



# Is Brexit fuelling support for independence?

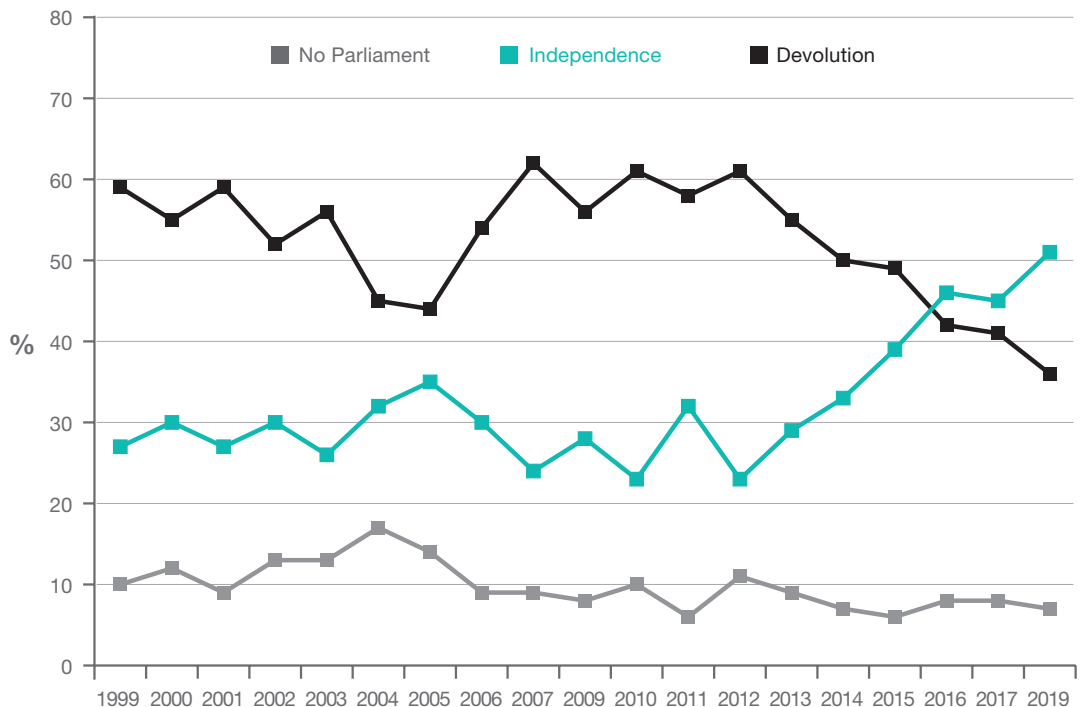
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## Summary

This paper uses new data from the 2019 Scottish Social Attitudes survey to examine the impact that the Brexit debate has had on attitudes in Scotland towards independence. It does so by (1) undertaking a systematic comparison of evaluations of the consequences of Brexit and the consequences of independence, and (2) comparing the evolution of attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional status among those with a more and less sceptical view of Britain's relationship with the EU. This evidence, it is argued, suggests that while initially it had little discernible impact on the overall level of support for independence, more recently the pursuit of Brexit has served to increase support for leaving the UK.

### *Attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed, 1999-2019*



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## Introduction

The outcome of the referendum in 2016 on the UK's membership of the European Union added a new twist to the long-running debate about Scotland's constitutional status. The UK as a whole voted by 52% to 48% in favour of leaving the EU. However, Scotland itself voted by 62% to 38% in favour of remaining in the pan-European institution. Meanwhile, under the slogan 'independence in Europe', membership of the European Union has been central to the SNP's policy position on the constitution for the last three decades. Consequently, the fact that Scotland would now be obliged to join the rest of the UK in leaving the EU seemed potentially to have both a strong resonance and important implications for the argument about how the country should be governed.

In practice, however, the outcome of the EU referendum did not appear initially to affect the balance of public opinion on the constitutional question. Opinion polls conducted in the ensuing two or three years after the ballot still seemed to point to 45% saying they would vote Yes in another referendum, while 55% would vote no, in line with the outcome of the 2014 independence ballot. At the same time, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey of 2017 did not detect any significant increase in support for independence over that registered the previous year (Curtice and Montagu, 2018). Nationalists might argue that the outcome of the EU referendum provided the clearest possible demonstration of their long-standing argument that for so long as it remained part of the UK Scotland was always at risk of having its 'democratic wishes' overturned by the rather different views of those living south of the border, but it appeared that in practice this argument was cutting little ice.

