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Who influences the formation of political attitudes and decisions in young people? Evidence from the referendum on Scottish independence

04.03.2014

d|part - Think Tank for political participation

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Summary

When in September 2014 Scots will be asked to decide whether Scotland should become an independent country, some 3% of the electorate will be comprised of voters younger than 18 years. It was an unprecedented move to declare 16-17 year olds eligible to vote in the referendum - a decision that has attracted considerable criticism.

Concern #1: Young people are less interested in politics and will therefore not know enough about what is going on.

Based on data from a comprehensive and representative survey of Scottish voters below 18 years of age, we find no evidence to support this concern. Young voters are no less interested in politics than adults and are keen on gathering information about the decision at hand. They critically engage with different sources of information such as talking to parents, friends or in class about the referendum.

Concern #2: Young people will vote exactly like their parents; they do not really add to the referendum debate and outcome

While parents are found to have an impact on their children's likelihood to vote, there is no evidence suggesting that children will copy the decisions of their parents. When comparing children's and their parents' intention to vote 'Yes' or 'No' in the referendum, we do not find sufficient congruence to conclude that this concern is justified. Rather, the results indicate that parents have significant impact when it comes to instilling voting as a civic norm.

Criticism #3: There is a danger of biased politicisation as young people will be prone to copy ideas they are given in schools

Young people are making up their own minds about whether Scotland should become an independent country or not. There is no evidence of biased politicisation: young people's intentions to vote either 'Yes' or 'No' are not associated with who they discussed independence with. Neither talking to parents and friends nor in-class discussion goes together with greater likelihoods of voting in favour or against Scotland becoming an independent country.

Taken together, these findings paint a picture of Scotland's youth that is very different from what many critics fear. The results suggest that young people can play a role in deciding the outcome of the referendum in September 2014. Beyond this, the one-off decision of including 16 to 18 year olds in the referendum can provide momentum for a unique spark of interest in politics and thus, may even serve as a chance to bringing Scottish youth closer to political discourse.

Insight #1:

Young people are interested, look for information and distinguish between different sources.

Insight #2:

Parents influence children's voting likelihood, but there is no major overlap in their voting intention

Insight #3:

Young people make up their own minds about independence

Background and rationale

In September 2014 there will be a referendum about the constitutional future of Scotland. Scots will be able to decide whether they want to stay part of the United Kingdom or become an independent country. One of the most distinctive features about this referendum is the reduced voting age to 16 years enfranchising an age group that has never been able to take part in political decision making at the national level in Scotland.

This move was not welcomed across the whole spectrum of policy makers and political commentators however. A large number of assertions has been presented arguing against a lowered voting age. Most contesters suggested one of the following as reasons to not reduce the voting age (or combinations thereof):ⁱ

- Young people are less interested in politics and will therefore not know enough about what is going on
- Young people will be influenced by and will vote exactly like their parents; therefore, they do not really add to the referendum debate and outcome as an additional group
- Young people will be prone to copy ideas they are given in schools and there is a danger of biased politicisation in schools that will discuss the issue.

While these assertions have been popular in public debates there has been little evidence to back up any of them. Using data from the only comprehensive and representative survey of young people below the age of 18 who will be of voting age in September 2014 this briefing will outline what we find when engaging with these assertions empirically.

In this briefing, we will explore how young people appear to form their political attitudes in the context of the upcoming referendum and which persons may influence different aspects of their perceptions and orientations. While this survey and analysis are set in the context of the independence referendum, the insights gained inform an understanding of young people's political attitude formation more generally allowing for the formulation of implications for further research and practice.

Methodological concerns

The relevant representative adult survey for attitudes towards Scottish political attitudes, the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, does not include respondents under the age of 18. Some polls include young voters, however often their samples of 16-17 year olds are too small to attend to insights beyond the headline figures and they also do not follow proper probability sampling methods.

Therefore a survey of 14-17 year old Scots was conducted in April and May of 2013.ⁱⁱ With one and a half years left before the referendum it was decided to include all those voters who would generally be omitted from other surveys, but would be allowed to cast a vote in September 2014: teenagers who were under 18, but by the time of the referendum would fall into the age bracket of 16 to 18 years. The survey was conducted via random digit dialing across Scotland to establish a genuine probability sample, using Scotland's eight parliamentary regions as stratification areas.

