Who will turn up and who will stay at home?

Examining turnout expectations for different groups of people

Jan Eichhorn

A high turnout is often claimed to be crucial if an election or referendum is to confer legitimacy on the winner. The rather low turnout in many recent elections (such as 50% in the 2011 election for the Scottish Parliament) is often described as a cause for concern. Arguably a low turnout in the independence referendum would be particularly problematic, as the decision would not be reversible in a few years’ time. How many people are likely to vote and how representative they are of Scottish public opinion as a whole is thus one of the key questions to be asked of the ballot on 18 September.

This briefing assesses the prospects for turnout in September and examines in particular who is and who is not more likely to vote. It discusses whether those on one side of the argument are more likely to vote than those on the other side. It assesses whether certain groups of the population are more inclined to vote than others, and thus whether there are some groups where a particular effort is needed to promote participation. Finally, in order to see whether or not the referendum is likely to be more successful than other ballots at securing the participation of politically ‘hard to reach’ groups, we compare the characteristics of those who say they are likely to vote in the referendum with the pattern of turnout in the (low turnout) 2011 Holyrood election.
Levels of turnout

Figure 1: Percentage of respondents “certain to vote” in the 2014 referendum by polling company over time.

There seems to be every prospect of a high turnout in the referendum. In Figure 1 we show the proportion of people who have said they were certain to vote according to the polls conducted by four companies that have been asking people on a reasonably regular basis how likely they are to vote. Although there are some differences between the companies that may well reflect differences in the way the polls are conducted and the way likelihood to vote is elicited, in each case the most recent reading is between 70 and 80 per cent. In those instances where a poll has also asked the same respondents how likely they were to vote in a UK or Scottish election, the proportion saying they were certain to vote in the referendum has always been markedly higher – in its most recent poll, for example, another polling company, Survation, found that while 75% said they were certain to vote in the referendum, only 63% said the same of a UK general election. Meanwhile it appears that people’s willingness to vote has been increasing as the campaign has developed.

In this briefing, however, our analysis of who is more or less likely to vote and why is based primarily on data from the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey. This is an annual high quality survey that aims to facilitate the development of public policy and the academic study of public opinion in Scotland. As it is conducted over an extended time period (in 2013 between June and October) and covers a range of subjects apart from politics, its respondents are less likely to be disproportionately people who happen to be

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1 Ipsos Mori (Telephone, random digit dialling): “And, how likely would you be to vote in an immediate referendum, on a scale of 1 to 10, where 10 means you would be absolutely certain to vote and 1 that you would be absolutely certain NOT to vote?”

YouGov (Internet panel): “And on a scale of 0 to 10, where 0 means you would definitely not vote, and 10 means you definitely would vote, how likely would you be to vote if the UK government held a referendum on Scottish independence?”

Panelbase (Internet panel): “And how likely are you to vote in the referendum?” (1 to 10 scale)

TNS BMRB (Face to Face quota): “How likely do you think you are to vote in the referendum on Scottish Independence on the 18th of September 2014?” (5 response categories)
ready and willing to be interviewed within a short period of time and/or who have an interest in politics. The 2013 SSA asked 1,497 people to report their likelihood of voting on an 11-point scale ranging from 0 to 10, where 0 meant “certain not to vote” and 10 meant “certain to vote”. In our analysis we compare those whose reported probability of voting is greater than 50% (that is between 6 and 10) with those whose probability is no greater than 50% (i.e., 0-5).

Are one side’s voters more determined to vote?
The first and perhaps most important question that we address is whether the views about independence of those who say they are likely to vote are typical of those of all adults in Scotland. In other words, does it look as though the outcome of the referendum will reflect the majority view north of the border? To ascertain whether people were inclined to vote Yes or No, the 2013 SSA asked its respondents whether they would vote Yes or No to the proposition that will appear on the ballot paper, that is ‘Should Scotland be an independent country’ or whether they had not decided yet. If they said they had not decided they were then asked which way they were most likely to vote. In Figure 2 we examine first of all the reported likelihood of voting according to how people answered the first of those questions, and then how the figures break down once we reallocate those who said they were undecided on the basis of their answers to the follow-up (‘squeeze’) question. The answers of those who were asked the follow-up question are also shown separately on the right hand side of the figure.

It appears that Yes voters are a little more likely than No voters to say they will make it to the polls. The proportion of those who are clear that they will vote Yes and who state that they are more than 50% likely to vote is four points higher than the equivalent proportion for No voters. The gap then grows somewhat – to seven points – when we add in those who are undecided but are leaning towards a Yes or a No vote. This is because those leaning towards a No vote are no less than 19 points less likely than their Yes counterparts to say that they will probably cast a vote. It seems that the less committed No voter is somewhat less strongly motivated to vote at all. Otherwise there is only a small difference between Yes and No voters in their determination to express their view.

