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Why don't more women support independence?

Findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey



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Summary

Opinion poll after opinion poll finds a ‘gender gap’ in men and women’s support for Scottish independence. But why are women apparently less willing than men to support independence? This paper uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) to explore this issue.

Independence: the gender gap

As the debate about Scottish independence intensifies, commentators and campaigners on both sides have started to pay attention to key groups whose views may prove decisive in determining the outcome of the referendum on 18 September 2014. Women are one such group. Opinion poll after opinion poll shows that women are less likely than men to support independence. ScotCen’s Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) – the only survey to have asked the same question on support for independence since 1999¹ – has consistently found a ‘gender gap’ of around 6 to 7 percentage points (Table 1).

Table 1 Constitutional preference by gender, 1999-2012 (Scottish Social Attitudes)

		99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	09	10	11	12
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	Men	30	34	31	35	27	35	38	34	29	31	25	36	27
	Women	24	27	24	25	24	31	32	27	19	25	22	29	20
Devolution	Men	57	53	57	48	51	43	41	51	58	57	61	57	58
	Women	60	57	61	55	60	47	46	56	65	56	61	58	63
No parliament	Men	11	12	9	13	17	20	16	12	11	9	11	5	11
	Women	9	11	9	12	9	16	12	6	8	8	10	6	10
Don’t know	Men	2	1	2	4	4	3	5	3	3	3	2	2	4
	Women	7	5	5	8	7	7	10	11	8	11	8	7	7
Sample size (unweighted)	Men	667	691	645	736	659	687	658	701	645	656	662	529	561
	Women	815	972	960	929	849	950	891	893	863	826	833	669	668

¹ Our question asks people to choose from 5 options which position best describes how they think Scotland should be governed. The first 2 options (combined in row 1 above) cover independence, either within or outwith the European Union; the second 2 (combined in row 2 above) relate to devolution, either with or without tax-raising powers; and the final option (row 3 above) refers to the status quo ante (Scotland remaining within the UK, without its own parliament).

Meanwhile, opinion polls conducted since February 2013 which have asked people how they intend to respond to the agreed referendum question ('Should Scotland be an independent country?') have found a 'gender gap' in the proportion stating they will vote 'Yes' of between 1 and 22 percentage points.²

As women account for 52% of the Scottish population aged 15+,³ this 'gender gap' is an obvious source of concern for the Yes campaign. Unless a significant proportion of women in Scotland can be persuaded to shift their view, then a majority Yes vote may remain out of reach. Pro-independence campaigners appear to recognise this challenge. A 'Women for independence' campaign was launched in September 2012.⁴ Meanwhile, Alex Salmond's promises on childcare in his spring 2013 party conference speech⁵ were interpreted by some as an effort to convince women of the benefits of independence (though of course childcare may equally be viewed as a key issue for men with children). Meanwhile, although pro-union campaigners to date appear to have paid less attention to women specifically, they too have announced plans to launch a campaign targeting female voters.⁶ Yet concrete explanations for the gender gap in support for independence remain elusive. While a number of academics and journalists have provided useful commentary and hypotheses about this subject in recent months,⁷ concrete empirical evidence to explain *why* women are less in favour of independence than men still appears thin on the ground.

This paper attempts to contribute to ongoing debate around this issue by summarising the evidence for some of the hypotheses that have been put forward to date to explain the gender gap. It uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA). Run since 1999 by ScotCen Social Research, an independent, not-for-profit research organisation, SSA is a high quality survey, conducted face to face (with a self-completion section) using probability sampling methods.⁸ Questions on attitudes to independence were funded in 2010 and 2011 by the Nuffield

² TNS-BMRB's February 2013 poll found only an insignificant 1 point gap, while a recent Panelbase survey (March 2013) put the gap between men and women at as much as 22 points. Meanwhile, IPSOS-MORI (February 2013), Angus Reid (February 2013) and a subsequent TNS-BMRB poll (March 2013) all put the gap at between 11 and 13 percentage points. The first TNS-BMRB survey and the Panelbase survey thus both look like outliers in terms of the size of the gap (and they certainly look like outliers compared with polls in 2012 which asked about intended referendum vote).

