

Political Engagement and the Scottish Referendum: Supply or Demand Explanations?

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Abstract

Scholars of British politics agree that there has been a decline in formal political participation but disagree about its causes. On the one hand, some scholars cite ‘demand’ factors. Flinders argues that citizens need to modify their expectations about what politics can achieve and stop thinking the worst of politicians. Others, such as Hay and Richards, think the problem is based on ‘supply’: the inadequacy of the type of politics on offer. This paper uses the Scottish independence referendum as a test of these two competing explanations. The referendum campaign involved high levels of political engagement and resulted in an 85% turnout – a turnout considerably higher than recent elections to the UK (65%) and Scottish (50%) Parliaments. Does this offer lessons for the rest of the UK or was this a one-off event based on unique circumstances? Did the referendum process create overly high expectations about what can be achieved in terms of public involvement in a representative democracy like Scotland and the UK? For elections where salience is lower and the questions are more complicated, it is not clear that the high level of turnout seen in the referendum can be maintained. If large numbers of citizens feel their participation matters only in the context of referendums rather than elections, then this has implications for the quality of democracy. We conclude that the terms of political ‘supply’ changed, but also that people demanded information beyond that provided by the parties. Overall, this highlights the tension between a ‘clean’ referendum result and the messiness of representative politics mediated through parties.

Key words: Scotland, referendum, anti-politics, participation, expectations gap

Introduction

There is a disagreement amongst scholars about the causes of the decline in formal political participation in the UK. Whilst all agree that there is a problem to be addressed, they differ in their interpretation of the diagnosis and the appropriate remedies. For Flinders (2012), the heart of the problem is citizens' attitudes to democracy (primarily a 'demand-side' explanation); for Hay (2007), the problem lies in the political system itself (primarily a 'supply-side' explanation'). In this paper we seek to use these two broad perspectives to analyse the referendum experience in Scotland. Most politicians and commentators agreed that Scotland had a 'good' referendum campaign, involving high levels of public engagement and deliberation. But what exactly changed in Scotland during this period? We use the literature on the decline in participation in the UK to try to shed some light on whether there was primarily a change in the political 'supply' (the way politics was conducted) or political 'demand' (citizens' views about politics) or a mixture of both. We also consider whether there are any wider lessons about citizen engagement from Scotland's referendum experience.

First, we review the literature on citizen disengagement in the UK. We outline the two broad perspectives of 'supply' and 'demand'. Do citizens need to change or does the system need to change? There is clearly some disagreement about the nature of the decline in formal political participation. However, we find that both of these explanations converge in their critique of the damage caused by depoliticisation and the encroachment of the logic of the market into political processes. Second, we consider the referendum campaign in Scotland using the analytical lenses of 'supply' and 'demand'. Did the high turnout result from solving a demand-side issue or a supply-side issue, or perhaps both? Did people become more engaged because they changed their view about what politics could achieve or because the manner of doing politics changed during the referendum? Finally, we ask whether there are any lessons for the UK from the Scottish referendum campaign.

We conclude that explanations for the high turnout and engagement in the Scottish referendum process are likely to involve a mixture of supply and demand perspectives. At its heart, we argue that the referendum involved a *repoliticisation* (Hay, 2013) of fundamental questions about the nature of government that are normally obscured by valence politics. The discussion of the creation of a new state opened up profound ideological debates about what is the 'good society'. This makes the idea of 'lessons for the UK' problematic and certainly does not provide support for the use of more referendums.

Perspectives on 'Anti-Politics': Supply or Demand?

Most scholars writing about British politics agree that there is a problem of formal political participation (Stoker, 2006; Hay, 2007; Riddell, 2011; Flinders, 2012). This also applies to political participation in Scotland in recent years (but see Henderson and McEwen, 2010). However, whilst there is broad agreement about the existence of a problem, there are diverging views about its causes. These may broadly be classified as 'supply' and 'demand' explanations¹. Those adhering to a supply side explanation argue that the political system needs to change fundamentally to re-engage disaffected citizens. Those who advocate a demand side explanation argue that citizens' expectations need to be modified to take into account the difficulties and achievements of the democratic process. However, it is also the case that both perspectives converge in their emphasis on the problem of depoliticisation

¹ We are acutely aware that distinction is not unproblematic (see, Hay, 2007: 158-160). We use it here simply as a device to group competing explanations.

and the dominance of the logic of the market in political processes. We explore these two perspectives below.