These are differences that could matter. If we take into account each Yes and No respondent’s reported probability of voting, it is enough to add two points to the Yes side’s estimated share of the vote. A similar finding is to be found in recent opinion polls. On average the four most recent of the polls shown in Figure 1 have indicated that Yes voters are six points more likely to say they

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2 Question asked: “How likely is it that you will vote in the independence referendum?”
3 To make this calculation each respondent who says they will vote Yes or No but says they have a 5/10 chance of voting is counted as .5 of a vote. Et simile for other probabilities of voting. We then sum these probabilities for Yes and No voters to secure an estimated Yes and No share of the vote and compare those shares with the survey’s estimated Yes and No shares if no account is taken of respondents’ reported probability of voting.
are certain to vote than No voters. If six per cent fewer No voters were to cast a ballot this would increase the Yes side’s share of the vote by around one and a half points – a small but still potentially decisive difference should the contest otherwise be very close.

**Figure 2:** Likelihood of voting in the referendum by referendum voting intention (%).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Initial decision</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Including squeezed votes</th>
<th>Undecided</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Undecideds (squeezed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Voting likelihood 6-10</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Voting likelihood 0-5</td>
<td>77</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>86</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>91</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Perhaps unsurprisingly those who say they are undecided how they will vote are less likely to say that there is over a 50% chance that they will eventually cast a ballot. Only just over three quarters (77%) put their likelihood of voting that high and that proportion falls to just 70% amongst those who still say they are undecided even after they have been ‘squeezed’. Evidently some of those who say they are undecided are going to be difficult to get to the polls at all, though even so as many as half of them (50%) say they are certain to vote.

**Who is more or less likely to vote?**

There are also some notable socio-demographic differences in people’s reported likelihood of voting. Men (85%) are slightly more likely than women (78%) to say that there is over a 50% chance that they will vote. There is even greater variation between those in different age groups (see figure 3). Those aged below 35 are much less likely than those who are older to say there is a good chance that they will vote. No more than 70% of younger voters, including newly enfranchised 16 and 17 year olds, make that claim compared with only a little under 90% of those aged over 45. Even if turnout does indeed prove to be high it looks as though younger voters will be less likely to make it to the polls.
There are also some differences between respondents from different occupationally defined social classes (see figure 4). Employers and managers and own account voters are most likely to say there is a good chance that they will vote, while semi-routine and routine (i.e. working class) voters are least likely to do so.

**Figure 4:** Likelihood of voting in the referendum by social class.

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4 *The figures for 14-17 year olds is based on a survey of this age group carried out independently of SSA by a team from the University of Edinburgh. Those who say they are “rather likely” or “very likely” to vote are contrasted with those who stated they are “neither likely nor unlikely”, “rather unlikely” or “very unlikely” to vote.
Interest and Identity

Larger than anything we have seen so far, however, are the differences in likelihood of voting between those who are most and least interested in politics. Only just over one in three of those who say they have no interest at all in politics say that there is over a 50% chance that they will vote. In contrast almost everyone who says they have ‘a great deal’ or ‘quite a lot’ of interest in politics indicates that they are likely to participate. As it happens, however, only one in eight Scots (12%) claim not to have any interest in politics at all.

Figure 5: Likelihood of voting in the referendum by political interest.

Disinclination to participate is also relatively high amongst those who not regard themselves as a supporter of (or identify with) any of the political parties (Figure 6). Rather less than half this group (43%) give themselves a good chance of voting. In contrast, as we might have anticipated from the analysis in Figure 2, nearly all SNP supporters have a strong propensity to participate though they are more or less matched in their zeal by Conservative supporters. Labour and Liberal Democrat supporters are not quite so ardent, though the differences are small.
Feelings About the Referendum

So far we have looked at how people’s reported likelihood of voting varies according to demographic and attitudinal characteristics that are potential influences on turnout in any ballot. But we might wonder whether people’s attitudes towards the independence referendum in particular make a difference too.

Respondents who think that Scotland becoming independent would make a difference to their own lives are indeed much more likely to give themselves a good chance of voting than are those who think it does not matter much for their personal lives (see figure 7). Similarly, those who feel that they have more knowledge about the referendum are more likely to vote than those who do not think they know very much (see figure 8). However, it should be noted that only 5% say that the referendum would have no impact on their lives at all, while equally, only 5% say they know “nothing at all” about the referendum (5%). Doubtless this helps explain why overall the vast majority of people say they are likely to vote.
Most of these patterns prove to be statistically significant when we include them altogether in a multivariate ordinal regression in which people’s reported likelihood of voting on the original 11 point scale is the dependent variable. The one exception is the small difference between men and women, implying that in that case the difference is simply the consequence of one or more of the other patterns we have uncovered. Meanwhile, the analysis confirms that people aged 35 and over are more likely to vote than those below that age and that those in the highest occupational social class are more likely to vote than those in the lowest (the differences between the other social classes not significant). At the same time, having some degree of interest in politics is associated with a greater likelihood of turning out as is an affinity with any political party. In addition, however, those who think that their lives would be affected substantially by independence and those who say they have rather more knowledge about independence are also more likely to vote, implying that people’s propensity to vote is affected by the character of the referendum in particular rather than just those considerations that influence turnout in most ballots.

