

# What do Scots think about Brexit and the EU?



*Scotland voted to Remain, but is it really less Eurosceptic than the rest of the UK? Ian Montagu (ScotCen) looks at public opinion and finds underlying views do not differ greatly. Nor has Brexit markedly altered the debate about independence, despite dissatisfaction with the Conservatives' handling of the negotiations.*

On 23 June 2016, voters in Scotland were asked to decide on a matter of constitutional importance at the ballot box for the second time in as many years. While the UK as a whole voted by a narrow majority to leave the EU, 62% of Scottish voters supported Remain. In response to this differential result, the Scottish Government, which adopted a strongly pro-European stance throughout the EU referendum campaign, published a white paper in December 2016 espousing a fundamentally different kind of Brexit to that favoured by the government at Westminster. Following the UK government's rejection of this proposal, which involved Scotland remaining part of the single market and adhering to the EU's provisions on freedom of movement, the First Minister used a speech at Bute House to request holding a second referendum on Scottish independence as a result of the 'material change of circumstances' brought about by the UK-wide vote to leave the EU.

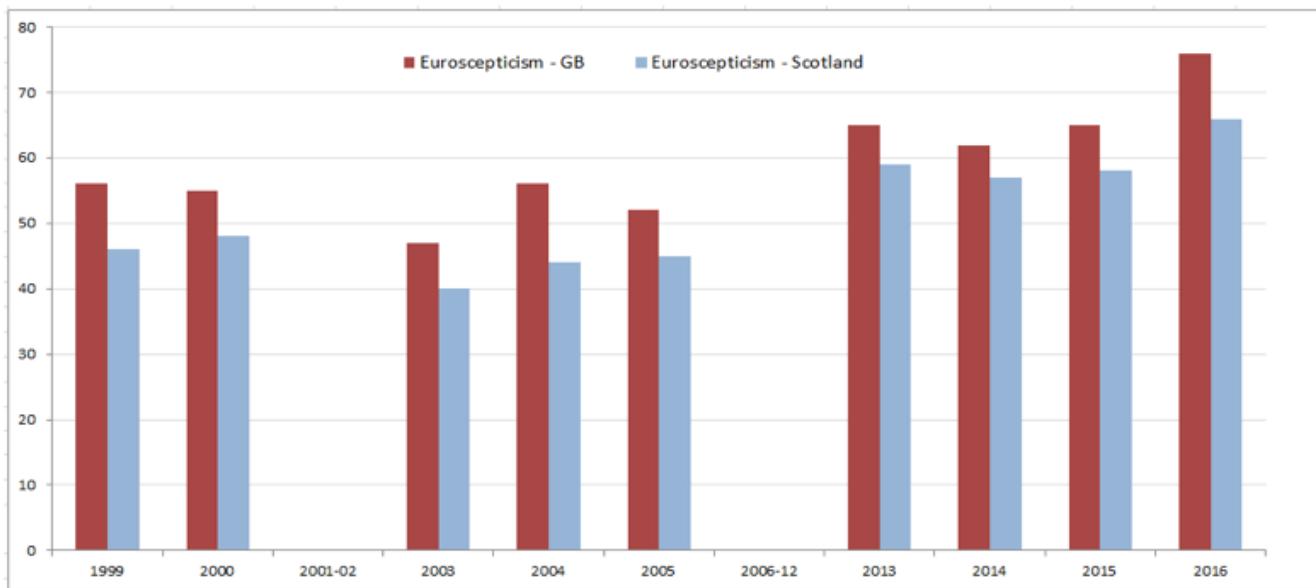


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The result of the 2016 referendum in Scotland, coupled with the response of the government at Holyrood, suggested that Scottish attitudes towards Europe were remarkably different from those held by voters elsewhere in Britain. However, research conducted since the referendum has uncovered a considerably more nuanced picture, with similarities emerging amongst voters north and south of the border in terms of what people want from Britain's future relationship with the EU.

## Underlying Euroscepticism

Despite a difference of around thirteen percentage points between the level of support for Leave registered at the ballot box in Scotland and that seen across the UK as a whole the proportion of those in Scotland who favour a *looser* relationship with the EU has not differed dramatically in recent years from the rest of Britain. According to comparable data from the high-quality British and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, levels of Euroscepticism in both Scotland and Britain as a whole were well above 50% in each of the three years prior to the referendum, with the most recent available reading suggesting that by 2016, Euroscepticism in Scotland had increased to 66% (compared with 76% across Britain as a whole).



