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Yes or No? Older People, Politics and the Scottish Referendum in 2014

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Yes or No? Older People, Politics and the Scottish Referendum in 2014

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Abstract

Scottish citizens actively participated in the political issues raised by the 2014 referendum on independence from the UK. Citizens' attitudes were characterized by a curiosity and willingness to learn and act for themselves, thus generating the self-education of hundreds of thousands of Scottish people (Hassan, 2014). This rich educative practice generated a genuine dialogue about what kind of place Scotland should seek to become (Mitchell, 2014). In this article we report on the issues, experiences and patterns of response to the independence referendum, with specific reference to the role of older voters (61+ age group) in this process.

Keywords: Independence referendum, voters, older adults, self-education, Scotland

¿Si o No? Personas Mayores, Política y el Referéndum Escocés en 2014

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Resumen

Los ciudadanos escoceses participaron activamente en las cuestiones políticas planteadas por el referéndum de 2014 en relación a la independencia del Reino Unido. Las actitudes de los ciudadanos se caracterizaron por la curiosidad y la voluntad de aprender y actuar por sí mismos, lo que generó la autoeducación de cientos de miles de escoceses (Hassan, 2014). Esta práctica educativa rica generó un diálogo genuino sobre qué tipo de lugar debería tratar de convertirse Escocia (Mitchell, 2014). En este artículo, informamos sobre los problemas, las experiencias y los patrones de respuesta al referéndum sobre la independencia, con referencia específica al papel de los votantes mayores (más de 61 personas) en este proceso.

Palabras clave: referéndum independencia, votantes, adultos, autoeducation, Escocia

One of the most positive aspects of the indyref was the self-education of hundreds of thousands of Scots who showed curiosity and a willingness to learn and act for themselves, rather than being spoon-fed the predictable narrow diet of official Scotland. It is this rich practice – of opening up debate and choices and refusing to accept the stale offerings of politics, media and power which have historically characterised so much of our public life – which has to be encouraged and given sustenance.

Gerry Hassan (2014)

...debates were conducted the length and breadth of Scotland in a remarkably civil, engaging, and open manner....The dull, limited, predictable, binary debate of the conventional press contrasted with the expansive, lively, and engaging discussions that took place in often novel venues in every nook and cranny of Scotland. The Scottish Question, as debated by the public, was not restricted to a narrow constitutional question but became a genuine dialogue about what kind of place Scotland should seek to become. The referendum started a process that has not been halted by the outcome of a referendum on whether Scotland should become an independent country, the formal question that provoked this all-embracing national conversation.

James Mitchell (2014)

Hassan and Mitchell, respected academic commentators on Scottish politics, emphasise what many other commentators on the Scottish referendum witnessed. Popular engagement with the referendum was exceptional, particularly in the few months leading up to the vote in September 2014. In everyday places, individuals were motivated to discuss the referendum, often on their own terms rather than led by political elites, and in a grammar and idiom that facilitated their political engagement in informal adult learning experiences. The final turn out for the vote showed an upsurge of interest in formal politics, very unlike the pattern of decline in voter turn out which has been witnessed in many comparable Western democracies (Woolridge, 2015). Writing about a very different context of lifelong learning, Field (2002) argues that there has been a ‘silent explosion’ of learning around personal interests and lifestyles in the era of ‘reflexive modernization’. Whilst we are not following this line of analysis, we do think Field’s metaphor aptly applies to the engagement with politics that the referendum generated. The ‘silent explosion’ of referendum politics stimulated a process of learning as people passionately and purposefully reflected on ideas, values and beliefs, information and priorities about the type of Scotland they wished to live in. In short, the referendum provided the opportunity to be political.

