ARBEITSPAPIERE ZUR EUROPÄISCHEN ZIVILGESELLSCHAFT / EUROPEAN CIVIL SOCIETY WORKING PAPERS

JAN EICHHORN GÖTZ HARALD FROMMHOLZ

How political mobilization can Still work on substantive issues

INSIGHTS FROM THE SCOTTISH REFERENDUM

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JAN EICHHORN & GÖTZ HARALD FROMMHOLZ

HOW POLITICAL MOBILIZATION CAN STILL WORK ON SUBSTANTIVE ISSUES

Insights from the Scottish referendum

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1. Emergence of the referendum

The Scottish referendum on independence did not emerge as a surprise in British politics. It was rather a logical step in the continuous development towards more devolution that took place since Scotland elected its first parliament after the Scotland Act 1998. The rise of the Scottish National Party (SNP) helped to promote the idea of an independent Scotland and made the referendum a political idea that was firmly put on the party's agenda in the Scottish elections in 2007 when it became part of the party's manifesto. Alex Salmond, who became First Minister in 2007, could not yet call for a referendum at that point because of his minority government, in which the SNP held 49 of 129 seats after the general election. The SNP had to wait four more years in order to pursue its goal of an independent Scotland. In the general election of 2011 Alex Salmond was firmly re-elected and ruled with a clear majority 69 of 129 seats of the fourth Scottish government from this point on. This situation was not anticipated in the construction of the Scottish parliament. To the contrary its complex electoral structure with list and direct candidates was specifically designed to prevent majority rule by a single party, in particular the SNP.

With his majority government backing the move for independence, Alex Salmond approached Prime Minister David Cameron to negotiate the terms for a referendum on independence. The legal grounds for this process were framed by the Edinburgh Agreement, which was signed on 15th October 2012. This was a historic event because it showed that the British and Scottish governments officially negotiated the possibility of

an independent Scotland on legal and legitimate grounds. This sets the referendum in Scotland apart from other separatist movements in Europe. Both parties agreed in the paper that the referendum is legal, legitimate, it should be legislated by the Scottish Parlament, and all parties involved would respect the outcome.

Alex Salmond approached David Cameron with the concept of two questions for the ballot. The first option would have been a form of maximal devolution (devolving all powers that were not foreign affairs or defence related). The second option was the question for a completely independent Scotland. The UK government did not agree to a two-question referendum and insisted on a simple yes-or-no vote, which resulted in the question: "Should Scotland be an independent country?" However, the UK government compromised on another point: It allowed for a long campaign. Initially they wanted the referendum to take place within a short time frame of up to six months (because support for independence was rather low at this point), but the Scottish government insisted on a longer period which was ultimately agreed and which led to the referendum taking place on 18 September 2014.

1.1 Public opinion as the context for the referendum

The 2011 electoral victory of the SNP may seem peculiar at first sight: If we look at figure 1 with data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey (SSA), we see that independence was not particularly popular at this point. Since devolution began and the Scottish Parliament was reestablished in 1999, there has rarely been a point at which support for

independence was higher than a third, with the majority of the Scottish population always having embraced some degree of devolution. But we would make a mistake if we therefore postulated the SNP electoral success as a paradox. The mistake – one which many commentators have made – would be to assume that voters only elect the SNP because of their position on independence. That is not the case however. While there is a correlation between SNP support and positive views on independence, the relationship is far from perfect. There was a substantial amount of people who gave their vote to the SNP although they did not support independence. The main reason for this was that the SNP managed to manifest itself as a credible alternative to the Labour Party in Scotland. While Scottish Labour had a range of problems to deal with during its government phase pre-2007 and UK Labour saw itself on a downward track leading to the loss in the 2010 Westminster elections, the SNP could gain grounds and ultimately become the centre-left party with the biggest vote share in Scotland. Their approval ratings stayed remarkably positive while in government and their positive performance (in particular compared to a highly problematic situation of Labour in Scotland) helped convince voters to choose Labour in the 2011 Holyrood elections. There is a further flip side to this: If SNP voting is not necessarily related to positive independence attitudes, neither do independence preferences always imply that voters like the SNP. The independence movement in Scotland may be dominated by the SNP in many ways, but there are other vocal actors involved. These include other political parties (such as the Greens or the Socialists), but also non-party groupings, such as people in the nonnuclear movement. While this explains to some extent why support for independence was lower than SNP support in 2011, it does not suffice to show why we actually observed a decrease in support for independence after that electoral victory. To some extent, the SNP's success became its problem at the start of the campaign.

