



palgrave▶pivot

**The Referendum that
Changed a Nation**
Scottish Voting
Behaviour 2014–2019

Ailsa Henderson
Robert Johns
Jac M. Larner
Christopher J. Carman

palgrave
macmillan

The Referendum that Changed a Nation

“This book is short but very sweet, in electoral analysis terms. You can pick this book up and read it in one sitting, gain a ton of fascinating insights you didn’t know, gain a depth of understanding about referenda in general and the Scottish referendum in particular, and learn lessons from the 2014 independence referendum and what has followed with all the implications still to come. Accessible and careful scholarship at its best.”

—Jane Green, *Professor of Political Science, University of Oxford, UK*

“This outstanding book provides a wonderfully detailed but accessible analysis of the lasting significance of a seismic event in Scottish – and UK – politics, the 2014 independence referendum. Although the contest yielded a decisive ‘no’ to independence, the substantial Yes vote indicated how the issue split regions, communities and even families, divisions which have not diminished. The volume shows how Better Together opponents of independence emphasised the risks of leaving the union rather than rely upon unionist sentiment. Lasting significance lay not just in the referendum. Increased political engagement and a convergence of Westminster and Scottish Parliament voting preferences have been evident. As the authors show, majorities on either side of the constitutional divide say they cannot vote for the political party seen as their main constitutional opponent. Packed with informative and authoritative data, *The Referendum that Changed a Nation* is a must-read for anyone who wants to enhance their understanding of contemporary Scottish politics and a constitutional debate which will not disappear anytime soon.”

—Jon Tonge, *Professor of Politics, University of Liverpool, UK*

Ailsa Henderson · Robert Johns ·
Jac M. Larner · Christopher J. Carman

The Referendum that Changed a Nation

Scottish Voting Behaviour 2014–2019

palgrave
macmillan

Ailsa Henderson
University of Edinburgh
Edinburgh, UK

Robert Johns
University of Essex
Colchester, Essex, UK

Jac M. Larner
Cardiff University
Cardiff, UK

Christopher J. Carman
University of Glasgow
Glasgow, UK

ISBN 978-3-031-16094-3 ISBN 978-3-031-16095-0 (eBook)
<https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-031-16095-0>

© The Author(s), under exclusive license to Springer Nature Switzerland AG 2022
This work is subject to copyright. All rights are solely and exclusively licensed by the Publisher, whether the whole or part of the material is concerned, specifically the rights of translation, reprinting, reuse of illustrations, recitation, broadcasting, reproduction on microfilms or in any other physical way, and transmission or information storage and retrieval, electronic adaptation, computer software, or by similar or dissimilar methodology now known or hereafter developed.

The use of general descriptive names, registered names, trademarks, service marks, etc. in this publication does not imply, even in the absence of a specific statement, that such names are exempt from the relevant protective laws and regulations and therefore free for general use.

The publisher, the authors, and the editors are safe to assume that the advice and information in this book are believed to be true and accurate at the date of publication. Neither the publisher nor the authors or the editors give a warranty, expressed or implied, with respect to the material contained herein or for any errors or omissions that may have been made. The publisher remains neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.

Cover illustration: Pattern © John Rawsterne/patternhead.com

This Palgrave Macmillan imprint is published by the registered company Springer Nature Switzerland AG

The registered company address is: Gewerbestrasse 11, 6330 Cham, Switzerland

Drawing on data from the Scottish Referendum Study, this book provides the first in-depth analysis of how voters engaged with the independence referendum in 2014 and what impact this has had on vote choice, polarisation and engagement in Scotland since then. The book is written in accessible language, for a wide audience, and while it engages with the wider academic literature on voter behaviour, it does so only when it helps to explain how the Scottish experience is different. The book contains eight chapters, and discusses how voters engaged with the referendum campaign, explains vote choice by examining reactions to the cues of parties, leaders and events, and compares the importance of these to calculations about risk. In so doing, it provides the first comprehensive analysis of vote choice in the referendum itself but it also looks at how the referendum has changed Scotland, exploring the impact of voting in subsequent elections, comparing the impact of the independence referendum to the impact of the Brexit referendum, and examining whether, if Scotland has changed, these impacts are felt evenly throughout it. The book challenges widely held assumptions about what mattered during the campaign, and what has happened in Scotland afterwards. Throughout, it compares the effects of the 2014 independence referendum to the 2016 Brexit referendum, arguing that in most instances, the former has had a far stronger impact on voting behaviour in Scotland.

