

Scotland a month before its referendum:

In what way do the Scottish government's plans to become independent represent the Scottish people's opinion?

An interview and research project in Aberdeen and Edinburgh,
Scotland, UK from August 9-22, 2014.

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1. Preface

1.1 Personal Motivation

The topic of separatist movements always surrounded me. It occurred to me for the first time when I visited our friends near Barcelona, which belongs to Catalonia. They expressed their anger about their present situation as they felt neglected by the Spanish government and treated badly by the other people of Spain. Besides the other arguments they had, their strong feelings made me think about the issue. Why do people want to separate? Do they not feel at home in the country they grew up in? How does this process work and who is responsible for a fair secession?

I was confronted with the issue again when I visited Canada for a couple of months. Part of my host family came from Montreal, which belongs to Quebec. I then learned that Quebec had already held two referenda which only narrowly failed. What were the reasons for their failure and who thought it sensible to have another referendum?

But the longing for independence or secession is also present when I simply take a look into the newspaper: there is Kosovo, which seceded from Serbia in 2008, but still is not recognized by all countries of the United Nations. There is Crimea and the crisis in the Ukraine, which is all over the media every day and which is particularly interesting as the situation is so delicate. And then there is Scotland, a nation which had undergone constant changes in the independence matter over the past centuries and which now actually had its legal and binding referendum. I wanted to find out what makes Scotland different from all the other nations across the world which aim for independence and, as the media only reports on the government's statements, how the Scottish people actually felt about the matter.

I hoped that the people there would be willing to talk to me as politics is a taboo subject for some people and such decisions can be very personal. I also heard about families being split up by the controversy, which increased my fear of being rejected as an interviewer. In the end I hoped that it would be different as I was a neutral observer and not someone who judges the people for their opinion.

1.2 Project Idea

The issue of secession and independence is a fascinating one. It is so complex and rich in historical as well as in recent examples, that one does not quite know where to start researching.

When I participated in a Model United Nations conference last year, we discussed separatist state movements. At that point, the Crimea crisis had just begun. What angered me about the discussion was that we always talked about the majority of Russian people, but never about the minority of Ukrainians. Even though there are tremendous differences between the Ukraine and the UK, the discussion about its people works analogously. We actually never talked about Scotland in English class, the focus was always set on England, the English people, the English capital. Some people even refer to the United Kingdom as England, leaving out Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. When I proposed my idea about researching the Scottish independence matter, some people I talked to did not even know there was one. When I started preparing myself, the reason became obvious: the press and media barely reported on it. How can one leave behind a nation so rich in history and culture and, even worse, forget about its people?

The few articles I found mainly referred to politics and economy. As I am always curious about other people's minds, habits and thoughts, I decided to make a difference and also include the people's opinions in my research. The democratic process of a referendum simply does not work without the voters. Because of that and due to the reason that the press rarely asks about people's thoughts, but predominantly the statesmen's, I wanted to talk directly to the Scottish people, learn about their hopes and fears and finally find out what makes them want to secede, apart from economic reasons. This is also the reason why I developed the question "In what way do the Scottish government's plans to become independent represent the Scottish people's opinion?" in the first place.

Little later, I contacted our partner school in Aberdeen, which helped me find a host family for my stay. I decided to go to Scotland exactly a month before the referendum in order to experience the campaigns and dedicated people vividly. Prior to my departure, I already talked to my contact teacher in Aberdeen to find out what would expect me. I then prepared a questionnaire and interview sheets to get started right away.

1.3 Educational Context

The United Kingdom, its language and its culture are topics in English class as soon as one starts out learning the language. Therefore, I was confronted with British culture from an early age on. At some point, one simply becomes curious about the topic, wants to find out, whether life in the UK is actually like the textbook tries to tell us and furthermore one wants to gain a deeper knowledge of it or just experience the things one learnt about in class.

For me, the Scottish referendum is particularly important since it is connected to my personal education, as I attend a European school, where European values are conveyed, and our topic in my political science class during the 3rd semester is Europe and the European Union.

