

**Will 16 and
17 year olds
make a
difference in
the
referendum?**

**FUTURE OF
THE UK AND
SCOTLAND**

**What
Scotland
Thinks**



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Comparisons between the newly
enfranchised voters and the adult
population

Summary

In the referendum on Scottish independence next year 16 and 17 year olds will be able to vote, the first time they will have had the right to do so in a major ballot in the United Kingdom. Using data from a survey of those aged 14 to 17 conducted in the spring of 2013, this briefing assesses the validity of some of the claims that have been made about young people's attitudes towards politics in general and Scotland's constitutional future in particular. The results of this survey are compared with those obtained by surveys of Scotland's adult population, and especially those obtained by the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey.

Young people in Scotland do not appear to be any less interested in politics than the overall population, though they are much less likely to identify with a political party. Turnout in the referendum amongst this group looks set to be high, albeit perhaps somewhat lower than amongst eligible voters in general. In contrast, support for independence itself seems set to be relatively low, because young people are more likely to have a reasonably strong sense of British identity and more likely to be worried about the practical consequences of independence.



Background to the study and rationale

In the 2014 referendum on Scotland's constitutional future, the franchise will be extended to 16 and 17 year olds. In truth they will not comprise a large segment of the electorate, no more than some 3% or so, even assuming they are all successfully registered to vote via what will be a less than entirely straightforward procedure.¹ Even so their participation will be historic. It will be the first time that people of that age take part in a major public ballot in Scotland (or indeed anywhere else in the UK).

Unsurprisingly, the consequences of making this move have been much debated. It has been suggested that the Scottish Government anticipated that 16 and 17 year olds would be more likely to support independence. Others have doubted whether many of them would bother to vote at all. Meanwhile, questions have been raised about whether those that do vote will be mature enough to make a sensible, rational choice of their own. Whether or not these claims eventually prove to be accurate can be expected to influence the wider debate in the UK about whether the voting age should be reduced to 16 in all elections, a proposal that is now backed by both Labour and the Liberal Democrats.

What, however, was missing in this debate was any evidence with which to assess the likely validity of such claims about what would happen as a result of lowering the voting age in the referendum. In order to fill this gap in April and May 2013 a team of researchers from the University of Edinburgh² conducted a survey of 14 to 17 year olds in Scotland, most of whom would be 16 by September 2014 and thus eligible to vote in the referendum. This briefing summarises some of the key findings of that survey and compares them with the results of the surveys of the adult population, including most notably the Scottish Social Attitudes survey.

The starting point for determining the content of the young persons' survey consisted of questions that had previously been included on the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, together with new questions designed to address areas of particular interest so far as this age group is concerned. The initial selection was tested through a pilot survey of 110 school pupils³ to assess whether the questions had the same meaning for young people as they did for adults. While most questions passed this test, about one third were adjusted to reflect the different interpretations and meanings that respondents in this age group expressed – thereby making the survey more relevant to its specific target group.

The main survey of young people was conducted over the telephone. The numbers to be called were selected using a random digit dialling procedure. Where it was ascertained that someone of the relevant age was resident in the household, then first of all a parent was asked to give their permission for an interview to take place, and only thereafter was the agreement of the young

1 This calculation is based on the mid-2012 population estimates available at <http://www.gro-scotland.gov.uk/files2/stats/population-estimates/mid2012/mid-2011-2012-pop-est.pdf>. The procedure to be used in registering 16 and 17 year olds is laid out in the Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Act 2013. See <http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/parliamentarybusiness/Bills/60464.aspx>.

2 Jan Eichhorn, Lindsay Paterson, John MacInnes and Michael Rosie – funded through the Economic and Social Research Council's Future of the UK and Scotland programme