Demand Side Explanations: 'People need to change'

The demand side explanation focuses on citizens' expectations of democratic government in the twenty-first century. For Riddell (2011: 3), 'voters have unrealistic beliefs and hopes about what the political system can deliver for them.' Voters' perception of themselves as 'citizen consumers' presents fundamental difficulties because the democratic process necessarily means that you cannot get what you want all of the time (Bale *et al.*, 2006). Thus, as Flinders (2012: vii) argues:

If we face a problem of political disconnection, we need to rebuild a set of authentic political relationships that focus not just on the responsibility and behaviour of politicians but also involve the expectations of all political actors, including the public. At the heart of this authentic relationship must also be a large dose of realism about the limits of democratic politics...

In short, people get the politicians they deserve (Bentley, 2005). From this perspective, therefore, efforts to increase opportunities for citizens to participate are unlikely to solve the problem of disengagement from politics. The evidence about citizens' desire to have a greater say in decision-making must be treated with caution. McHugh (2006: 550) argues that 'new methods of direct engagement will fail to significantly increase activism amongst the overwhelming majority—no matter how frustrated they presently claim to be'. Instead, creating new participation opportunities is likely simply to encourage more engagement from the same middle class professionals who currently vote in elections (see also Mutz, 2006).

It follows that the policy response to declining participation must concentrate on voter and citizen education, rather than any fundamental change to the democratic institutions of the UK (McHugh, 2006: 551). As Riddell (2011: 101-102) explains, 'Participatory democracy has attractions at a local, neighbourhood level, but not nationally in reconciling preferences and pressures on public spending, taxation and borrowing. That job is for politicians elected by, and acting on behalf of, all the people.' The problem of participation is primarily to do with citizens' attitudes, rather than the inadequacy of political institutions (although there is some scope for reforming these institutions to make them more open and transparent).

Supply Side Explanations: 'The system needs to change'

Another group of scholars disputes the idea that voters are to blame for the decline in participation. Instead, the system needs to change. Richards (2014: 30) argues that it is far from clear that the British public has an exaggerated sense of what government should do. Instead, he suggests that, in keeping with the dominance of Thatcherite economic arguments, British people actually expect the state to do *less*. Thus, as Whiteley (2012: 29) concludes: 'Over a period of years the UK population has grown more conservative in feeling that government should do less.' For instance, the percentage of people who expect that government should definitely 'provide a job for everyone who wants one' declined from 38 per cent in 1985 to 11 per cent in 2006. Similarly, the percentage of people who think that the state should provide a decent standard of living for the unemployed declined from 45 per cent in 1985 to 11 per cent in 2006 (Whiteley, 2012: 12).

Instead of changing attitudes, those who argue for a supply-side explanation emphasise the need to change the UK’s political processes. As Hay (2007: 45) argues:

For even if it could be shown definitively that levels of social capital and political trust were correlated...why should we see the relationship as causal, and why should we see the lines of correlation running one way rather than the other? Put slightly differently, to settle for an explanation of changing patterns in political participation in terms of variations in the level of social capital begs as many questions as it answers...

For Richards (2014: 37) recognising this fact means considering a fundamental reappraisal of the British Political Tradition and the Westminster Model of British governance:

The diagnosis then for the issues raised...concerning a second-wave crisis of expectation is that one should, in the first place, preference reform to the supply of politics. Crucially this requires willingness by the political class to abandon the British Political Tradition and instead seek out a smarter democracy appropriate for the 21st century emphasising much greater deliberation and participation.

