

The EU referendum and legislation on ‘English votes for English laws’ will be crucial for Scotland’s future in the Union

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The crucial factor in any future move towards Scottish independence is not the will of the Scottish electorate, which clearly rejected independence in last year’s referendum, but the will of the English electorate, writes [Elliott Green](#).



The UK general election last week threw up a lot of questions about the relationship between Scotland and the rest of the UK, inasmuch as the Scottish National Party won a staggering 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland. Much of the commentary on the election has rightly focused on how Britain’s First Past the Post (FPTP) system has overrepresented the SNP relative to UKIP and the Green Party, which won 12.6 per cent and 3.8 per cent of the vote, respectively, yet only won one seat each, while the SNP only won 4.7 per cent of the total vote across the UK.

While true, this fact has obscured the historic success of the SNP in this election. It is true that only half – exactly 50 per cent – of all Scottish voters chose the SNP. Yet this tally is 5 per cent higher than voted for the independence referendum last year, and also 5 per cent higher than the 45.4 per cent that the SNP received in the most recent Scottish Parliament election in 2011 (itself was the highest the SNP has ever received in a Scottish election). Moreover, it is the third-highest percentage ever won by any party in Scotland in the past century, lower than the 55.4 per cent won by the Scottish Conservatives in 1931 and just slightly shy of the 50.1 per cent won by the Conservatives in 1955.

In contrast, while the Conservatives won an outright victory overall in the election, they continued their decline in Scotland, where they only picked up 14.9 per cent of the vote. Remarkably, this marks their lowest total in Scotland since 1865, when they won only 14.6 per cent of the electorate. Of course, the decline in the Tory vote is a long term trend over the past 60 years, and thus drew little attention in the press. Clearly the strategy of the Tories to scaremonger voters south of the border that a vote for Labour would mean a Labour/SNP coalition did little to help their vote in Scotland, and tactical voting in areas where Labour was the strongest opposition party also brought the Tory vote down.

Just as interesting has been the [collapse in the support](#) for the Labour party in Scotland, which elected only one MP, its lowest total ever. With 24.3 per cent support, its share of the popular vote also collapsed, bringing it its lowest share since 1918 (when it received 22.9 per cent of the Scottish vote). Unlike the continued decline of the Tories, the decline in support for Labour has drawn a large amount of coverage as it has been much more dramatic, with the party winning 42 per cent of the vote and a majority of Scottish MPs in the previous election in 2010.

As many others have noted, the problem with the Labour party is that it appeared too left-wing in England and too right-wing in Scotland, and thereby failed to win enough support in both regions. What has drawn considerably less attention, however, was how little Miliband discussed British identity in the campaign. As the leader of the only political party in the UK with significant support across England, Scotland and Wales, he easily could have campaigned on the platform that only he could prevent the breakup of the UK. Miliband could have attempted to draw support from English voters who were unhappy with the thought of Scotland seceding from the UK, simply by noting the obvious fact that the Scottish electorate would be more likely to vote for independence under a Tory government if given the chance in another referendum.

Yet Miliband resolutely failed to position himself as the pro-UK candidate, choosing instead to focus on economic

issues such as growing inequality and energy prices. His reasoning is simple: voters in England – apart from [JK Rowling and David Bowie](#) – simply didn't care much about the prospect of Scotland leaving the UK. [Polls](#) from last year did suggest that a majority of English voters didn't want Scotland to secede. However, at 59 per cent this was by no means a huge majority, and was lower than the percentage of people polled who thought that Scottish MPs should be prevented from voting on laws that only affect England and Wales (63 per cent). Moreover, with the negative result in the independence referendum last year, the breakup of the UK was nowhere to be seen as a salient issue in pre-election polls, which meant that a pro-UK stance would not have won Miliband much support.

As things stand now pundits have speculated that there could indeed be another independence referendum relatively soon, especially if the [in/out EU referendum](#) in 2016 or 2017 sees a majority of voters in England vote to leave while Scottish voters vote in favour of staying. Thus, the crucial factor in any future move towards Scottish independence is not the will of the Scottish electorate, which clearly rejected independence in last year's referendum, but the will of the English electorate. Not only would a yes vote from England in the EU referendum immediately push Scotland towards independence, but continued electoral support for the Conservative Party and UKIP in England will only push the two regions further and further apart. More specifically, 'English votes for English laws' [featured](#) in the 2015 Conservative Party manifesto, and if passed by Parliament could alienate the Scottish electorate for the simple fact that there is [no such thing](#) as a law which affects England only, at least as regards public expenditure.

The crucial events in the life of this new parliament will thus be the EU referendum as well as legislation on 'English votes for English laws', which David Cameron [promised](#) would be implemented within one year of the election. In the end, the future of the UK in its current shape lies in the hands of English voters and MPs.

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