Source: *British Social Attitudes 1999-2016; Scottish Social*

The relative strength of the party cues received on both sides of the border accounts for at least some of the apparent misalignment between the levels of Euroscepticism observed amongst the electorate in Scotland and the referendum result itself. An examination of British Election Study data suggests that many voters in Scotland (and supporters of the politically dominant and staunchly pro-European SNP in particular) chose to Remain in the EU even though they felt that Brexit might cause immigration to fall, and despite not being convinced that leaving would be particularly harmful for the economy. This can be contrasted with the situation south of the border, where the Conservatives were publicly split on the issue, Labour struggled to get its official pro-Remain message across to the electorate, and where far fewer voters who felt either that Brexit might cause immigration to fall or that leaving would make little difference to the economy voted Remain.

Brexit would...		
% voted Remain:	Make no difference to UK economy	Cause immigration to fall
SNP supporters	57	62
Scotland	43	43
England & Wales	29	29

Source: *British Election Study*

## The shape of Brexit

Although underlying attitudes in Scotland towards Europe did not appear to differ greatly from those observed elsewhere across Britain prior to the referendum, perhaps Scottish voters adopt a divergent stance on the shape that Brexit should take now that the UK has voted to leave the EU?

Once again, this appears not to be the case. Data collected using the random probability-based NatCen and ScotCen Panels demonstrates that, as amongst voters elsewhere in Britain, the majority of voters in Scotland wish to end freedom of movement whilst maintaining free trade with the EU. The most recent wave of fieldwork undertaken on both sides of the border (in October 2017) suggests that support for retaining free trade stands at 90% in Scotland compared with 88% across Britain as a whole, while the equivalent figures for ending freedom of movement are 59% and 64% respectively. Furthermore, although voters in Scotland appear to be more likely than voters south of the border to accept freedom of movement in return for free trade (63% compared with 53%), a majority believe that post-Brexit rules on both trade and immigration should be the same in Scotland as they are across the rest of the UK.

Opinions in Scotland are now also broadly in line with those across the rest of Britain in respect of how voters feel the Brexit negotiations are being handled. Although data collected last spring suggested that Scottish voters were considerably less positive about the direction in which the negotiations were headed than their counterparts elsewhere, the latest data illustrates that an increase in pessimism south of the border has resulted in a narrowing of this attitudinal gap. Sixty nine per cent of Scottish voters now assert that the UK government has handled the negotiations badly (compared with 61% of voters across Britain as a whole), whilst 55% feel that the EU has handled the negotiations badly (compared with 57% of those south of the border). Taking this into account, it is perhaps unsurprising that over half (55%) of voters in Scotland expect the UK to get a bad deal out of the negotiations, as is also the case across Britain as a whole (52%).

## What impact has Brexit had upon the independence debate?

Around three in five Scottish voters feel that decisions about farming (59%) and fishing (62%) that are currently made by the EU should be made by the Scottish government post-Brexit, a position at odds with the UK government's current proposal for a 'common framework' which suggests that decision-making in these areas should be shared between Holyrood and Westminster. However, while there is majority support for decisions currently made by the EU in devolved policy areas to return to Holyrood after Brexit, the UK's vote to leave the EU appears to have had little impact upon headline levels of support for Scottish independence.

Although some believed that the prospect of Scotland being taken out of the EU against what the First Minister has referred to as its 'democratically expressed wishes' would boost support for independence, this now looks unlikely. It appears that the group of people who would need to revisit their constitutional preference in order to push support for independence over the 50% mark – i.e. those who voted No in the 2014 independence referendum and Remain in the EU referendum – may not be so attached to the EU as to be inclined to break up the Union with the rest of the UK.

To add further complexity to the situation, while nationalist MPs and MSPs may be united in their pro-European stance, Brexit is an issue that divides the wider independence movement. Polls indicate that anywhere between a quarter and a third of those who voted SNP in 2015 also voted to leave the EU, suggesting that any increase in support for independence amongst unionist Remain voters is liable to be counterbalanced by any change in the constitutional preference of previously pro-independence Leave voters.

Although the prospect of indyref2 remains theoretically live, it seems that leaving the EU may not represent the constitutional game-changer that some expected.

*This post represents the views of the author and not those of the Brexit blog, nor the LSE.*

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