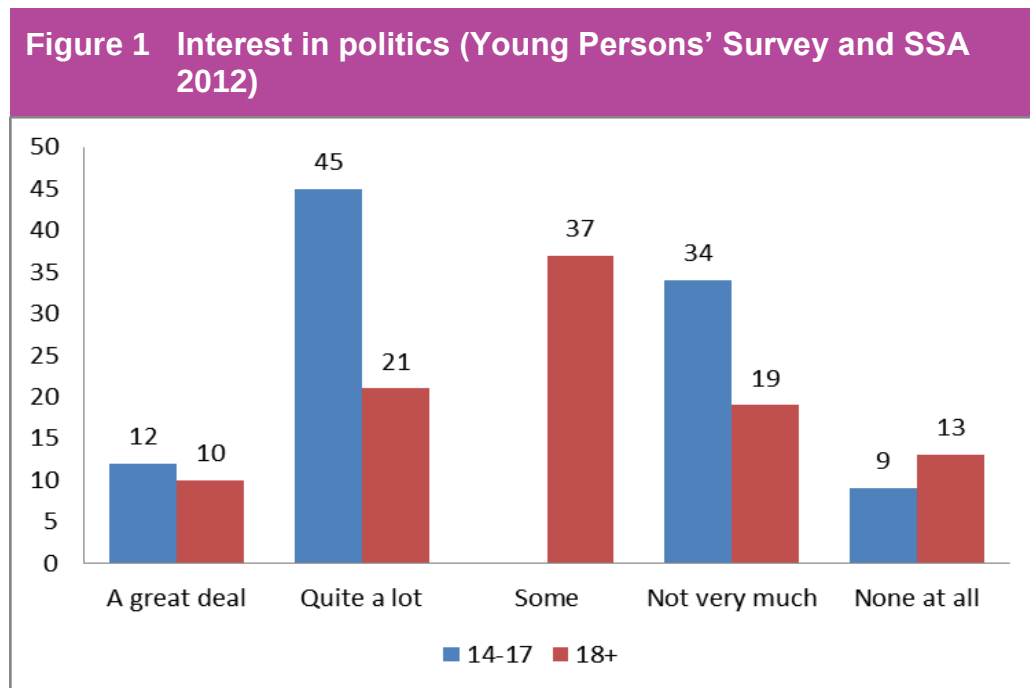
3 Conducted at Knox Academy, Haddington, who have agreed to be identified as having taken part in the pilot

person to be interviewed sought. This procedure meant there was an opportunity to ask a few questions of one of the young person's parents, thereby making it possible to compare the views of young people with those of one of their parents.

This briefing begins by looking at how much interest Scotland's young people have in politics and whether they are likely to vote in the referendum. We then examine how they say they will vote in the referendum and compare their views with older voters, and especially those aged 18-24. Finally, we try to cast some light on why young people hold the views that they do.

An apolitical youth?

As we noted earlier, one of the key criticisms of the decision to enfranchise 16 and 17 year olds was that many of them had little interest in politics and thus were unlikely to vote. However, this presumption appears to be inaccurate. In Figure 1 we show how interested our sample of 14-17 year olds said they were in politics and compare their responses with those of all respondents (aged 18 and over) to the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey. As many as 57% of 14-17 year olds report that they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics while only 9% state that they have no interest at all. Unlike SSA the Young Persons' Survey did not include a middle option of having 'some' interest in politics, and thus the results cannot be compared directly. However we might note that the proportion of young people who at one end of the spectrum say they have 'a great deal' of interest in politics is much the same as the proportion of adults who do so (12% and 10% respectively), while, equally, similar proportions of young people (9%) and adults (13%) say they have no interest at all. Meanwhile in the absence of a middle option, the overall proportion who say they have a 'quite a lot' of interest (45%) is actually somewhat higher than the proportion who say they do not have very much interest (34%). All in all these figures do not suggest any particular reason for concern about the level of interest in politics amongst Scotland's young people. Rather, they appear to be no less interested in the subject than everybody else.



Indeed, a lot of the young people want more information before they finally decide which way to vote. Only 33% said that they already had enough information. They may not, however, look to political parties to supply further information. No less than 57% say they do not feel close to any political party at all, far higher than the equivalent figure of 42% amongst adults.⁴ Evidently this is

⁴ The young persons' survey asked, 'Which political party, if any at all, do you feel closest to?'. On Scottish Social Attitudes respondents were asked, first, 'Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?', and if they said, 'No.', in response to that question were asked, 'Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?'. The figure of 42% represents the proportion saying, 'No.', to both of these questions.

a group amongst whom the views and claims made by the political parties at least during the referendum campaign are likely to carry relatively little weight.

Meanwhile, it seems quite likely that a majority of young people will take the trouble to vote. Only 13% say that they are rather or very unlikely to vote in the referendum, while as many as two-thirds (66%) say they are 'very' or 'rather' likely to do so. However, the propensity of young people to vote does seem to be somewhat lower than amongst voters in general. Recent polls conducted by TNS BMRB in which reported likelihood of voting was also obtained using a five point scale, albeit a differently worded one, have on average found as many as 78% of all those aged 16 and over say they are either 'certain' or 'very likely' to vote. It may well be the case that after the referendum advocates of enfranchising 16 and 17 year olds more generally will be able to argue that Scotland's ballot shows that most young people are willing to go to the polls, while critics will be able to point out that, nevertheless, they are not as willing to get involved as their elders.