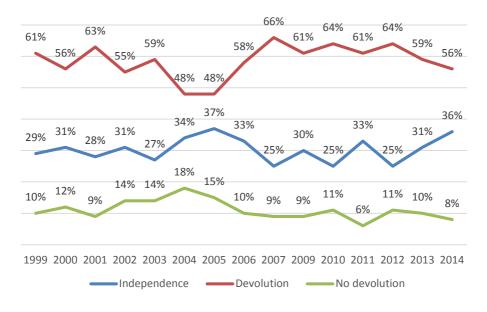


Figure 1: Attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional future since devolution (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey)

1.2 Scots' attitudes towards the Union and the problems of success

In the early years of devolution Scots were not particularly satisfied about the outcomes. While there was some initial improvement a consistent majority said that Scotland received less than its fair share of spending within the United Kingdom (see figure 2). This only changed

in 2007, the year when the SNP came to form the government in Scotland. Since then, first while they formed a minority government and then obtained the absolute majority, about the same amount of people said that it received less than its fair share as those who said it got pretty much its fair part (and throughout a small minority claimed that is received more than it deserved). We observed a genuine improvement in the evaluation of how Scotland was doing vis-à-vis the rest of the UK under the SNP government. This exemplifies its success in public opinion that led to the 2011 election result, but it also highlights a core problem: During the SNP government Scots became more satisfied with devolution – hunger for independence was therefore lower between 2007 and 2012 than it was in the preceding years, in particular the years leading up to the 2007 elections (2004-2006). While there was some increase in support in 2011 to 33% support (which can be partially explained because of the added exposure for the issue in the lead up to the election during the campaigns), it dropped to a mere 25% in 2012. So at the beginning of the referendum campaign process support for independence was very low - one of the key reasons why the UK government initially favoured a speedy timetable for the referendum. Pro-independence groups had a lot of work ahead for themselves, effectively having to double support for their cause if they wanted to win, which at that point seemed rather unlikely.

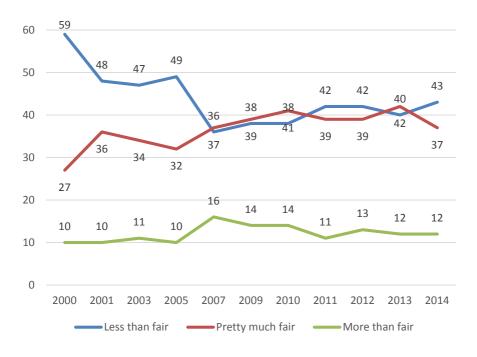


Figure 2: Evaluations of Scotland's share of UK funding since devolution (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey) - figures in %

2. What decided the vote? Identity vs. future expectations

A lot of media and public commentary on the referendum focussed on a distinct set of issues. There were many assertions that Scots would mostly vote based on their historically developed viewpoints and their strong sense of national identity and distinctiveness. However, the representative attitudes data of Scots presents a more complex evaluation in which the decision was mainly based on what Scots expected an independent Scotland would mean to their lives.

2.1 Economic pragmatism decided the ballot

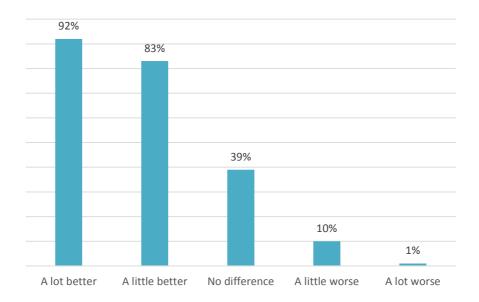


Figure 3: Intention to vote "Yes" in referendum by expectations about the economy in an independent Scotland (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014)

There was one factor that was more strongly related to support or opposition to independence than anything else: The expectation of how the economy in Scotland would have developed after independence. Nearly everyone who thought that it would be better, supported independence, nearly everyone who thought it would do worse opposed it (figure 3). Even when modelling this relationship including other variables to control for differences between people (that may make them more or less likely to expect positive economic consequences of independence), the findings are not altered. By far the strongest predictor of yes or no voting intention was the expectation about the

economic prospects of an independent Scotland.¹ While this has been true from the outset of the campaign in 2012, the relationship between expectations and voting intention became stronger throughout these two years reaching this nearly perfect correlation in 2014.

