

# The limits of partisan loyalty: How the Scottish independence referendum cost Labour

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*“I am a trade unionist and coming from a Labour supporting background I should be red through and through but I could never vote for such a bunch of lying toe rags”*

Comment posted by a ‘Yes’ voter on [whatscotlandthinks.org](http://whatscotlandthinks.org)

## 1. Introduction

The triumph of the Scottish National Party (SNP) and the collapse of Scottish Labour at the 2015 UK general election was one of the most dramatic upheavals in British electoral history and a crucial factor in shaping the outcome of the election. In 2010 Labour had won 41 of the 56 seats in Scotland with over 40% of the vote, whilst the SNP had won only six with 20%. In 2015 Labour could muster only 24% of the popular vote and a single seat while the SNP won 50% of the vote and all but three of the 59 seats. This was Labour's worst performance in Scotland in terms of vote share since 1918 and the best ever achieved by the SNP. It also made the SNP the third largest party in Parliament, and contributed to the fragmentation of the party system both in terms of vote share and Parliamentary representation (J. Green and Prosser, 2016).

But what precipitated such a dramatic change in electoral fortunes? In this article we consider how a political event - the independence referendum - altered the basis of political alignments in Scotland, bringing about a shift in the underlying structure of political allegiances through widespread changes to political identities, and the nature of their relationship to party support. We argue that whilst the referendum did not create Labour's Scottish problems in a vacuum, it certainly acted as catalyst for Labour collapse in Scotland.

Previous research has shown that second-order elections may influence voting behaviour in first-order elections (Bechtel, 2012). Here we extend this logic to referendums and demonstrate that voting in apparently stand-alone and non-partisan electoral contests can also have spill-over effects on to ‘first-order’ elections. Research in the US context has demonstrated that this can be the case, albeit with less immediately dramatic consequences compared to the Scottish case. Bowler et al. (2006) have shown that a series of anti-immigrant ballot initiatives in California led to a decrease in the likelihood of Latinos identifying as Republican. Donovan et al. (2008) show that state ballot

initiatives on same sex marriage increased the issue salience of gay marriage and the importance of gay marriage to vote choice at the 2004 Presidential Election.

## 2. Background

The Scottish independence referendum which took place on September 18th, 2014 was the result of a long-running campaign for independence led by the Scottish National Party since their formation in 1934 and followed the creation of a devolved Scottish Parliament in 1999. The decision to hold the referendum was made by the Scottish Parliament following the SNP victory in the Scottish Parliamentary Elections of 2011, but required the agreement of the UK Parliament, which was formally provided by the coalition government in Westminster in the 2012 Edinburgh agreement. The result of the referendum saw the pro-Union (*‘Better Together’*) side winning by a margin of 55%–45%, despite a dramatic narrowing of their lead in the polls in the run up to referendum day. The referendum followed a hard-fought campaign and the turnout rate of 85% – the highest ever recorded for a vote in Scotland – underlined the high level of engagement across the electorate.

The major Westminster parties (and their Scottish counterparts) all lined up to back the *Better Together* campaign, while the Scottish National Party (SNP) dominated the *Yes Scotland* campaign, although formally both campaigns were non-partisan and *Yes Scotland* involved members of other parties including the Scottish Greens and Labour for Independence.

In terms of electoral politics many of Labour's problems that the independence referendum highlighted were brewing well before the referendum was announced. Although Labour had held the majority of Scottish seats in every general election since 1959, they had come second in the Scottish Parliamentary elections in 2007 and 2011 under the Additional Member System to a burgeoning SNP under the leadership of Alex Salmond. Notwithstanding this, in terms of popular support Labour had enjoyed a comfortable lead in the opinion polls for Westminster elections in Scotland throughout the period following the SNP victory in 2011 through to April 2014 when the referendum campaign was in full swing. It is important to note that in terms of vote

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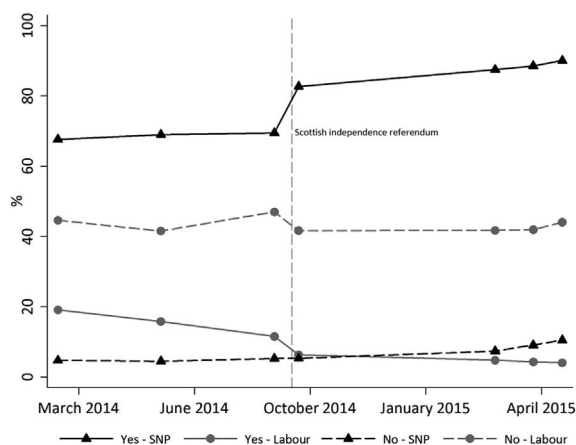


Fig. 1. General election vote intention of Yes and No voters 2014–2015.

intention at least, the impact of the referendum campaign on Labour's popularity did not seem to hit until shortly before referendum day, their support continued to erode steadily thereafter, right through to the General Election of 2015. The most dramatic period of decline for Labour immediately followed the referendum, which our analyses suggest reflects the shifting of alignments of political attitudes and partisanship in the immediate post-referendum period.