Why is Scotland so important for Europe?

First of all, Scotland is part of the United Kingdom, one of the EU's strongest member states. One reason for its strength is the strong Scottish economy. What will happen, if an important part of the UK just breaks away? Another very important issue is the UK's Euro-scepticism. While England is moving further and further to the right politically, Scotland is more left-orientated. This becomes very important when one thinks of a possible referendum in the UK determining whether or not to stay in the European Union. If Scotland becomes independent prior to that, it is more likely that this referendum will be successful. It is obvious that the UK leaving the EU would be an explosive issue, not only because that would be the first time in the EU's history, but also because the UK is such a strong member state and it is uncertain what would happen afterwards.

Scottish independence would moreover be striking for Europe as nobody knows in what way other European independence movements like the Catalanian one would be pushed. One fear most certainly is that Europe could split up into uncountable micro-states, a trend contrary to the values passed on in my school, where unison and solidarity between the European states is supported.

2. Carrying out the project

2.1 Realization of the project

In advance of my project I prepared myself thoroughly. I read about Scottish history and politics and about the different parties and campaigns involved and then connected that new knowledge with the things I learnt in class about Britain. It was very important to me to

always see both sides of the coin during the whole project. This becomes clearer later on when I describe my interviewees and interviews. During my stay I also collected numerous leaflets, newspaper articles from various British newspapers and spent an afternoon at Aberdeen's Public Library.

The main aim of visiting Scotland was to learn about Scottish culture and its differences to e.g. England by getting into contact with Scottish people, in order to actually understand the separatist movement. Therefore my self-set program in Aberdeen consisted of two parts: Firstly, participating in Scottish everyday life to get in touch with the culture and secondly, talking to people there, including the interviews, to learn about hopes, fears and personal viewpoints on independence.

The first part of my activities consisted of learning about Scottish culture. One main contributor to that was living in an Aberdonian family for two weeks. I was very lucky with my host family, as they were not only supporting me with my interviews and research, but also showing me around Aberdeenshire and Edinburgh. I visited castles, did a harbour cruise, learnt about the oil business, bagpipes and kilts, visited the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood in Edinburgh and even participated in school life for a day, to only name a few things.

The other part of my project was getting into direct contact and talking with Scottish people about the referendum. This happened in various ways: I talked to people after the Sunday service, with campaigners on the street, with friends of my host family and with people in school. Also, I differentiated between informal talks and formal interviews. The latter ones were much longer, going deeper and addressing a broader variety of aspects. Nevertheless, the informal talks inspired me as much for my further project work and gave me ideas for my upcoming interviews. They also appeared even more personal than the interviews as the interlocutors addressed their personal view more directly.

2.2 The Independence Movement

The longing for independence is deeply rooted in Scottish history. The fact that Scots have a strong will to fight for their freedom is proven by two wars of independence and many more battles against the Romans, later on the Vikings and then the English. As England is a direct neighbour of Scotland, the greatest potential for conflict always lay between those two kingdoms. Ever since Scotland's failure in Panama and the following dependence on England, there were separatist formations amongst the Scots. The movement was revived by Thatcher's

Conservative Government which openly disrespected Scotland and strengthened by the establishment of the Scottish Parliament in 1999. The Scottish National Party (SNP) represents the main official supporter of independence. Finally, in 2012, the Edinburgh Agreement on an Independence Referendum was signed by David Cameron and Alex Salmond.

The person Alex Salmond himself is essential in the issue as he was not only the First Minister and political leader of Scotland at the time of the Referendum, but also the initiator, the head and face of the Yes-Campaign. This reasons my research question that equates the Scottish government and the striving for independence.

The Yes-Campaign is based on the feeling of inequality and disregard by the Westminster government. It claims that Scottish interests are not well-represented and the region could be far better off independent. It always contrasts Scotland and the rest of the UK by using statistics or pointing at things Scotland already does better than its counterparts, e.g. that Scotland has generated more tax per person than the rest of the UK for the last 33 years.

