

It all depends on your perspective: economic perceptions and the demography of voting in the Scottish Independence Referendum

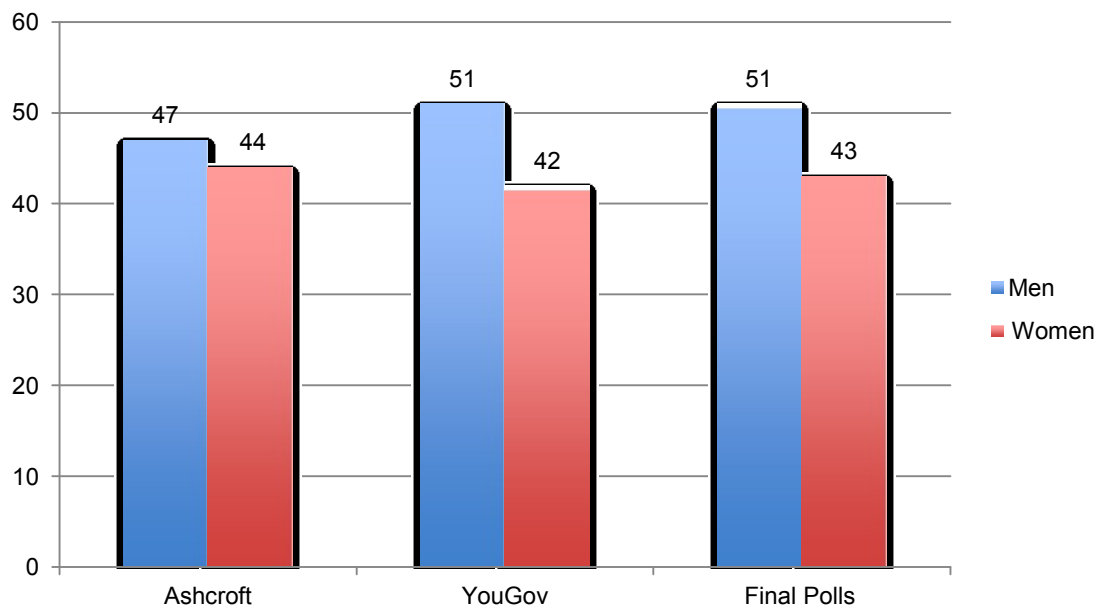
John Curtice, University of Strathclyde

A lot closer than had seemed likely a few months previously; not as close in the end as the final polls had suggested. That probably summarises many people's reaction when they learnt that 45% had voted Yes, and 55% No in Scotland's independence referendum.

But Scotland did not vote as one. Voters' propensities to vote Yes or No varied according to their social and economic circumstances. Not least of the reasons is that those circumstances affected their perceptions of the economic consequences of independence.

Two polls of how people actually voted have been published so far. One was conducted on polling day by YouGov (via the internet) and consisted of interviews with 1,756 people who had also participated in YouGov's final pre-polling day poll, undertaken during the three days immediately before 18 September 2014. To their reports of how they had just voted were added the reported voting behaviour of 783 people who had previously told YouGov that they had already voted by post. The results of this exercise were first published shortly after the polls closed at 10pm on polling day and it forecast that 46% had voted Yes, and 54% No, only one point apart from the actual result.

Figure 1: The Scottish Independence Referendum - Gender Gap: % of men and women voting Yes