Disenchantment with politics, according to this perspective, is justified. Educating people more about or tinkering with the present system will merely result in further alienation and the preservation of a system with nineteenth-century origins that is long past due for reform.

Table 1: Summary of academic arguments about British political participation

<i>Demand</i>	<i>Supply</i>
People have unrealistic expectations about what democratic government can achieve.	People’s expectations are not the source of the problem: the system cannot meet their reasonable demands.
People’s cynicism about politics is inflated and in many cases unjustified. The present system needs to be explained and communicated better.	People can feel legitimately aggrieved that the political system is not working for them and needs to change more fundamentally than a demand-side explanation suggests.
Increased participation opportunities are likely to dilute accountability, disappoint and involve the same middle class people who currently vote.	Increased participation opportunities and a recasting of the British Political Tradition offer a reasonable chance of improving the political system.

Depoliticisation and the Logic of the Market

However, both of these perspectives converge when they discuss the importance of depoliticisation as a central component of an explanation of participation. Whilst Flinders (2012) and Hay (2007) come to quite different conclusions, they both emphasise the

pernicious effects of depoliticisation and the encroachment of market-based processes into politics.

For Flinders (2012: 90):

Depoliticization rarely brings power closer to the general public and is more accurately viewed as the transfer of power *between* competing elites. Put slightly differently, depoliticization represents the denial of democratic capacity and the narrowing or infolding of the public sphere.

Hay links processes of depoliticisation to the unthinking acceptance of the main tenets of public choice theory among political elites. Thus:

There is a very real sense in which formal politics is diminished both by the admission (if that is what it is) of political incapacity on the part of politicians and the institutional depoliticization that follows from this (Hay, 2007: 94).

In both of these perspectives, depoliticisation serves to remove decision-making from the democratic arena and place it out of the hands of politicians. It therefore both signals a lack of faith in politics (where decisions might be short term, populist or prone to capture by special interests) and suggests that formal political participation matters less when technocratic considerations are emphasised over deliberation.

Referendums and the Democratic Process

Referendums are the clearest examples of direct democracy in use in contemporary representative democracies, and their use has become widespread (Butler and Ranney, 1994). For some, this increase in use can be explained with reference to the negative role of the people in representative democracies – that is, the power of the people is limited to selecting and de-selecting their preferred representatives in elections (Bogdanor, 1994). For others, it is a question of increasing the legitimacy of a particular course of action – if the people vote for it, it appears to have more legitimacy (Papadopoulos, 2001). For Qvortrup, referendums are “a supplement to indirect democracy”, giving the public the deciding vote and an opportunity to take democracy closer to the “ideal of government by discussion” than whipped votes along party lines in contemporary representative democracies (Qvortrup, 2005). However, Chambers argues that the polarisation of debate in referendums and the inevitability of majoritarian outcomes actually “derails deliberation and, in so doing, undermines the legitimacy of outcomes”. Indeed, this goes as far as seeing voting in a referendum as “final” and citing referendums as a “zero-sum game” (Chambers, 2001: 240-5). LeDuc’s (2003) criticism goes further, noting that referendums are often susceptible to “insufficient information, confusing question wording, or contradictory lines of argument regarding the possible consequences of a referendum vote”. Tierney (2012) points out that referendums in the context of representative democracies are problematic, potentially anti-democratic, and may not be the most appropriate means of directly engaging the public in political (and especially, constitutional) discussions.

The UK House of Lords appointed its Select Committee on the Constitution to investigate “the role of referendums in the UK’s constitutional experience”. The report examined a range of evidence in favour of continuing, expanding or formalising the use of referendums