**Table 1 Reported Likelihood of Voting
(Young Persons' Survey)**

	%
Very unlikely	7
Rather unlikely	6
Neither likely nor unlikely	19
Rather likely	26
Very likely	40

Sample size: 1018

Headline results and methodological concerns?

The survey of 14-17 year olds showed that a clear majority would have voted “No” to Scottish independence in April/May 2013. Just 21% would have said “Yes” in response to the referendum question “Should Scotland be an independent country”, 60% would have voted “No”, while 19% declared themselves to be undecided. The figures vary little between the younger and older members of the sample. Such a low level of support for independence is remarkable. In Table 2 we compare the results of the Young Persons’ Survey with the findings of opinion polls of all voters that were conducted at more or less the same time. While one poll, conducted over an extended period of time for Lord Ashcroft, also reported a 39 point lead for No over Yes, all of the other observations show a rather narrower if often quite substantial lead for the opponents of independence. Rather than being more likely to support independence than the rest of the population, it appears that, if anything, young people are less likely to do so.

Table 2 Attitudes in Referendum Voting Intention (Young Persons’ Survey and Opinion Polls)			
	Yes	No	Undecided
	%	%	%
Young Persons’ Survey	21	60	19
TNS-BMRB 20/3-2/4.13*	30	51	19
Ipsos MORI 29.4-5.5.13	31	59	10
Ashcroft Polls 29.4-2.5.13	30	56	14
Ashcroft Polls 22.2-9.5.13	26	65	10
Panelbase 10-16/5/13	36	44	20

* This poll included 16-17 year olds in its sample

Source: whatscotlandthinks.org

This perhaps might raise doubts in the minds of some about whether the sample of young persons is indeed adequately representative of 14-17 year olds in Scotland. Where comparisons could be made with other estimates of the characteristics of our target population, this did not appear to be a concern. However, there was some evidence that households in which at least one parent had a degree might be over-represented, a not uncommon bias in surveys of political issues conducted by phone. In order to check that this did not affect the results unduly, weights were calculated and applied to the survey data such that the proportion of parents with a degree matched that to be expected from the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes survey.⁵ Applying these weights increases the estimated Yes vote by just two points to 23%, while the No vote is equally reduced by two points.⁶ Even so, such figures still imply that the balance of opinion is tilted rather more towards No amongst young people than it is amongst adults as a whole.

⁵ The data were weighted such that the distribution of parent’s highest educational qualification matched that of adults aged 30 or more living in a household with a child aged between 14 and 17 in the 2012 SSA.

⁶ All figures from the Young Persons’ Survey reported hereafter in this briefing are those to be found after this weighting has been implemented.

The relative lack of enthusiasm for independence amongst young people is also affirmed by another comparison we can make. On the left hand side of Table 3 we summarise the pattern of responses obtained by the 2012 SSA when respondents were asked to choose between two variants of independence, two of devolution and one of not having a Scottish Parliament at all. On the right hand side we show the distribution of responses in the Young Persons' Survey when its respondents were asked a simplified version (capable of being administered by phone) of that SSA question.⁷ The comparison reveals that measured in this way support for independence amongst 14-17 year olds appears to be some six points lower than it is amongst adults as a whole. Of course we need to bear in mind the two surveys asked somewhat different questions and conducted their interviews very differently, but it seems unlikely that these considerations can wholly account for the gap between the two sets of results.

Table 3 Attitudes in England and Adults' and 14-17 year olds' constitutional preferences (SSA 2012 and Young Persons' Survey)				
SSA (2012)	%		%	Young Persons'
Independent, separate from the UK & EU	23	In favour of independence	17	Independent, separate from the UK
Independent, separate from the UK but in EU				
Part of the UK, with elected parliament with some taxation powers	61	Against independence	67	Part of the UK, with its own elected parliament
Part of the UK, with elected parliament with no taxation powers				
Part of the UK, without its own elected parliament	11		13	Part of the UK, without an elected parliament
	5	Don't know	3	

The views of our 14-17 year olds prove to be even more distinctive when compared with those of the 2012 SSA aged between 18 and 24. For, as had been the case in previous SSAs, that year's survey found that support for independence was higher than in any other age group.⁸ As many as 31% of 18-24 year olds said that they supported independence, while 48% backed having a devolved Scottish Parliament and a further 8% no parliament at all. Clearly we need to try and

⁷ The exact wording of the questions was as follows:

SSA: "Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has some taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has no taxation powers

Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament"

Young Persons' survey: Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK?

Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament?

Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament?

⁸ Curtice, J. (2013) "Who supports and opposes independence - and why". Briefing paper available at <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading>

explain why those who have yet to enter into adulthood are apparently so distinctive in their views.