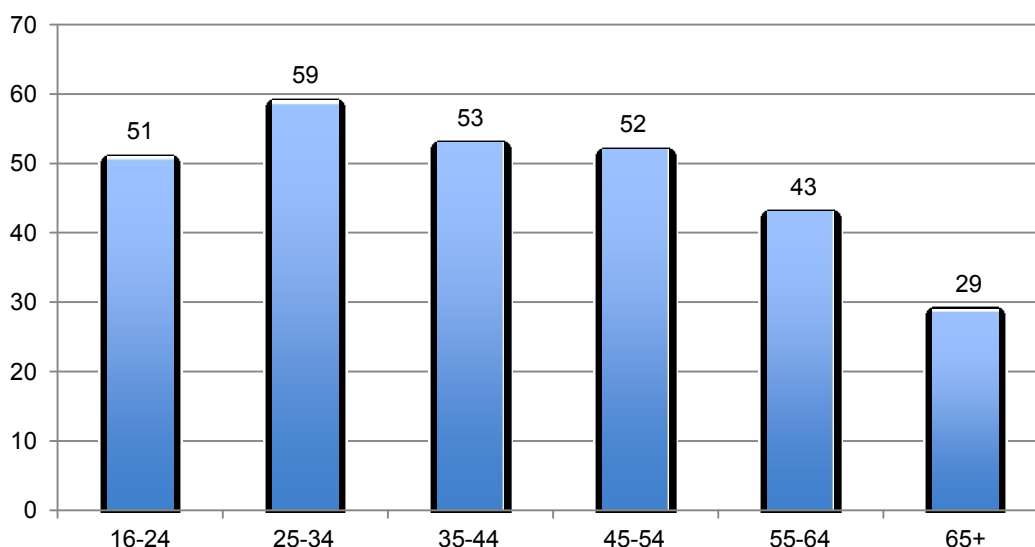


The second poll, commissioned by Lord Ashcroft, was conducted on polling day and the day after. In this case some respondents (1,216) were interviewed by 'phone, others online (831), giving a grand total of

2,047 interviewees. In this poll the data were weighted, so that the overall proportion who said that they voted Yes and No reflects the actual result.

Between them, the two polls uncover three clear patterns, patterns that in each case had long been anticipated by pre-polling day opinion polls. First, as Figure 1 shows, women were less likely than men to vote Yes. According to YouGov, 51% of men voted Yes but only 42% of women. This figure is quite close to the pattern in the final polls; on average each company's final poll pointed to a 51% vote amongst men, 43% amongst women. Ashcroft's poll suggests that the gender gap was rather narrower, with 47% of men voting Yes and 44% of women. But taking into account the vagaries of sampling error it is at least possible that a majority of men voted Yes and that Scotland's decision to stay in the Union rested on the support given to the No camp by women.

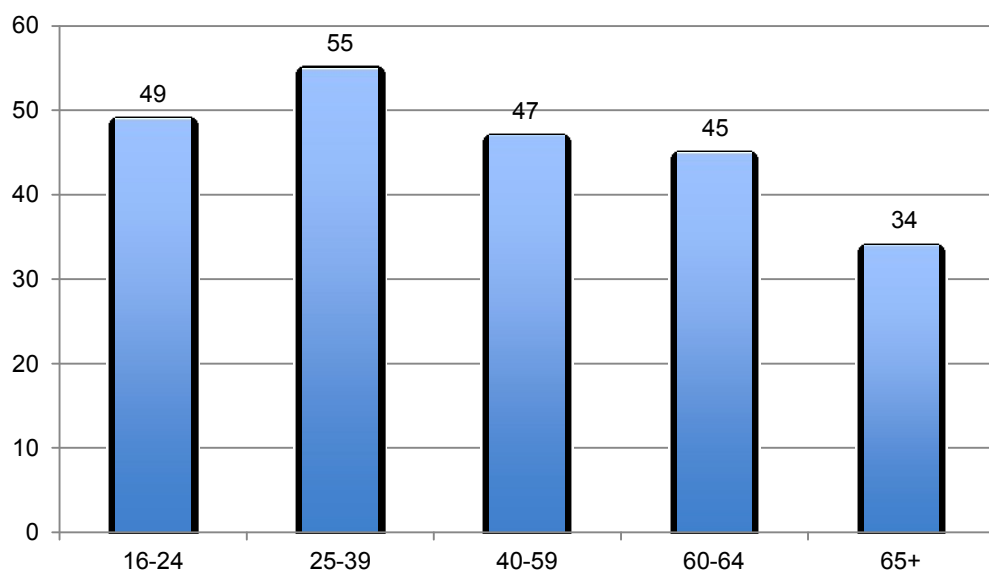
Figure 2A: The Scottish Independence Referendum - Age Gap (1): % voting Yes, by age group



* Source: Ashcroft Polls

Second, older people were less keen on the idea of independence than younger people. According to Ashcroft (see Figure 2A), the age gap was particularly stark, with just 29% of those aged 65 plus saying that they voted Yes, whereas a little over half of those aged under 55 backed independence. YouGov suggest that the age gap was not quite that stark, but even so still found that only around a third of those aged 65 and over voted Yes, whereas support for independence amongst the under 60s as a whole might have been only just short of 50%. This age gap has led to some speculation that perhaps there might be a majority for independence in, say, twenty years' time when the current generation of older people is no longer with us. However, we should note that both polls suggest that support for independence was highest amongst those in their late twenties and thirties rather than amongst the very youngest group of voters aged 16-24. So perhaps we should not necessarily assume that future generations of voters will necessarily evince the same degree of enthusiasm for independence that is currently in evidence amongst those aged between 25 and 55.