CONTENTS

1	Studying Referendums and Voting in Scotland	1
2	The 2014 Referendum in Scotland	19
3	How Voters Reacted to Campaign Cues	43
4	Explaining Referendum Vote Choice	73
5	One Earthquake or Two?	97
6	Electoral Behaviour 2015–2019: The Multilevel Scottish Voter	117
7	How the Referendum Changed Scotland: Engagement, Polarisation and Losers' Consent	143
8	Conclusion: Now What?	173
	Appendices	179
	Bibliography	185
	Index	197

LIST OF FIGURES

Fig. 2.1	Polling on independence in Scotland, 1999–2019	28
Fig. 2.2	2014 Independence referendum public opinion and key dates	29
Fig. 2.3	2014 Independence referendum outcome by council area	30
Fig. 2.4	Referendum engagement compared to political engagement	33
Fig. 2.5	2014 Campaign engagement, by Yes and No vote	34
Fig. 2.6	Views of campaigning organisation tone, by Yes and No vote	37
Fig. 2.7	Engagement with Brexit campaign activities	40
Fig. 3.1	Percentage of ‘Don’t knows’ in vote intention polls for referendums, 2011–2016	45
Fig. 3.2	Average trust in various actors and institutions among undecided voters	49
Fig. 3.3	Party averages on scale from 0 (strongly dislike) to 10 (strongly like), June 2014	51
Fig. 3.4	Percentage trusting ‘claims made by—in the independence debate’	58
Fig. 3.5	Estimated swing by newspaper readership, March–September 2014	61
Fig. 3.6	Poll-of-polls trend, 15 August–17 September 2014	65
Fig. 4.1	Relationship between relative territorial identity (pre-referendum) and probability of Yes vote	77

Fig. 4.2	Sureness about consequences of referendum outcomes, 2014 and 2016	83
Fig. 5.1	Psychological engagement with the 2014 referendum by vote choice	101
Fig. 5.2	Flow of the vote from 2010 to 2015, by 2014 referendum vote choice	103
Fig. 5.3	Yes/No profile of family and friendship groups, by 2014 referendum vote	106
Fig. 5.4	Scottish voters reported interest in the 2014 and 2016 referendums	109
Fig. 5.5	Anticipated emotional reactions to constitutional change in the 2014 and 2016 referendums	110
Fig. 6.1	Difference in mean constituency vote share at Westminster and Holyrood election before and after 2014 independence referendum	121
Fig. 6.2	Proportion of Conservative/Labour/Liberal Democrat voters at Westminster election who later voted for SNP at subsequent Holyrood election	124
Fig. 6.3	Change in reported Westminster vote intention in Scottish opinion polls	126
Fig. 6.4	Proportion of Labour voters at Westminster election who later voted for Conservatives at subsequent Westminster election	127
Fig. 6.5	The ‘ordering’ of elections in Scotland according to the SOE model	129
Fig. 6.6	Turnout at Holyrood and Westminster elections	129
Fig. 6.7	Distribution of Relative Territorial Identity (RTI) in Scotland, 2019	132
Fig. 6.8	Perceived influence over the way Scotland is run, 2000–2019	133
Fig. 6.9	Scottish issues groups, 2016–2017	135
Fig. 6.10	Average marginal effects predicting membership of different groups within the electorate	138
Fig. 7.1	Decade of party membership in Scotland, 2009–2019	147
Fig. 7.2	Referendum <i>has</i> made me more involved, 2014	149
Fig. 7.3	Referendum <i>will</i> make me more involved, 2014	150
Fig. 7.4	Referendum has made Scotland more involved, 2014	151
Fig. 7.5	Intensity of identification with party, independence and Brexit, 2019	153
Fig. 7.6	Intensity of constitutional identities in Scotland, 2019	154
Fig. 7.7	Four tribes in Scottish constitutional politics	157

