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The Contentious Politics of Scottish Independence

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Note: Aberdeen, 17 August 2019. Photo by author.

As the United Kingdom (UK) emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, many familiar issues that had been set aside are now returning to the fore. One of these is Scotland's demand to hold a second referendum on its independence.

While the massive independence marches that have become part of the way of life in Scotland were postponed during the height of the pandemic, small independence demonstrations began again in July 2020. Plans are afoot for them to resume on a larger scale this Fall.

This article looks at what these demonstrations are all about. It uses surveys of participants conducted at recent events in 2019. It considers the reasons that people participate and how that differs between independence proponents and unionist counter-protesters. It also examines how the movement is organised and the outlook for the cause.

What would it take to have an independence referendum?

The Scottish Parliament most recently called for a second independence referendum in January 2020. However, holding such a referendum is technically outside the parliament's power. Yet, it is possible for the UK Parliament to use Section 30 of the Scotland Act 1998 to temporarily grant that power, if it so chooses.

This situation is a battle of wills between Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and Prime Minister Boris Johnson. As the Leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), independence is central to Sturgeon’s political mandate. On the other hand, Johnson campaigned against allowing Scotland to leave the union and has already declined its Section 30 request. At the heart of the independence question is whether Scotland can bring sufficient political pressure to bear to convince Johnson to change his mind.

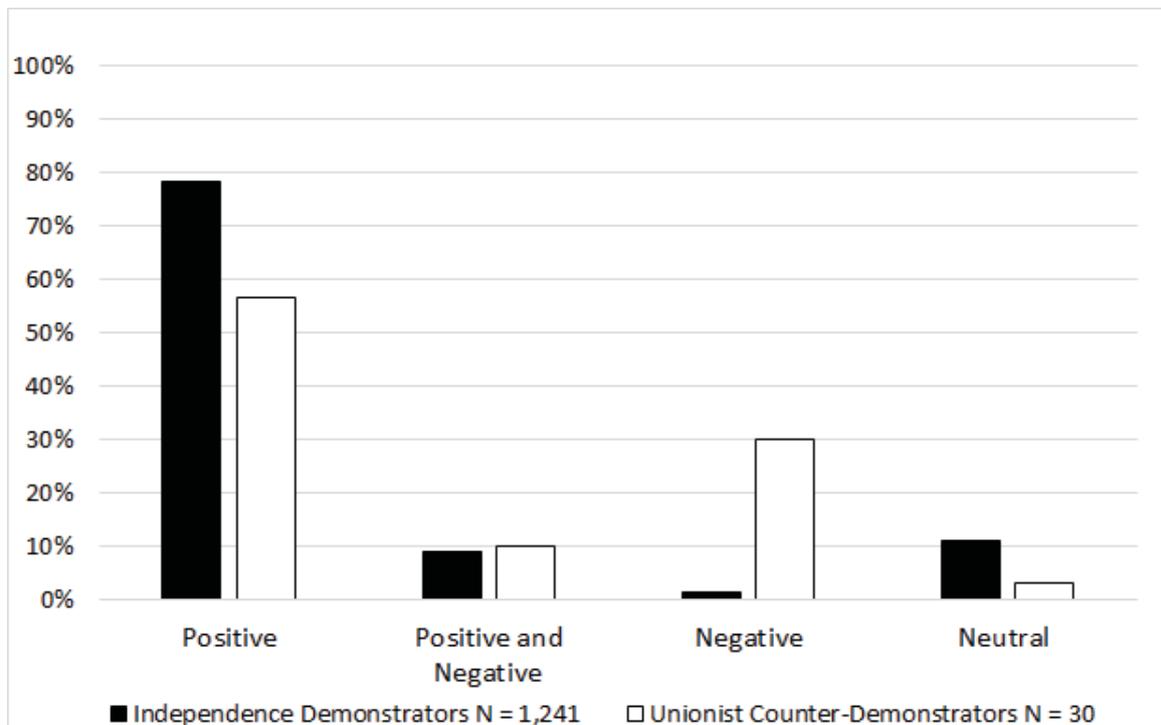
To help understand these politics, I fielded teams that conducted surveys of a random sample of 1,327 participants in – and 35 counter-demonstrators against – five pro-independence demonstrations. The rallies were held between August and November 2019 in Aberdeen, Perth, Edinburgh, and Glasgow (two demonstrations).