Telephone surveys (like all forms of surveys) are prone to certain biases. Scotland still has a rather extensive landline penetration rate (of about 80%). However, landline access is less frequent, in particular for people in lower socio-economic situations. Indeed, the sample shows some bias towards households with parents that were holding higher education degrees. When adjusting for this bias using weightsⁱⁱⁱ only small changes emerge in the results. These changes are between 2 or 3 percentage points for any question at most – suggesting that it is not too extensive. Other key demographic variables (such as sex) were very close to population estimates. All analyses presented here are weight-adjusted to compensate for the parental education bias.

In addition to interviewing the young person, there was also the opportunity to interview one parent. Ethical approval was sought by parents for all respondents and the first parent on the phone was also asked about their voting intention allowing for an indicative comparison between parental and young people's voting intention. Please note that the sample is designed to be representative of the young people, but not of parents per se. Such comparisons are therefore an insightful indication but cannot be read as a representative figure for the adults.

The insights presented in this brief are partly derived from the descriptive statistics of the data and partly from logistic regression analysis: the voting intention and likelihood of the young person, their perception of whether they have enough information on the referendum to take a decision and their general understanding of and interest in politics served as dependent variables.

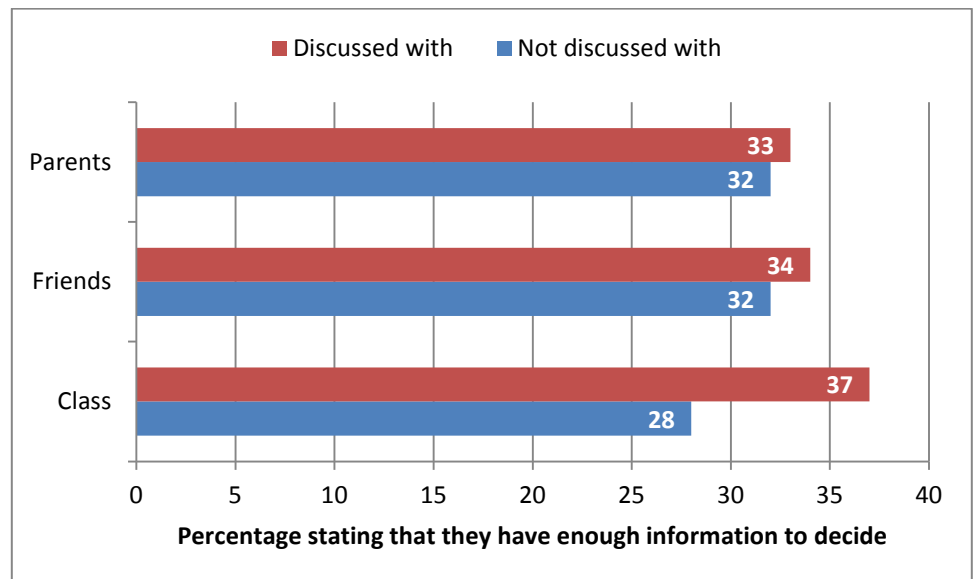
Findings

Insight #1: Young people are interested in politics, look for more information and distinguish between different information sources

Assertions that 14-17 year olds are not interested in politics and will therefore not be informed about what is going on have to be rejected. When comparing young people's levels of political interest with the average adult population there is no indication at all that their average levels are any lower.^{iv} As many as 57% of 14-17 year olds report that they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics while only 9% state that they have no interest at all. These proportions are very similar to those of adults, where 12% and 10% respectively state they have 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest, in contrast to 13% saying they have no interest at all.

In addition, young voters are looking for information to make an informed decision from various sources. Two thirds of the respondents indicate that they would like to have more information before finally deciding about how they will vote in the referendum. Of those who are undecided about the referendum question even 88% would like to gather more information before making a decision. When asked about their current sources of information, more than half of young respondents indicate to have talked to their parents (56%) or in class (55%), while 45% have discussed the referendum with their friends.