Opposed to that stands the No-Campaign, led by Alistair Darling, former finance minister of the UK. It always stresses that Scots can have “the best of both worlds” and that a no-vote is not a vote against change. It also points at problematic facts as e.g. the North Sea oil that will run out at some point and the large financial burden that will be caused by all the upcoming processes like setting up embassies, keeping up the good health care system or paying for pensions. This strategy of pointing at all the likely problems that might occur is labelled and ridiculed as a “frightening strategy” by the Yes-Camp.

2.3 The Interviews

The perspective described above is the one found in every newspaper or online magazine as it is the one represented by officials. But the focus of my project was on the personal thoughts and opinions of ordinary people. I therefore conducted a series of interviews during my two week’s stay in Aberdeen and Edinburgh.

In my interviews, I aimed at getting to know and understand the controversy of the topic as well as the variety of opinions. It is obvious that nobody can display the total variety of opinions of a people since opinions are diverse and can differ fastly. Moreover, in many issues it is the case that opinions differ between different age groups, sexes or social classes. As a

compromise, I decided to interview the same amount of people from each sex and additionally have the same amount of people in each age group. On top of this, I had about one half of Scottish interviewees and the other half interviewees who come from somewhere else, but live in Scotland (for exact numbers, see 4.2).

My interviews were divided into three parts regarding the content. In the first part of the interview I wanted to learn about Scotland as a nation: Is there a special feeling or a certain pride in being Scottish? What makes Scotland special? The second part was all about politics and the referendum itself: How do people feel about their governments in Westminster and Holyrood? What do they think might change in either of the cases of a yes or a no-vote? Which issues weigh most in the decision-making process? The final part of the interview was about the vote: Have people decided yet? Why do some of them hesitate or are still open to change their mind? And, most importantly, how will they vote in the end? As I did not aim for short, easily comparable answers, but rather general directions which revealed the complexity and diversity of opinions and, more importantly, the personal views of an average Scottish citizen, I varied and adjusted my basic questionnaire according to my different interviewees. When I interviewed an Englishman, for example, I would not ask him what it was like to be Scottish, but whether he thought there were differences between or peculiarities about the English and the Scots. Moreover, I added questions when I felt that there could be more interesting or new answers in that new direction. To make it short: I adjusted and personalized every single interview in order to have a fluent, interesting and especially personal conversation. And this was my goal: to see and hear all the different people with all their very different minds, hopes, fears and opinions and then to place this small part of the puzzle in the big picture of a nation striving for independence (for a sample questionnaire see 4.1).

Even though every single interviewee had his or her very personal view on the issue, an overall picture of the situation could be drawn after two weeks of countless conversations and studying material.

First of all, the majority of Scottish people considered themselves firstly British and only then Scottish. Still, they found that there are differences between Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom, e.g. the heritage and the culture. Another very important aspect was their political direction. Scottish people are, contrary to the English, more left-leaning. Thus, the Conservative government in Westminster does not represent the Scottish people. Also, the Scottish are very EU-friendly. Some interviewees called independence a “chance to stay in the EU” as they feared the UK’s resignation from it. However, the majority of interviewees rather

wanted to keep the Pound than having an own currency or the Euro. Still, the reason for that phenomenon is not an objection to the Euro, but rather the opinion that the Pound is not the property of England, but of every region of the UK.

While the supporters of independence were looking forward to a Scotland that would be more prosperous and self-determining with a more important role in the world, the opponents feared that Scotland could lose its positive achievements such as free education or its excellent health care. They also could not understand why one would need a separation for a better future. More devolution seemed to be a good alternative. However, both sides admitted that building up a state would cause some years of hardship for those living in it. They were aware of the fact that the money needed e.g. for embassies, would be missing for pensions, education and health care. The interviewees' belief in Scotland as a nation was very strong. They all were convinced that Scotland could make it on its own, even though it would have a harsh start. Also, no matter of which opinion my interviewees were, every single one was willing to contribute to the creation of the new state as well as living with the likely financial restrictions.