2.2 Agenda changes: Social inequality

Not all factors that were strongly linked to the voting intention in the end were decisive factors already in 2012 however. A good example for this is social inequality. In 2012 there was no relationship between expectations about the distribution of income after independence and people's support or opposition to Scotland leaving the UK. Nearly as many people who thought Scotland would be a more equal society intended to vote yes and no respectively – it was not a factor that differentiated voters much. However, the SNP presented its vision of Scotland as a country with lower levels of income inequality and managed to change the agenda to link this to the economic discussion. Of course some people were not convinced of this, mainly because they questioned the availability of sufficient resources. These people though were largely leaning towards a no vote anyways, as they were more likely to have negative outlooks on the economy of an independent Scotland. But for a growing number of people the issue of social inequality kept becoming more strongly linked to their voting decision. While the

¹For details, please see Curtice, J. 2014. Has the Referendum Campaign Made a Difference. Briefing published by ScotCen Social Research and available at:

 $[\]frac{http://scotcen-what-scotland-thinks-chart-images.s3.amazonaws.com/files/62d0afd9-d75b-46ba-887c-a384017007b7/ssa-2014-launch-jc-briefing-final-2pdf$

relationship was not as strong as it was for the economic evaluation overall, it became very substantial. The vast majority of people who thought income inequalities in an independent Scotland would be lower supported independence and vice versa. The groups supporting a Yes vote managed to link the issue of distribution of wealth and income to the economic debate. It helped them to set the agenda and create a future-oriented narrative that saw support for independence rise (see figure 4) throughout 2014, while the yes side focussed on less persuasive arguments (which will be discussed further below).

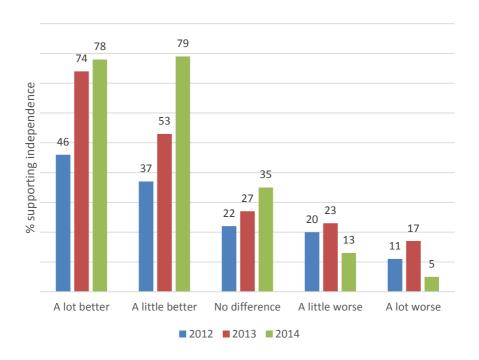


Figure 4: Support for independence by views on the prospects for equality in an independent Scotland $\,$

2.3 Only a secondary factor: National identity

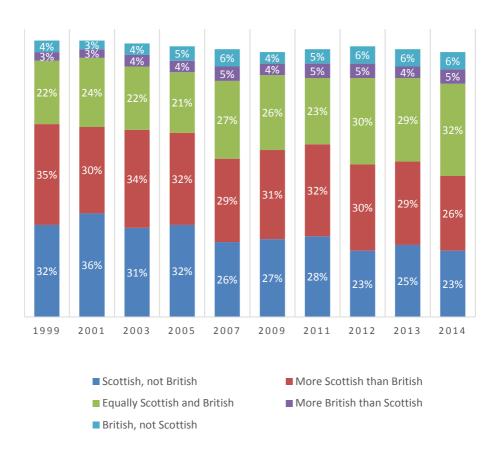


Figure 5: National identity in Scotland (Moreno Question) since devolution (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey)

Especially commentary from outside Scotland and the UK focussed very often on the strength of national identity in Scotland. And indeed, the vast majority of Scots identifies as strongly Scottish. Only around 10% would say that they are more British than Scottish – a number that has

been pretty stable over the past 15 years (see figure 5). However, if anything, there has been a slight increase of those who say that they are equally British and Scottish with an accompanying decrease of those who say they are Scottish only and have nothing to do with Britain. The overall conclusion is clear though: Scottish identity is still more important for most Scots than their British identity, however, at the same time the vast majority of Scots also acknowledges that they have (at least) two national identities. They consider themselves both Scottish and British.

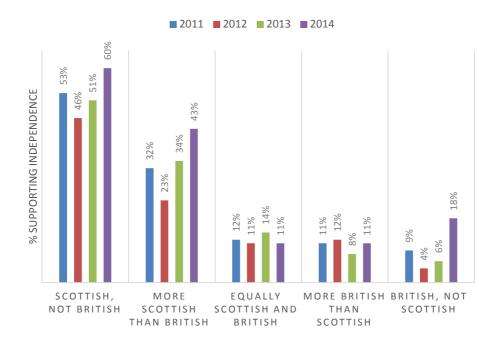


Figure 6: Support for independence by national identity (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey)

So if we are looking at a national identity configuration that is much more complex than the sometimes asserted Scottish vs. British duality, we may not be surprised to find that national identity and referendum voting intention were not that strongly related to each another. While those who identified themselves as "Scottish, not British" were indeed more likely to support independence, the match was not even close to the relationship we have seen for the pragmatic evaluations above. Even amongst the solely Scottish identifiers we found a substantial number of people who did not support independence (figure 6). National identity mattered for some people a lot, but they were in the minority. For the largest part of the population substantive evaluations of the prospects of an independent Scotland were more important than historical evaluations. The independence movement in Scotland in most of its facets was not a particularly nationalistic one, if we only conceive of nationalism in a narrow definition asserting a homogeneous identitybased understanding.