Yet underneath the surface a potentially important development was under way. Although Brexit might not have changed the overall level of support for independence, it was having an impact on who supported and who opposed leaving the UK (Curtice and Montagu, 2018). When voters in Scotland went to the polls to give their verdict on independence in 2014, their views about Europe seemed to make little difference to how they voted. Those who were sceptical about Britain's membership of the EU were no more or no less likely than those who were more sympathetic to the organisation to vote Yes. However, this stopped being the case after the EU referendum. A gap opened up between 'Eurosceptics' and 'Europhiles', with the latter now being more likely than the former to say that they supported independence. But while this indicated that the outcome of the EU referendum had served to increase support for independence among some of those who had voted Remain, it also implied that this movement was counterbalanced by increased opposition to the idea among those who had voted Leave. Moreover, the latter development appeared to play a crucial role in explaining why the SNP lost ground in the 2017 UK general election (see also Fieldhouse et al., 2019, Chap. 8). In short, Brexit was not proving particularly advantageous for the nationalist movement at all.

The 2017 election resulted, of course, in a ‘hung’ Parliament that repeatedly rejected the terms of withdrawal from the EU that the government had negotiated but at the same time failed to back any alternative course of action. The resulting stalemate intensified the debate about Brexit, such that the issue came to dominate the country’s domestic political agenda. At the same time, during the course of 2019 opinion polls began to suggest that support for independence was beginning to rise, and especially so among those who voted Remain (Curtice, 2019) – a trend that continued to be in evidence in the early weeks of 2020 as the UK formally left the EU (Curtice, 2020). It looked as though perhaps the continued row about Brexit might now be shifting the balance of opinion on Scotland’s constitutional status in the nationalists’ favour.

In this paper, we use the latest Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey to examine further the role that Brexit now appears to be playing in shaping public attitudes towards independence. We make use, in particular, of the responses to a series of questions on the latest survey that were designed to facilitate a systematic comparison of what voters think would be the consequences of being in or out the UK with what they consider to be the implications of being part of the EU or not. After all, the choice that now seems to face voters in Scotland is between being part of the UK outside the EU or becoming an independent country that might (re-)join the EU. In these circumstances, voters’ perceptions of the consequences of leaving the EU might be thought particularly pertinent to their evaluations of the consequences of leaving the UK. How far that is now the case is the central question that we seek to answer.

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## Data

The latest Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey was undertaken from late August 2019 through to the middle of March 2020 (Reid et al, 2020). Two-thirds of interviews were conducted by the beginning of November 2019, at which point fieldwork was suspended because of the UK general election that was called for December 12. Interviewing restarted after polling day but then had to be concluded in March because of the lockdown introduced in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic. By this time, a total of 1,022 people – all selected for interview at random – had responded, representing a response rate of 41%.

Our evidence thus comes from a period during which the argument about Brexit reached its height in the UK Parliament together with the time immediately after a general election that paved the way for the UK to leave the EU at the end of January 2020. In short, most of our interviews were conducted when Brexit was a highly salient issue, and may well have been at the forefront of voters’ minds. This, then, was an apposite time to ascertain what impact, if any, these developments may be having on people’s attitudes towards the constitutional question.

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## Attitudes towards Scotland's Constitutional Status

We begin by examining the long-term trend in the level of support for independence. Ever since the advent of devolution in 1999, SSA has asked people how they think Scotland should be governed by posing the following question:

***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*

Crafted as it was in the 1990s, the choices offered by the question reflect the political debate at that time. The SNP had recently committed itself to a policy of 'independence in Europe' (rather than, as in the 1975 referendum, being in favour of withdrawal), while the issue of whether or not the Scottish Parliament should have taxation powers was the subject of a separate question in the devolution referendum held in 1997. However, although it may now appear a little dated, this is the only survey question on Scotland's constitutional status that has been asked on a regular basis throughout the twenty years of devolution.<sup>1</sup> It thus provides us with a unique insight into the long-term trends in attitudes towards the constitutional debate.

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<sup>1</sup> SSA has also monitored people's perceptions of the devolution settlement on a regular basis during the last twenty years. The most recent evidence on these is to be found in Reid et al. (2020).