³ Based on figures from the 2011 census, Statistical Bulletin Release 1B - <http://www.scotlandscensus.gov.uk/en/censusresults/downloadablefiles.html>

⁴ <http://www.womenforindependence.org/>

⁵ <http://www.heraldscotland.com/news/home-news/in-full-alex-salmonds-speech-to-snp-conference-march-2013.1364059881>

⁶ 'Yes and No camps to target women and young voters', Herald, 5 February 2013 <http://www.heraldscotland.com/politics/referendum-news/yes-and-no-camps-to-target-women-and-young-voters.20112732>

⁷ Bell, C and Mackay, F (20 Feb 2013) 'Why should women care about constitutional debates? And why aren't their voices being heard?' <http://genderpoliticsatedinburgh.wordpress.com/2013/02/20/why-should-women-care-about-constitutional-debates-and-why-arent-their-voices-being-heard/>; Hassan, G (29 March 2013) 'Mind the gap: gender and the debate over Scotland's future' <http://www.gerryhassan.com/blog/mind-the-gap-gender-and-the-debate-over-scotlands-future/>; Riddoch, L (17 February 2013) 'Independence vote split by gender' in the Scotsman <http://www.scotsman.com/the-scotsman/opinion/comment/lesley-riddoch-independence-vote-split-by-gender-1-2796656>

⁸ For further detail on methods, see Ormston, R and Curtice, J (2013) More devolution: an alternative road? ScotCen Social Research/The Electoral Reform Society, available at: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/images/dynamicImages/devolutionroadFINAL.pdf>

Explaining the gap

A variety of possible explanations for women's lower levels of support for independence have been put forward in recent months. It has been suggested that women's voices are marginalised or absent in public debate about Scotland's future. The debate itself has been characterised as stale and legalistic and as failing to tap into issues that matter to women's everyday lives. Others have speculated that Alex Salmond's relatively lower standing among women may be affecting their willingness to support his party's key policy of independence. Given what we already know from SSA about the factors that underpin support for independence in general⁹ - which include national identity and expectations about the consequences of independence - we can add to this list of potential explanations. Perhaps women feel less strongly Scottish than do men. Or perhaps they are more sceptical about the potential impacts of independence on key areas like the economy. What can our data tell us about how important each of these issues seems to be in explaining the 'gender gap'?

Ignoring 'women's issues'?

The view that the debate about independence is failing to address issues that might convince women of its importance includes an implicit assumption that women have different priorities to men. Such a statement is obviously in itself open to accusations of gender stereotyping. But what is the evidence that there is in fact a gender divide in terms of the kinds of policy issues that exercise men and women? Looking across 4 years of responses to a question which asks people to choose from a list which area of policy they think should be the Scottish Government's highest priority, we find that any claims of fundamental divergence in the issues that matter to men and women are overstated. It is true that in 2011 women were less likely than men to choose 'Helping the economy to grow faster' (31% compared with 42% of men). However, growing the economy was still the option most commonly chosen by *both* men and women. Moreover, differences in the proportion of men and women picking this option were not apparent in every year, undermining any suggestion that men are in general more likely than women to prioritise economic growth. At the same time, there were no consistent differences over time in the proportions of men and women choosing priorities which have sometimes been characterised as more likely to matter to women – such as improving the nation's health or improving education.

