Minority Ethnic Young People and the Scottish Independence Referendum

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This briefing draws from an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) funded project exploring the everyday geopolitics of young people from diverse ethnic backgrounds growing up in Scotland. The project began in 2013 and runs to 2016. The project is focussing on a number of issues relating to young people’s experiences of discrimination, the ways in which they are, or are not, mistaken for being Muslim (and so experience Islamophobia as a result), and their perceptions about everyday geopolitics. The project team uses the term ‘everyday geopolitics’ to refer to the ways in which international, national, state and local political issues shape, and are shaped by, people’s everyday lives in different contexts. This research takes place across urban, suburban and rural Scotland.

The multi-disciplinary project team is led by Professor Peter Hopkins (School of Geography, Politics and Sociology, Newcastle University) in collaboration with Dr Rowena Arshad (Moray House School of Education and the Centre for Education for Racial Equality in Scotland (CERES), University of Edinburgh) and Dr Gurchathen Sanghera (School of International Relations, University of St Andrews). Dr Katherine Botterill from Newcastle University is the full-time researcher on the project.

As the period of study covered the timescale at which 16 and 17 year olds have been given the opportunity to vote in a major ballot in the UK, the Scottish Independence Referendum, the briefing extracts themes emerging from discussions about the referendum and independence. This briefing covers the period from November 2013 – July 2014.

Overall respondent profile
Of the 259 young people who have taken part in the research thus far, 150 (58%) are in the 16-20 age group and comprise of senior school pupils and also young people at college or university. Of those under 16, most are between 14-16 years of age. There is an almost equal gender split with 51% female and 49% male respondents. In terms of respondent samples, the project has five target groups and the table below shows the breakdown of...
respondent profile (to date) of the project target groups. The category White Scottish/English has been added as a sixth category on advice from the Project Advisory Group. More information about the project can be found at https://research.ncl.ac.uk/youngpeople/

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<td>International students</td>
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The respondents (91%) come largely from the central belt covering Glasgow and Greater Glasgow, Edinburgh and Fife. The remaining 9% are from northern Scotland. In the coming months, the project will be seeking to boost their rural respondent sample.

For purposes of the briefing, information has been drawn only from the 16 to 20 year old cohort.

**Research methods**

The research team has employed qualitative methods in the form of conversations with individual or small groups of young people. Conversations (interviews) were used as a way of exploring the lived experiences, values and feelings of these young people rather asking them to make broad generalizations about all young people. As such, the findings in this briefing do not reflect the views of all young people in Scotland, although there may be issues mentioned that have resonance among a broader cohort of young people.

Young people were identified using a variety of routes, including contacting local authorities, individual schools, voluntary and community organisations that work with young people, FE and HE student associations, and through word of mouth as individual young people suggested other young people who might like to participate in the research.

Each focus group opened with young people being asked to write on post-it notes what they liked about Scotland and what they did not like or would wish to see improve. The researchers provided no steer. Once everyone had written something on their post-it notes, they were asked to place them on various flipchart sheets and to group similar comments for ease of reading. They completed this exercise independent of the interviewers and entirely through peer negotiation. The post-it responses enabled the interviewers to open up discussions about issues that young people themselves were raising. Most groups did flag up the issue of the Referendum and Scottish independence and that enabled the interviewers to ask questions in this area. Where these
issues were not raised, the interviewers asked a direct question about independence at some point through the conversation.

Along with the focus groups, individual interviews have also been conducted. Individual interviews opened with finding out a little more about each young person and their background. While the emerging themes cover a wide range of areas including their views about community, identity, racism, misrecognition, and future aspirations, this briefing focuses on young people’s views about the Referendum and Scottish independence. Although some interviews commenced in November 2013, the majority of focus groups and interviews took place over the period of January to July 2014.

**Lowering the voting age to 16 has stimulated discussions about issues**
The prospect of being able to vote has stimulated discussions and there was enthusiastic engagement with the independence debate. Young people in the study wished to exercise their right to vote on September 18th 2014. The majority welcomed the lowering of the voting age to 16, and as one respondent put it:

“…this shows the development of society, like they are relying on younger minds as well...not just people who are older” (Male, Muslim, senior school pupil)

Some respondents did voice that they thought the lowering of the voting age was a tactical step taken by the Scottish Government, based on the assumption that young people were more likely to vote yes. A small minority felt that young people were not mature enough at 16 to make an informed decision. However, virtually all who could and who were aware they could vote were intending to do so. Young people appreciated the fact that the people of Scotland have been given an opportunity to decide about their future through having this referendum.