in the UK. Reasons to do so included: settling an issue; enhancing citizen engagement; promoting voter education; safeguarding the parliament or government from controversial decisions; the fact that when the public make their position known in a referendum that position is difficult to reverse; and that the referendum is a compliment to representative democracy as practised in the UK (House of Lords, 2010). Against that, they heard evidence that referendums were simply tactical devices; that the campaigns were dominated by elite groups; had a damaging impact on minority groups; are a block on progress; do not settle an issue; tend not to be about the issue in question; are costly; and, in fact, undermine representative democracy. They concluded that while they held particular criticism for the ad hoc nature of referendums – specifically, their use as tactical devices – there was a place for referendums in the UK, and that place was most appropriately in dealing with “fundamental constitutional issues” such as changing the electoral system for the House of Commons or matters of national secession from the Union. The Scottish referendum fits into this criterion, and the engagement by the electorate in the process provides evidence of some of the committee’s evidence. In particular, the clarity and binary nature of the question, the salience of the issue, and the use of a referendum as the means to determine the issue are factors which would point towards increased levels of public engagement on the question.

Analytical Framework for Scotland

We want to use the literature on participation to try to shed some light on the nature of the referendum process in Scotland. From this literature, we draw three broad possible perspectives on the high political engagement in the Scottish referendum process:

1. The high political engagement can mainly be accounted for by a demand side explanation: people temporarily changed their expectations about what politics could achieve. Thus, the high salience of the question was a major factor in the high turnout.
2. The high political engagement can mainly be accounted for by a supply side explanation: the way politics was conducted changed during the referendum process. There was a temporary shift away from normal processes in the way politics was conducted during the campaigns.
3. The high political engagement cannot be accounted for unless we use a mixture of both supply and demand perspectives.

This provides two broad analytical lenses through which to isolate and explore in detail aspects of the Scottish referendum debate. All of these perspectives beg questions about how far this experience is sustainable in Scotland and perhaps replicable in the rest of the UK or elsewhere.

Political participation during the referendum

In 1951, 2.9 million people in the UK were members of the Conservative and Unionist Party, with another 876,000 members of the Labour Party. The electoral turnout was 83.9% and between them the two large parties took a 96% share of the vote and 616 of the 625 seats in the House of Commons. By 2011, membership of the parties was significantly reduced: the Conservatives had fallen to 177,000, with Labour succeeding them as the largest party by membership, with around 190,000 members. The General Election turnout in 2010 was 65% and, while the combined Conservative and Labour vote had only reduced

to 87%, they now only commanded 564 of the 650 seats in the House of Commons. The polls for the General Election in May 2015 suggest that not only will the turnout continue to sit around the 65% mark, but that the combined total of Conservative and Labour votes and seats will continue to fall markedly.

All of this stands in stark contrast to the level of engagement in and with the Scottish independence referendum in September 2014. Here, 97% of those eligible to do so registered to vote, and the turnout in the event itself was a Scottish-record 84.6%. But the numbers here do not do justice to the democratic success of the independence referendum. Town hall meetings were packed, previously un-engaged citizens gave up their evenings and weekends to campaign and you couldn't enter a pub, shop or taxi without someone mentioning the referendum. After the results were counted and Scotland's place was secured in the UK (at least for the foreseeable future), many of those re-engaged activists decided to remain involved, joining political parties – predominantly, those that had campaigned in favour of independence.

The Scottish independence referendum actively engaged the electorate in political discussion for almost the entire duration of the 'long' campaign. From the point the referendum date was declared by First Minister Alex Salmond, supporters of both independence and the Union mobilised. The referendum was governed by the Scottish Independence Referendum Act (2013), which included slight variations to the rules set out in the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act (2000), and was overseen by the Electoral Commission. The rules allowed for the two designated campaign organisations – Yes Scotland and Better Together – to spend up to £1.5m each, which necessitated accounting returns to be done at a national rather than local level. In addition, the Scottish political parties were given spending limits based upon their performance in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary election. Given that the SNP (£1.34m) and the Greens (£150,000) were campaigning for a Yes vote while Labour (£834,000), the Conservatives (£396,000) and the Liberal Democrats (201,000) were campaigning for a No vote, by fortunate coincidence the limit for parties campaigning on both sides was nearly the same: just shy of £1.5m, in addition to the £1.5m available to the designated campaign organisations. Non-party organisations and individuals could and did register with the Electoral Commission, with a limit on their spending of £150,000. Again, coincidentally, the number of organisations and individuals registered was the same (21) for both outcomes (Electoral Commission, 2014).

