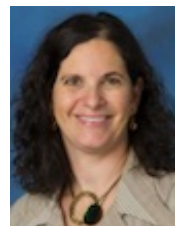# Tactical voting in referendums: did SNP's mixed signals encourage those for independence to vote for Brexit?

__Zachary Greene__, __Jae-Jae Spoon__ and __Christopher Williams__ argue that some proponents of Scottish independence may have resorted to tactical voting in the EU referendum. They did so in the hope that a Leave win would make a second Independence referendum more likely, responding to hints by SNP leaders to this effect.

Proponents of direct democracy and referendums often point to their apparent simplicity for voters: a direct vote would allow citizens to provide a simple yes or no answer to pressing troubles. Yet, elite-led referendums' apparent simplicity likely masks a more complex underlying process. An increase in the number of referendums across representative democracies opens the door for the tactical use of votes in one referendum, to set the stage for another.

In our forthcoming article, we argue that this is just the case for Scottish voters in the 2016 Brexit referendum. Elite statements from prominent Scottish nationalists planted the seed among voters that a vote in favour of Brexit could be instrumental in securing a second Scottish independence referendum. Using panel data from the British Election Study (BES), we examined whether Scots who supported Scottish independence were more likely to vote Leave, and how party identification conditions the likelihood of a pro-independence Scot voting Leave.

Image credit: CC0 Public Domain.

During the Brexit campaign, the official message of all Scottish parties was in support of Remain. However, many elites in Scotland sent mixed messages to voters, including former Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond, and former SNP leader Gordon Wilson, who both suggested that a vote to 'Leave' the EU could result in a second independence referendum. Even current SNP leader and Scottish First Minister Nicola Sturgeon, who officially supported Remain, stated in a debate that a Leave vote could be the material change that leads to a second Scottish referendum.
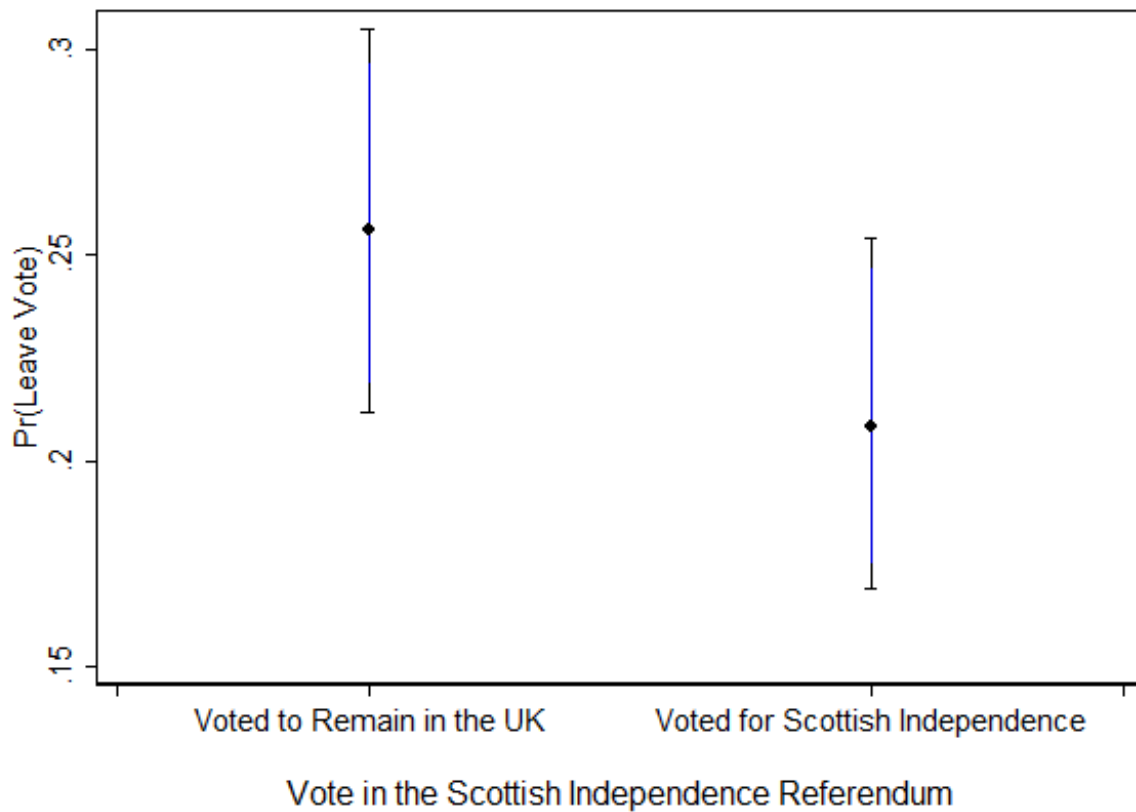
Following the logic of tactical or strategic voting, we argue that these mixed signals from Scottish elites encouraged Scots who supported independence from the United Kingdom to vote Leave in the EU referendum, in the hopes of securing a second independence referendum. That is to say, Scots who wanted a second bite at the apple of independence would vote in favour of the UK leaving the EU, thinking that it may change the circumstances enough to inspire a second Scottish independence referendum.

Further, many of the mixed messages regarding the Brexit vote and the possibility that it would lead to a second Scottish independence referendum were coming from elites in the SNP. Following the logic that individuals are more likely to listen to messages from parties they support, we expect that the mixed messages regarding Brexit were more likely to influence supporters of the SNP. Simply put, we propose that the messages regarding the likelihood of a second Scottish independence referendum as a result of a vote to 'Leave' were more likely to influence voters who were both supports of the SNP and of Scottish independence.