Fig. 7.8	Satisfaction with Scottish democracy during the independence and Brexit referendum campaign periods	163
Fig. 7.9	Satisfaction with UK democracy	164
Fig. 7.10	Satisfaction with democracy in the UK, by 2014 winners and losers	165
Fig. 7.11	Satisfaction with democracy in Scotland, by 2014 winners and losers	166
Figure A.1	Knowledge of legislative competence of Scottish Parliament	183

LIST OF TABLES

Table 2.1	Key dates and events in 2014 Scottish independence referendum	22
Table 2.2	Breakdown of campaign contacts by organisations and parties	31
Table 2.3	Reactions to arguments for and against independence	35
Table 2.4	Attitudes to referendum process, by Yes and No vote (% agree)	38
Table 3.1	Inconsistency in partisan and constitutional preference in 2011, and its resolution in 2014	52
Table 3.2	Left–right self-placement (%), by support for independence, 2011 and 2014	56
Table 3.3	Per cent ‘Yes’ voting by vote intention in June and debate viewing in August, 2014	59
Table 3.4	Newspaper endorsements and approximate 2014 circulations (thousands)	60
Table 4.1	Expected costs and benefits of independence and the Union, (%)	81
Table 4.2	Percentage Yes voting by socio-demographic group	86
Table 4.3	Predictors of vote choice in the 2014 independence referendum	89
Table 5.1	Brexit preferences among Yes and No voters	111
Table 6.1	Holyrood and Westminster aggregate constituency vote and Holyrood advantage by party, 1999–2019	120
Table 6.2	Proportion of voters supporting different parties at Holyrood and Westminster election	121

Table 6.3	Percentage of respondents who identify as a support of political party at different levels	123
Table 7.1	Percentage of voters (column %) ‘very unlikely’ to support particular political parties, 2019	156
Table 7.2	Strength of tribe identity by past behaviour, 2019	158
Table 7.3	Predictors of satisfaction with Scottish/UK democracy in 2014	167
Table 7.4	Predictors of Satisfaction with Democracy, 2019	168
Table A.1	Summary statistics for variables used in Chapter 4 models	180
Table A.2	Coefficients and standard errors for statistical modelling in Chapter 4	181
Table A.3	Coefficients and standard errors for statistical modelling in Chapter 6	182
Table A.4	% of respondents in each group who think the Scottish Parliament is responsible for policy area	184



Studying Referendums and Voting in Scotland

Abstract This chapter sets the scene for the entire book, outlining why we might want to study the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, how it may be located within the study of independence referendums more broadly, its unique features and possible impacts. The chapter then discusses the data used throughout the book and the general approach to analysis. It ends by outlining the structure of the remainder of the book.

Keywords Referendum · Comparative politics · Deliberation · Voting · Elections

It would be tempting to divide contemporary Scottish politics into two periods, the first capturing everything leading to the referendum on 18 September 2014, when 45% of Scots voted for independence, and the remainder tracking what happened afterwards. The referendum, after all, seems to have had a significant impact on engagement, the electoral fortunes of political parties and knock-on institutional changes at Holyrood and Westminster. Surely, if one is interested in Scottish voting, it can be seen as a play in two acts, separated neatly by September 2014.