**Influences**
Most young people indicated that they received their information from the media (e.g. news and current affairs programmes); the Internet, social media (e.g. Facebook, Twitter) and quite a few indicated their parents, siblings and wider family influenced them. Peers also played a role in influencing their thoughts on the matter of independence.

Schools have also played a role in generating spaces for discussion and debate. Where schools have provided such spaces, this has enabled young people to become more cognizant of both sides of the independence debate and showed awareness of the different arguments, the constituents involved and the implications for their future.

Many of these discussions (e.g. about democracy) would appear to have taken place in Modern Studies, but also in subject areas such as English where
young people have been encouraged to write and critique the issues and also in Personal and Social Education (PSE). It was apparent to those who did not opt for Modern Studies that those who took Modern Studies felt they were more informed and confident about the two sides of the Yes/No debate:

“I literally have no clue like on the difference [between the two sides] because I have not taken [Modern Studies], maybe some of you have taken [Modern Studies] but I have not, but like I don’t know.” (Female, White Scottish, senior female pupil)

Overall, young people were very positive about Scotland, the passion and friendliness of Scottish people, a sense of local close-knit communities, the Scottish landscape and the perceived multiculturalism were all identified as positive aspects of Scotland.

“The people are the best thing ‘cause the people are the country anyway.” (Female, Scottish, African, senior school pupil)

Voting intentions
The study has found that over two thirds of young people eligible to vote are likely to vote ‘No’. The primary reason for voting no is a fear that an independent Scotland would not be economically viable or sustainable. There is concern about whether a small country can afford the range of welfare provision that would be needed to meet people’s needs, such as having an effective NHS or to continue having free higher education. Others were skeptical that having access to North Sea oil would provide sufficient reserves to sustain the future. Some indicated they felt the benefits of being part of a larger nation and having economies of scale outweighed being independent. The prospect of things going wrong and Scotland ending up with a lot of debt gave real concern. Many were also anxious about which currency Scotland will use:

“…losing the pound would also be extremely dangerous, because you wouldn’t really know what currency you are using and no one in the international market would know how to place your currency. But of course these are all completely different, you know, reasons, because people don’t think about this when they think about themselves as Scottish”. (Female, Indian, international student, at university)

The length of time it would take Scotland to regain membership of the European Union was also a topic of concern for young people. They wondered about the prospect of loss of access to European funding, about whether tuition fees would be charged to EU citizens and the impact of all of this on businesses. Young people felt that Scotland had gained a great deal from Europe and that it was therefore important to stay in Europe.
For those voting ‘No’ or who remained undecided, the lack of answers to key questions and the number of uncertainties worried them.

**Moving beyond emotions and a desire to disassociate from England**

There was also concern that those who were pro-independence were doing so based on emotions and patriotism and/or a desire to disassociate from England rather than being focused on other issues:

“We are back to this desire to have an identity that is different and this difference is largely perceived as located with a stance that, ‘I don’t want to be English.’” (Female, Scottish, Caribbean, senior school pupil)

“And I don’t see ... it is not going to give us much gain...it is just like old rivalry that it comes down to. And to be honest, most of the people that live in Scotland aren't completely Scottish anyway. [Interviewer: Is that why you don't think they should be independent?] Yeah. It is like most of us are like partly Scottish, and partly Irish and then...partly English as well.” (Female, White, Scottish, senior pupil)

“Firstly, think it’d be sort of fanciful notions of Braveheart and all of that which are pushin people for an independent Scotland. Where it really isn’t feasible and I just think you know from an economic perspective it just doesn’t really make much sense. I don’t think of myself as you know English or Scottish, I think of myself as British. And okay that's maybe from an ethnic minority perspective that I don’t have any English blood in me. But when I, actually when I speak to my friends who are English they, they are more likely to say they’re British rather than, than English. Okay, I don’t know about Scottish people [laughs] they might, they might say Scottish rather than English. And you know I have seen the odd t-shirt in, you know in Edinburgh station which says ‘I’m, I’m Scottish not British. (Male, British, Indian, home university student)

Issues of difference and England were themes that did surface on a number of occasions. One respondent (male, English, Muslim, senior school pupil) who now living in Scotland feels that the divisions at present about Scotland and England could intensify:

“You know it’s, it’s bad enough already that you know we’re qualified as English and Scottish they, they’re not the same...If you divide the two...and let’s just say you want go for a visit to Scotland if you’re English, that’s just gonna make your life even worse... at the end of the day we’re all human beings, right? I personally believe it’s not where you’re from that matters it’s, it’s the type of person you are.”