Figure 2B: The Scottish Independence Referendum - Age Gap 2: % voting Yes, by age group*



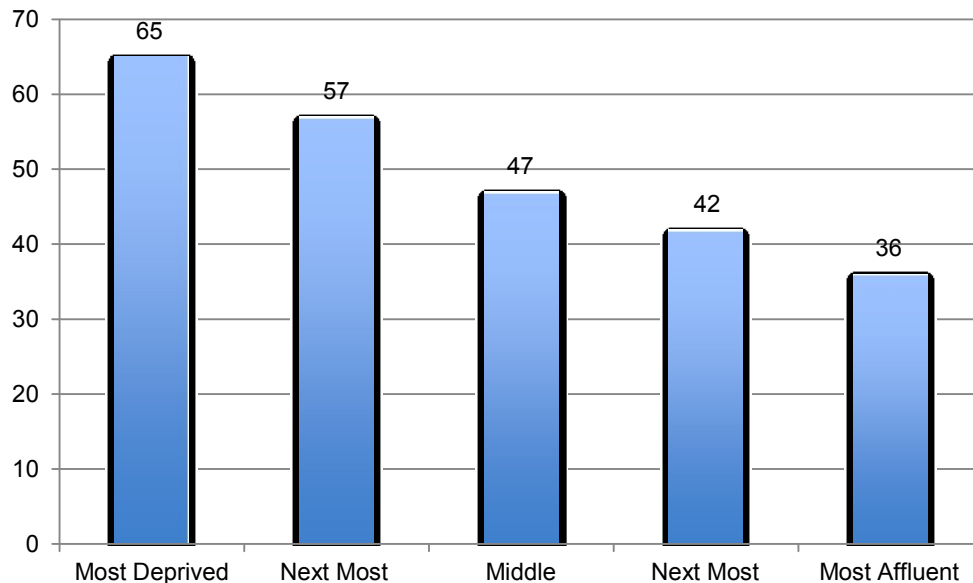
* Source: YouGov

Third, those living in less affluent circumstances were more likely than those who are living more comfortably to vote Yes. According to YouGov, 50% of those who market researchers classify as 'C2DEs' that is those who are or who were engaged in manual, 'working-class' occupations, or who are now primarily dependent on the state for their income, voted Yes. In contrast support amongst those categorised as 'ABC1s', primarily those in white collar, 'middle class' jobs, stood at only 41%. This class gap is, though, bigger than that found on average in the final polls, where support for Yes again stood at 50% amongst C2DEs, but at 44% amongst ABC1s. Ashcroft also has a rather lower estimate of the gap, with only 47% of C2DEs supporting Yes and 44% of ABC1s.

However, this *binary* division of Scots into two large classes undoubtedly underestimates the extent to which economic circumstance influenced the way that people voted. A much sharper pattern was uncovered by Ipsos MORI when in two polls they conducted just before polling day they classified their respondents according to the level of deprivation in their neighbourhood. As Figure 3 shows, a clear majority of those living in the most deprived parts of Scotland (as measured by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation) voted in favour of independence, whereas only around only two-fifths of those living in the most affluent did so.

These patterns were also evident in the geography of the vote as revealed by the results in each of Scotland's 32 local council areas. In the one-third or so of council areas with the highest levels of unemployment, on average 51% voted Yes. In contrast, the Yes vote averaged just 39% in the places with the lowest levels of unemployment. Equally, in the one-third of council areas with the highest proportion of people living in one of the 15% most deprived neighbourhoods in the country, on average 51% voted Yes, compared with 40% amongst those areas with the fewest living a multiply deprived neighbourhood.