Why they march and how they organise

Each respondent was presented with the open-ended question, “What are the most important reasons that you came to this event today?” I coded responses with respect to whether the frames were positive, negative, a combination of positive and negative, or entirely neutral reasons. Positive reasons included “to support Scottish independence” or “to support the Union”. Negative reasons included “to end Tory rule” or “to stop the SNP”. Neutral reasons included “to listen to the speakers” or “I came across the rally by accident”.

The valence of respondents’ frames is reported in Figure 1. Independence demonstrators framed their motivations in overwhelmingly positive terms. More than three-fourths explained their motivations entirely positively, such as to promote a more just society or to build a better future for their children. This finding suggests that the movement is based more on a positive vision of an independent Scotland than on grievances with the UK.

Figure 1. Valence of Frames for Demonstrators’ Motivations for Participation



Just less than ten percent of independence demonstrators added negative reasons to their positive motivations, such as opposition to Brexit or frustration with Boris Johnson's leadership. Less than two percent framed their involvement entirely negatively. Approximately 11 percent used a neutral frame for their motivations.

Almost 60 percent of Unionist counter-demonstrators also framed their motivations in largely positive terms, such as expressing the desire "to do what is best for Scotland". They more readily projected a positive vision of the Union than they cast aspersions on the independence cause. However, counter-demonstrators were significantly ($p \leq 0.01$) more likely than independence demonstrators to frame their motivations entirely negatively, with 30 percent of counter-demonstrators offering reasons such as "to stop Nicola Sturgeon". This more negative posture is to be expected in any counter-movement. As was the case for independence demonstrators, counter-demonstrators sometimes gave a mix of positive and negative reasons (almost ten percent of counter-demonstrators) or entirely neutral motivations (only three percent of counter-demonstrators).

The reasons given by respondents are indicative of the concerns that were at the top of their heads when they were answering the survey. I recorded as many reasons as they listed, with some respondents giving numerous reasons. However, these answers may not provide a complete accounting of people's motivations. If they had been further prompted, respondents might have expanded upon their answers by offering additional motivations. Nonetheless, reviewing these reasons improves the understanding of the independence movement and its Unionist opposition. A summary of the most common reasons given is reported in Table 1.

Approximately four-fifths of independence demonstrators stated their motivations as aligning with the explicit purpose of the movement by calling for independence, self-determination, freedom, and/or seeking to support the movement. Almost one-quarter of respondents stated their desire to show the public the strength of the movement. One in ten answers mentioned the need to support Scotland, or some part of Scotland, such as the area in which a rally took place. These findings document a strong alignment between the movement's leaders and its grassroots supporters, suggesting that factionalism is not a substantial concern for the movement.

It was less common for respondents to volunteer direct opposition to the government of the UK, to support Europe or stop Brexit, or to advocate on policy issues, all of which were mentioned by less than ten percent of demonstrators. About three percent focused on their hopes for future generations. Others expressed the goal to become more educated about the movement and its issues, to meet other people, to transact personal business, or to exercise their rights. Only one percent named the SNP or Nicola Sturgeon in their answer, indicating that the party and movement may not be as directly connected in the minds of grassroots activists as might be assumed by outside observers.

As was the case for independence demonstrators, the majority of Unionist counter-demonstrators focused on the main goal of their movement: two-thirds said that they were there to support the Union. One in five counter-demonstrators said that they were there to oppose the SNP and/or Nicola Sturgeon, making them significantly ($p \leq 0.01$) more focused on the SNP/Sturgeon than was the case for independence demonstrators. This result suggests that

counter-demonstrators personalised their opposition to independence much more than its supporters did.

Table 1. Reasons for Demonstrating Given by Pro-Independence and Pro-Union Activists