**Other reasons for voting ‘No’**

Some intend to vote no for very personal reasons, such as having family across the UK or wanting the ability to work in England without the prospect of
additional border or immigration controls – an issue that would arguably impact disproportionately on minority ethnic people. Others felt it would limit opportunities and therefore an independent Scotland would be less attractive to immigrants as people who migrate often want greater opportunities for movement and employment.

Some other minority views worth mentioning relate to those who were not born in Scotland, and their perception of the legitimacy of voting on September 18th. A female university student from Eastern Europe was not the only one from the grouping of newer migrants to Scotland to express the following sentiments:

“But I think that if I go to vote for the Scottish independence referendum, people there will think, ‘why, why is she voting, she’s not Scottish’, you know… why is she deciding the fate. No, having a say in the fate of Scotland when she’s, she’s not Scottish.”

Others had either lived through separation, such as those from Eastern European backgrounds, or who have relatives who remembered when countries were partitions, such as the partition of India and Pakistan and the catastrophic impact that it had and continues to have. Often drawing on the experiences of their grandparents and parents, these young people told us that their parents had concerns about how separation would not bring the gains hoped for, but rather generate division and negativity. These young people acknowledged that their parents’ views did influence the way they were thinking about the issue of independence.

Proud of being Scottish

The majority of young people we interviewed were fiercely proud of being Scottish (a few did indicate that they would rather classify themselves as British). Importantly, some stressed that you could be patriotic and vote no. Some did not understanding why people were intending to vote yes. One respondent (female, Indian, international student), captured this when she stated:

“We’re Scottish so we should have Scotland to ourselves and life would be much better. And I understand from that perspective that this is the opportunity for Scotland to take that chance and say, ‘we don’t know if this will be for better or worse but we at least want to try’. So I totally get that point but from my point of view, it will be nicer to be together.”

Others indicated they agreed with many of the reasons for why people might be voting yes, such as having the ability to make our own decisions about whether to have nuclear programme or not:

“I mean independence has its own good things, cause then the nuclear would be removed…and Scotland doesn’t really want to be under the Conservative party anyway. (Female, Scottish, Hindu, university student)
Leaving Scotland
A handful of young people who indicated that should Scotland become independent that they and their family would consider moving. The reasons are generally about wanting to be in a bigger country, which they felt could offer more prospects:

‘Most of my friends are saying they are going to move to England if there is independence like.” (Male, Scottish, African, senior school pupil)

“I think like I would probably leave Scotland if it becomes independent. I will leave Scotland. Because I just think I would have like a better life somewhere else. I don't think…I don’t think the country would be able to sustain itself. I think there will be a lot of problems and a lot of issues.” (Female, Scottish, senior school pupil)

Greater powers in devolution
The research also found that there is a group of young people who intend to vote ‘No', because they would like to see greater devolved powers for Scotland. Young people were aware of being politically isolated from Westminster in Scotland and favoured greater devolution powers as a useful way forward.

For these young people, greater devolved powers would allow Scotland to have the best of both worlds: making more decisions to suit Scotland whilst remaining with the rest of UK. The absence of a Devo-Max option might also push people to voting no:

“I think if they just put the Devo-max on the ballot, I think that would have been voted for. Because I feel like a lot of people who maybe want more powers, but they don't want full independence, might just vote no because they don’t have any other option.” (Female, White, Scottish, senior school pupil)

Young people for independence
For those who said they would be voting yes or veering to a yes, the main reasons are captured in the following quotation:

“Well, self-determination for the people of Scotland… to be able to choose our own path, to be able to make Scotland better.” (Female, White Scottish, senior school pupil)

Similarly, a Scottish Indian (Female, senior school pupil) concurred that:

“…It kind of makes sense to have people who live in the country like have more of a say.”
More broadly, young people felt that the people of Scotland should have the ambition to believe in themselves.