**Table 1** Attitudes in Scotland towards How Scotland Should Be Governed, 1999-2019

	Constitutional Preference			Unweighted Base
	Independence	Devolution	No Parliament	
	%	%	%	
1999	27	59	10	1482
2000	30	55	12	1663
2001	27	59	9	1605
2002	30	52	13	1665
2003	26	56	13	1508
2004	32	45	17	1637
2005	35	44	14	1549
2006	30	54	9	1594
2007	24	62	9	1508
2009	28	56	8	1482
2010	23	61	10	1495
2011	32	58	6	1197
2012	23	61	11	1229
2013	29	55	9	1497
2014	33	50	7	1501
2015	39	49	6	1288
2016	46	42	8	1237
2017	45	41	8	1234
2019	51	36	7	1022

Table 1 summarises how people have responded to this question in each year that SSA has been conducted. To simplify matters, we combine those who choose either of the two options that suggest that Scotland should become independent, as we do those who pick one of the responses that indicate that Scotland should have its own elected parliament within the framework of the UK. Doing so reveals that there has been a dramatic transformation in attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed – and especially so since the 2014 independence referendum was held.

Between 1999 and 2013 the proportion choosing one of our options that express a preference for independence averaged no more than 28%. Even in 2014, when SSA was conducted during the summer months before the September referendum, support stood at no more than 33%, only a little above the long-term average. But by 2016 those backing independence were outnumbering those who supported devolution for the first time, a result that was confirmed by our 2017 survey. Now, in our latest reading just over half (51%) back independence according to this measure.

A similar trend is in evidence in the pattern of responses to a second question that has been asked on a regular basis on SSA since 2010. This reads as follows:

***Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?***

*The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland*

*The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else*

*The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest*

*The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland*

This question has two important features. First, it reflects the fact that during the last decade or so the constitutional debate has not simply been about the choice between independence and devolution. It has also encompassed a debate about the extent of the powers that the devolved Scottish Parliament should have. When it was originally established in 1999 the parliament only had a very limited tax-varying power and no responsibility at all for welfare payments. However, following the reports of two commissions on devolution, one created in the wake of the SNP first coming to power in Edinburgh in 2007 and chaired by Sir Kenneth Calman (Commission on Scottish Devolution, 2009) and another in the immediate wake of the independence referendum (Smith, 2014), the parliament now has primary responsibility for income tax north of the border and has acquired control over some welfare payments. Meanwhile, some have argued that this increase in the powers of the Scottish Parliament should go further, with the devolved institutions taking on responsibility for nearly all domestic policy, a stance that at various stages has been dubbed as ‘Home Rule’ or ‘devo-max’ (Thomson, 2020). Our alternative question includes that possibility among its options.

The second key feature of our alternative question is that it does not make reference to independence or indeed to any other constitutional term. It simply invites respondents to indicate where they think the balance of responsibilities should lie between the Scottish Parliament on the one hand and the UK government on the other. However, apart from the fact that the second option is intended to refer to the possibility of ‘devo-max’, the first – whereby the Scottish Parliament would be responsible for everything – implies independence, while the third – under which the parliament would have little responsibility for taxation or welfare – points to the settlement that was in place prior to the work of the Calman and Smith Commissions.

**Table 2 Attitudes in Scotland towards the Distribution of Responsibilities Between the Scottish Parliament and the UK Government 2010-19**

	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Scottish Parliament should make...</b>									
All decisions	28	43	35	31	41	51	49	46	52
All except defence and foreign affairs	32	29	32	32	27	30	31	32	26
All except defence, foreign affairs, taxation, and welfare	27	21	24	25	22	12	12	14	16
No decisions	10	5	6	8	6	3	4	4	5
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1495	1197	1229	1497	1501	1288	1237	1234	1022

Table 2 reveals that, although varying considerably from one year to the next, in the run-up to the 2014 referendum the proportion who said that the Scottish Parliament should make all decisions never exceeded 43%. However, since then it has oscillated around 50% and, after having been somewhat below that figure in 2016 and 2017, is now standing at a record high of 52%. So, as in the case of our first long-running question above, this measure also points to a further rise in support for independence during the 2017-19 UK parliament.

Meanwhile, for the period since the referendum we can also examine how people said they would vote if another independence referendum took place. In both 2016 and 2017 rather more people said they would vote No than indicated they would support Yes – in 2016 by 45% to 44% and in 2017 by 47% to 42%. However, in our latest survey as many as 53% say that they would vote Yes, while just 36% stated that they would back No. If we put aside those who say they would not vote or are not sure which way they would vote, this translates into figures of 60% for Yes and 40% for No.<sup>2</sup>

Our latest survey has, therefore, clearly identified – much like the opinion polls – a further marked increase in support for independence, such that pursuing that status is now not only a more popular option than remaining part of the UK, but also is the preference of just over half of all voters in Scotland, even when those who are unsure of where they stand on the issue are included the calculation. A country that once largely seemed satisfied with devolution now appears to have tilted in favour of wanting to become an independent state.

