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**Nationalism and the 2014 Scottish Referendum- To what extent were votes for Scottish independence in the 2014 referendum primarily motivated by nationalism?**

It would be a bit of an understatement to say that England and Scotland have had a fraught history. After all, Scotland has been conquered by the British empire longer than almost anyone else, and England hasn't exactly been very nice to them all this time. The tension between the two countries is so old that these days it's essentially just part of the cultural understanding of the two-- it's even become somewhat of a joke or meme, à la this joke from Frankie Boyle-- "In Scotland we have mixed feelings about global warming, because we will get to sit on the mountains and watch the English drown."<sup>1</sup>

While for some this whole England/Scotland tension can be boiled down to a joke or is simply something of the past, for an increasing number of Scots today this dichotomy is alive and well. For years there have been calls for Scottish independence, with the firm belief that Scotland's best days could be ahead of it if only Scotland could finally strike off on its own. In 2014, Scotland was finally given the chance to make this dream a reality by holding a referendum on Scottish Independence from the United Kingdom. Yet by a fairly large margin,

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<sup>1</sup> Ramsay, "Do the Scots really hate the English?"

voters chose to stay. Despite this, questions still remain- what exactly happened in the 2014 referendum that turned up this result? Has the situation changed due to Brexit? And, the question we're going to be focusing on here today: to what extent were votes in the 2014 referendum based on nationalism? In other words, was the main issue for voters in the 2014 Scottish referendum questions regarding Scottish identity, or was it something else?

In order to understand the basis of why a referendum was wanted in the first place, we first must discuss a bit of the history of the two nations and why their relationship is so full of tension. England and Scotland have basically been in conflict with each other since the 1000s. As rival kingdoms sharing a relatively small amount of landmass, the two have often had reason to fight. Although there was a great amount of armed conflict beforehand, the situation really changed in 1296 AD when England officially invaded Scotland and brought it under English control.<sup>2</sup> This only lasted until 1314 AD, when Scotland won back *de facto* independence via the Battle of Bannockburn. The issue was once again reignited in 1332 in the Second War for Scottish Independence (the conflict from 1296-1314 being the first) when England, still upset over losing access to Scottish lands, once again invaded Scotland. Despite many battles and years of conflict the war ended in 1357, with Scotland retaining its status as an independent kingdom. Over the next several centuries fighting continued, but eventually everything came to a head in 1603 with the death of Queen Elizabeth I, who had no children and thus no heir. In a twist of fate, James VI of Scotland became the heir to the throne, which meant that the kingdoms of Scotland and England were once more unified. This unity didn't last long, however- the

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<sup>2</sup> BBC Scotland, "The Wars of Independence"

English Civil War and the struggle between King Charles I and parliament in 1650 caused more turmoil and destabilization.

For a little while after, Scotland existed in a somewhat self-governing state, sharing a monarch with England but having its own parliament. But food shortages as well as a disastrous attempt to set up a Scottish colony in Panama bankrupted the country, forcing the merging of the Scottish and English parliaments in 1707 order to save Scotland.<sup>3</sup> Yet many Scots were very unhappy with this decision, and saw the chance to protest with the arrival of Charles Edward Stuart, a descendant of King James I and the one who would have inherited the throne if not for Oliver Cromwell and the events of the English Civil War. The Jacobites, as they came to be known, saw Charles as the rightful heir to the throne and supported his attempts to reclaim Scotland and England. This group included many Highland clans. But these attempts were brutally suppressed in a conflict that ended in 1745 at the Battle of Culloden in Northern Scotland, and British rule in Scotland was never challenged by force again.

Scotland existed in mostly an subordinate state in the period after that, limiting expressions of rebellion and Scottish culture merely to the more creative arts, such as works of literature about the Highland clans. There was little official position for Scotland in government until 1885, when the position of Secretary of Scotland was reestablished, as well as the creation of a “Scottish Office” that would administer central government functions.<sup>4</sup> However, this still gave little control to the Scottish people themselves over what do in their own country, as they were still firmly part of the UK and thus ruled by Westminster.

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<sup>3</sup> Murray, “Twelve dates which shaped Scotland's relationship with England”

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Perhaps one of the most crucial developments in recent history and the one that has to do the most with a rise in Scottish nationalism in the last several decades in the creation of the National Party of Scotland in 1928, the party that would eventually become the Scottish National Party, or the SNP. Journalist Hugh MacDiarmid had been very interested in the revival of Scottish culture and thus eventually founded the party in order to promote awareness of the Scottish national identity. But the SNP didn't really find its legs until 1967, when the SNP won its first seat in Westminster and proved to the rest of the country Scotland's growing interest in the concept of devolution. A referendum on this devolution of powers was held in 1979 and passed with a narrow majority, but unfortunately there was a requirement that at least 40% of the electorate had to have vote yes, which did not happen and thus nothing came of this referendum. The situation worsened when Margaret Thatcher came into power and showed overall disdain for the idea of Scottish devolution. Thatcher also instituted a massively unpopular poll tax in Scotland, a year before the tax was instituted in England, which covertly served as a form of voter suppression.<sup>5</sup> In 1997, the dream of devolution was finally achieved through a two-part referendum that reestablished the Scottish parliament and passed a significant amount of control over Scottish affairs to this parliament. In 2011, the SNP won an overall majority in this parliament for the first time, finally paving the way to the events of 2014: the Scottish Referendum for Independence from the UK.