The alternative view is that such a division is misleading. The surge in SNP support to 50% at the 2015 Westminster election appears to have receded somewhat. Support for independence has increased a little but

most polls now show it is stubbornly stuck within, or slightly outside, the margin of error of 50%. Surely, it would be more accurate to divide Scottish politics into everything that happened before and after the 1997 referendum on the establishment of the Scottish Parliament. Or perhaps before and after a first SNP government in Holyrood. Or even before and after the 1979 devolution referendum. Or before and after the UK voted to leave the European Union in 2016, a fact which fundamentally transformed the landscape in which independent statehood for Scotland might be achieved. Scottish politics has not been short of seismic moments in the last fifty years.

Nor has it been short of trips to the polls, especially recently. Between 2010 and 2021, Scots went to the polls thirteen times in eleven years, including six times in a span of 34 months. This included the full range of local (2012, 2017), devolved (2011, 2016, 2021), Westminster (2010, 2015, 2017, 2019) and European (2014, 2019) elections, as well as referendums on electoral reform (2011),¹ independence (2014) and EU membership (2016). Scots have multiple arenas in which to cast ballots and each result has the potential to exert a knock-on effect on subsequent trips to the polls. For voters, however, some results are more significant than others.

This book focuses on this flurry of voting activity, and in particular on the 2014 independence referendum as a pivotal moment in Scottish politics, examining the ways in which it has (and some ways in which it hasn't) had a profound impact on Scottish politics: on the choices voters make at the ballot box, on the extent to which citizens engage in politics and on how they feel about the wider democratic system. Our focus is on Scotland but the broader lessons—about how constitutional preferences are influenced by and influence voting in elections, on the importance of leaders and perceived competence, about how electoral systems influence voters—are important beyond our immediate surroundings. Scotland is treated here as an instance of something larger, a case study of the types of attitudinal and behavioural change that can smoulder or erupt within modern democratic states.

Throughout this book, we rely on data that we collected before and after the 2014 independence referendum. The main data source is the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC)-funded Scottish

¹ The UK-wide referendum on an alternative vote took place on 5 May 2011, the same day as elections for the Scottish Parliament.

Referendum Study, which polled voters before and after the referendum (August and September 2014), and conducted a follow-up survey in September 2015.² We have merged these surveys with the ESRC-funded 2016 Scottish Election Study, which polled voters before and after the election that took place one month before the 2016 Brexit referendum. We also draw on surveys conducted after the 2017 UK General Election, and before and after the 2019 UK General Election. All of these surveys ask about vote choice in elections and referendums, a range of other political attitudes and behaviour, and information about those completing the survey: their age, gender, education and social class, religion, ethnicity and national identity. We provide additional detail on the surveys in Appendix 1. These data allow us to examine the powerful impact of the 2014 independence referendum—and the less powerful but still discernible impact of the 2016 Brexit referendum—on Scottish political attitudes, allegiances and voting behaviour, including voter dealignment and polarisation.

REFERENDUMS IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

To understand how the referendums might have influenced Scottish politics, we need to begin by examining referendums in general and independence referendums in particular. This helps us to grasp not only how voters cast ballots in this particular type of democratic exercise, but also what impact such referendums might have on the wider polity.

Referendums on *sovereignty* are not that uncommon, with over 200 taking place since 1791, although these can include issues of independence, border disputes, state unification or the ceding of sovereignty to supra-state organisations such as the European Union (He, 2002; Laponce, 2010; Mendez & Germann, 2018; Qvortrup, 2014; Sussman, 2006; Tierney, 2012). If we are speaking of referendums on *independence*, specifically efforts to create a new state from within an existing state, that number drops substantially to between 43 (Mendez & Germann, 2018) and 56 (Qvortrup, 2014).