Another way in which it is argued that the independence debate is not addressing women's concerns is that too little attention is being paid to how gender parity in political, social and economic life could be advanced by constitutional change. It is pointed out that initial advances in the gender balance of MSPs seem to have stalled and that the face of political debate in Scotland (with some obvious high profile exceptions) remains too 'male, pale and stale'. If such considerations do in fact help explain the gender gap, then we should find that women in general are more concerned than men about state action on gender equality. Data from SSA does provide some limited support for this view. A 2010 question which asked whether respondents felt that attempts to give equal opportunities to women in Scotland had gone too far or not far enough found that 41% of women compared with 36% of men felt they had not gone far enough.¹⁰ However, the modest size of the gender gap on this issue perhaps indicates that activists need to

⁹ J. Curtice and R. Ormston, 'The state of the Union: Public opinion and the Scottish question', in A. Park, E. Clery, J. Curtice, M. Phillips and D. Utting (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th report*. London: NatCen Social Research, 2012. Available at <http://www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk>

¹⁰ This difference was marginally statistically significant ($p = 0.057$).

be cautious about assuming that such issues have a great deal more appeal to women than to men - in fact, the most common position among both women and men was that the scale of attempts to give equal opportunities to women was 'about right'.

Moreover, views on attempts to promote equal opportunities for women appear to be no more closely related to women's attitudes to independence than to men's. For example, among women who felt that not enough had been done in Scotland to promote equal opportunities for women, 28% supported independence, compared with 17% among women who felt attempts had gone too far - a gap of 11 percentage points. But among men, the equivalent gap was actually bigger, at 21 points (32% and 11%). Seizing the opportunity the current constitutional debate presents to advance issues of equality, not just for women but for other marginalised groups in Scotland, may be a moral imperative. But on this evidence, we should perhaps be cautious about assuming that any such moves from either the 'Yes' or 'No' campaigns would necessarily translate into many more votes from women.

Alex Salmond's 'women problem'?

Alex Salmond has enjoyed unparalleled popularity as First Minister in Scotland. His opinion poll ratings are consistently higher than those of his predecessors, and compare extremely favourably with his counterparts in Westminster. However, beneath these headline figures a common finding is that he is nonetheless considerably less popular with women than with men. SSA has found a similar pattern - in 2011, 60% of men compared with 43% of women gave Salmond a mark of 7 or more out of 10 for his performance as First Minister. Given the strength of association between Alex Salmond as an individual and independence as a cause, is this one possible explanation of the gender gap in support for independence?

Higher ratings of Salmond are, unsurprisingly, associated with higher levels of support for independence. Moreover, in 2011 the gender gap on support for independence was no longer statistically significant once ratings of Salmond were taken into account. However, it is worth noting that Salmond appears to have something of a 'women problem' even among nationalists - among women who favour independence, his average (mean) rating in 2011 was 6.9 out of 10, while among men it was 7.8.

But an obvious rebuttal to the argument that Salmond is the main cause of the gender gap on independence is to point out that this gap existed even during the period when the SNP was led by John Swinney (2000-2004, see Table 1, above). So while Salmond may not be the Yes campaigns best asset in terms of pressing their case with women specifically, findings over a longer-time frame suggest that the gender gap on independence would exist with or without him.

Do women feel less Scottish?

Our previous work on public attitudes to independence has identified national identity as one predictor of support. Put simply, if you feel less British and more Scottish, you are somewhat more likely to support Scottish independence. It is possible to exaggerate the importance of national identity in this respect - even among those who say they feel Scottish and not British at all, fewer than half in 2012 supported independence. However, there is undoubtedly an association there, particularly for those who reject a British identity in favour of an exclusively Scottish one. Could this be a factor in explaining women's lower levels of support for independence? In short, the answer to this is no. Women are no less likely than men to describe themselves as Scottish - in 2012, 57% of women and 50% of men said they felt either Scottish not British or more Scottish than British. Moreover, the gender gap is still apparent even *within* the group of people who feel more Scottish than British. Among those who said they felt Scottish not British, 40% of women compared with 53% of men favoured independence. So there is no evidence either that women are different from men in terms of their broad sense of national

identity or that this is a factor that might help explain their different levels of enthusiasm for independence.

More pessimistic about consequences?

