendums to determine matters of public policy in established democracies has grown (LeDuc, 2002; Bjørklund, 2009). Referendums are considered a cornerstone of direct democracy allowing citizens to have a direct say on the great issues of the day and to become more knowledgeable and engaged on issues of public policy. They also provide a 'people's veto' as an additional check on governments (Qvortrup, 1999, 2005). However, referendums are not without their problems. Many are synonymous with a lack of knowledge among voters on the topic on which they are voting (for e.g.: Sinnott, 2002; Hobolt, 2005; Sinnott and Elkink, 2010; Whiteley et al., 2012; Suiter and Reidy, 2015; Elkink and Sinnott, 2015). They can suffer from weak voter interest, a

particular problem in countries that hold frequent plebiscites (for e.g.: United States and Switzerland), and where voter engagement tends to be low (LeDuc, 2003). Furthermore, many referendums are characterised by what are considered as 'second-order' issues, with government popularity and/or partisan politics determining the outcome rather than the issue voters are being asked to decide on (for e.g.: Franklin et al., 1994; van der Eijk et al., 1996). More frequently referendum campaigns are also peppered with strong negativity and misinformation (for e.g.: Luskin et al., 2005; Quinlan, 2009).

These drawbacks put the focus on whether citizens are well served by the referendum process. Proponents of deliberative democracy would contend that political choices, such as those made in a referendum, should ideally take place in an atmosphere of civility, characterised by extensive discussion, knowledge exchange, due consideration being given to all options, and an openness to changing one's mind on the basis of rational thought (for e.g.: Chambers, 2003; Fishkin and Luskin, 2005; Fishkin

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and Laslett, 2008). However, it is evident that many referendums fall far short of this ideal standard.

The growth of social media in politics offers hope to those who want to see referendum campaigns contain more deliberation. Social media, in particular online discussion forums, do at the very least offer the opportunity for political discussion to take place, negating geographical boundaries and offering easy access to discussion forums at a low cost. The growth in the number of online discussion forums and blogs focusing on politics (for e.g.: Farrell and Drezner, 2008; Davis, 2005; Koop and Jansen, 2009, p. 158) does suggest an appetite exists to “talk politics” online. Accordingly, we might assume that online political discussion could be an outlet for referendum deliberation to take hold. On the other hand, sceptics may point out that online discussions are frequently known to descend into cacophonies of insults with participants simply reiterating their already held fixed opinions (for e.g.: Davis, 1999, 2005; Sunstein, 2000, 2009).

To date, there has been little exploration of the impact that social media can have on referendum campaign dynamics. This paper seeks to fill this void by exploring whether online discussion of referendums can be classified as deliberative, and in the process whether social media can assist referendums in living up to a deliberative standard.<sup>1</sup> Our data comes from the BBC *Have Your Say* (BBC HYS) discussion forums concentrating on the Scottish independence referendum. On 18 September 2014, Scottish voters went to the polls to decide whether Scotland should secede or remain within the United Kingdom. On a turnout of 84.6% of registered voters, Scots decided by 55%–45% that the country should remain part of the United Kingdom (Electoral Management Board for Scotland, 2014). While this referendum was without precedent, Scottish independence/nationalism has been a dominant cleavage within Scottish politics for the past forty years and a referendum on the issue had been much flagged with the pro-independence SNP in power in Scotland since 2007. Considering this and the fact that there have been two other referendums on Scottish devolution in the past thirty five years (see Bolsom and McAllister, 1979; Mitchell et al., 1998) we argue that there is strong potential for referendum deliberation to have taken hold far in advance of the vote as this was a familiar issue on the political agenda.

We conduct a content analysis of four discussion threads focusing on Scottish independence over a nineteen-month period, capturing important events in the early part of the 2014 referendum campaign. Our objective is to ascertain whether online discussions in the campaign have deliberative characteristics, and whether social media offers a new avenue for referendum campaign deliberation.

Our results paint a mixed picture. The balance of evidence shows online discussions of the Scottish referendum do lack many of the features of deliberation: there is little

discussion intensity with low levels of engagement between contributors and dominance of the conversation by a small select few. There are also low levels of information exchange and a lack of participatory equality, with male voices preeminent.

On the positive front, the conversations do show a relatively high level of civility with little stereotyping of individuals, low evidence of ‘flaming’, and a relatively satisfactory level of engagement with policy issues, at least in comparison to the proportion of discussion given over to partisan politics and stereotypes. So while there is evident promise, the potential of social media to contribute to referendums becoming more deliberative has yet to be fully realised and our results imply that social media is not a panacea for those wanting referendum campaigns to contain a more deliberative dimension. Our findings illustrate a number of dimensions that would need to be worked on if online discussions of referendums were to become deliberative.

The article proceeds as follows: in the next section, we open by discussing the Scottish referendum, charting Scotland’s road to referendum and establishing that the independence cleavage in Scottish politics makes deliberation on the issue possible. We explore deliberation and the potential for it to take place with the rise of social media in politics, before concentrating on online discussion boards as the online forum where this is most likely to occur. We devise a series of hypotheses to test if online discussion lives up to deliberative standards. We conclude by detailing our empirical results followed by a discussion of the implications for social media, deliberation, and referendums.

## 2. The Scottish independence referendum 2014

On 18 September 2014, Scottish voters voted in an historic referendum where voters were asked “Should Scotland be an independent country?” On a turnout of 84.6%, 55% of voters voted in favour of Scotland remaining part of the United Kingdom (Electoral Management Board for Scotland, 2014). While the 2014 referendum represented the first occasion on which the Scottish people formally voted on the independence question, the secession issue is nothing new in terms of Scottish politics. Ever since the electoral breakthrough of the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP) in the two 1974 Westminster elections, which saw the party capture 30% of the Scottish vote in the October 1974 election (Cairney, 2011, p. 25), independence has been on the political agenda. And while the SNP’s fortunes have ebbed and flowed in the years since this breakthrough, their presence on the Scottish political scene has ensured that a nationalist/self-rule/independence cleavage has been a consistent part of Scottish political discourse for the past forty years. This has resulted in Scotland having a distinct political system (for e.g.: Kellas, 1984; McCrone and Paterson, 2002; Keating, 2010).

The pressure for some form of Scottish home rule has been a constant source of political debate from 1974, helped in large part by the Conservative party’s minority position in Scotland and the antipathy to some of its policies during its time in power at Westminster between 1979 and 1997 (McGarvey and Cairney, 2008; pp. 32–6). Preceding

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