A thing which surprised me was the attitude towards Alex Salmond. Even though people had their reservations about him, everyone admitted that he was a good speaker and clever leader. However, many people called the whole campaign a "Salmond project". I met plenty of people, not only opponents of independence, who had the impression that Salmond's main goal was his name in history books. The idea of an independent Scotland has always existed, but it was Salmond's only focus throughout his political life. After the referendum failed, he immediately stepped down, as if he had no other projects as Scotland's First Minister. The supporters of independence whom I met were not necessarily supporters of Salmond. Their idea of an independent Scotland was not a shining SNP, but a shining nation in general. This showed me that independence is an ideology, not a campaign. The ones who really want independence have always wanted it, even without the government's campaign, and they still want it, even though the referendum failed. One could conclude that the government's campaign forced the people to make up their minds and that the resulting outcome is not necessarily the government's one.

In the end, the result of my interviews was 14:6 against independence. The fact that everyone with an address in Scotland could vote became once more important. During my talks, many people criticised this policy. Why should French, Polish or English people who have only lived in Scotland for some years be allowed to vote, while Scottish people working in

England are not? That this policy would influence the result of the referendum immensely becomes clear when having a look at my statistics (cf. 4.2). The Scottish interviewees were split into two almost equal yes- and no-groups, while the foreign interviewees all except one planned to vote against independence. Some enjoy the freedom that a union gives them; others are originally from England or have English relatives.

The undecided people to whom I talked, rather leaned towards to the “no”, as they liked Scotland the way it is and therefore did not want to take the risks independence would have brought. Still, they did understand the positive side of the issue and considered a yes-vote as well. Those undecided people made the referendum so unpredictable and exciting in the end.

3. Reflection

My project taught me various things: On the one hand seemingly small ones like how to make shortbread or the fact that some English shops would not accept the Scottish Pound and on the other hand bigger ones such as the importance of the Glaswegian Kiss for the Scottish identity or the actual ingredients of haggis.

However, not only did I achieve a broad knowledge of Scottish culture and lifestyle during my stay, I could also improve my communication skills a lot. I had never done interviewing in such a professional and organized way before and I most certainly would not have expected the effectiveness of a thoroughly prepared series of interviews. Before I left, I considered preparing poll sheets. Now I am convinced that the combination of doing personal short talks and longer interviews was the right choice. In an interview, one can not only change the direction at any point and find out things one had not thought of before, but also get a more personal approach to the topic. One example for this is the story of a woman I met in church. She told me that her son lived and worked in London and was therefore excluded from the vote, even though he was born and raised in Scotland. In the following days, I learned about more and more similar stories and the background of the history. I found it extremely surprising that all you needed to vote was a Scottish address. This policy enabled e.g. an exchange student from Poland whom I met, to vote. I would have never known about things like that, if I had not talked to the people personally. Moreover, I learned that every person has something to say, no matter how unimportant this might seem at first sight. No matter whether I talked to a 16 or a 90-year-old, a housewife or a university lecturer: without all the little personal examples given by my interviewees, one simply could not fully understand the issue,

let alone their feelings or decisions. Direct contact with people also gives you a precise idea of their habits and it is more likely that they would start talking about the things that actually matter for them. This is another reason why I chose to take so much time for each interview, on average half an hour.

A thing that generally surprised me was the Scottish identity, which is very special. Even though the Scots see themselves as normal British people, they still have their very own identity. The conscience of this identity based on heritage and culture as well as strong social cohesion makes the Scottish people extremely strong as a nation. I was more than impressed when every single one of my interviewees explained to me that they were willing to give their best in an independent Scotland, even though they were not initially supportive of the idea.

Overall, I had an extremely enriching experience. Not only did I learn many things, I could also develop my personality as well as my communication and research skills. A thorough preparation combined with some spontaneity lead me to an interesting and enriching journey from which I still profit.

4. Appendix

4.1 Sample Questionnaire

The following questionnaire was my basis for every interview. As described above, the questions could vary a lot. This means that the questionnaire below is more of a framework than a fixed conversation.