This referendum was essentially posing what it suggests on the tin: should Scotland continue to be part of the UK, yes or no? For many Scots, this was the chance of a lifetime. As one can see from the history above, Scotland has long found itself in conflict with, and

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<sup>5</sup> BBC Scotland, "The Poll Tax is introduced in Scotland – 1989"

submissive to, England and later its “united kingdom.” For centuries before Scottish people had fought for control over their own land and the ability to shape their own political destiny. It’s this history and the sense of shared national history Scots have with one another that prompted many people to vote Yes for independence. The narrative presented by Scottish nationalists including the SNP was this: Scotland has been subordinate to England for too long, and for once Scotland finally has the chance to peacefully do what its ancestors could not and create a free and independent land all its own.

One of the most crucial aspects of Scottish nationalism is in fact that it is deeply tied to the idea of Scottish home rule and Scottish independence. Unusually, although many Scots do have shared history, mostly that of rule by England and struggles associated with that, as well as the Gaelic language and Highland Culture, Scotland’s nationalism tends not to be ethnically based like some other brands of nationalism. Scotland’s nationalism is instead civic, based on the belief that the most important prerequisite to being “Scottish” is living in the country and trying to partake in the betterment of the culture as a whole.<sup>6</sup> This belief in the betterment of Scotland takes form in the idea that in this day and age, especially with Scotland’s newly-discovered oil reserves, the country would be better off being independent, which would allow for policies that benefited Scotland specifically instead of just being grouped with the rest of the UK.

For those who voted Yes in the 2014 referendum, this brand of nationalism was perhaps the largest single reason they voted this way. In a set of data released by Lord Ashcroft Polls following the referendum, Yes voters were asked to choose from a variety of options as to why they supported independence, and by a huge majority (70%) the most cited answer was “The

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<sup>6</sup> Hild, “Renegotiating Scottish Nationalism after the 2014 Independence Referendum”

principle that all decisions about Scotland should be taken in Scotland,”<sup>7</sup> followed by “Scotland’s future looked brighter as an independent country” (20%). Yes voters were also more likely to believe that Scotland’s “best years are in its future” according to a YouGov survey taken in 2018.<sup>8</sup> Based on these beliefs, it’s fair to say that most Yes voters subscribed to Scotland’s brand of civic nationalism-- that it was in the best interest of the country to become independent.

But despite all this, a majority of voters in the 2014 referendum decided to stay in the UK. For 55% of those that turned up to the polls, the question of nationalism and taking control of Scotland’s political destiny was not compelling enough to make them vote Yes. Most of the arguments against independence revolved around uncertainty of what would happen if Scotland left. Scotland would have no longer been allowed to use the pound as its currency, meaning they would have had to quickly find a replacement.<sup>9</sup> Entering the EU independently and gaining access to the Euro could have taken years, leaving Scotland without an actual currency to fall back on in the meantime. There was also no guarantee the EU would have taken Scotland as an independent country, which made many Scots nervous. Additionally, independent Scotland would have been a very small country-- out of the more than 66 million people in the UK, Scotland only has 5.4 million of that,<sup>10</sup> or just a little over 8%. New Scotland would have had almost no international standing, and would likely have had difficulty securing trade deals and alliances as such a small country.

In the Lord Ashcroft Polls, in the same survey given to Yes voters after the referendum, No voters were asked what issues were most important to them in making their decision, and

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<sup>7</sup> Lord Ashcroft, “Post-Referendum Scotland Poll, 18-19 September 2014”

<sup>8</sup> Curtice, “Nationalism 'means something different' in Scotland”

<sup>9</sup> Daileida, “The Pros and Cons of Scottish Independence”

<sup>10</sup> Office for National Statistics, “Overview of the UK population: November 2018”

47% of them echoed the sentiments from above- “the risks of becoming independent looked too great when it came to things like the currency, EU membership, the economy, jobs, and prices.”<sup>11</sup>

Other answers included “a No vote would still mean extra powers for the Scottish Parliament with the security of remaining part of the UK, giving the best of both worlds” (25%), and interestingly enough, 27% said that their main reason for voting No was “a strong attachment to the UK and its shared history, culture, and traditions.” This indicates that although a huge majority of those who voted yes felt strongly identified with Scottish nationalism, there was a certain subset of those who voted No that in fact identified with the shared British nationalism generated by all the nations in the UK.

Overall, what all of this tells us is that despite Scotland’s long often bloody history of rule by England, at the current political moment even this history is not enough to motivate Scots to sever ties with England the rest of the UK. For those who voted in favor of leaving the UK, their decision was actually heavily based on the idea of nationalism and that Scotland would be better off on its own, bound together partly by a shared culture and history of oppression, but also by a self-deterministic view that Scotland’s best days are ahead of it. For No voters however, who ended up being the majority at the time, the potential risks of leaving the UK around currency, the EU, and Scotland’s international standing were too great to justify any possible benefits of leaving.

Even though the nationalistic tide in 2014 wasn’t enough to finally give Scots the independent country they’ve been struggling for for centuries, change may still be on the wind-- with Brexit changing the UK’s standing with the EU, a major factor for those who voted No,

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<sup>11</sup> Lord Ashcroft, “Post-Referendum Scotland Poll, 18-19 September 2014”

another referendum may be in the future, and this time perhaps nationalism will be a more primary motivator for a majority of the population.



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