In this article, we report on the issues, experiences and patterns of response to the independence referendum from across the age range but with particular reference to older voters. By older voters we are referring to the 61+ age group, although information cited from different opinion polls can refer to slightly different age ranges. We interpret the data through the lens of informal learning, that is, by understanding the referendum as a process of action and reflection that developed as people engaged with the arguments through different media and educative experiences in everyday life environments. Our view differs markedly from the dominant narrative applied to explain the pattern of voting amongst older members of the Scottish electorate. One particular well publicised story circulating in the aftermath of the referendum, from pro-independence supporters, was that older voters were the real problem; too worried about their pensions, too cautious about the future, too politically conservative and too self-interested to give independence a chance they had let down the younger generation by

sticking their heads in the sand (Waterson, 2014). This inter-generational antagonism was stoked, even if unintentionally, by the former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP) Alex Salmond (2016), claiming that his own generation had ‘impeded progress’. Pro-independence campaigners could take heart in the fact that the older voters would probably die off sooner, therefore, the prospects for a successful referendum campaign would improve as the younger age group, with pro-independence views, replaced them.

What the above argument tends to ignore, however, is the far more complex pattern of relations and experiences that influenced people’s voting decision than the claim that age was the critical factor, as if older voters were cocooned from the experience of political thinking that was engaging the nation. Whilst it is true that older adults were more likely to reject the argument for independence so too did younger first-time voters (see below). There is another more persuasive explanation for older adults voting as they did; that is, they were simply not convinced about the intellectual case for independence. Indeed, post-referendum experiences in Scotland indicate a retreat from anti-austerity policies by the SNP which had been central to their independence position (see Macwhirter, 2016). Moreover, a late convert to the cause of independence back in 2014, the leading Scottish historian and public intellectual Tom Devine, has since stated the argument for independence is now less convincing than it was before (Devine, 2016). We make these points not to claim the unionist position was correct from the start, but merely to emphasise the contextual and contested nature of the arguments. Unless being for or against independence was seen as an end in itself, rather than a means to an end, the claims and persuasiveness of different arguments were necessarily contingent and problematic. They had to be weighed up with imperfect information, through the prism of contested values and priorities based on competing arguments that were never unequivocally decisive. Rather than making essentialist claims about older voters being inherently reluctant to change, the virtues of the case for independence were not beyond reproach.

Our article is organised in the following way. The background context to the referendum will be described and the voting patterns of older and younger voters will be compared. The account also draws on an online

survey of voters, which was undertaken a few months after the referendum vote. This will focus on how older voters engaged in the referendum and whilst they were more likely to be pro-union the pattern is more complex than age at first might indicate. We will address the following research questions in this analysis: 1) to what extent was voting No (i.e. to stay in the union) determined by age? 2) what, if anything, was distinctive about older adults engagement in the referendum?

Context and Background

In October 2010, the UK Government agreed that the Scottish Government could call a referendum on independence on the condition that there was a single question with a yes or no answer. The question was “Should Scotland be an independent country?” The vote was inclusive in that adults eligible to vote only had to fulfil a residency requirement – Scots living outside Scotland were therefore ineligible – and it permitted 16 and 17 year olds as first-time voters (see [MacWhirter, 2014](#)).

The outcome in 2014 saw the country split over whether or not to remain part of the UK. Although the majority favoured the pro-union position (55.3% voted No) many disagreed (44.7% voted Yes) and preferred independence. This picture seemed very different in 2013 when support for independence was around 25% ([Curtice, 2014](#)). Moreover, in the final months of the pro-union campaign the argument for constitutional change, short of independence, was widely canvassed particularly when in the final weeks two national opinion polls predicted a majority for independence. In other words, for both campaigns the status quo was not an option. This is the really significant point that needs underlining – it was the degree of constitutional change that was being decided, not about accepting or rejecting it. As opting out of one of the richest countries in the world was being considered, and indeed could have happened with a further 5 per cent swing to the Yes campaign, the process of how people in Scotland were discussing, disagreeing and debating, that is, learning about the issues and articulating their opinions, is worthy of investigation.

The official campaign was between Better Together, a coalition formed by the main UK political parties supporting the union, led by the former

Labour Government chancellor, Alistair Darling. The campaign was dubbed as ‘project fear’ because of its focus on the negative impact of independence. The Yes campaign, which was also a broad coalition of political parties and groups, was claimed to be positive and optimistic and was largely focussed on the SNP (Torrance, 2016). However, much fear and optimism was at the essence of these campaigns they both oversimplified the reality of the many debates which occurred. Both campaign groups had their propaganda material, meetings, publicity information, web sites, blogs and all the paraphernalia of modern campaigning. The period between the October 2010 agreement to hold the Referendum and the September 2014 date for the vote provided plenty of time for debate and discussion across Scotland. This time period was critical to the participative and deliberative nature of the campaign.