3. Broadening participation – the reduction of traditional gaps

Regardless of the desired outcome, the referendum has to be seen as a success for most people in one crucial regard: it galvanised public engagement in political debate to an extent that is hard to find anywhere. Participation took place in many ways, through reinstated townhall meetings, public events with or without politicians, academic debates, door-to-door campaigning efforts, neutral information sessions in

schools and many other formats. However, the crucial question of whether voting turnout would also increase had to be answered on polling day. After just over 50% participation in the last Scottish Parliament elections and around 63% in the last Westminster elections, Scottish voter turnout could not really be described as exemplary. During referendum night hopes for high levels of voting in this important decision were not disappointed though with around 85% of people taking part. While turnout went up in all groups, this increase reflected in particular greater levels of participation of groups that would normally not take part in the voting process. This shall be exemplified using one pertinent example: age.

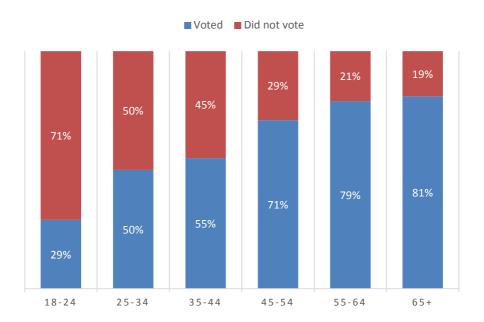


Figure 7: Voter turnout (in %) in 2011 Scottish Parliament election by age group (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey)

In the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections there was a very strong age gradient in relation to voter turnout. Of those in the youngest age bracket (18-24) only about 3 in 10 people actually took part in the vote, while in the oldest age groups (55+) there were around 8 in 10 (figure 7). This is not a phenomenon specific to Scotland — we know that younger people are often less likely to vote in elections, at least in many post-industrial countries (this does not mean that they are politically apathetic, as many of them engage in other political activities through citizens' initiatives, NGOs, etc., but suggests that they are less engaged with the traditional political party system).

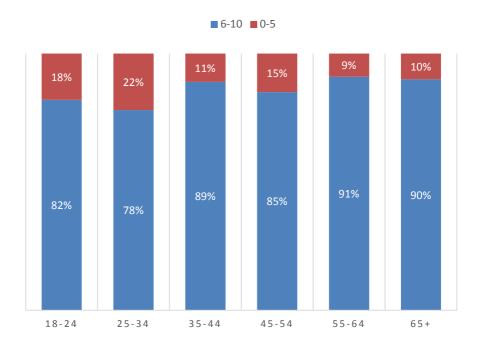


Figure 8: Voting likelihood (%) in referendum by age group (based on a 0-10 scale for the likelihood to take part in the vote — Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014)

In the referendum however, this massive gap between younger and older voters shrunk substantially. If we compare the reported voting behaviour from 2011 and the voting likelihood just before the referendum (we need to wait for the 2015 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey data to have exactly comparable figures), the general trend becomes very clear (figure 8). While there was still a small gap with older age groups being more likely to vote in the referendum, the gap had become very small indeed. The differences in who votes and who does not in relation to age were reduced substantially – thus increasing the representativeness of this decision.

We could observe similar patterns for many other traditional inequalities in voting participation. They usually were still observable for the referendum, but their magnitude was reduced substantially. People who live in areas of greater deprivation are less likely to vote in elections normally, but their participation increased substantially. The same applied to people from lower occupational social classes and even people who do not identify with any political party at all. While some may say, that should not be surprising, considering that the referendum was such an important decision, we find it quite remarkable. This is because of an apparent consensus in the commentary around previous elections in many countries where it has been suggested that elections are not fought and won over substantive issues, but personalities who act as the faces of their parties. While politicians mattered in the debate, public opinion did not shift when they interfered. The most substantive shifts in mass attitudes during the referendum campaign could be observed after

topical proposals (such as the presentation of the Scottish government's white paper or the publication of plans for further devolution by the Better Together side). As we have seen above as well, the strongest influences on vote decision were substantive evaluations, not preferences for individual politicians. So contrary to some existent so-called wisdoms, it seems that people actually can be mobilised over substantive issues, if those issues seem important and relevant to their lives and if there is enough time for engagement to take place outside the top-down driven process in traditional political structures.