Figure 1: Having enough information to make decision by persons talked to about the referendum^v



Young Scots distinguish between the different actors they talk to about the referendum and critically evaluate the information gathered. Those who have talked to their parents about the referendum are not substantially more likely to feel that they have enough information than those who did not. Similarly, talking to friends also does not enhance young people's perception that they have enough information. However, those who have discussed the referendum in class are indeed more likely to feel sufficiently informed (37%) than those who have not (28%).^{vi}

This result indicates that it matters who young people speak to in forming their perceptions about their knowledge on the issue: Sources in school appear to be perceived as more informing and actually contributing to knowledge – distinct to parental or friends' views which are not considered in the same manner. The same picture emerges when investigating the effect of having talked to the different actors on young people's perceived understanding of what was going on in politics generally.^{vii}

The results are robust when controlling for other characteristics that differentiate the respondents (sex, age, national identity, whether they have taken Modern Studies as a subject, parental education, whether they feel close to any political party and political interest) in a logistic regression model (see table 1).^{viii} This allows us to identify whether the relationship we found is due to these differentiating characteristics or actually robust in itself.^{ix} And indeed, independent of demographics those who have discussed the referendum in class are significantly more likely to feel that they have enough information to decide.

Table 1: Summary results from logistic regression^x

	Having discussed referendum with		
	Parents	Friends	Class
Having enough information to decide	n.s.	n.s.	+
Understanding politics	n.s.	n.s.	+

In the light of prior criticism, this finding is encouraging as it implies that young people do not merely take on blindly what they are told by parents or peers uncritically.

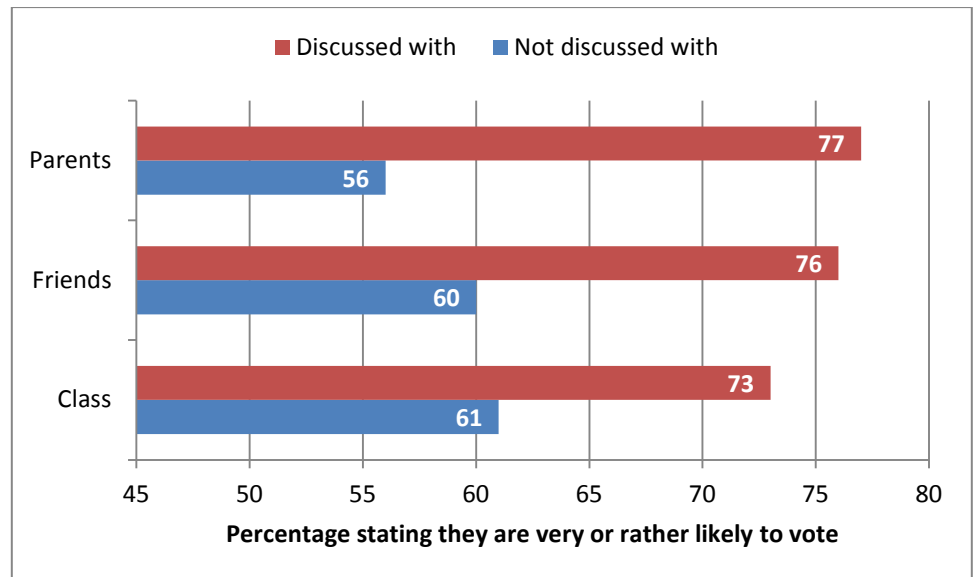
It appears that the formation of confidence in one's own political knowledge in general and the referendum in particular is enhanced

for young people when they engage actively in classes with the referendum question. However, it is not enough to simply take a class in political education per se: if we only compare students who have taken Modern Studies (a subject with elements from sociology and politics – closest to what we may call a “civics” class) with those who have not, we do not see a significant difference. The actual engagement with the issue in a classroom setting is required to have a positive effect. This is distinct to engaging in discussions with parents or friends – which do not lead to greater levels of referendum-specific or general self-perceived confidence in political knowledge.

Insight #2: Parents influence their children's voting likelihood, but there is no significant overlap in voting intention

The findings above indicate that young voters critically engage with the information they gather from their parents. However, this does not imply that parents have no influence on their children's political socialisation. Quite contrary, while parents may not provide a source of information that makes young people more or less confident about their knowledge, they do appear to influence normative political orientations of young people. Those 14-17 year olds who have talked about the referendum with their parents are significantly more likely to report a higher likelihood of voting in the referendum (see figure 2). The relationship is robust even when controlling for the other factors in our logistic regression model.

Figure 2: Voting likelihood by persons talked to about the referendum^{xi}



It thus seems that parents indeed are a key source in instilling a notion of voting as a norm. Talking to friends or discussions in class al-

so show a difference with regards to respondents' voting likelihood (albeit a smaller one, in particular regarding discussions in class). These relationships however are not statistically significant when we control for other factors in the logistic regression model. So while we generally find that respondents who have talked to others are more likely to vote in the referendum, only the strongest relationship (talking to parents) proves to be statistically significant.