The fact that 96% of the electorate registered to vote and over 85% voted on the day – an historic high for modern elections in Scotland, the UK, and elsewhere – is indicative of the importance people attached to the outcome. However, in the previous national election in Scotland, in 2010, the turnout was just over 50%. There had been, therefore, a marked change in people’s engagement with the politics of the state. This degree of engagement could not have been taken-for-granted from the outset, instead, it had been produced as people participated in debate and learned why the decision mattered. A simple majority was all that was required to decide the direction the country would take; every vote counted and the stakes were high.

Referendum Voting Responses: Some Characteristics

The following information derives from material on different polls assembled by John Curtice (2014) at the University of Strathclyde and the electoral commission’s public opinion survey taken after the referendum. Just to emphasise the civic commitment of older adults, 96% of over 65s voted, which was well above the national average. The lowest turnout, in contrast, was amongst the younger age range from 18-24, where only 54% of this demographic voted. However, if we break this down further, first

time voters in the 16-17 age range surpassed their contemporaries by registering a 75% turnout.

According to John Curtice the post-referendum opinion polls on voting behaviour confirmed a pattern consistent with most of the pre-referendum polls; that is, older people, women, people from more affluent backgrounds and those born elsewhere in the UK were more predisposed to vote against independence.

Focussing on older voters in particular, some of the polls were misleading in suggesting a much larger gap between their voting behaviour and those below them in age. According to the Ashcroft poll taken after the result was known, which received a good deal of media attention, only 27% of older voters were prepared to entertain independence in contrast to 52% of 45-54 year olds, 53% of 35-44 year olds, 59% of 25-34 year olds and 52% of those in the 16-24 age group (cited in [Curtice, 2014](#)). Another poll from YouGov showed a very similar pattern, although the age gap in voting was not quite as stark it was still evident. It had 34% of over 65 year olds voting for independence compared with 45% amongst the 60-64 age range, 47% of 40-59 year olds, 55% of the 25-39 year olds and 49% of those aged between 16-24 (cited in [Curtice, 2014](#)). Both polls, to differing degrees, reinforced the link between age and support for independence albeit to differing degrees.

One of the myths which the Ashcroft poll in particular created was that first time voters (71% of this group) were much more likely to vote for independence than those at the other end of the age spectrum. This age differential in voting choice was the source for many of the ageist comments on older voters. However, Ashcroft's sample was only based on 14 voters in the 16-24 age category, hardly a representative sub-sample to make wider claims from. A further breakdown of YouGov's sample of 16-24 year old voters showed that a larger sub-group, 350 16-17 year olds, showed to the contrary that a small minority actually preferred the union to independence (YouGov 2014 cited in [Curtice, 2014](#)). Rather than older voters being out of step with the younger cohort they were, to this extent, more similar in their voting behaviour.

Whilst age was a factor in voting behaviour it was, of course, not the only one. The age demographic was complicated by other significant

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variables such as occupational class position, geography and gender. The largest city in Scotland, Glasgow, was for independence (55% Yes), as was the fourth largest city Dundee (57% Yes), both of which are characterised as working-class cities. However, in all other areas across Scotland the union vote won even in very poor and disadvantaged areas. Voting patterns also had strong regional and rural dimensions. The North East and North West of Scotland (traditional heartlands of the SNP) along with the Border region to the South and the South West rejected independence. Meanwhile the capital city Edinburgh was decisively No (61%).

People drawn from working class occupations were more likely to be pro independence than those in middle class jobs (47% compared to 44% in the Ashcroft poll, cited in [Curtice, 2014](#)). In a YouGov poll the difference was more marked: 50% to 44%. Indeed, an Ipsos MORI poll suggested that living in an area of high deprivation was also highly significant. People from the 20 most deprived areas of Scotland were more likely to vote for independence (65% compared to 36% of people in the more affluent areas) (cited in [Curtice, 2014](#)). In gender terms the Ashcroft poll found that 47% of men were predisposed to independence compared with 44% of women; YouGov put the figures as 51% men compared to 42% of women.