Placing limitations on what parties and non-party actors could spend during the referendum campaign was intended to widen the participation in the process beyond the 'usual suspects' of party members, and this objective achieved a measure of success. National organisations in favour of each option – Yes Scotland and Better Together – were established in May and June 2012 respectively. However, those organisations were only the beginning of the story in terms of activism during the referendum. This was particularly true of Yes Scotland. While at the national level the campaign was led by former journalist Blair Jenkins and Dennis Canavan, former MSP, the organisation was comprised of a network of local Yes campaign groups. These groups operated with much in the way of autonomy, relying only on the national organisation for campaign materials and media support. But there were also a plethora of campaign groups involved – on both sides – which had no formal ties with the official campaign organisations (see table 1.2).

Table 2

Yes outcome	No outcome
1001 campaign	Better Together 2012 Ltd
Business for Scotland Ltd	Better With Scotland
Christians for Independence	Britannica
English Democrats	Communication Workers Union (CWU)
Farming 4 Yes	Conservative Party
Generation Yes	Cumbria Broadband Rural and Community Projects Limited
Labour for Independence	GMB
Mr Tommy Sheppard	Grand Orange Lodge of Scotland
Mrs Sarah-Louise Bailey-Kelly	Labour Party
National Collective	Let's Stay Together
Radical Independence Campaign	Liberal Democrats
Scottish CND	Mr Alistair McConnachie
Scottish Green Party	Mr Angus MacDonald
Scottish Independence Convention	Mr Ghill Donald
Scottish National Party	Mr Tony George Stevenson
Scottish Socialist Party	No Borders Campaign
Spirit of Independence	Scottish Jacobite Party
Wealthy Nation	Stirlingshire For No Thanks
Wings Over Scotland	The Scottish Research Society
Women for Independence	Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers (USDAW)
Yes Scotland Limited	WFS2014 Ltd
Source: Electoral Commission (2014)	

Clearly, political parties were involved at the heart of the referendum process, registering and taking an active role in campaign groups. But beyond the parties, other sectoral and interest groups, as well as individuals, organised themselves to campaign for both outcomes. On the 'Yes' side, the spectrum of interests and viewpoints was immediately apparent. Business for Scotland and Wealthy Nation provided a centre-right perspective of independence, arguing for lower taxes, economic liberty and self-reliance. This contrasted sharply with the Radical Independence Campaign's egalitarian positioning. Women for Independence – one of the Yes campaign's most prominent organisations – concentrated on issues of gender equality and social justice, and sought to increase political engagement among women. Generation Yes similarly saw constitutional change as an opportunity to alter the political and institutional setting to deliver beneficial change to Scotland's young people. National Collective brought together artists, writers and musicians, arguing that the 'ultimate creative act – creating a new nation' would deliver opportunities for change. The Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament also saw independence as an opportunity, in their case, an opportunity to remove nuclear weapons from Scotland. In many ways, the disparate campaign groups served to highlight the inherent contradictions at the heart of the campaign for independence – that the ambitions and desires of each of the campaign groups could not all be delivered, since some of them directly contradicted others. However, the 'everything to everyone' nature of the Yes campaign in particular served to engage the public and widened the debate from a narrow focus on the constitutional settlement to a broader, multi-faceted discussion.

The decision to allow 16 and 17 year olds to vote in the referendum also helped to boost engagement levels, and increased the record electorate for an election or referendum in Scotland to 4,283,938 (Electoral Commission, 2014). With an estimated 4.41m people in Scotland over the age of 16 eligible to register (according to 2012 figures released by the Scottish Government), this meant that approximately 97% of those who could register to vote did so. This represented an increase of some 300,000 on the registrations for the 2010 UK General Election in Scotland. Around 109,000 of those registrations can be accounted for with the addition of 16 and 17 year olds – 89% of whom registered to vote for the first time. The evidence here is clear: excluding the 16 and 17 year olds who had no been permitted to register previously, close to 200,000 voters who had not been registered to vote previously did so for the referendum. When it came to the referendum itself, 84.6% of the electorate – 3,623,344 of those registered – turned out to vote, representing a significant increase in turnout on the 2010 UK General Election in Scotland (63.8%) and the 2011 Scottish Parliament election (50.4%).