4. Consequences of the referendum for the United Kingdom and the European Union

4.1 Consequences for the United Kingdom

The end of the independence referendum process does not mark the end of discussions about the constitutional future of the UK. To the contrary, it actually seems to be the starting point for changes that will be affecting public and policy debate for years to come. Starting in Scotland, those who think that losing the referendum will result in a demise of the Scottish National Party probably need to re-examine the situation. While we have seen the high levels of voter turnout, we cannot know to what extent this political mobilisation will persist. However, there are some positive indicators. The most extraordinary one that surpassed any expectations is the tremendous rise in political party membership in Scotland — which mainly benefitted the "Yes" parties. Clearly, many

people who got involved in the campaign do not want to stop now, but continue their engagement. SNP membership stood below 30,000 the day before the referendum and has now surpassed 80,000. This makes the SNP the third largest party UK wide, ahead of the Liberal Democrats. The Green Party in Scotland also saw massive increases, about quadrupling its membership from 1,700 on referendum day to over 6,000.

But what is the role of these parties now that independence is off the table for the moment? It is the debate about further devolution. In the last days of the campaign the unionist parties' leaders presented their famous "Vow" in which they guaranteed the devolution of further powers with a definitive timetable and a quick turnaround. The Smith commission which has now been installed to oversee the consultation process on this matter has already received over 11,000 submissions and debates on the further devolution of power dominate political debate in the UK. This is partially because it does not just affect Scotland, but constitutional arrangements across all parts of the UK. David Cameron announced in his first speech after the results of the referendum were announced that part of his focus would turn to how these changes would affect England and championed the concept of "English Votes for English Laws" which would see Scottish MPs in Westminster unable to vote on matters that were fully devolved. Also, Welsh and Northern Irish devolution arrangements are being revisited and will form part of the deliberations.

In this situation unionist parties in Scotland will have to align with the plans of their Westminster counter-parts, which can be conflictual as we have seen in the recent resignation of Scottish Labour leader Johann Larmont over her disagreements with UK Labour leader Ed Miliband. Because the unionist parties will have to appeal to Scottish voters, but most importantly also voters in the rest of the UK for the next general election, they have to strike a balance between promises to Scotland and attention to the rest of the UK which partially is sceptical about what many there perceive as preferential treatment for the people in the North of the island. Neither the Conservatives nor Labour or the Liberal Democrats will offer anything close to maximum devolution. Even if they offer full income tax devolution (as for example the Conservatives propose), they will reserve most powers on crucial policy areas in, for example, welfare questions. This is where the SNP will be able to offer proposals to the Scottish people that resemble their notion of maximum devolution – as close to home rule as possible, because they do not need to consider UK wide attitudes. The pro-independence parties will be the champions of the greatest amount of devolution of further powers to Scotland.

At the moment this looks to enhance the support they may be able to gather in the upcoming elections, with the SNP potentially taking some additional seats even in Westminster. In the first polls after the referendum their support as well as that of the Green Party has gone up, in particular in relation to Holyrood voting intention. But these discussions will not only have lasting impacts on Scotland. Whether the

result for England will be a process by which the Westminster Parliament would effectively be split into two sections — one that votes on all laws, and a subset of MPs that would vote on laws affecting England only — or a form of regionalisation, this will potentially mark the biggest shift in the constitutional setup of the United Kingdom in recent history even beyond the devolution of powers to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in the late 1990s.

4.2 The European question

The focus of the political debate will be on further devolution for a while from now on. Independence is not going to disappear from the agenda of parties like the SNP, but it will not be at the forefront of policy initiatives and debates for now. Experiences from other countries suggest though that it is absolutely plausible that another attempt would be made to achieve their ultimate goal after a substantial hiatus and the implementation of governance under new devolution arrangements. There is one potential accelerator however that could bring the issue back to debate earlier: Britain's role in the European Union. The Conservative Party has promised that they would hold a binding in-out referendum about the UK's membership in the European Union in 2017 should they gain an absolute majority in Westminster. At the moment their prospects of achieving this do not look too great, but a potential EU referendum has received substantial attention, not least because of the electoral successes of the UK Independence Party. Should there be a referendum and the UK opted to leave the EU, while the vote in Scotland showed a clear majority to remain part, the issue of independence would come back to the agenda much more quickly.