It is true that where people gained their knowledge and information about the referendum diverged significantly by age ([Electoral Commission, 2015](#)). Not surprisingly, younger voters between the ages 16-34 were more likely to go online for material on the Yes and No campaigns compared to the 55+ age group (63% compared to 35%). Online sources of information, through social media and the Internet, were strongly preferred by the younger cohort. They were also more reliant on family and friends, posters and billboards. In comparison, the older group relied more on traditional news outlets such as television (65% compared to 50%) and preferred more traditional methods of communication. In a small online survey we undertook the above picture on age differences and preferred sources of information was confirmed. However, an interesting and complicated picture emerged on predispositions to voting as well as insights into the learning and action that people were engaged in.

Methods and Sample

In December 2014, we undertook an online survey to document people's experience of the Referendum. The survey relied on a 'convenience sample' (Robson, 2011) in that we had no means of controlling who completed it. The plan was to invite responses by emailing a handful of Yes and No supporters known to us, asking them to complete the survey and pass on the hyperlink to their own networks, and through a process of 'snowballing' collect the data. The survey went viral and within the space of a week we had 1345 replies and decided to close it. Returns that were not fully completed have been discarded leaving an overall sample total of 1091, which included 140 older voters.

The research questions which the study aimed to address included the following:

1. Were older people less likely to change their mind than any other age category?
2. Did older adults place less value on Twitter and Facebook as digital information sources?
3. Does age and gender influence the likelihood of becoming more active in politics and life in the community?
4. Was age influencing likelihood of being a definite yes or definite no voter?
5. Did age differences influence the key factors in taking a decision?
6. Did age influence the sources of information respondents most valued?

The questionnaire included 24 questions, related to background of the respondents, voting intentions, key issues which influenced their decision, sources of information, political awareness, the role of social media, impact on family and friends and changes in political and community involvement. A number of questions provided the opportunity for people to further elaborate and clarify their answers. Because we were particularly interested in the effect on political awareness, we asked people what their view had been a year before the referendum and if this had changed, or not, as the case might be. It is true that, looking at those who had decided, more

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respondents had intended to vote yes, but taking into account the ‘undecided’ and ‘other’ respondents, we have the following distribution:

Table 1

Distribution of sample in relation to voting intentions 1 year before Referendum by percentage and numbers.

Definite yes	45.4 %	495
Definite no	23.2 %	253
Undecided	26.8%	292
Other	4.7%	51
Total	100.0 %	1091

Further information on the characteristics of the sample is as follows:

Table 2

Socio-demographic characteristics (age) of the sample by yes, no and undecided in total numbers and percentages.

	16-24 years	25-44 years	45-60 years	61 and older
Definite yes	35 (7.1 %)	191 (38.6 %)	194 (39.2 %)	73 (14.7 %)
Definite no	28 (11.1 %)	94 (37.2 %)	92 (36.4 %)	38 (15.0 %)
Undecided	24 (8.2 %)	136 (46.6 %)	101 (34.6 %)	29 (9.9 %)
Total	87	421	387	140

Table 3

Socio-demographic characteristics (gender) of the sample by yes, no and undecided in total numbers and percentages.

	Male	Female
Definite yes	215 (43.4 %)	274 (55.4 %)
Definite no	85 (33.6 %)	168 (66.4 %)
Undecided	93 (31.8 %)	197 (67.5 %)
Total	393	639

As tables 1 and 2 indicate our sample is skewed towards definite Yes voters, although we need to be clear that this distribution refers to the voting intentions 12 months before the referendum, and that is thus hard to judge on representativeness. Nevertheless, it would be very difficult to base generalisations on this sample. The small group of ‘other’ in table 1 refers to respondents ineligible to vote. We do not have statistical information about the final yes-no distribution. Looking at the sample in relation to socio-demographic characteristics, it is clear that women were more likely to belong to the ‘definite no’ and ‘undecided’ group.