5 The question read as follows: “How much difference do you think Scotland becoming independent would make to your everyday life?”
**Comparison with turnout in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections**

If the likelihood of voting in the referendum is influenced in part at least by people’s feelings about the particular issue at stake, this would seem to open up the possibility that not only might the level of turnout be higher than it has been at recent general elections, but also that the composition of those who vote could be different too. Perhaps those who are typically less likely to vote at election time are especially more likely to participate in the referendum? Respondents to the 2011 SSA were asked whether they had voted in that year’s Scottish Parliament election.\(^7\) We can thus compare our findings from the 2013 survey with the pattern of (reported) actual voting in 2011 as ascertained by that survey.

In Figure 9 we compare the relationship between (on the right hand side) likelihood of voting and constitutional preference in 2013 with (on the left hand side) the relationship between voting in 2011 and constitutional preference in that year. Here constitutional preference is measured not by referendum voting intention (as this information is not available for 2011) but rather by responses to a question about what the competences of the Scottish Parliament should be, a question that effectively distinguishes between those who want independence, those who would prefer more devolution within the

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\(^6\) “Some people say they feel they don’t know much about Scottish independence. Other people say they feel they know quite a lot. How much do you feel you know about Scottish independence?”

\(^7\) At 59% the proportion of SSA respondents who said that they voted in 2011 was somewhat higher than the official turnout of 50%. There is a variety of reasons why this discrepancy arises; our assumption is that in any event it does not affect the degree to which the 2011 survey effectively captured the differences in turnout by people’s demographic characteristics and attitudes.
UK, those who are content with the status quo, and, finally those (few) who would prefer there not to be a Scottish Parliament at all.\textsuperscript{6}

**Figure 9:** Turnout in 2011 by constitutional preference 2011/Likelihood of voting in the referendum by constitutional preference, 2013.

As we would anticipate from our earlier discussion, those who prefer independence are a little more likely to say that they have a good chance of voting in September. In contrast, in 2011 those who backed independence were no more likely to vote than those who either wanted more devolution or were happy with the status quo. It appears that supporters of independence are more motivated to vote in the referendum in a manner that is not necessarily evident in devolved elections to the existing Holyrood institution.

\textsuperscript{6} Respondents are asked: 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
In contrast, it looks as though the differences in the level of turnout between different demographic groups could well be smaller in the referendum than they were in 2011. In 2011 the vast majority of those aged between 18 and 24 did not vote (Figure 10); their rate of abstention was over 50 points higher than for those aged 65 and over. The equivalent gap in Figure 3 above is just over 20 points. Equally, the relatively greater propensity of employers and managers to vote was more apparent in 2011 than it is in reported intentions to vote in 2014 (see figure 11 and compare with figure 4). On the other hand whereas women appear somewhat less inclined than men to vote in the referendum, they were not significantly less likely than men to have voted in 2011. Fifty-nine per cent of women said that they voted at the last Scottish Parliament election, compared with 61% of men.

Figure 10: Turnout in 2011 by age.

![Figure 10: Turnout in 2011 by age.](image)

Figure 11: Turnout in 2011 by social class.

![Figure 11: Turnout in 2011 by social class.](image)
Equally, although we have seen that those who do not support any particular party are less likely to vote in the referendum, the gap (see figure 6 above) could well be less than it was in 2011 (figure 12). It may be that what is a battle for a constitutional idea rather than one between parties is of somewhat greater interest for those who do not feel any strong motivation to back a particular party. On the other hand, the differences in the level of turnout by level of interest in politics were much the same in 2011 as they seem set to be in September (figure 13 and compare figure 5). The (relatively small) group of the wholly uninterested will evidently still be rather hard to get to the polls.

Figure 12: Turnout in 2011 by political party support.

Figure 13: Turnout in 2011 by political interest.
Conclusion

Although the level of turnout in the referendum looks set to be considerably higher than it has been at recent elections, in many respects the pattern of turnout looks set to be one with which we are very familiar. Much as in elections, younger people, those with little interest in politics and those who do not support a party are particularly less likely to vote. However, some of these differences in turnout may prove to be less marked than they were in the 2011 Holyrood election, in part perhaps because those who think independence would make a difference to their own lives (and who feel knowledgeable about the subject) are more inclined to vote in September irrespective of their age or level of engagement with politics in general. However, even if this proves to be the case there is no guarantee that the balance of opinion expressed at the ballot box will prove a wholly accurate representation of public attitudes as a whole. For it seems that those who support independence are somewhat more inclined to vote in September – and in a tight race at least their apparent greater enthusiasm could potentially make all the difference.