But how might we account for this latest increase in support for independence? In particular, has it arisen as a result of the pursuit of Brexit? And does it indicate that voters now take a rather different view of what the consequences of independence would be as compared with 2014?

<sup>2</sup> However, the exact level of support for independence in our latest survey should, perhaps, be treated with some caution. Of the 48% of our sample who said that they voted in the European election held in May 2019 and who were willing to say how they had voted, as many as 45% said that they voted for the SNP, when, in practice the party secured a more modest 38% of the vote. This may indicate that our sample over-represents to some degree those who support independence.



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## Attitudes towards the EU

Our first step in answering these questions is to examine attitudes in Scotland towards the EU. Here too we are able to apply a long lens. In both the early years of devolution and again more recently SSA has asked a question about Britain's relationship with the EU that enables respondents to express a wide array of views ranging from, on the one hand, withdrawal to, on the other hand, replacing the individual member states with a single EU government. The question asks:<sup>3</sup>

### ***Do you think Britain's long-term policy should be...?***

*... to leave the European Union,  
to stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU's powers,  
to leave things as they are,  
to stay in the EU and try to increase the EU's powers,  
or, to work for the formation of a single European government?*

Table 3 reveals that the proportion of people in Scotland who say that Britain should leave the EU has always been relatively low. That said, it has consistently been higher since 2013, when it has averaged 19%, than it was between 1999 and 2005, when it stood at 12%. What, though, has been widely supported throughout – indeed, it has always been the single most popular option – is the view that Britain should remain in the EU but seek to reduce its powers, a stance that might be considered less 'Eurosceptic' than leaving but still indicates a preference for a relatively loose relationship with the institution. In the period since 2013, at least, over half of people in Scotland have consistently backed one or other form of Euroscepticism. That said, we might note that, in our latest survey, the proportion who give either 'Eurosceptic' response has fallen to only just over half (53%), while the proportion who we can regard as 'Europhile', that is, they want Britain to be part of a EU that is at least as powerful as it is at present, has risen from just 29% in 2016 to 43% now. It appears therefore that while Scotland is not necessarily enthusiastic about the prospect of being part of a relatively powerful EU, the Brexit debate of the last few years has to some degree eroded the level of support for a more Eurosceptic outlook.

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<sup>3</sup> Note that since 2016, the question has been prefaced by stating, 'Leaving aside the result of the referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union...'

**Table 3 Attitudes in Scotland towards Britain's membership of the EU, 1999-2017**

	1999	2000	2003	2004	2005	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2019
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Britain's EU policy should be to....</b>											
..leave the EU	10	11	11	13	14	19	17	17	25	19	19
..stay in the EU but reduce its powers	36	37	29	31	36	40	40	41	42	39	34
<b>Eurosceptic</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>48</b>	<b>40</b>	<b>45</b>	<b>51</b>	<b>59</b>	<b>57</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>58</b>	<b>53</b>
..stay in the EU and keep powers as they are	21	21	24	27	21	25	24	21	21	30	34
..stay in the EU and increase powers	14	13	19	12	13	8	7	9	5	5	5
..work for formation of a single European government	9	9	8	7	5	3	4	3	3	3	4
<b>Europhile</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>44</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>33</b>	<b>29</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>43</b>
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1482	1663	1508	1637	1549	1497	1501	1288	1237	1234	1022

This last conclusion is underlined by other evidence in our survey. Of those of our respondents who said that they voted in the EU referendum in 2016, 66% said that they had voted Remain, and 34% Leave, figures that are just a little more pro-Remain than the actual outcome of the referendum in Scotland of Remain, 62%, Leave 38%. However, as many as 75% of those who express a preference now say that they would vote Remain in a second EU referendum, while just 25% would back Leave. That implies a swing of 9% from Leave to Remain over the course of the three years during which the UK government was endeavouring to implement Brexit.

Still, we might wonder whether the views that people express about Britain's relationship with the EU necessarily translate into a similar outlook when people are asked what Scotland should do about EU membership if it were an independent country. In practice, however, it appears that they do. As many as 74% state that an independent Scotland should 'definitely' or 'probably' become a member of the EU – a figure that rises to 91% among those who indicate that they would vote 'Remain' in a second UK-wide Brexit referendum. While we apparently should not assume that people in Scotland necessarily want to be part of a highly-integrated EU, it appears that most do regard membership as an integral aspect of any move towards independence. Indeed, if we return to the question we introduced at Table 1 above and examine separately those who pick independence outside the EU rather than independence inside the EU, we find that, at 7%, the proportion who do so is now at a record low.