Results

Were Older People Less Likely to Change their Mind than any Other Age Category?

Table 4
Change mind in older people.

Age	% changed mind	p = .002
16-24	46.2	
25-44	40.8	
45-60	33.2	
61 +	26.8	

This table shows that ‘changing mind’ decreased by age so that the older the respondent in the sample, the less likely they were to have changed their mind. This might be expected. It would seem reasonable to say that accumulated experience can lead to a point of view developed over time that is not easily changed without a dramatic reinterpretation occurring. The table also shows that it was the youngest age group who were most likely to change their mind 16-24, however, as the 16-24 age group is not broken down in a manner that allows us to see the response of 16-17 year olds, it may well be this group of first time voters who were most likely to be uncertain and susceptible to changing their position.

Did Older Adults Place Less Value on Twitter and Facebook as Digital Information Sources?

Table 5

Digital information sources.

Age	16-24	25-44	45-60	61+	p
Twitter	2.30 (1.42)	2.56 (1.50)	2.71 (1.64)	3.05 (1.69)	.005
Blogs	2.69 (1.26)	2.51 (1.26)	2.66 (1.41)	2.72 (1.48)	.290
Youtube	2.78 (1.31)	3.00 (1.29)	3.20 (1.33)	3.31 (1.39)	.008
Google	2.40 (1.27)	2.75 (1.25)	3.01 (1.35)	3.11 (1.47)	.000
Text messaging	4.01 (1.12)	3.90 (1.20)	3.99 (1.25)	4.12 (1.16)	.407
Facebook	2.26 (1.39)	1.92 (1.25)	2.28 (1.43)	2.18 (1.32)	.002
E-mail	3.56 (1.19)	3.14 (1.23)	3.12 (1.26)	2.76 (1.35)	.000

The sample was asked to rate their most valued sources of digital information and to place a numerical rating on them: one was high and five was low. It is clear that Twitter was valued more by the youngest respondents, while Facebook was used most by respondents between 25 and 44. A bit surprisingly, it would seem that the value placed on Facebook between the youngest and the oldest group is not that different. Perhaps for different reasons, young and older voters used Facebook to facilitate engagement with political debate. Moreover, Facebook was used prolifically during the final stages of the referendum so it became an important means of political discussion and communication. In the five weeks before the vote there were over 10 million exchanges and 85% of these were generated in Scotland. Facebook research indicates that 2.05 million interactions were directly related to the Yes campaign and 1.96 million were about Better Together (BBC News, 2014). About these exchanges is the degree to which personal Facebook sites and political messages were reducing the space between the personal and the political. Social media can seem to have a self-referential dimension as users present images of themselves to friends or, it can simply be a social medium for sharing information and items of interest. The referendum provided the

context for political issues to become part of how Facebook was used to link the personal and political through online posts, information sharing, discussion and debate.

Does Age and Gender Influence the Likelihood of Becoming more Active in Politics and Life in the Community?

Table 6

Age in politics and in the life in the community.

Age	16-24	25-44	45-60	61+	p
More	55.7	54.4	53.3	45.9	.121
Less	6.8	4.6	2.6	2.7	
The same	37.5	41.1	44.1	51.4	

Table 7

Gender in politics and in the life in the community.

Gender	Female	Male	p
More	54.6	49.6	.048
Less	2.8	5.4	
The same	42.6	45.0	

We can see across all age groups substantial percentages of respondents saying they would become more active in politics; political debate over the referendum had stimulated social and political action. Whilst those over 61 were most likely to report the same level of interest, as some respondents pointed out, that was because they already had a high level of interest in politics. Nevertheless, almost half of the older cohort claimed they would be more politically active as a consequence. Differences for those groups under 61 years of age are rather small. Younger people stated they were more likely to become more interested in politics. Women were also more likely to report a higher level of interest in politics compared to men. However, we cannot claim statistical significance for any differences above.

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Table 8

Age and active in community.