Not all referendums have the same legal and political effect, however. Some are binding, others are merely advisory. Some provide a mandate to negotiate independence while others are confirmatory referendums on agreements. In some, the government is a neutral arbiter without a stated

² Scottish Referendum Study (2014–2015) ESRC grant number ES/M003418/, Scottish Election Study (2016–2020) ESRC grant number ES/N018060/1.

view on the outcome, as is most obviously the case when referendums follow deliberation from Citizens' Assemblies who then make recommendations. In other referendums, the government calling for the vote campaigns for a particular side. Referendums also vary in their capacity for or openness to external influence, in terms of international involvement in the definition of the franchise, formation of the question or tallying of results (Tierney, 2012). The Council of the EU for example approved the threshold (55%) for the 2006 Montenegrin referendum on independence from Serbia.

Some referendums offer straightforward options, while others offer ambiguity on what a yes vote would mean. Issue ambiguity can be exacerbated by complex or ambiguous referendum questions. The Quebec 1980 referendum question is typically used as an example of a non-pithy question (though perhaps clear in intent) and demands a charitable definition of the word 'question':

The Government of Quebec has made public its proposal to negotiate a new agreement with the rest of Canada, based on the equality of nations; this agreement would enable Quebec to acquire the exclusive power to make its laws, levy its taxes and establish relations abroad—in other words, sovereignty—and at the same time to maintain with Canada an economic association including a common currency; any change in political status resulting from these negotiations will only be implemented with popular approval through another referendum; on these terms, do you give the Government of Quebec the mandate to negotiate the proposed agreement between Quebec and Canada?

The referendum fifteen years later had a shorter question but arguably was less clear on the consequences of a Yes vote.

Do you agree that Quebec should become sovereign, after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership, within the scope of the bill respecting the future of Quebec and of the agreement signed on June 12, 1995?

Here, voters wanting independence would vote Yes, hoping that the offer of partnership would be rejected, but voters wanting partnership would also vote Yes.

The 2014 referendum question in Scotland, as originally proposed by the Scottish Government, read 'Do you agree that Scotland should be

an independent country?', a formulation that the Electoral Commission deemed to be leading. As a result, the final question on which voters cast their ballots was 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' The options Yes and No thus became both the options on the ballot and the currency of the campaign, those opposed to independence arguing that this meant a positivity bias in favour of the other side. There certainly is evidence from surveys that, when asked a Yes/No question, respondents are slightly biased towards the positive answer—even adding the words 'or not?' at the end can shift opinion several percentage points away from Yes (Schuman & Presser, 1996: ch. 7). Probably more powerful but much harder to estimate is the purported advantage afforded by campaigning under a Yes rather than a No banner. There is only mixed evidence from psychologists on this point; in any case, it is very difficult to separate the benefits of a Yes message from those of a *change* message, since the latter also triggers positive reactions like hope and efficacy. What is clear, as Chapter 2 shows, is that voters saw the Yes campaign as much more positive. How much this has to do with the name as opposed to the contents of the campaign is hard to say, although the length of the campaign—and hence the time voters had to go beneath a label—probably points to content mattering more.

Some referendums are agreed, in the sense that the host state (or colonial power) agrees to allow one part within it to hold a referendum. Agreed referendums on independence are comparatively rare, with 16 in the twentieth century, many of them decolonisation referendums held between the end of the Second World War and the late 1960s.³ More recent examples include East Timor in 1999, and, in the twenty-first century, Montenegro in 2006 and South Sudan in 2011. Those not agreed, including many other decolonisation referendums in the twentieth century, include the October 2017 referendum on independence in Catalonia, which the Constitutional Court of Spain declared illegal the month before it was held. The Catalan case also highlights the possible consequences of pressing ahead with a referendum that does not have the

³ Most decolonisation referendums were not agreed referendums. The first twentieth-century independence referendum was in Norway in 1905. Others include Outer Mongolia 1945, Faroe Islands 1946, Comoros 1947, Samoa 1961, Algeria 1962, Somaliland 1967, with a subsequent referendum one decade later, Quebec 1980, Eritrea 1993, Quebec 1995, St Kitts and Nevis 1998, East Timor 1999, Serbia and Montenegro 2006, South Sudan 2011. See Remond 2017 for a useful analysis of the impact of referendums on the success of secessionist movements.

full support of the state. Sometimes the extent to which a referendum is agreed is not clear. The 1995 Quebec referendum on sovereignty partnership, for example, was not opposed by the Canadian federal government but federalists maintained throughout the campaign that the terms of the referendum, including the prospect of partnership, were fanciful. Agreement on process is not the same as agreeing to the outcome.