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## Perceptions of Brexit

But what underlies this seemingly wary but widespread commitment to being part of the EU? The answer appears to be considerable concern about the consequences of being outside the EU, coupled with a relatively relaxed (albeit not wholly relaxed) view of the implications of being a member – a mood that is rather different to that found in the rest of Britain. Table 4 reveals that a half (50%) of people in Scotland believe that leaving the EU will mean that Britain has less influence in the world while even more, around three in five (61%), reckon that the economy will be worse off. Both perceptions are more common than they are in England & Wales, where the same questions were asked as part of the most recent British Social Attitudes survey (Curtice and Montagu, 2020). South of the border only a half (50%) feel that the economy will be worse off as a result of leaving the EU, while just over one in three (36%) believe that Britain will have less influence in the world.

**Table 4** *Perceived Impact of Leaving the EU on Britain’s economy and influence in the world, Scotland and England & Wales*

Perceived impact of leaving the EU	Scotland	England & Wales
<b>...on Britain’s economy</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
Better off	18	24
Won’t make much difference	16	23
Worse off	61	50
<b>...on Britain’s influence in the world</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>%</b>
More	15	25
Won’t make much difference	32	36
Less	50	36
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	<i>1022</i>	<i>997</i>

Source: England & Wales: British Social Attitudes 2019.

Meanwhile, by almost two to one, people in Scotland reject the claim that being in the EU undermines Britain’s distinctive identity, whereas in England & Wales public opinion is evenly balanced on the issue (see Table 5). True, opinion is more or less evenly split in Scotland on whether being in the EU ‘undermines Britain’s right to be an independent country that makes its own laws’ – further evidence that voters north of the border are not unaware of what may be regarded as the constraints of EU membership. However, this still stands in sharp contrast with the position in England & Wales, where around a half (51%) agree with the proposition and only 28% disagree.

**Table 5** Perceived Impact of Being in the EU on Britain's distinctive identity and its ability to make its own laws, Scotland and England & Wales

Being in the EU undermines	Scotland	England & Wales
<b>... Britain's distinctive identity</b>	%	%
Agree	25	37
Neither agree nor disagree	24	24
Disagree	48	37
<b>...Britain's right to make its own laws</b>	%	%
Agree	38	51
Neither agree nor disagree	19	19
Disagree	41	28
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1022	997

Source: England & Wales: British Social Attitudes 2019.

For the most part, then, people in Scotland have a relatively benign view of membership of the EU, while they are certainly heavily inclined to be pessimistic about the consequences of leaving. Consequently, there would seem to be reason to anticipate that being required to leave the EU as a constituent part of the UK might raise questions in some people's minds about the relative risks of independence as opposed to being part of a UK that was outside the EU. However, whether or not that is the case depends, of course, on voters' perceptions of the consequences of independence. It is to these that we turn next.

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## Perceptions of Independence

There are many similarities between the debate about the UK's relationship with the EU and that about Scotland's constitutional status. Just as a key issue in the Brexit debate is whether leaving the EU would be economically advantageous or deleterious, so disagreement about the economic consequences of leaving the UK is a prominent feature of Scotland's constitutional debate. Similarly, there are claims and counterclaims about the impact of Brexit on Britain's influence in the world, and about the relative influence of Scotland as an independent country as opposed to being part of the UK. Meanwhile, both debates touch upon people's sense of identity and how they would like that to be reflected in the arrangements under which they are governed. These parallels suggest there might be merit in undertaking a systematic thematic comparison of voters' attitudes towards the consequences of Brexit and of independence.

First, however, we look at how attitudes towards the consequences of independence have changed over time. Table 6 shows perceptions of the implications of independence for the economy, Scotland's voice in the world, and people's sense of pride in their country over the course of the last decade. It suggests that voters were inclined to the view that independence would mean that people would have more pride in their country long before the independence referendum took place; between 2009 and 2014 at least around half said that people would have more pride while little more than a handful suggested they would have less pride. However, during this same period voters were less certain about both the implications of independence for Scotland's voice in the world and especially for the economy. Indeed, as polling day came into view in 2014, considerably more people said that Scotland's economy would be worse (43%) than believed it would be better (26%), while the balance of opinion had also tilted slightly in the direction of Scotland's voice in the world being weaker (37%) rather than feeling it would be stronger (33%).