The Electoral Reform Society Scotland's 'Democracy Max' programme attempted to engage the public in considering how best Scotland's political system might operate, irrespective of the constitutional question. Indeed, they asked attendees at a special conference to consider the following hypothetical question: "It's 2030, and Scotland is admired as a shining example of democracy and democratic participation. What three aspects of this future society please you most?" (Electoral Reform Society, 2013). The suggestions focused both on the expectations of the electorate and the potential changes to the institutional setting which would allow further public engagement. Three themes were identified: the sovereignty of the people (empowering and engaging the citizenry); defending our democracy (limited the influence of vested interests); and writing the rules (improving checks and balances in the democratic system). Broadly speaking, the suggestions made by the public engaged in this process fell into the two categories we identify as relevant to altered public engagement in the referendum process: supply and demand factors. Here, however, there is a clear suggestion that if supply factors are altered – such as providing more in the way of local democracy, accountability, openness and transparency – the expectations of the public will be altered too, thereby reducing apathy and increasing the perception that engagement with the system has some kind of outcome. The Electoral Reform Society suggest that the current system of politics is the main barrier to public engagement, and that if structures were altered, expectations would also be better able to be delivered. Herein, evidence that the instant gratification of a referendum vote and outcome had a direct impact upon the electorate's perception that their vote counted for something.

Explaining the level of engagement

With regards to our perspectives explaining the high political engagement during the referendum campaign, both supply and demand side factors appear to have been important in raising involvement with the local and national campaigns. On the one hand the salience of the issue led many to attach higher expectations to the potential outcomes. As we have seen from the nature of the disparate Yes campaign organisations, some of these expectations were in direct competition with the expectations of other Yes activists. Naturally, the expectation of being able to deliver upon a preferred outcome gives impetus to those not normally motivated to do so to become active on an issue and attempt to convince others of the merits of their argument. However, on the other hand, there is clear evidence that there were attempts made to move the debate away from the political elites and into wider society, engaging beyond the usual suspects. Thus, it became a campaign

like no other: political parties were not the only actors involved in campaigning, local town hall debates were well-attended – and, arguably, more important than set-piece debates on national television – and the electorate was very aware that a campaign was ongoing.

From the referendum campaign we can identify three ways in which supply and demand changes affected the electorate's engagement with politics. In terms of supply factors, the distillation of politics to one single issue – a six-word question on the constitutional future of Scotland – limited the breadth of politics. It created a binary issue, one which parties united to support or oppose. While parties remained the dominant actors in the political process, the debate became less overtly party political, with parties which have historically competed against each other working together to support a common goal. Second, as a result of the temporary lull in partisan hostilities, the public were more inclined to involve themselves in the debate, and in political activism. This seemed, in many cases, to help overcome the decline in party memberships and provided the umbrella organisations Yes Scotland and Better Together with 'boots on the ground', activists to canvass, deliver leaflets and provide a visible emphasis of support for their constitutional position. Moreover, the organisation of events at a grass-roots level helped to bring the debate to a more local level, removing perceived distance between political decision-making at elite level and the impact upon the electorate. The closeness of opinion polls also helped to encourage activists to campaign right up to the close of polls on 18 September – as a binary issue decided by a straight majority vote, there was no requirement for tactical voting. Third, organisations which were not necessarily overtly party political sought to involve themselves in the campaign, either by providing information on a neutral basis, or by aligning with one option or the other. As we can see from the table above, organisations such as the Grand Orange Lodge of Scotland and the Communications Workers Union aligned themselves with those campaigning for a No vote, while the Scottish Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament and the English Democrats supported a Yes vote. The focus for these organisations was which constitutional option best helped advance their own objectives. Beyond those organisations, local community councils and churches arranged hustings events in order to help provide (neutral) information to their local electorates. The effect of these three factors was a repoliticisation of issues. Hay's (2013, 113) argument about depoliticisation is relevant here. He argues that 'big politics' is

a showcase public spectacle which confirms all of our worst suspicions, reinforcing the very cynicism which we have been encouraged to see as crucial to defending our liberties from the roguish knaves who would claim to represent us.