Age	16-24	25-44	45-60	61+	p
Yes	8.0	25.9	26.6	15.4	.000
No	79.5	59.6	62.9	75.2	
Maybe	12.5	14.4	10.5	9.4	

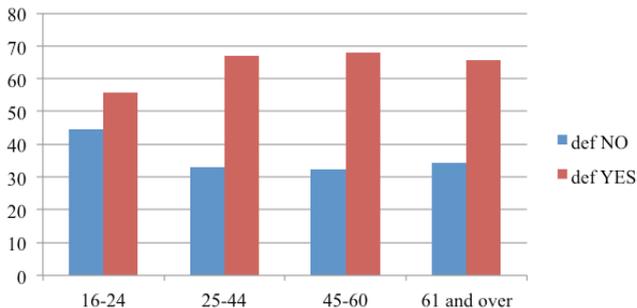
Table 9

Gender and active in community.

Gender	Female	Male	p
Yes	23.0	22.4	.135
No	63.3	67.8	
Maybe	13.7	9.8	

In the above table the youngest and oldest age groups look more alike than compared to those between 25 and 60 with sizeable minorities stating they would be more active in the community. Those in the middle groups were most likely to state they would be more active. This result is statistically significant. While men were slightly more likely to report no increased level of activity in the community, gender differences were not found to be statistically significant.

Was Age Influencing Likelihood of Being a Definite Yes or Definite No Voter?



Graphic 1

Age and likelihood of being a definite yes or definite no voter (continued).

Age was not found to be significant in a bivariate analysis between age and voting intentions one year before the referendum (Chi-square = 3.624, df = 3; p = .305). We can see that for those between 25 and older, regardless of the age group they belong to, the intention to vote yes or no are very similar. We should, however, draw attention to the fact that our older age group sample is distinctly pro-independence by almost two to one. As the actual population of older adults was roughly two-thirds against independence we are picking up a very distinctive sub-sample of older adult voters.

Did Age Differences Influence the Key Factors in Taking a Decision?

Table 10

Age and active in community.

	16-24	25-44	45-60	61+	p
Economy	37.6	49.2	48.0	56.6	.038
Identity	26.9	24.5	28.2	36.2	.050
Political autonomy	40.9	48.5	55.0	47.4	.049
Health services	47.3	37.9	32.2	22.4	.000
Defence	10.8	13.6	19.8	27.6	.000
Political party affiliation	4.3	4.5	3.5	7.2	.299
Trade union affiliation	3.2	2.3	2.0	1.3	.774
Education	34.4	21.8	17.1	9.9	.000
Welfare	37.6	40.1	36.9	33.6	.506
Equality	53.8	48.5	47.0	41.4	.271

Respondents were asked to rank by importance the three most important factors influencing their decision, with an option to include something not mentioned on the list above. Three priority topics analysed by age are significant at the p<.001 level. Young people were much more likely to indicate health services and education among their top priorities, while older people were more likely to opt for defence, the state of the economy

as well as identity issues. What is important to keep in mind is that for older voters, their formative period in post-War Britain would entail positive experiences of the union particularly in terms of the stability and prosperity it generated. This would likely impact on holding a positive British identity. These achievements would be less significant for younger age groups whose experience is increasingly one of instability, economic decline and austerity. Political autonomy was prioritised by over half of the respondents in the 45-60 age group, although it clearly figured highly for all respondents – but slightly less for the youngest age range. Other priorities were not found to be significant in relation to age.

Did Age Influence the Sources of Information Respondents Most Valued?

Table 11

Sources of information

Age	16-24	25-44	45-60	61+	p
Television	26.9	24.5	31.7	29.6	.130
Daily newspapers	17.2	16.3	23.0	36.8	.000
Friends and family	45.2	35.4	31.2	26.3	.012
Campaign material	20.4	17.0	16.6	18.4	.816
Attending meeting	9.7	12.9	18.6	20.4	.018
Attending educational activities	10.8	8.2	5.0	5.9	.118
Involvement in political party	6.5	2.9	5.4	8.6	.035
Involvement in a campaign group	8.6	8.2	12.1	15.8	.039
Books	4.3	9.3	11.9	12.5	.111
Advertisements	2.2	2.3	1.7	2.0	.957
Personal social media (e.g. Facebook)	37.6	50.1	36.9	21.7	.000
Internet	64.5	62.1	54.0	47.4	.003
Campaign social media	41.9	39.9	38.9	36.2	.805