**Table 6 Attitudes towards the Consequences of Scottish Independence, Scotland, 2009-19**

Perceived consequence of independence for...	2009	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2017	2019
<b>Scotland's Economy</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better	31	34	34	30	26	42	41	43
No difference	22	26	23	26	15	13	13	12
Worse	32	31	34	34	43	37	35	33
<b>Scotland's voice in the world</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Stronger	n/a	50	42	38	33	n/a	49	54
No difference	n/a	26	32	32	23	n/a	22	19
Weaker	n/a	19	22	25	37	n/a	25	21
<b>Pride in country</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
More	58	63	55	51	49	n/a	58	62
No difference	33	27	39	41	39	n/a	34	30
Less	1	3	3	4	6	n/a	3	4
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	1324	1167	1180	1348	1433	1232	1174	972

n/a: Not asked

However, the position is now rather different. Considerably more voters now say that Scotland's economy would be better under independence (43%) than indicate that it would be worse (33%). For the first time, over half (54%) feel that Scotland's voice in the world would be stronger as a result of independence, while over three in five (62%) now say that people

would have more pride in their country. It appears from these figures that, in contrast to the position just a few years ago, voters are now on balance inclined across range of possible criteria to the view that independence would be beneficial.

Meanwhile, this trend also means that voters in Scotland are more optimistic about the consequences of independence than they are about Brexit. As we saw earlier (see Table 4), only 18% believe that Britain's economy will be better off in the wake of Brexit, whereas (Table 6) 43% feel that Scotland's economy would be better under independence. Only 15% reckon that Brexit will result in Britain having more influence in the world, whereas over half (54%) believe that Scotland's voice in the world will be stronger as an independent country. Meanwhile, 48% disagree that being part of the EU undermines Britain's distinctive identity while 62% feel that an independent Scotland would have more pride in itself. In short, on three criteria that are widely thought central to the constitutional debate, independence is judged much more favourably than Brexit.

There is, however one other key issue that we addressed earlier when we were examining attitudes towards Brexit that we have so far not considered in respect of independence – the question of sovereignty. This, after all, is also common to both debates. Those who advocate leaving the EU argue that membership constrained Britain's ability to make its own laws. Meanwhile, those who support independence claim that for so long as it remains part of the Union the preferences of voters in Scotland can be overridden by the views of those living in England. To address this issue so far as independence is concerned, we asked for the first time in our most recent survey:

***Would you say that, as a result of being part of the United Kingdom, Scotland's ability to influence its future is strengthened, weakened, or is it neither strengthened nor weakened?***

Here people in Scotland are evenly divided. While one in three (33%) say that Scotland's ability to influence its future is strengthened by being part of the UK, exactly the same proportion (33%) say that it is weakened. Meanwhile 31% state that it is neither strengthened nor weakened. This, it seems, is one issue at least where, on balance, independence is not necessarily regarded as preferable to being part of the UK. Even so, this still casts the Union in much the same light as being part of the EU, on which we saw earlier (Table 5) opinion is also more or less evenly divided between those who think that membership limits Britain's ability to make its own laws and those who take the opposite view. In short, the debate about sovereignty seems at present not to incline voters in one direction or the other.

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## Brexit and Attitudes towards Independence

Still, this one issue apart, it seems that people in Scotland evaluate the consequences of independence both more favourably than they did before the 2014 referendum and more favourably than they do leaving the EU. But does this mean that Brexit is having an impact on people's views of independence?

There is certainly some indication that those who are pessimistic about the consequences of Brexit are more likely to be optimistic about the implications of independence. For example, among those who believe that Britain's economy will be worse off as a result of Brexit, as many as 51% feel that Scotland's economy will be better after independence and just 32% that it will be worse. In contrast among those who think the economic consequences of Brexit will either be neutral or positive, rather more (38%) reckon Scotland's economy would be worse after independence than believe it would be better (33%). Similarly, among those who believe that Britain's voice will be weakened as a result of leaving the EU, as many as 63% feel that Scotland's voice would be stronger as an independent country and just 19% believe it would be weakened. Among those who reckon Brexit will strengthen Britain's voice, or at least not make much difference, a more modest 46% anticipate that Scotland's voice would be strengthened by independence while 25% feel it would be weaker.

This analysis, however, simply tells us that there is a relationship now between people's views about Brexit and their perspective on independence. Perhaps such a link has always existed? In order to examine whether the debate about Britain's EU membership has served to change attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed we need to track attitudes towards the two issues over time. However, to do so we cannot simply use as an indication of their attitude towards the EU people's response to the binary choice between Remain and Leave that was posed in the 2016 EU referendum – the EU referendum question was only crafted in the autumn of 2015 and thus was not included on earlier SSAs. Instead, we need to make use of the question about Britain's relationship with the EU that was introduced at Table 3 above, a question that we have indicated can be used to categorise people as either a Eurosceptic or a Europhile.