Figure 3: The Scottish Independence Referendum Deprivation Gap: % voting Yes, by degree of neighbourhood deprivation (SIMD*)



* SIMD (Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation)

Source: Calculated from Ipsos MORI polls 15-16.9 & 16-17.9

The Yes vote was also higher in places with a relatively young population. In those council areas with relatively few people aged 65 and over, on average 47% voted Yes, whereas only 39% did so in those areas with the highest proportions of such voters.

It is thanks to these patterns that, despite its historical association with the Labour party, Clydeside together with Dundee provided the four areas where a majority did vote in favour of independence. Glasgow, North Lanarkshire, West Dunbartonshire and Dundee are amongst the six council areas with the highest unemployment count and the highest proportions of people living in a deprived neighbourhood. At the same time, all four areas contain relatively low proportions of people aged 65 or over.

But why did these demographic differences and geographical patterns arise? One hypothesis that suggests itself is that those who were less well-off felt that they had relatively little to lose financially and indeed might have been inclined to hope that independence would bring about an improvement in their lot. Older people, meanwhile, might have been more likely to feel that independence posed an economic risk that they as pensioners could not afford to take.

After all, people's evaluations of the economic consequences are known to have played a *central* role in whether they opted to vote Yes or No (Curtice, 2014). According to the 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes survey, conducted between May and August 2014, no less than 92% of those who thought that the economy would be better under independence said that they intended to vote Yes rather than No. In contrast, just 6% of those who reckoned the economy would be worse under independence stated that they would vote in favour of leaving the UK. ICM uncovered much the same pattern when in the polls it

conducted each month they asked whether independence would be good or bad for Scotland's economy.

Table 1: Perceptions of the economic consequences of Independence, by gender, age group and social class (by %)

...by	Better off	Worse off	No difference/ Don't know
Gender			
Men	41	43	17
Women	30	51	19
Age group			
16-24	37	44	19
25-39	40	40	21
40-59	37	45	17
60-64	35	48	17
65+	26	59	15
Social grade			
ABC1	32	51	16
C2DE	38	43	19

Source: YouGov 15-17 September 2014

These perceptions did vary significantly from one demographic group to another. As Table 1 shows, older voters were markedly less likely than younger voters to think that Scotland would 'economically better off' if it became an independent country. The same is true, if less starkly, of ABC1 as opposed to C2DE voters. Here again, however, a rather sharper picture emerges if we look at how perceptions varied according to the character of the area in which someone lived. According to the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, amongst those living in one of the one-fifth most deprived neighbourhoods in Scotland, 30% thought Scotland's economy would be better under independence, almost as many as the 34% who thought it would be worse. In contrast amongst those living in one of one-fifth most affluent parts of the country, only 24% thought the economy would be better while as many as 54% felt it would be worse.

So it looks as though people's views of the economic consequences of independence depended on the perspective from which they were looking. For those living in less well-off circumstances and for younger people, the economic prospects under independence looked brighter than they did for those who were better off and were older. For all the complex debate about currency union, the prospects for North Sea Oil, and the future of labour market productivity, the debate about the economics of independence was in truth in part at least an argument about whose interests might or might not be best served by changing the country's constitutional status - and thus was an argument that reflected some of the *social* divisions in Scottish society.

That, of course, still leaves us with one other pattern to consider – the gender gap. For as our Table shows, it appears that the gender gap also reflected different perceptions of the economics of independence. However, it is less obvious why women's current economic circumstances should lead them to come a different perspective (or at least a less favourable one) on independence than did men. Perhaps here a different psychology came into play – certainly women were more inclined to say that the consequences of independence were all rather uncertain (Ormston, 2014). Or maybe women just proved to be a lot more hard-headed than men?

Despite the best efforts of professional economists to lay out what the implications of a Yes or No vote might be, in practice voters were faced in the referendum with a choice between two uncertain futures. Nobody could be entirely sure what the economic consequences of independence or remaining in the Union might be. Against that backdrop we should not be surprised that people's evaluations of those consequences were influenced by their current circumstances and psychology, and that as a result who voted which way reflected some of the social divisions in Scottish society. After all, those were a present reality, not part of an unknown future.

References

Curtice, J. (2014), *Has the Referendum Campaign Made a Difference?* Available at <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading>

Ormston, R. (2014), *Minding the Gap: Women's Views of Independence in 2014*. Available at <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading>

Author Details

Professor John Curtice,
School of Government and Public Policy
University of Strathclyde
j.curtice@strath.ac.uk