Our previous analysis suggests that people’s expectations about the consequences of independence are more important than their sense of national identity in predicting whether or not they support independence. In 2012, respondents were asked whether, if Scotland became independent, things would be better, worse or no different across a range of areas: the economy, the level of tax, the standard of living, how much pride people in Scotland have in their country, Scotland’s voice in the world, and the gap between rich and poor in Scotland. Perhaps women are more negative than men about the potential consequences of independence in some or all of these areas, and this explains their lower levels of enthusiasm for the prospect?

In fact, as Table 2 shows, women are no more likely than men to think that things will be worse if Scotland becomes independent. In fact, if anything, men are a little more likely to express negative expectations, particularly in relation to believing taxes will increase (62% of men compared with 52% of women) and that independence will result in a bigger gap between rich and poor (29% of men compared with 21% of women). On the economy, which proved to be the most important of these expectations in predicting support for independence in both 2011 and 2012, differences by gender in the proportions that think things will be better or worse are not statistically significant.

What is true, however, is that women are significantly more likely than men to say that they do not know what the impact of independence will be across many of these areas. For example, in 2012 12% of women compared with 6% of men said that they did not know whether the economy would be better, worse or no different under independence. Similar differences are apparent in relation to expectations of living standards, taxes and the gap between rich and poor. This finding leads us on to a further possible explanation for the gender gap – perhaps women simply feel less *sure* about the likely consequences of independence, and are less likely to support it as a result.

	Women				Men			
	More/better	No diff	Less/worse	Don't know	More/better	No diff	Less/worse	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pride	54	39	2	5	55	38	4	2
Voice in the world	41	34	18	6	42	29	25	3
Economy	31	26	31	12	36	21	37	6
Standard of living	30	38	21	11	34	34	27	5
Gap between rich and poor*	20	47	21	12	18	46	29	6
Tax**	9	27	52	12	7	26	62	5

* More/better = smaller gap; less/worse = bigger gap

** More/better = lower; less/worse = higher

Sample size = 1,180 (all who completed self-completion section)

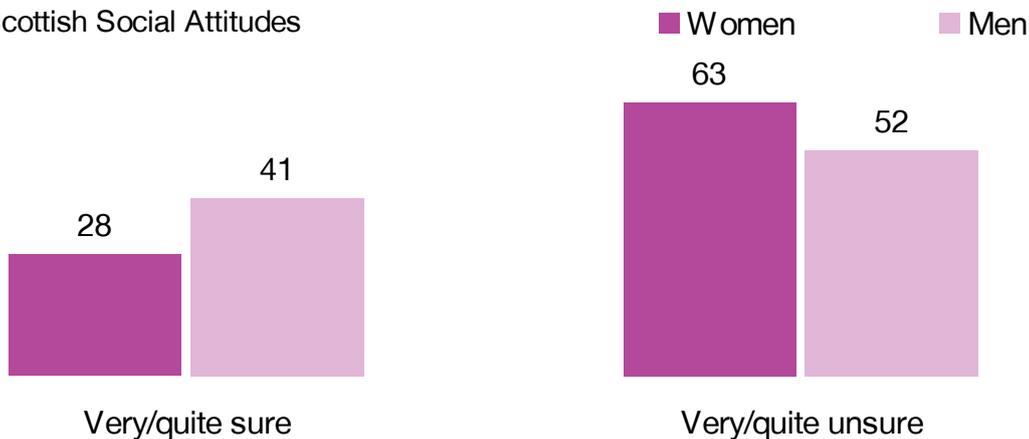
More uncertain about consequences?

In designing the 2012 SSA questionnaire, we hypothesised that even if people thought independence might have positive effects, if they were *uncertain* whether or not these effects would definitely materialise they might still be unwilling to support it. The survey therefore asked people to say whether they felt very or quite sure or very/quite unsure about what would happen to Scotland – either good or bad – if it became independent. Overall, in 2012 people were still fairly uncertain about the likely consequences of independence – 45% were quite unsure and a further 13% very unsure, with only 34% saying they were very/quite sure. And certainty did appear to have an impact on attitudes to independence. For example, among those who thought that Scotland’s economy would be better under independence and who were *sure* about the likely effects of independence in general, 68% favoured independence. However, among those who thought the economy would be better but who were unsure, support was only 36%.