However, the referendum campaign did something different. Rather than taking issues away from the public, politicians opened up the constitutional question and allowed the public to partake in the debate. As Hay argues, 'to politicize something – to render it political – is to bring it in to the realm of contingency and to create the possibility of subjecting it to human purpose and intention' (2013: 109). For a short period of time, the constitutional question, and the politics surrounding it, was outwith the control of the political elites and in the hands of the public.

Crucially, it also presented the opportunity to discuss issues that are normally placed off limits by processes of depoliticisation and the day-to-day valence politics of the UK. Thus, in addition to more mundane questions about the availability of the BBC and the location of the Passport Office, the campaign focused on fundamental questions about the state and

about the type of society Scottish people wanted to live in. Quite simply, general elections are not normally focused on these questions. What currency should Scotland have? Should it be a member of the European Union? Should the state attempt to fundamentally change the economy to make it more like that of some of the Nordic countries? Should it unilaterally remove nuclear weapons from its soil? In short, much of the campaign focused, uniquely, on the process of creating a new state. Although the logic of the market did enter into the campaign when some participants argued that it precluded a more ambitious reimagining of the Scottish state, this did not prevent mainstream discussion of profoundly ideological and political questions. The Big Issues were temporarily *repoliticised*.

At the same time, demand factors also played a considerable role in engaging the electorate in the debate. The repoliticisation of the constitutional question, the requirement for the public to make a considered judgement on whether or not Scotland should become an independent country created a demand for information. This required not only more political activism-to-electorate engagement, requiring elected representatives to spend more time with voters discussing the potential implications of the referendum but also required those who desired information to be more active in seeking it out. This was a distinct change in electorate attitude: during election campaigns votes often go out of their way to avoid political contact, but here, with the impression that their vote would ‘matter’, they were keen to become informed and make their decision based upon that informed choice. This manifested itself not only in engagement on the doorstep but also in an increase in demand for public events. The public meeting made a return to Scottish politics, with the demand for town hall meetings and public information events in some cases outstripping the supply. At a town hall hustings one of the authors attended in Ellon, Aberdeenshire, community council members expected around 50 people to attend. They ran out of chairs when over 150 arrived to hear the debate – with more standing at the back of the hall. Anecdotally, this is a story which was replicated across the country: the public were engaged, they wanted to know what their vote meant and what difference it would make. Balancing this, there was still a scepticism with politics, and particularly, a distrust of politicians, but this was overcome by a belief that – in this instance at least – their vote mattered, and that it could deliver some kind of change.

In the aftermath of the referendum, parties across the political spectrum saw an upturn in membership evidence that the electorate who had gotten involved in September remained engaged in the political process and are eager to have their voice heard. The increase in membership among those parties which supported independence, however, is markedly more than those which supported the union. Indeed, the SNP recently announced their membership had passed 100,000 members – meaning approximately 0.2% of the Scottish population are members of the party. What does it tell us that supporters of independence remain disproportionately engaged in the political process? Partly, there’s a reaction to outgoing First Minister Alex Salmond’s prophecy that ‘The Dream Shall Never Die’ (Salmond, 2015), a recognition that if such a constitutional change is desired then it requires political activism to deliver it. It’s also partly a restatement of the desire for change which was evident in the referendum campaign, and a restatement of activists’ commitment to try to deliver it. But we might also read into it that the prior low expectations of politics may have been somewhat tempered by expectation that only by engaging in political activism through party membership can things be changed. This suggests that some of the confidence in the political system has returned – and particularly, that there is an expectation that political activism can have an impact.

