

# Five minutes with John Curtice: “In over 60 opinion polls, only one has ever seen a majority in favour of Scottish independence”

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By Democratic Audit UK

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*Strathclyde University's polling and public opinion expert Professor **John Curtice** recently spoke at an LSE event on the forthcoming Scottish independence referendum. Democratic Audit's Sean Kippin took the chance to speak to him. They discussed the prospect of a 'Yes' vote, the demographics at play in the election, and an independent Scotland's party make-up.*



**We have three enormous democratic events coming up: the Scottish independence referendum in September, the 2015 General Election next May, and a potential European elections. I was hoping we could take them in turn. Do you feel the 'Yes' camp can still win?**

The first obvious thing to say that we've had 60 to 65 opinion polls now, and of all of those only one has ever put the 'Yes' side ahead, and that was back in the August of last year – no is ahead and every single opinion polls that is the case the more any 'Yes' vote would come as a shock.

There are two caveats, however. Caveat number one is that 'No' votes lead did narrow during the winter, probably to the order of four percentage points or so and to that extent at least the 'No' vote lead doesn't look as solid now as it did six months ago. The second caveat is that there has always been throughout this campaign a consistent difference between the opinion polls in terms of their estimate of the level of 'Yes' support.

We have now a trio of pollsters; Panelbase, ICM and Survation that tend to put Yes support at somewhere around the 45-48% mark, suggesting it's a pretty close contest, on the side – YouGov, TNS-BRMB, and Ipsos MORI, who

have been putting it around 39/40% to around the 42% mark. Clearly, if they are right, the 'No' side still has a very comfortable lead and it's hard to see how the 'Yes' side could possibly narrow it. Certainly, they would appear to need a pretty remarkable 'game-changer' to do so.

Clearly, the expectation is that Scotland is going to vote 'No', but that exactly by how much we have to wait and see. And so, the 'No' side has been put under enough pressure over the last few months that it has felt the impetus to at least come some of the way towards some kind of joint statement about the offer of more devolution in order to shore up the softer end of its support.

Because there is no doubt that without the support of those people whose first preference is more devolution, the 'No' side will be sunk. It is a crucial part of its coalition so that they have felt compelled to at least shore up their support. Certainly I think that what is now true is that the prospect of the 'No' side getting an overwhelming victory, which is what some of them maybe hoped for originally is now probably remote.

We are talking about a referendum in which there has been a debate of 40 years, for many people it touches on their fundamental sense of identity, and the arguments are being endlessly recycled. In that context, it is very difficult to move the numbers very far, and they've only ever moved gradually, even during the winter of this year.

**I was wondering about demographics, particularly age demographics. Are the young likely to vote 'Yes' in greater numbers? If so, does that make a future tilt towards independence more likely?**

Those people aged 60-65 or so are less keen on independence than those who are younger than that. To that group, you are talking about people who first cast a vote in a time before the SNP were serious players in Scottish politics in the 1970s and for whom at least the British Empire is not just something that they read about in the history books but actually saw the sun begin to set on some of the colonies as they were given the freedom in the 1960s. So you are looking at a group of people who are somewhat more likely to have a sense of British identity and who are less likely to be in favour of a yes vote.

Thereafter, the age differences are there but they're very gradual and they're sufficiently gradual that they don't always show up in every poll given the vagaries of sampling error. And we are also faced with a rather curious finding from a couple of academic surveys which have been done on those that were 14-18 years old a year ago, most of whom will be 16 or older.

We have reached this rather curious position where the very youngest voters age group are not particularly keen on the idea. So, I would therefore then say two things: first, that there is probably a bit of a generational phenomenon to play out and indeed when those who are currently aged 65 or over are no longer in the electorate, the electorate may become a little more favourably disposed towards independence, but the effect is not going to be major.

The second question you have to ask yourself about whether this is going to come back again is if the SNP – or at least those parties in favour of independence – win another majority in the Scottish Parliament. Although it has happened once, given the proportional voting system used in elections in Scotland it is unlikely to happen again. It only happened in 2011 because the Labour Party made an enormous mistake with its election campaign. It's perfectly conceivable that the SNP will be the largest party again, and in fact they will be favourites, even following a 'No' vote to be the largest party in 2016. But, winning a majority – that's tough, and unless they've got a majority you don't have the pressure from the Scottish Parliament to hold the referendum in the first place, and therefore the Westminster Government is not under pressure to accede to one.

The crucial problem for the nationalists is that if they don't win now, when will they win?

**In the event of a 'Yes' vote, (which you have made clear is unlikely!) what do you think the party make-up of an independent Scotland? There isn't a shortage of centre-right voters there, yet the Conservatives are unpopular. Would the SNP take on that mantle?**

If Scotland becomes an independent country, it will have to create a set of political parties that are wholly independent of those that currently exist south of the border. Although there may well be fraternal relations, as there are between parties with similar ideological hues across the world. Scotland is, in some way or another, going to have to develop its own party system. In some senses, it already has, as it's very distinctive from England's.

But you do have to ask yourself two questions: and they do in a sense present something of a paradox. The first is: if Scotland votes yes, why do we need the SNP? The *raison-d'être* of the SNP is to deliver independence for Scotland. Once that's achieved, what is the point of the party? And I know it, as a party (these days) has a preponderance of people at least call themselves social democrats and you can argue about whether some of the policies they pursued in office justify that description, though some of them like Nicola Sturgeon undoubtedly are, it also contains people who are not social democrats who are indeed on the centre-right.

Indeed, one classic example who is no longer in the Parliament but he was a Minister in the 2007-2011 administration Jim Mather. I've called Jim Mather a Thatcherite on air and he still talks to me! He agrees and says "you're absolutely right!". Fergus Ewing is another. I suspect what would happen is that there would be a battle in Scotland for which organisation becomes the genus of a centre-left party in Scotland. Once the current animosities which are undoubtedly there die down, why there should be both a Scottish Labour Party and the SNP, both of them supposedly social democratic, it isn't obvious.

Equally, conversely on the other side, although Scotland's public social attitudes are somewhat to the left of England's, it's a matter of degree. It's certainly nothing like to the same degree as is true of the differences in the levels of Conservative support. The problem that the Conservatives have north of the border is that people on the centre-right do not vote for them. And they don't vote for them goes back to them being anti-devolution, seen as rather English, and has all these millstones around its neck. It would find being forced to re-invent itself as a centre-right, smallish nationalist party which people like Murdo Fraser in the party have long intended. So, paradoxically, the consequences of a 'Yes' vote for independence could be the demise of the SNP, and the resurrection of a new centre-right party in Scotland. People don't always get what they wish for when they vote for constitutional change.

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