And women did indeed appear to be less certain about the likely consequences – good or bad – of Scottish independence (Figure 1). Just 28% of women said they were very or quite sure about what those consequences might be, compared with 41% of men.

Figure 1 How sure about consequences of independence by gender, 2012

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes



Sample size (unweighted): Women = 637; Men = 543

A stereotyped response to their lower levels of certainty would associate this finding with the oft-repeated characterisation that women are inherently less political and/or more risk averse than men. But perhaps a more subtle reading is that uncertainty is in fact a completely rational reaction to the wildly different claims being made by the two sides in the current debate and the inherent uncertainties around the impacts of any major constitutional change. As Mackay and Bell¹¹ put it:

... we would argue that a 'wait and see' approach is a rational response to the legalistic and narrow process and the lack of authoritative information and analysis available as to the consequences of constitutional change.

Further support for the idea that women are perhaps reacting to arguments about independence with their heads rather than their hearts comes from analysis of the '£500 question'. Respondents to SSA 2011 were asked whether they would be in favour or against independence if it became clear that (a) the standard of living would be higher, with people on average £500 a year better off, and (b) the standard of living would be lower, by an average of £500 a year. Women were more likely than men to shift their position across these two questions. 63% of women said they would favour independence if it was clear people would be better off, while only 13% said the same if it

¹¹ Op cit

were clear people would be worse off - a gap of 50 percentage points. Among men, the equivalent gap was only 38 points (67% vs. 29%). Women also appear less likely than men to fall into the 'principled' or 'heart' nationalist camp, who would support independence whatever the apparent outcome for the standard of living (10% compared with 23%). And they are more likely to fall into either the Nationalist or Unionist 'target group', who might be persuadable contingent on pragmatic considerations to change their vote. Thus even more than with men, to move women towards supporting independence, the Yes camp may need to convince on practical arguments around economics and the standard of living.

Conclusions

Women are significantly and persistently less likely than men to support independence for Scotland. While this gender gap is not necessarily getting wider, its persistence presents a significant challenge for the Yes campaign – without increasing support among women, their chances of victory in 2014 are likely to be significantly reduced. Our evidence provides further support for some of the explanations that have been put forward to explain this gap but calls others into question. For example, empirical evidence for the idea that the women's priorities are substantially different from men's appears relatively weak, while the idea that a lack of focus on gender equality is something that turns many women off is open to question. Alex Salmond's relatively lower standing among women may do nothing to help narrow the gender gap, but this gap existed even in years where he was not SNP leader. Meanwhile, there is no evidence for women feeling 'less Scottish' than men, and women are no more negative than men in their expectations of the consequences of independence. However, they are significantly more likely to say they simply do not know what those consequences will be. And this greater uncertainty about its consequences does appear to be a factor in explaining why support for independence is lower among women. Women's responses to questions posing different possible outcomes in terms of the impact of independence on the standard of living suggest that they may be less prepared to vote with their 'heart' and may need more convincing on the practicalities. Rather than indicating that women are more 'feartie', these findings can be read as reflecting a more realistic and pragmatic response among women to the numerous uncertainties of the current debate.

Postscript – the need for further research

We hope that this paper has contributed to the debate around why women are less likely to support independence. However, much research raises as many questions as it answers. There remains a relative lack of empirical research – both quantitative and qualitative – that actually explores the views of women (and men) across Scotland in an attempt to explain the gender gap. Future qualitative research could take a more 'bottom-up' approach, starting with men and women's own accounts of how they see the independence debate to ensure that academics and policy makers are not missing obvious explanations for the gender gap. Further survey work could test ideas emerging from such work as well as exploring in more detail the areas in which women feel less certain about independence. We hope this paper will prompt further discussion, research and collaboration on these questions, to ensure that the views of both women and men are more fully incorporated into the debate in the lead up to 2014.

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