Table 2: Summary results from logistic regression

	Having discussed referendum with		
	Parents	Friends	Class
Voting likelihood^{xii}	+	n.s.	n.s.

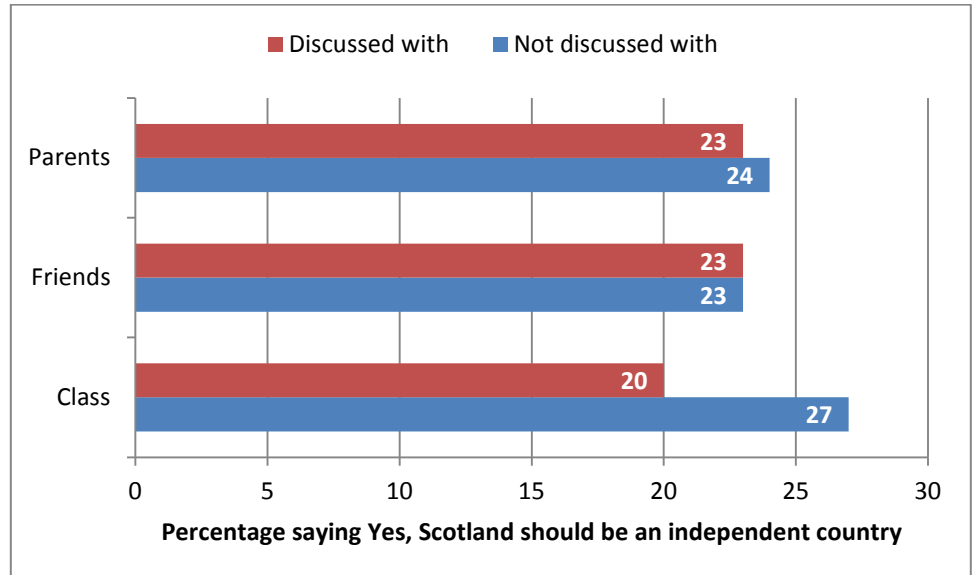
In contrast to this normative influence of parents on their children's voting behaviour, the responses in the survey do not provide any evidence for children voting exactly like their parents. Only just over half of the 14-17 year olds (56%) expressed the same voting intention about the referendum as the parent interviewed on the phone as well – meaning that nearly half of the young voters held a different view to at least one of their parents. This figure is clearly far away from any level of congruence that would suggest that most young people held the same view on the issue under consideration as their parents.

Insight #3: Young people make up their own minds about the question of independence

We have seen that the formation of different types of political attitudes varies for the different contacts young people engage with about the referendum suggesting that young people do actually develop their perceptions in differentiating ways. However, this does not address those critics of a lowered voting age who voice concerns that young people may simply vote like they are told to.

Some people suggested that young voters may not form their views on the referendum question by themselves, but only by following others' close discourse. Some critics suggested that in particular discussions of the referendum in schools would lead to biased politicisation and may influence young people unduly to vote one way or another.

Figure 3: Referendum voting intention by persons talked to about the referendum^{xiii}



The evidence from the survey does not support any such concerns. Neither talking to parents, friends nor discussions in class were significantly associated with greater likelihoods of either voting in favour or against Scotland becoming an independent country. While those who had not discussed the referendum in class were slightly more likely to say they would vote “Yes”, this relationship was not robust when controlling for other variables in a logistic regression framework. So increased politicisation – here meaning that young people talk about an important political issue in different settings – does not appear to be a biased form of politicisation favouring a particular outcome of the debate.

Table 3: Summary results from logistic regression

	Having discussed referendum with		
	Parents	Friends	Class
Voting intention	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.

Conclusions and implications

Critics who suggest that young people's formation of political views is merely based on copying others are mistaken. Our findings indicate that different domains of political attitudes are actually affected by different settings and actors. While young persons' confidence in political knowledge and understanding is enhanced by discussions in school, normatively based orientations, such as turning out to vote, appear to be influenced by parents. Most crucially, young people do not seem to simply take one single actor as information source when deciding on their orientation in political matters.

With regards to the referendum on Scotland's constitutional future young people do not appear to mimic the views of their parents – many have different voting intentions to at least one of their parents. Even more importantly, discussing the issue with different actors (parents, friends or in school) does not create biased politicisation in making young people more likely to favour a particular outcome of the referendum.