As referred to earlier in the electoral commission survey, sources of information that were valued most among the respondents differed according to age groups. Despite the fact that our sample of older adults are

skewed towards Yes they still, nevertheless, tend to value newspapers higher than younger people, while the younger respondents were more active on the internet, including social media, while those between 25 and 44 seemed to be most active on social media. Older people were also more likely to be involved in a political party and a campaign, and to attend meetings, while younger people placed a higher value on discussing politics with friends and family. Participation in political parties and campaigns was higher for intended yes voters, it seemed higher for those belonging to the highest age categories, so also for those who intended to vote no, although this result was not found to be significant at the $p < .050$ level.

Finally, we want to include some of the more qualitative comments from the questionnaire that were added from those committed to Yes and No positions within the 61+ age category. We are not claiming these are representative in any sense but that they are interesting. Only one of the No voters stated they had changed the sources of information they would use to inform their decision. This individual referred to being a bit more inclined to use social media than before. Two others responded with the question: ‘why should I?’ However, it should not be assumed this meant No voters were simply accepting a digest of official information uncritically. A number of comments from older No voters qualify their use:

I have enough general knowledge and experience of politics, economics and current affairs. I am not politically active. I only need information on the specifics of the campaign and its progress.

I don't have involvement with political parties and campaign material went straight in the bin. The information in the press and TV had to be filtered very carefully – all strands of the media had an agenda.

Social media highlighted arguments from both sides...I do not have a television. I am dependent upon my own searches for information and follow up reading. Newspapers were less influential to me, but they allowed me to hear what the various leaders were saying and provided analysis and context.

The response of Yes voters is, not unexpectedly, more critical of official sources with the majority stating they had changed where they look for information, and articulating strong condemnations of the BBC, television and the mainstream newspapers:

I used to read newspapers and watched political programmes on the TV. I have almost completely given up on these as reliable sources of information. Actively look for alternative sources discovered during the campaign. I want to follow up and be part of this new energised democratic momentum. I use twitter now.

When I go to a BBC site, I check it against other sites before or after. No longer trust the BBC, even though I spent nearly all my life (70 now) thinking they were objective.

I no longer watch BBC news programmes and am examining means of legally withholding my licence fee, even if I have to purchase expensive new equipment to achieve this.

Of those who said they hadn't changed where they look for sources of information they too were equally critical of the mainstream media and the narrow range of choices they presented. In both Yes and No older groups the Internet and campaign social media, along with campaign materials and involvement in a campaign group or political party, were still significant sources of information. In other words, older adults, particularly Yes voters who were looking for counter-arguments, were purposefully searching out alternative sources of information.

Apart from one or two individuals who never wavered in their views, the further comments provided by respondents were full of accounts of engaging with the issues, questioning information, critically engaging with the mainstream media, researching alternative sources of information through social media, digesting ideas, thinking things through, reading between the lines of arguments and so on. Respondents were clearly active and critically engaged, not passive or simply being spoon fed information that they uncritically accepted without question. The Internet obviously stands out as a major resource in this respect, both as an easy resource for

locating specific information but also one that puts the user in control of the extent and diversity of sources researched. The fact that individuals could control the process, extend their searches in whatever direction they wanted, was the really important point. The active role was linked to the motivation stimulated by the issues and the political choices open to people but, in judging the comments, there is also the personal sense of empowerment that comes through from individuals researching the arguments for themselves.

Older adults were also fully engaged with the passion and emotions that the referendum generated as indicated in the comments below:

Flamed my deeply held beliefs in independence.

We had a huge amount of excitement. Some of the older generation (over 80s) were so excited about seeing Scotland possibly becoming independent. No matter which way we were voting, we still got on as well as ever.

The greatest pleasure for me was listening and seeing how my grandchildren reacted, learned and became active. Also how the campaign became the main topic among friends.

Lost a friend of 50 years.