**Delivering for Democracy**

There is also a view that an independent Scotland will deliver for a more democratic society:

“I think in the long run it will be better because we will have more of a democratic society and more of what we want that like everyone in Britain wants.” (Male, white Scottish, senior school pupil)

Some young people indicated independence would enable Scotland to take control of key strategic issues, such as North Sea oil and the UK Trident programme:

“I just think we would be better off, because there is things like north sea oil and stuff and if we were independent we would have control of that so England wouldn’t have control of it so we would have more money coming in because of that. Or like umm, Faslane really bothers me, like the nuclear submarine that if we are independent then we can get rid of Faslane because if there is ever like a nuclear war or something then that would be the first place that got hit in Britain because it is where we have the nuclear weapons. So the whole of Helensburgh could get destroyed, which is a Scottish area. But England, British parliament wants to keep it just in case, but it is not in their country.”

(Female, White, Scottish, senior school pupil)

Others felt the value base (or moral compass) in Scotland was different from the rest of the UK, particularly. Therefore, if Scots were closer to government they would be able to influence their own future more constructively, particularly on important issues such as poverty:

“We are less driven by money, whereas I think that England and especially London, everything is to do with money. And nothing is to do with what is right and what is morally right. Whereas I think Scotland is a more just society”.

(Male, Muslim, school pupil)

“I have actually been pro-independence since the debate began because I think that Scotland as a country, it should have more autonomy. It should get like the power to do that. I think if we have a government that is directly accountable to us and actually has the powers to do things then it might improve the situation here a bit more in terms of poverty and stuff.”

(Female, Scottish, Sikh, university student)
Others indicated that Scotland was capable of so much more if offered the opportunities through Independence:

“I think Scotland can do a lot more on it’s own. And the reason why I say it, because I think it’s different from England, and I’ve seen people…the views that the people have are different. And so I think they’d be better off making their own decisions and, you know, being a small harmless independent country”. (Male, Pakistani international student)

This student also indicated that the flow of international students has been restricted because of immigration policies that Scotland has no ability to influence. He feels that higher education in Scotland would benefit with independence as Scotland could control areas like immigration.

Another respondent (female, Scottish, senior school pupil) stressed how proud she is to be Scottish and will be voting yes. Like many young people in this study, regardless of how they will vote, they feel positive about the future for Scotland. She however did state that her family in England would move to Scotland unlike other young people who have voiced concerns about additional border controls.

A few young people felt that being independent would also mean that Scotland would really have to stand on its own two feet and if things went well it could congratulate itself and if things went less well, it could not just blame others.

“We call ourselves Britain when it suits us, but we are like oh no we are Scotland now. Like I think we just use the term to their advantage at times and then when something goes wrong they say ‘well England did that’ and I think it should, it would be good to be independent because then it would be our own kind of thing. It would be our responsibility for the good and the bad things that happen. Rather than just picking and choosing what you think is good.”

(Female, Scottish, White, senior school pupil).

Not all young people in this cohort started off wanting to vote yes. Some have switched as a result of thinking about the issues a bit more.

“At first I was like no to independence but now that I’ve looked at it more I think yes. Well people like my friends always talking to me about it and I don’t know. ‘cause they always highlight the bad things in the news like all about the money and the currency and stuff like that. And I’m like, ‘what about the good things’. And obviously that, the money and stuff that will like I don’t know, develop over time, I don’t know. But I think it will be great if Scotland’s Independent.” (Female, Scottish, African, senior school pupil)

A few young people are considering or have started campaigning for the Yes vote.
Perceptions about Government and politicians
The integrity and track record of politicians and governments were also reasons that might impact on how young people might vote. For example, the policies of the Westminster Parliament and the Conservative Party in particular were named as reasons for separation and voting yes. The policies of the Scottish Government, for example on the removal of Trident and free tuition fees, were cited as good reasons for voting yes.

However, some young people were aware of personalities associated with the current Referendum campaign. Not surprisingly, as the front spokesperson for the Scottish Government, the name of the First Minister Alex Salmond was one that was often referred to during interviews and focus groups, although other politicians named at least once or twice included Nicola Sturgeon, David Cameron, Nick Clegg and Nigel Farage.