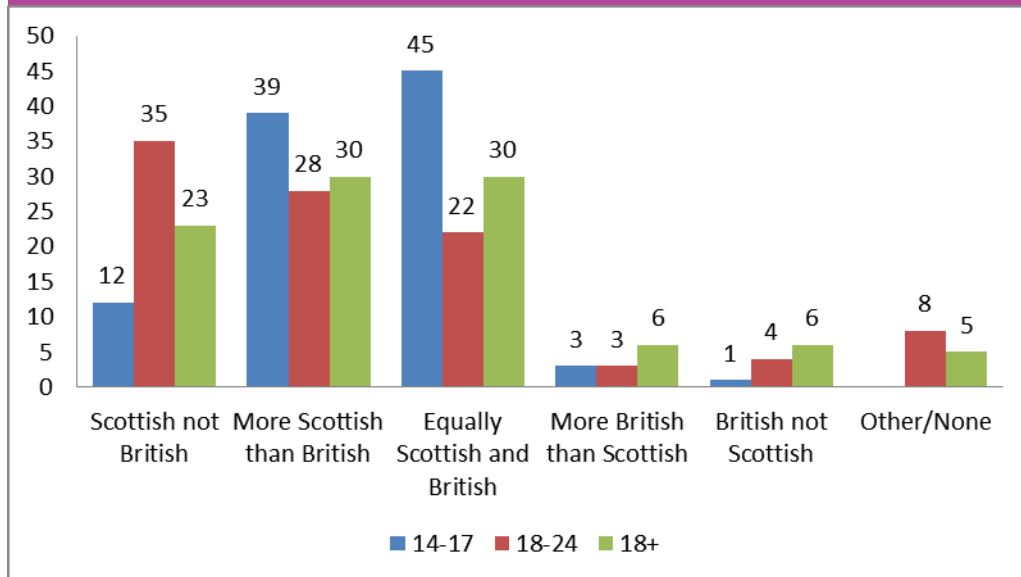
Why are 14-17 year olds reluctant to support independence?

Two factors that previous research has suggested are important in influencing people's views about independence are, first, their sense of national identity, and, second, how confident or worried they feel about the prospect of Scotland becoming independent. Those who have a strong sense of Scottish identity and feel confident about independence are more likely to support the idea than are those who have a strong British identity and are worried about the possibility that Scotland might leave the United Kingdom.⁹ The Young Persons' Survey reveals that 14-17 year olds are less likely to feel Scottish and – albeit to a lesser degree – more likely to be worried about independence.

Both the Young Persons' Survey and SSA 2012 ascertained people's sense of national identity by asking them to choose between five different combinations of being Scottish and being British, as listed at the bottom of Figure 2. As that figure shows, those aged 14-17 are much less likely to have a strong sense of Scottish identity than those aged 18-24 or, indeed, adults in general. Only 12% of 14-17 year olds say that they are 'Scottish, not British', compared with no less than 35% of 18-24 year olds and 23% of adults as a whole. Although very few young people claim be primarily or exclusively British, no less than 45% say they are equally British and Scottish, well above the equivalent figure for 18-24 year olds (22%) and that for all adults (30%). Apparently one reason why young people are less likely to support independence is because they are more inclined to feel a dual sense of identity - a product perhaps of being the first generation to have grown up in a digitised world in which interpersonal communication is no longer bound by geography.

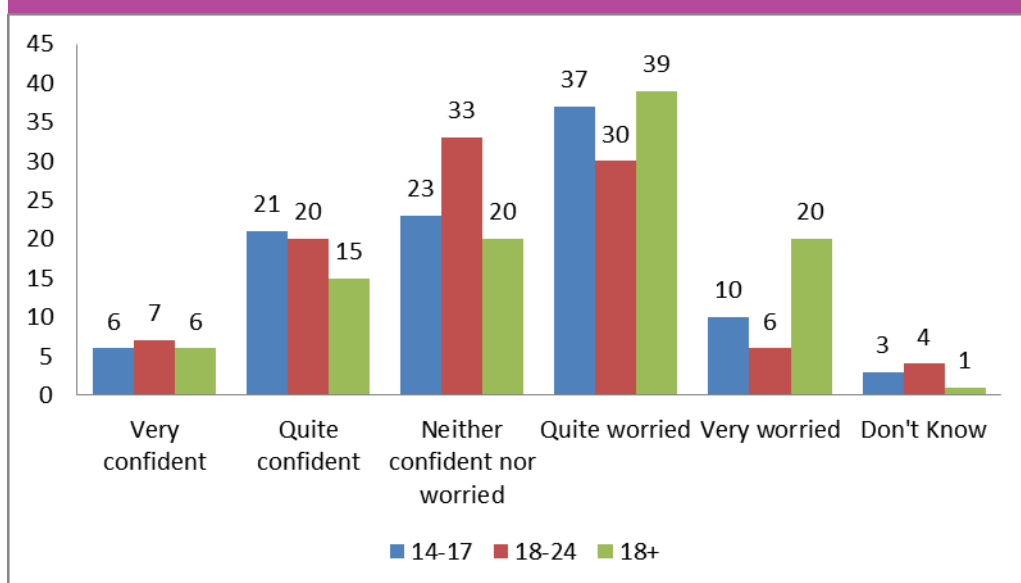
9 Curtice, J. (2013) "Who supports and opposes independence - and why". Briefing paper available at <http://whatscotlandthinks.org/scottish-social-attitudes-reading>. J. Curtice and R. Ormston (2012), 'The state of the Union: public opinion and the Scottish Question', in A. Park et al. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th report*, London: NatCen Social Research. Available at <http://www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk/>.