Older adults did vote differently and did have different priorities from other age groups, although they were often more closely positioned to younger voters than the middle age range were. They also, unsurprisingly, were subject to the same range of experiences and emotions as any other age group, which provided the affective motivation for engagement in political thinking and debate.

Discussion and Conclusion

I am awake now not asleep (Older adult male).

The above comment from one of the committed Yes respondents captures a consequence of political engagement that the opening quotes to this article alluded to. We suspect this sense of increased political consciousness applies to many more voters, old and young, men and women, in the pro and anti independence groups. What is worth re-emphasising is that in the end no one was voting for the status quo. Whilst we framed the title of this article with the words Yes or No the result was neither option. The people were offered, in the final days before the vote, a Vow of substantial devolvement of power to the Scottish parliament which was publicised in the best selling Daily Record on the 16th September, two days before the vote, and later publicised in other media outlets. All the mainstream UK political leaders endorsed the Vow which has been subsequently carried through – of course not to the degree campaigners for independence wanted. Regardless of the final vote, the process had been highly significant and it was this that made the difference to what was really being decided.

Our first research question asked ‘to what extent was voting No determined by age? Well clearly voting No was influenced by age but not in the sense that older voters were distinctly out of step with the rest of the electorate. Older voters and younger voters were more likely to vote for the union but, as indicated above, the meaning of the decision was ultimately very different from when the referendum started. Social class, gender and geography, amongst other things, also complicated the voting pattern. Our second research question asked ‘what, if anything, was distinctive about older adults engagement with the referendum? The answer, from the perspective of the referendum as an informal process of adult political learning, seems to be very little. Older adults were engaged as subjects in a process of making arguments and engaging with information, sharing experiences and weighing up the choices available as much as anyone else involved. They may have had preferences for different information sources but this did not make them uncritical and unreflective about the decision they made. This age group shared in the wider process of change underway rather than being unaffected by it.

We agree with other commentators that what the informal process of adult learning did, more than anything, was remove the stranglehold

political parties, political elites and mass media ‘opinion leaders’ have on politics which, in most cases, can simply reinforce prevailing patterns of political authority (Jones, 2014). In other words, whilst the outcome did not result in constitutional independence it generated widespread politicisation amongst large numbers of people, that is, it sparked an interest and independence of mind that potentially has long-term repercussions. Informed and engaged voters may turn out to be less predictable and more conditional in their support for political parties in the future. In some respects this is evident in the haemorrhaging of support for Scottish Labour in the 2015 UK General Election, which resulted in the party being almost annihilated electorally. A situation that was inconceivable only a decade earlier. On the other hand, the SNP returned an almost unbelievable majority of MPs to Westminster in the same election by winning 56 of the 59 seats contested, another inconceivable political event from only a decade earlier. However, this dominance might more easily change, as an independently minded electorate is less easily persuaded and less likely to vote based on traditional loyalties or unconditional trust. Older adults were a part of this political sea change in Scottish politics – a kind of politicised ‘silent explosion’ in Field’s terms - as anyone else living there.

According to Torrance (2016) one of the central tropes of the political battle during the referendum was couched between hope and fear, about being negative or being positive. Such a simplification, he argues, misses the point about the credibility of the case for independence, which subsequent events seem to call even more into question. The intellectual case for an independent currency, declining world oil prices, a political retreat from resisting austerity by the SNP and the volatility of the world economy have made the arguments for independence all the more difficult to make. Indeed, Alex Salmond now takes the view that the currency argument needs ‘to be refurbished’ if independence is ever to be successful (Salmond, 2016). In short, all of these points add up to the problem of persuading voters to back independence was down to the shortcomings of the case rather than the shortcomings of the voters in general and older voters in particular. There was no ‘killer argument’ that won or lost the debate which older voters simply ignored because they were disengaged, self-interested or unable to actively participate in the learning that was

underway. We do not take the position that the case for independence cannot be made convincing in new circumstances or with stronger arguments. But that has not yet happened for many and for older voters in 2014 the arguments were not convincing enough. In such circumstances perhaps it is the wisdom of age that we should be grateful to?

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