Even from this brief discussion, it is clear that not all sovereignty referendums are the same, and within this not all independence referendums are the same. In a comparative context, therefore, the Scottish referendum was a non-binding referendum that would offer a mandate to negotiate independence. Both sides agreed on the timing, franchise and question, where a Yes vote was clearly linked to independence (rather than sovereignty partnership or sovereignty association). The Scottish referendum is the only time a modern democratic state has agreed both to the process of an independence referendum and the implementation of its outcome. This point, striking in itself, is highly relevant for what follows about the heat of the campaign and the extent of voter interest and engagement. In more contentious contexts, cynical citizens could be forgiven for doubting the link between their vote and the constitutional outcome. Such doubts were strikingly absent from this referendum.

Referendums have a bad reputation for not allowing sufficient opportunity to deliberate. They can offer voters a chance to cast ballots on highly technical but low salience issues in which the costs of being informed are high, but where the motivation to bother to dig out all the relevant information can be low. A typical example of this would be some (though not all) ballot propositions, or citizen-initiated constitutional amendments. Proposition 24 in the US state of California, for example, offered voters the opportunity in 2010 to repeal complex business tax breaks gained through the mechanics of calculating taxable business income.⁴ Referendums are also criticized for serving as votes on other things, such as attitudes to the government of the day or attitudes to leaders. Here, they become proxies for government support rather than democratic soundings on the issue under study. The Euro currency referendums, for example, were seen as much as an assessment of national elites or national sovereignty as they were referendums on currency as such (Downs, 2001; Gabel & Hix, 2005; Miles, 2004; Widfeldt, 2004).

⁴ [https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_24,_Repeal_of_Corporate_Tax_Breaks_\(2010\)](https://ballotpedia.org/California_Proposition_24,_Repeal_of_Corporate_Tax_Breaks_(2010)).

There is considerable debate among researchers about whether the decision-making process in referendums is similar (Clarke et al., 2004, *inter alia*) or dissimilar (Laycock, 2013) to the decision-making process in elections. Pointing to dissimilarity, the absence of party cues and the highly technical nature of some questions means that many voters lack prior—or, at least, strong prior—opinions on the referendum issue. This heightens the importance of calculations made by voters and thus makes campaigning, media coverage and the short-term acquisition of political knowledge more important. However, many of those arguments, and their implication that voting is different from the electoral context, do not apply in the same way to referendums on independence. After all, independence referendums are not on narrow, technical issues, rather they are complex and very broad. Instead of being of interest to a small minority, they are highly salient to many voters. Almost all will at least have considered the question before; many voters will already have strong views rooted in emotional commitments like national identity. This significance to voters is not surprising: these referendums have wide-ranging implications about the state's borders but also offer opportunities to define who is included in the polity. Independence referendums thus have the capacity to be both demos-shaping and demos-creating.⁵

Where sovereignty issues are prominent, party cues are often of relevance because the structure of partisan politics already reflects the constitutional debate. In such contexts, it is typically possible to identify the constitutional preferences of political parties—certainly for those at the poles of constitutional debate. Indeed, where independence referendums have been held, we can often speak of two axes structuring partisan competition: one left–right, the other constitutional (Bélanger et al., 2018; Carman et al., 2014). In these cases, parties distinguish themselves not only by whether they would raise or lower taxes, prioritise education or health, but whether they want more or less autonomy. The zero-sum nature of many constitutional issues can make it easy for parties to identify a clear position. Parties can of course offer a precise and clear policy view on one of the axes of competition but serve as a broad church on the other. The Welsh Labour Party, for example, is avowedly centre left but includes those in support of the union as well as a growing ‘Labour

⁵ If the demos is the population in a polity, and referendums can create new borders for new political systems, then they can also define new populations, the population of New Country X. See Canovan 2005.

for an Independent Wales' movement. In 2019, even the current Welsh Labour First Minister Mark Drakeford suggested that his support for the union was not unconditional (ITV Wales, 2019). The SNP, by contrast, supports independence but was (at least until recently) a broad church of opinion on economic policy (Hassan, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2012).