These results are encouraging: Young people are interested in the referendum, many state to have engaged with the topic through discussions with different actors. Young people distinguish between sources of information in their attitude formation and they make up their minds not simply based on one particular source of orientation. There is no evidence that they are any less capable than older voters to take part in such a decision making process. Rather, it seems that many young voters are engaging actively in discussions around this issue.

These findings suggest that 16-17 year olds can play a role in the decision of whether Scotland should become an independent country and that they seem able to take political decisions by themselves on matters like the referendum question. Beyond this, the Scottish referendum could provide a momentum of unique political interest which could be used to identify ways of bringing young people closer to political discourses.

Of course, further research is necessary to develop such forward looking thoughts. More detailed accounts of the specific sources young people use to get information on political issues are crucial to understand their attitude formation. Also, a closer engagement with young people's sources of information, their peer networks and the importance of those for the discussion will be elementary for the development of pathways to reach out to young people.

While there is strong interest by young people in the issues under consideration, we know that they are largely disengaged from tradi-

tional political institutions such as political parties.^{xiv} Working with alternative political actors to understand how these young people may engage with them instead and political parties to discuss their strategies to re-engage young people will be important to address the multiple pathways that young people seek in their political attitudes formation and engagement.

Notes

ⁱ Some examples of the arguments in the political arena around the legislative process are summarized here: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-23074572>

ⁱⁱ The survey was conducted as part of a project funded by the Economic and Social Research Council. The core team coordinating the survey was made up of Dr Jan Eichhorn, Prof Lindsay Paterson, Prof John MacInnes and Dr Michael Rosie (all School of Social and Political Science, University of Edinburgh). The team cooperated with researchers from d|part in the questionnaire design stages and for the analysis of certain sections. The survey was piloted with 110 school students aged 14-17 before going to the field and adjustments to the questionnaire design were made to reflect different understandings of the young respondents compared to adults. Details about the survey and headline results can be obtained from: <http://www.agmen.ac.uk/youngscotsurveyresults>

ⁱⁱⁱ The data were weighted such that the distribution of parent's highest educational qualification matched that of adults aged 30 or more living in a household with a child aged between 14 and 17 in the 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey

^{iv} Eichhorn, J. 2013. Will 16 and 17 year olds make a difference in the referendum? ScotCen Social Research briefing. Available at http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/205540/131129_will-16-and-17-years-olds-make-a-difference.pdf

^v Question wording: "Thinking about the debate on Scottish independence so far would you say,

a. I have enough information to make a decision

b. I would like more information before I finally decide

^{vi} It is important to note that we do not capture only one group of young people who have talked to parents, friends and in class. While there is some overlap, we find there are quite distinct profiles – with many who only talked to one type of actor and some having talked to more. Only 12% have not discussed the referendum with anyone.

^{vii} Q16. Question wording: "On a one to five scale where one is disagree strongly and five is agree strongly, to what extent do you agree with the following statement: 'Sometimes politics and government seem so complicated that young people find it difficult to understand what is going on.'" (answers were recoded for higher values to indicate a greater self-perceived understanding of politics)

^{viii} A logistic regression allows us to investigate relationships between several independent variables with one dependent variable of interest that can have two possible values (for example whether the young person thinks they have enough information to decide or not).

^{ix} The meaning of "controlling" for these other variables can be described in a simplified way in the following manner: Imagine that we were comparing two respondents that have exactly the same characteristics on all the control variables (e.g. they are both male, both aged 16, both identify as equally Scottish and British, etc.). We then investigate whether our variables of interest (here whether they have talked to parents/friends/in class about the referendum) show a difference between any two respondents that otherwise share all characteristics?

^x "n.s." indicates that the relationship was not statistically significant, "+" indicates a positive relationship and "-" indicates a negative relationship

^{xi} Question wording: "In autumn next year there will be a referendum to decide whether or not Scotland becomes an independent country. Assuming you will have a vote, on a one to five scale where one is very unlikely and five is very likely, how likely would you be to vote in the referendum?"

^{xii} Operationalised as those very or rather likely to vote compared to those very or rather unlikely to vote or neither likely nor unlikely.

^{xiii} Question wording: "Should Scotland be an independent country?"

^{xiv} Eichhorn, J. Eichhorn, J. 2013. Will 16 and 17 year olds make a difference in the referendum? ScotCen Social Research briefing. Available at http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/205540/131129_will-16-and-17-years-olds-make-a-difference.pdf



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