The decline in Labour voting was not spread evenly across the population. Data from the British Election Study Internet Panel (BESIP) (Fieldhouse et al., 2017) and Scottish Referendum Study (SRS) (Henderson et al., 2014) reveal that the referendum had little impact on the voting intentions of Scots who voted against independence (Fig. 1). Rather the shifts in Scottish voting behaviour occurred primarily amongst those supporting independence that deserted Labour, switching allegiance to the SNP. Fig. 1 shows how at the beginning of the period (February–March 2014) around two-thirds of people who voted in favour of independence (hereafter 'Yes voters') intended to vote for the SNP, and approximately 20% still intended to vote Labour. Indeed, with Labour still ahead in the opinion polls at the start of 2014 the SNP lead amongst pro-independence voters was insufficient to outweigh Labour's comfortable lead amongst unionists. The picture from the BESIP changed very little in May following the European Parliamentary Elections which saw the SNP emerge as the largest party in Scotland but by a narrow margin over Labour of 29%–25%, less than in the corresponding elections of 2009, when the SNP had beaten Labour by 8.3%. After the referendum in September, however, a dramatic change had occurred: 83% of Yes voters were now intending to vote SNP compared to only 6% Labour. In contrast No voters barely moved. By March 2015 we see that almost 88% of Yes voters intended to vote SNP, and this increased still further over the election campaign, with 90% of Yes voters in BESIP reporting voting for the SNP in May 2015.

In this paper we show that voting in the referendum precipitated switching party allegiance in Scotland. This resulted not from a process of persuasion, where some voters became convinced of the case for Scottish independence and subsequently switched to the SNP, but through the changing alignments between support for Scottish independence and support for the Labour party. Having voted in favour of Scottish independence, Yes supporters could not reconcile themselves with supporting a unionist political party.

### 3. Attitudes, behaviour and identity

The argument that electoral events may themselves have feedback effects on political alignments is not new. In particular, it has been suggested that how people vote influences party identification as well as the reverse (Markus and Converse, 1979). It is long established in social psychology that as well as attitudes leading to behaviour, behaviour can

lead to attitude formation and change. Prominent examples of psychological theories that predict a change in attitudes arising from changes in behaviour include cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957), balance theory (Heider, 1958), and self-perception theory (Bem, 1967).

In the political domain, voters engage in motivated reasoning in order to reconcile new political information with their pre-existing views and behaviours (Lodge and Taber, 2013). In general motivated reasoning tends to increase the stability of political attitudes and alignments and the act of voting itself can buttress voters' affective orientations towards a pre-existing attitude or affiliation. Dinas (2014) demonstrates that people reinforce their partisan predispositions by voting for their preferred party, arguing that voting provides signals of group identity, which in turn strengthens people's partisan ties. However the same process can lead to change in political attitudes and alignments in the event of one-off or idiosyncratic political behaviours. Bølstad et al. (2013) reveal a positive effect of the act of voting tactically on preferences for the party voted for, attributing this to the reduction of cognitive dissonance – having voted for a party it is harder to dislike that party and easier to like it.

The idea that political identity might shift in response to behaviour is consistent with social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Tajfel, 1981). Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggests that how citizens perceive other members of a group can affect attitudes and norms through a process of self-categorisation and meta-contrast, whereby group members maximise inter-group differentiation and minimise within group differentiation. Self-identity can operate at different levels of abstraction – from the individual self ('I') to shared group identities ('we'). For self-categorization theory the situational salience of group membership is key to the role of social identities in explaining behaviour (Turner et al., 1987). The move from personal to social identity increases the adherence to group norms and self-stereotyping (Hogg et al., 1995; Terry and Hogg, 1996; Turner et al., 1987) 'factors that are logical precursors to political cohesion' (Huddy, 2013, 740).

In political science, partisan identification has been likened to other forms of social identity as described in social identity theory (Greene, 1999, 2004; Huddy, 2001; Huddy et al., 2015; Huddy, 2013). Self-categorisation may therefore lead to greater differentiation between one's own party and its opponents (Duck et al., 1995; Greene, 2004). While people have multiple identities of varying importance, it has been successfully demonstrated that political parties can be relevant psychologically salient bases for identification and form the basis of stable political identities in a similar way to other social identities (D. Green, Palmquist, and Schickler, 2002; Greene, 1999, 2004).

Social Identity Theory (SIT) predicts that group norms and attitudes towards behaviour are correlated and that the effect of the attitude on behaviour is stronger for people who perceive an attitudinally congruent group norm (Terry and Hogg, 1996). Moreover, behaviours may reinforce group identification especially when those behaviours are public in nature. In other words, we might anticipate a circular model of attitudes, behaviour and identity. If political partisanship can form the basis of social identity and self-categorisation, it is possible that other salient political positions may do likewise. In the case of the Scottish referendum, the campaign and the view citizens took on independence was highly salient and socially significant. Following the logic of self-categorization, the referendum might change the perception of Yes-voting Labour supporters to regard other Labour voters to be part of an out-group ('unionists') whilst SNP supporters will be increasingly viewed as an in-group ('nationalists'). This will be manifested in a switch or weakening of party-identification amongst erstwhile Labour supporters who voted 'Yes'. Certainly, such a shift would serve to reduce the cognitive dissonance inherent in a combination of pro-Labour and pro-independence identities as nicely articulated by the quotation at the beginning of this article.

By shifting the basis of social identity of voters from one which is defined by party to a new basis of self-categorisation (nationalist versus unionist), the referendum could weaken the salience of traditional

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