Party messaging can provide the same sort of heuristic cues or information shortcuts to voters that occur during elections. But the effect on voters will not be uniform. If individuals support a political party with a clear constitutional position, and support it solely because of that position, then the way in which voters arrive at their voting decision on election day or referendum day might well be very similar, with the primary difference being the additional role of risk aversion in a referendum contest. If individuals support political parties for a range of reasons, some of which might have nothing to do with their constitutional positions, then we might anticipate that the decision-making calculus in any referendum would draw on the range of factors summarised by Liesbet Hooghe and Gary Marks (2005) under the three headings of community (or identity), calculations (including risk) and cues (including party ties).

We also know that referendums are subjected to a status quo bias, with late swings in public opinion towards the status quo as referendum day approaches (e.g. Bowler et al., 1998; LeDuc, 2003; Dyck & Pearson-Merkowitz, 2019). This has routinely been described as an instance of risk aversion and uncertainty avoidance, although it may also reflect in part the intensification of campaigning by a status quo side that is typically more 'establishment'-based and better resourced. But we also know that the popularity of campaign leaders, the perceived performance of the government calling the referendum and attachment to community can each influence vote choice. From the voters' point of view, referendums are thus similar to elections in some respects but unlike them in others—and are more similar for some voters than others.

What is more clear-cut is that referendums can deliver external shocks to the system, with consequences to individuals and the electorate or indeed the entire political system. For individuals, they may prompt a re-evaluation of long held beliefs—about the parties they support, or about whether to start or stop being involved in politics. For the electorate, they can lead to voter dealignment, a rapid rise or fall in the electoral

fortunes of political parties.⁶ For the system as a whole, they can deliver fundamental change: a new electoral system, a new method of selecting a head of state, or indeed a new state. Some of these changes depend on the referendum delivering a particular result, specifically a successful Yes result. In some ways, however, referendums and their campaigns can influence individual voters, the wider electorate and political system regardless of the actual referendum result. An independence referendum that doesn't produce a new state can still have enduring impacts on voters and on politics more broadly.

The binary nature of the debate in referendums and the fact that the results can seem more final than the results of elections that are called every four or five years can have a polarising impact on the electorate and can harden party positions that then makes compromise difficult (Hobolt, 2016). Referendums can also, regardless of their result, lead to lower levels of democratic satisfaction among those who backed the losing side. This is obviously more true in those cases where change occurs, and less true if there is the prospect, in the eyes of referendum losers, that they can try again in a few years.

Finally, it is also worth noting that referendum effects can be exaggerated. Referendums are often called by parties who are elected on platforms of change, and for such parties to win elections, they must be supported by sizeable portions of the electorate. Some of the ways in which politics appear to change after a referendum can be linked to the wider political context in which the vote was *called* rather than the campaign or outcome itself. Referendums may indeed serve largely as legitimisation devices for changes that a government or regime either wants or has accepted as inevitable anyway (Remond, 2017). In this sense, we must be mindful to tease apart the impact of the referendum and the impact of the wider political context.

⁶ If voters are aligned to particular political parties, habitually backing the same parties in election after election, then electoral change happens in one of two situations: if voters dealign, and no longer support the parties that they used to, or if they realign, and detach themselves from former parties and begin supporting a new party. The classic reference for this is Key 1949. See also LeDuc 1985, Rosenof 2003.