Obviously, there are a number of hypotheticals here. We do not know whether there will be a referendum and cannot predict the outcome at the moment. But we cannot dismiss the possibility of it taking place. Also, we should not overstate the Scottish enthusiasm for the European Union. While only a minority of Scots would like to leave the EU (17%), combined with those that would like to see the powers of the EU reduced, they make up over 50% of Scots — which is not representative of a Europe-loving population (see figure 9). But nevertheless, the preference to remain in the EU is the clear majority view in Scotland (according to the 2014 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey around 70% of Scots would have wanted an independent Scotland to be part of the European Union as well).

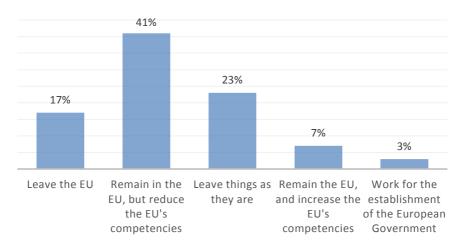


Figure 9: Views of Scots about Britain's long term strategy in relation to the European Union (Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2014)

4.3 Consequences for the debate on separatism

The outcome of the Scottish referendum has significant effects on the future discourse that addresses separatist movements. Catalans, Basques, Corsicans and Flemings attentively observed the event in Scotland and view the referendum as the precedence that legitimises their own aspirations, regardless of the outcome in Scotland. Especially the Catalans feel that they now have the authority to pursue their goal to separate from Spain.² They demonstrated this in September when about two million people fought on the streets of Barcelona for the right to decide about their independence. Catalonia is going to conduct its own referendum on November 9 even though the government in Madrid declared it illegal. This shows the self-confidence of secessionists after the Scottish ballot. The "No" vote did not abate the discussions about independence movements within the European Union. On the contrary, it will change the entire narrative how European member states address the issue of separatism in the future.

Alex Salmond and David Cameron exemplified how the process of secession can be legally and legitimately framed. But this cannot be easily transferred to other contexts such as Catalonia or the Basque country. The different histories and political strains in the separatist regions in Europe are not comparable with the unique relationship of Scotland with the United Kingdom. In addition, we must not forget that

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Scotland joined the United Kingdom voluntarily. It was not conquered and forced into a union. Also, the Scottish referendum was not primarily based on nationalist ideas but driven by economic reasons, which sets it apart from many other territories that seek independence. However, the Scottish referendum does provide legitimate grounds for those places to plea their cases in the European community. This also means that the European Union needs to change its usually neutral position on separatism, mostly avoiding the topic by referring to the sovereignty of its member states. These times have past and the European experiment has to face the stress test of dealing with separatist movements in a democratic setting. The separatists will ensure that their voices are heard.

5. Conclusions

We can never tell what the future brings, but we can be sure that the political debate in Scotland and the UK will be fascinating. All things being equal independence will not dominate the political debate in Scotland for a while. Instead the process of further devolution will be at the forefront of political deliberations in Scotland and the rest of the UK. The country may well be undergoing one if its largest constitutional transformations in recent history and the outcome of it is uncertain. While the UK negotiates its internal structure it also seems to appraise its position with the European Union. Should it ultimately leave the EU, there is a chance that the issue of Scotland. We have to wait and see.

One clear conclusion we can draw from the referendum is that it is possible to mobilise people to take part in politics. Crucially, people got involved from a wide variety of backgrounds, which is very different to what we normally observe with political participation being stratified to a much larger degree. Those involved largely were focussing on issues, not personnel or party politics. It will be fascinating to see whether the political actors can handle this enthusiasm and maintain the engagement beyond the referendum. We have some positive indications in this regard with massively increased membership figures for some political parties and increased expressions of likely voting turnout in future elections in Scotland.

From a participatory democratic point of view this referendum was a full success. It will be important to learn from this to apply it to other contexts. Unfortunately, this is where we might be a little less confident. The timetable for the biggest constitutional change process in the UK is very tight. Proposals are meant to be developed and laws drafted within less than half a year of the referendum – in order to be usable for the Westminster election in 2015. What we have learned from the referendum is that engaging people from wider parts of society requires more time. Quick turnaround processes favour the decision making of the existing political elites however. So there is still a lot to do to develop positive transfers from the good referendum process.

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