**Table 7 Attitudes in Scotland towards the perceived consequences of independence, by attitude towards the EU, 2014, 2017 and 2019**

Perceived consequence of independence	2014		2017		2019	
	Attitudes towards the EU		Attitudes towards the EU		Attitudes towards the EU	
	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile	Eurosceptic	Europhile
<b>Scotland's Economy</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Better	25	28	37	48	40	50
No difference	13	17	13	13	10	14
Worse	48	41	40	29	41	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	453	737	388	540	385
<b>Pride in country</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
More	48	49	56	61	54	71
No difference	39	40	36	32	36	23
Less	6	6	4	3	6	1
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	453	737	388	540	385
<b>Scotland's voice in the world</b>	%	%	%	%	%	%
Stronger	33	34	46	56	48	63
No difference	23	23	23	20	21	16
Weaker	39	38	30	18	28	14
<i>Unweighted base</i>	853	453	737	388	540	385

In Table 7 we chart how these two groups viewed the consequences of independence in 2014, 2017 and 2019. In 2014, they barely differed at all in their expectations. The only discernible difference was that Europhiles (41%) were a little less likely than Eurosceptics (48%) to feel that independence would make Scotland's economy worse. But by 2017 a gap had begun to emerge, with Europhiles being consistently more optimistic than Eurosceptics about what independence would bring. Now, on some of these issues at least, the gap is even wider. This is particularly true of perceptions of whether independence would result in more people having pride in their country. Although even among Eurosceptics as many as 54% think that this would be the case, among Europhiles the figure stands as high as 71%.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> We might also note that the 2017-19 period may have witnessed some change in the relative strength of the association of the various consequences of independence and support for leaving the UK. Hitherto, the strongest correlate of support for independence has been then perceived economic consequences, followed by its impact on Scotland's voice in the world. Now, however, those positions are reversed. This may be an indication that Brexit has also drawn people's attention towards the international implications of the country's constitutional status. This may also help explain why support for independence has increased between 2017 and 2019 even though perceptions of the economic consequences of Brexit have changed little (see Table 6).



**Table 8** Attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed, by attitude towards Britain's membership of the EU, 2013-2019

Constitutional Preference	Attitudes towards the EU	
	Eurosceptic	Europhile
<b>2013</b>	%	%
Independence	29	30
Devolution	57	55
No Parliament	10	8
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	913	484
<b>2014</b>	%	%
Independence	35	31
Devolution	53	49
No Parliament	7	9
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	893	476
<b>2015</b>	%	%
Independence	41	39
Devolution	50	51
No Parliament	7	5
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	787	394
<b>2016</b>	%	%
Independence	44	53
Devolution	45	37
No Parliament	8	7
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	836	337
<b>2017</b>	%	%
Independence	40	56
Devolution	48	33
No Parliament	9	7
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	763	407
<b>2019</b>	%	%
Independence	43	62
Devolution	42	31
No Parliament	10	4
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	568	413

This emergence of a gap between Eurosceptics and Europhiles in their perceptions of the consequences of independence is matched by the advent of a difference between them in the level of support for independence. Table 8 shows that prior to the EU referendum there was not a relationship between people's stance on the EU and their propensity

to support independence (see also Curtice and Montagu, 2018). In 2015, for example, 41% of Eurosceptics supported independence, as did 39% of Europhiles. Evidently, at the time of the independence referendum people's views on the issue of Britain's relationship with the EU did not move people towards one answer to the constitutional question rather than another. However, in 2016 (when SSA was conducted after the EU referendum) a gap opened between Europhiles and Eurosceptics on the independence question. As many as 53% of Europhiles were now in favour of independence, compared with 44% of Eurosceptics. That gap has widened every year since. As a result, while, at 43%, support for independence among Eurosceptics is still much the same as it was in 2016, the proportion has increased by nine points (from 53% to 62%) among Europhiles (a group that we saw earlier has also become larger in size since 2016). In short, our latest survey affirms the evidence in Curtice and Montagu (2018) that attitudes towards Brexit have become intertwined with views on the independence debate – and further implies that much of the growth in support for independence over the last two years has occurred among those who are relatively favourably disposed towards the EU.