Rank	Reason	Percent
<i>Independence Demonstrators</i>		
1	For independence, self-determination, freedom, and/or the independence movement	80%
2	To show the public, media, and/or government the level of movement support	24%
3	To support Scotland, a region, and/or a locality in Scotland	10%
4	To oppose the government of the United Kingdom, such as Westminster or the Tories	8%
5	To support Europe, the European Union, and/or stop Brexit	6%
6	For personal reasons, such as to see family or meet friends	5%
7	To observe the event, listen to the speakers, and/or learn about the issues	4%
8	To advocate on policy issues, such as climate change, poverty, or immigration	4%
9	To do what is best for children, grandchildren, family, and/or future generations	3%
10	Came across rally by accident, such as by hearing the music	3%
11	To network, such as by meeting like-minded people	3%
12	To exercise rights, such as freedom of speech	2%
13	To support the Scottish National Party (SNP) and/or Nicola Sturgeon	1%
<i>Unionist Demonstrators</i>		
1	To support the Union	67%
2	To oppose the Scottish National Party (SNP) and/or Nicola Sturgeon	20%
3	To show the public, media, and/or government the level of movement support	7%
3	To support nationalism	7%
5	To support Scotland, a region, and/or a locality in Scotland	3%
5	To do what is best for children, grandchildren, family, and/or future generations	3%
5	To observe the event, listen to the speakers, and/or learn about the issues	3%
5	To oppose nationalism	3%

Note: Some respondents gave more than one reason, leading column percentages to sum to more than 100 percent. Reasons named by less than one percent of respondents are not reported. There are fewer reasons listed for Unionists than for independence demonstrators because there were more responses from independence demonstrators (N=1,241) than from pro-union activists (N=30).

Counter-demonstrators shared several motivations with independence demonstrators. They were similarly interested in showing their level of support to the public, advancing the interests of Scotland, doing what is best for future generations, and observing the event. They differed from the pro-independence side in their attention to nationalism, with some in favor and some opposed to it.



Note: Glasgow, 4 May 2019. Photo by author.



Note: Aberdeen, 17 August 2019. Photo by author.

The survey asked respondents if they were contacted by organisations that encouraged them to attend the rally and, if so, which ones. The responses point to three types of organisations that brought independence supporters into the streets. First, there were coalition leaders that did the lion's share of the work in making demonstrations happen. These included All Under One Banner (which has sometimes been a locus of controversy within the independence movement), Hope Over Fear, and *The National* newspaper, which were the most active mobilising organisations in 2019.



Note: Edinburgh, 5 October 2019. Photo by author.

Second, there were local organisations that helped local contingents travel to rallies in other cities. Examples included Yes Aye Rosyth, Yes Southside, and Aye Aberdeen.

A third type of organisation appealed to supporters on the basis of narrower interests, such as social status, hobbies, or political loyalties. Organisations of this type include Women for Independence, Pensioners for Independence, Yes Stones, Yes Bikers, the SNP, and others.

On the Unionist side, the only organisation that mobilised counter-demonstrators was A Force For Good (AFFG). Advocating for Unionism and opposing the independence movement are at the core of AFFG's mission. I noticed that AFFG shared leaders and key participants with the Orange Order, a Protestant fraternal organisation that opposes Catholicism in Northern Ireland and Scotland. While Unionist activism was modest in 2019, it is likely that it would grow substantially if another independence referendum was placed on the ballot.

Outlook

The strengths of the Scottish independence movement are that it has a positive focus, is relatively free of internal cleavages, and is efficiently organised. Its chief weakness is that it lacks the ability to exert much pressure on politicians outside Scotland. The Prime Minister is not paying political costs for refusing to meet the movement's demands. A classical activist perspective would advise the movement to focus on the Prime Minister as a target and attempt to create incentives for him to listen to its demands.

Unionists exhibit the opposite pattern of strengths and weaknesses. They are strong in the UK broadly but not well organised inside Scotland. If Scotland were to hold another independence referendum, Unionists would benefit from building more organisational diversity.

Independence advocates could do numerous things to strengthen their hand. First, they could look for ways to vividly illustrate what they believe to be the injustice of being denied a new independence referendum. The Prime Minister might not want to develop an "undemocratic" reputation as Scottish opinion swings towards the movement's position (as recent polls suggest).

Second, advocates would be well advised to build stronger coalitions with aligned social movements around the UK, such as the stop climate change movement.

Third, the independence movement might bring some actions directly to London. Marches in Edinburgh and Glasgow may be impressive, but still largely "out of sight, out of mind" for the rest of the UK.

Finally, the independence movement would be wise to be attuned to factionalism within the SNP. If Johanna Cherry (currently a member of the UK Parliament) is successful in her bid for a seat in the Scottish Parliament in the 2021 elections, she could potentially challenge Sturgeon's position as First Minister. The movement should think strategically about whether it is in its interests to amplify that competition or instead focus on pressuring the prime minister.



Note: Perth, 7 September 2019. Photo by author.