However, just last month, a TNS Scotland poll suggested that just 64% are “certain to vote” in May’s General Election, a figure roughly the same as the last election 5 years ago, and a considerable fall from the referendum turnout. So why, when political interest appears higher than it has been for decades, are people still reluctant to vote? Academics have long considered the Scottish electorate to be rather sophisticated, clearly distinguishing between different levels of election and electoral systems, and voting accordingly. It is clear too that the Scottish electorate is also distinguishing between the potential outcome of a stand-alone example of direct democracy and the run of the mill, business-as-usual politics of a general election. The former sees expectations raised; the immediacy of a decision made and delivered. The latter delegates decision-making to representatives in a parliament far removed from the individual.

Lessons from Scotland’s Experience?

It is a mixture of both supply and demand explanations and it occurred at a specific place and time. This makes it difficult to replicate in the rest of the UK. We know that lots of individual referendums on public policy issues are not the answer (House of Lords, 2010). We also know not to adopt the ‘build it and they will come’ attitude of the Power Inquiry (Mutz, 2008). This experience is unlikely to be replicated through ‘democracy hubs’. It seems that, without the immediacy of clear outcome or the salience of a constitutional question in a referendum, voters see less at stake in a ‘normal’ election when party politics takes centre stage.

What can we learn from the referendum? The electorate are engaged, and they want to be involved in political decisions. They expect much from their political representatives. However, those expectations seem to be tempered by a general apathy with the system of representative politics that exists at Westminster (and, based on turnout figures, Holyrood, Brussels and local government as well). To that end, there are both supply and demand explanations for engagement in the referendum process, and that engagement being significantly reduced for elections. This suggests that both require changes: the system itself needs altered, in part to account for the increased plurality of options at the ballot box; while the expectation of what can be achieved through political engagement also requires modified to consider the challenges inherent in representative democracy.

The context of electoral politics in the UK has altered significantly in the devolution period. Not only do we now have multi-level governance, with different parties in power and in opposition at state, regional and local level, but we are now seeing parties which hitherto have played a limited role at the state level bringing influence to bear. The UK electorate delivered a hung parliament and a coalition government in 2010, and looks likely to repeat this outcome in May 2015. The erosion of the two-party politics of old and the rise in support for parties outside of the ‘establishment’ suggests that the influence of public engagement with politics is altering the political dynamic of the UK. The evidence of public engagement with the Scottish independence referendum suggests that there is an appetite for politics, but that it may require specific circumstances in order to engage the electorate in the process. In this sense, moves towards participatory democracy and wider party representation in the political system seems to be a result of supply and demand factors. The public appear to remain sceptical about the institutional setting and their ability to affect change, but if representative politics reacts more broadly to the lessons of engagement in the referendum, there might be scope to retain some of that engagement with politics more broadly.

Conclusion: Repoliticisation

As David Melding (2013: 6) argues, the Scots in 2014 were asked to perform a ‘fiduciary duty of the highest order’. The consensus among politicians and commentators appears to be that, on the whole, the process was a positive one and generated a debate worthy of the question. This optimistic assessment and the high turnout is in contrast to much more depressing analyses of formal political engagement in the UK. We therefore sought to assess the reasons for the ‘success’ of Scotland’s referendum using two broad perspectives adapted from the literature on the decline of political engagement in the UK: viewing it through the lenses of political ‘supply’ and political ‘demand’.

We conclude that during the campaign, both the supply and demand elements of politics changed. Voters demanded more information and were inspired to involve themselves in grassroots campaigns. At the same time, new avenues for political participation opened beyond the political parties (in the two campaigns) and the immediacy and impact of the question suggested a change from the more complicated and indirect form of representative democracy. We suggest that the overarching explanation for this change can be found in the repoliticisation of issues that are normally removed from the political agenda. Lessons for the UK are more difficult because representative politics is inherently messier than a clear-cut referendum and it is difficult to repoliticise issues outside the context of the creation of a new state.

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