Figure 2 National Identity by age group (Young Persons' Survey and SSA 2012)



Meanwhile, Figure 3 shows that young people are rather more likely to be worried than those aged 18-24 about independence. Nearly half (47%) say they are 'very' or 'quite' worried by the prospect compared with just over a third (36%) of 18-24 year olds. However, young people are not more likely to be worried than adults in general. Thus although it might help us to some degree to understand the reluctance of 14-17 year olds to support independence, how confident or worried they feel about independence is evidently less important than the group's distinctively strong sense of British identity.

Figure 3 Confidence in an Independent Scotland (Young Persons' Survey and SSA 2012)



Just following their parents' lead?

But what of the critics' argument that young people are unable to make a sensible decision for themselves about how Scotland should be governed? If that is the case then we might anticipate that the way in which young people propose to vote is simply a reflection of their parents' views. To enable us to see whether or not that is the case when parental permission was being sought to conduct an interview, that parent was also asked how they proposed to vote in the referendum. In Table 4 we show how our young people proposed to vote broken down by what their parent said they will do.

Table 4 Attitudes in England and Scotland towards Parental and 14-17 year olds' voting intentions (Young Persons' Survey)				
		Parents referendum voting intention		
		Yes	No	Undecided
		%	%	%
Young persons' referendum voting intention	Yes	50	13	24
	No	32	72	48
	Undecided	18	15	28
	Base	206	556	257

It is evident that young people's views are not simply a reflection of their parents' political opinions. Only 72% of those whose parent said they were voting No indicated that were also going to vote the same way. In the case of those whose parent was going to vote Yes the equivalent figure is just 50%. Overall, just 56% of young people propose to vote the same way as the parents who gave permission for them to be interviewed.

Table 5 Parental education and 14-17 year olds' voting intention					
		Highest parental education level			
		Standard Grade* or Less	Higher*	Professional	Degree
		%	%	%	%
Young persons' referendum voting intention	Yes	28	22	24	20
	No	52	53	54	65
	Undecided	20	25	22	15
	Base	265	155	187	412

* or its equivalent

Parent's social background appears to play an even less important role, at least as measured by a parent's level of educational attainment. Those with a parent whose highest educational qualification is no more than a standard grade or its equivalent are a little more likely to be in favour of independence, while those with a university educated parent are more likely to say they will vote No, but overall the relationship between parental background and our young people's views is no more than a modest one.



Conclusion

For the most part we have uncovered relatively little support for the claims of those who have been critical of the decision to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the independence referendum. First, although our survey evidence suggests that 16 and 17 year olds may vote in somewhat lesser numbers than the electorate as a whole, the majority of the newly enfranchised voters do intend to vote, accepting like voters of all ages that this vote is important and worthy of their participation. Second, our research provides no support at all for the claim that the enfranchisement of 16 and 17 year olds could act as a tool to boost the Yes vote. If anything, younger people are less likely to be in favour of independence, primarily it seems because they have a strong sense of British identity that co-exists alongside a Scottish one. Finally, it seems that young people are not simply following the views of mum or dad, and to that extent at least there is no reason to believe that they are unable or unwilling to make up their own minds about which way to vote.

Still there may be a need for some caution before presuming that this means that the experience of the referendum will support the case for extending the franchise towards younger people more generally in the UK. Although they may be interested in politics in general as well as being largely willing to participate in the referendum, around half of Scotland's young people do not identify with any particular political party. For them the standard fare of a Westminster or Scottish election might well fail to grab their attention and participation – unless perhaps as politicians fight over Scotland's constitutional future they also learn how to reach out to Scotland's young people in a way that so far they have evidently failed to do.

Acknowledgement

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