Relying on panel data from Waves 3 (September 2014) and 8 (June 2016) of the BES, we were able to examine how individuals who reported voting in favour of Scottish independence after the September 2014 referendum, planned on voting in the June 2016 Brexit referendum. Contrary to our first expectation, those who voted in favour of Scottish independence were less likely to report an intention to vote Leave in the Brexit referendum.

In fact, the predicted likelihood of voting Leave if a person voted against Scottish independence was 0.25. At the same time, an individual who voted for Scottish independence had a predicted likelihood of voting Leave of about 0.21 (see Figure 1). Thus, it appeared that those who supported Scottish independence were actually more in favour, albeit very slightly, of remaining in the EU than those who opposed Scottish independence.
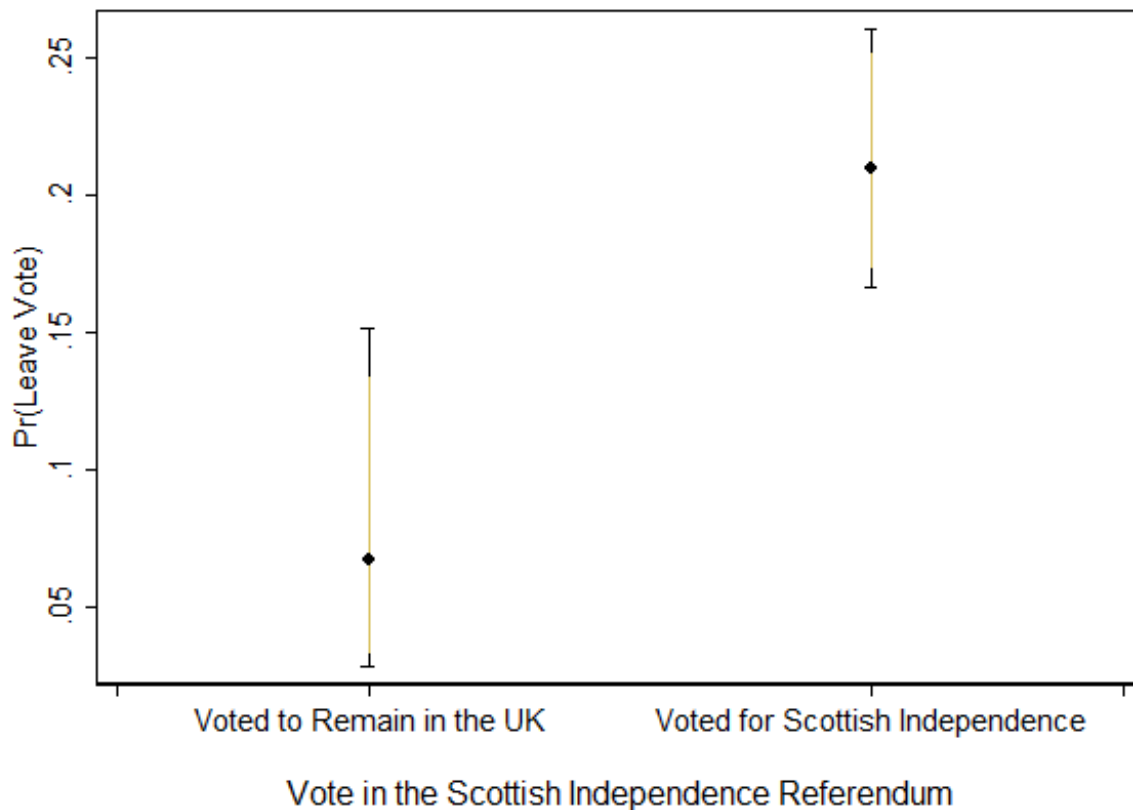
Figure 1. Likelihood of Voting in Favour of Brexit by Vote in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum

Note: table compiled by the authors and derived from their journal article (2017).

Conversely, our second expectation, that those who support Scottish independence and the SNP would be more likely to vote Leave, was confirmed. Supporters of the SNP who voted against Scottish independence had a predicted likelihood of voting to 'Leave' the EU of about 0.07. However, SNP supporters who voted for Scottish independence had a predicted likelihood of voting Leave of about 0.21 (see Figure 2). This suggests that SNP supporters who also sought Scottish independence picked up on the mixed messages of elites, and voted strategically.

Figure 2. Likelihood of Voting in Favour of Brexit by Vote in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum for Supporters of the SNP

Vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum

Note: table compiled by the authors and derived from their journal article (2017).

Importantly, this study has implications for our understanding of voting behaviour, political parties, and referendums, as well as for understanding the outcome of the Brexit vote. First, these results indicate tactical or strategic voting does occur when voters are presented with uncertain long-term incentives. In this case, Scottish voters who support the SNP and supported Scottish independence were willing to risk leaving the European Union in the hope of achieving the goal of Scottish independence. Second, our research indicates that parties are not unitary actors, and that the public can perceive and react to intra-party divisions. Third, our findings strongly suggest that the outcomes of referendums are not necessarily clear plebiscites regarding a single issue, which occur in a vacuum.

Perhaps most importantly, our research demonstrates that the Brexit referendum may have underpredicted support for remaining in the EU among Scots. Our findings suggest that if tactical voting among supporters of the SNP and Scottish independence did not occur, the outcome of the Brexit referendum might have looked very different.

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Note: this post summarises the findings of the authors' joint article "Reading between the lines: party cues and SNP support for Scottish independence and Brexit" in the *Journal of Elections, Public Opinion and Parties, 2017*.

About the Authors

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