0. General Questions

- Name, Age, Profession
- Location, Origin

1. Being Scottish

- Do you feel Scottish or rather British?
- (What makes you feel Scottish?)
- To what extent can you identify yourself with the other people of Great Britain?
- Are you proud to be Scottish?/Is there a certain Scottish pride?

2. The Referendum

- How do you feel about the government and Alex Salmond?
- What would a perfect Scotland look like?
- What would you imagine an independent Scotland to be like?
- Is there something you expect from a possible independence?
- What main obstacles do you see in becoming independent?
- What advantages and disadvantages do you see in being independent?
- Do you think Scotland is strong enough to keep a financially, economically and therefore socially stable state?
- What issue weighs most in making the decision? (pensions, currency, health care,...)
- Would you prefer your own currency or to keep the Pound?
- Should an independent Scotland join the EU?/Do you believe they can make it into the EU?

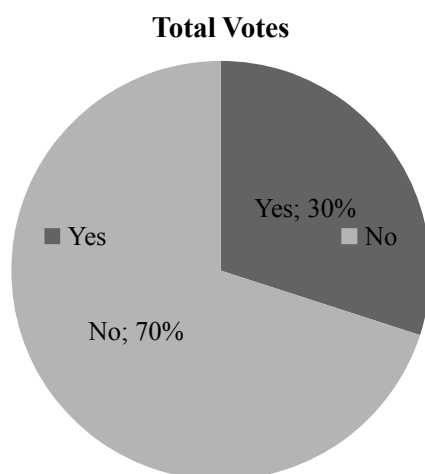
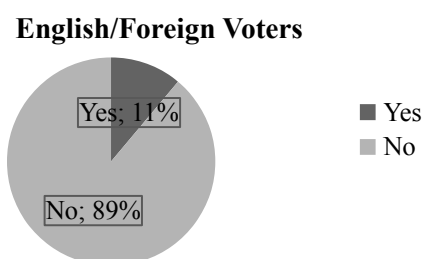
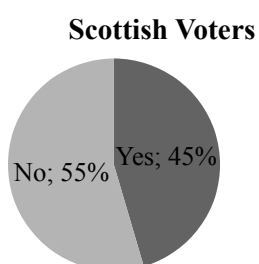
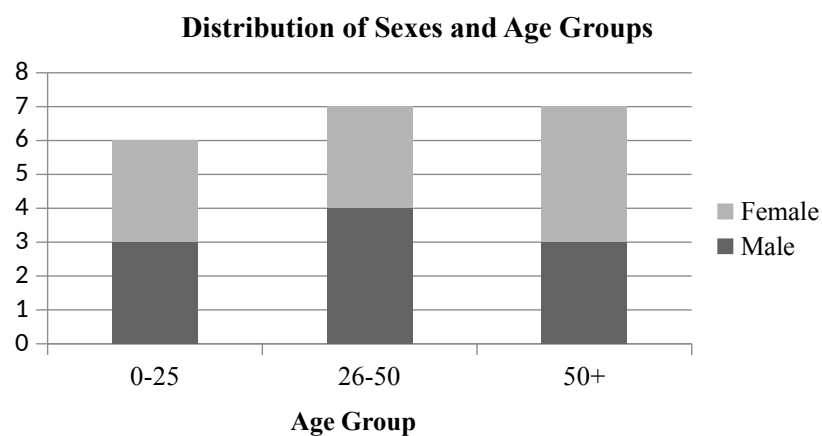
3. The Vote

- Could you live with the probable problems/hurdles which could occur when Scotland would actually become an independent state?
- Have you yet decided how you will vote?

4.2 Results: Statistics

Total interviewees: 20

An interviewee is a person who participated in an interview following the basic questionnaire and taking at least ten minutes. The average interview duration was 20 minutes.



4.3 Declaration of independent work

I hereby declare that I have written the project documentation on my own and only used the listed references and aids.

4.4 Permission for anonymous publication

I hereby authorise the anonymous publication of my project documentation.