This picture of what has happened since the EU referendum is confirmed by two additional more short-term pieces of analysis that we can conduct. In Table 9 we show the constitutional preferences reported in 2016 by those who voted Remain and those who backed Leave, and then for 2017 and 2019, people's preferences at those points in time broken down by how they said they would now vote in a second EU referendum. Here we discover that when attitudes towards the EU are measured in this way, it was still the case shortly after the EU referendum in 2016 that those who had just voted Remain (44%) and those who had supported Leave (45%) were more or less evenly matched in their propensity to back independence – a further reminder of how people voted in the EU referendum cut across the nationalist/unionist divide. However, since then support for independence has grown markedly among those who back Remain, and, at 57%, is now thirteen points above the equivalent figure in 2016. In contrast, support for independence among Leave voters is currently six points below where it stood at the time of the EU referendum.

**Table 9** Attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed by Current EU Referendum Vote Intention, 2016, 2017 and 2019

Constitutional Preference	Current EU referendum vote intention	
	Remain	Leave
<b>2016*</b>	%	%
Independence	44	45
Devolution	48	40
No Parliament	6	13
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	601	327
<b>2017</b>	%	%
Independence	48	41
Devolution	42	44
No Parliament	17	12
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	811	282
<b>2019</b>	%	%
Independence	57	39
Devolution	33	44
No Parliament	5	12
<i>Unweighted Base</i>	680	234

\*Actual EU Referendum Vote

We also uncover much the same pattern if, instead of looking at how people answered SSA's long-running question on the constitutional choices facing the country, we analyse how people say they would vote in another independence referendum (leaving those who said 'Don't Know' etc. to one side). In 2016 those who voted Remain (48%) were just a little more likely than those who backed Leave (44%) to say they would vote Yes in a second independence vote. Now, nearly two-thirds (65%) of those who currently would vote Remain say they would support Yes, whereas, at 43%, the equivalent figure among those who currently support Leave is little changed from the position in 2016.

All of these analyses point clearly in one direction – that attitudes towards Brexit and preferences for how Scotland should be governed became yet further intertwined during the course of the 2017-19 UK Parliament, whose agenda was dominated by a stalemate over Brexit. Moreover, although initially this process cost the SNP support in the 2017 UK election (Curtice and Montagu, 2018), in the longer-run it seems to have occasioned an increase in support for independence. In this respect, our findings echo and underline the evidence of opinion polls that were conducted during 2019 and early 2020 (Curtice, 2019; Curtice, 2020).

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## Conclusion

For a while after the EU referendum, it looked as though the divergence between the outcome of that ballot in Scotland and that in the rest of the UK was – despite initial expectations – failing to move the dial of public opinion significantly in one direction or the other on the issue of how Scotland should be governed. Yet underneath the surface a change was afoot. An issue that had seemingly had little or no impact on how people voted in the 2014 independence referendum – despite many hours of argument over whether an independent Scotland could remain a continuing member of the EU – was gradually becoming a consideration in people’s minds. For some Leave voters Brexit was apparently a reason to stick with the UK but for some Remain voters Britain leaving the EU seems to have made independence look more attractive. As a result, although Remain voters are far from all being advocates of a highly-integrated EU, many view Brexit with concern and for some at least independence inside the EU has now come to look more attractive than being part of a UK that is outside the EU.<sup>5</sup> That perception has in turn seemingly resulted in a marked increase in support for independence beyond that which was in evidence in the immediate wake of the 2014 independence referendum.

None of this, of course, means that Scotland is now set firmly on a path that will eventually lead to independence. Many of the potential implications of Scotland being independent inside the EU while England & Wales is outside, ranging from the consequences of having a single market border between Gretna and Berwick to the relative merits of easy access to the EU single market as opposed to the internal UK market, have yet to be debated. These debates may yet change minds (in either direction), as might perceptions of the implications of the coronavirus pandemic that has dominated attention since our survey was concluded. However, what seems clear is that the pursuit of Brexit has served to weaken the perceived merits of the Union in the eyes of a modest but significant body of voters north of the border. That may not have been either the wish or the intention of those who have advocated leaving the EU, but that does not mean that they can afford to ignore the apparent consequences.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, as many as 81% of those who would now vote Remain believe that Britain’s economy will be worse off as a result of leaving the EU, whereas only 30% believe that Scotland’s economy would be worse as a result of leaving the UK. Similarly, while as many as 65% of those who would prefer to Remain in the EU believe that Brexit will reduce Britain’s influence in the world, only 18% believe that independence will weaken Scotland’s voice in the world.

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