Some valued the fact that Alex Salmond put in place free university tuition fees, but equally felt he was now trying to split the country:

“I don’t personally like the way Mr Salmond treats the whole thing but, as I see it, he won the votes of the people so he was elected by people. Well, I don’t like the thing that he tries to split the UK. I think, mostly because of the current geopolitical situation, the west is a big [pause] is a factor of stability in Europe, opposition to Russia, and I think dividing some of the traditional NATO members such as the UK is not a good thing to do nowadays. On the other hand, Mr Salmond gave me the opportunity to study free here so, yeah, this is a plus obviously. But yeah, the drawback would be that he tries to, I dunno, split the country”. (Male, Scottish, Eastern European, senior school pupil)

Others were however eager to stress that the type of nationalism that Alex Salmond wanted to promote was inclusive:

“Cause Scottish Nationalism the one that Alex Salmond and that lot are selling is a Nationalism based on inclusion, Civic Nationalism his argument is regardless of your race, your religion, your class there is a Scottish Identity. The thing about the Nationalism that Nigel Farage is talking about is a Nationalism based on difference. So surely in an Independent Scotland then would be a bit more attractive, this inclusive Nationalism where everyone has a place regardless of your skin colour and your race and your ethnicity and your religion.” (Male, Scottish, Bangladeshi, senior school pupil)

The study did not tease out whether young people understood that there was difference between the issues of nationalism and independence.

Nevertheless, the negative perception of the current First Minister was a recurring theme. It is, however, difficult to gauge the extent to which the personality and style of the First Minister, generally perceived to be quite
egoistic, has influenced young people to vote no or whether the intention to vote no prompted a negative reaction to the First Minister:

“He lies quite a bit apparently, well that’s what, like he’s been saying all this stuff but not all of them are true, so I guess that’s not very good”. (Female, Scottish, African, senior pupil)

“I think he just wants to run the country himself like. He wants it for himself, that would be more money for him. He would get a higher position.” (Male, Scottish, White, senior school pupil)

“He just wants to rule… By judging on personal traits, his speeches wouldn’t be like anything like Martin Luther King. I think they would do better [referring to Nicola Sturgeon] but I still don’t think independence would be a very, very popular idea [No matter who it was].” (Male, Scottish, White, school pupil)

“I would say Alex Salmond just wants a statue of himself.” (Male, Scottish, Muslim, senior pupil)

The following English senior school pupil, who now lives and goes to school in Scotland, felt that the way Alex Salmond talks about independence is making people more anti-English.

“Yeah, basically yeah. … and then [people] look at us as if like we are in the wrong. When end of the day if one person does something bad from England, it affects the whole nation. It affects the whole culture. People look at us like, that person has done something bad, you are part of them. Like even if you don’t know the person, you are a part of them. And you get basically looked at for something you didn’t do, or get accused of something you didn’t do. And at the end of the day, we are a good nation. We do want peace on earth and if people do something wrong, then it is them people that are blamed for, not everyone.”

In summary
At least two thirds of the 259 young people who have been interviewed would vote no if they had a vote (58% of the 259 have a vote). The reasons given are related to uncertainties about the economy, which currency Scotland would use for the future, doubts about the ability of a small country to sustain itself, concerns that there might be no way back if things did not work out and a worry that the reasons for wanting independence is based on emotions and historical patriotism rather than pragmatic politics.

For those who were pro-independence, the idea of self-determination that would allow Scotland to shape a country committed to fairness and justice, to tackling poverty were fundamentals that they thought were important. These young people want people to have the courage and ambition to vote ‘Yes’. Young people intending to vote ‘Yes’ believe that Scotland would be able to
keep the currency and sustain itself financially. This group also wanted a government that was more accountable to the people of Scotland.

Virtually all young people in the study see the distinctiveness of Scotland. Some employ more stereotypical examples of what is distinct such as images of bagpipes, neeps and tatties, the Highlands, whisky and heather, but others see the values and dispositions that underpin Scotland to be different and worthy of accentuating. These include a perception that Scottish people are friendlier, place greater value on community and people, and would favour more policies that would deliver for fairness and justice.

There was recognition of the gap between Westminster and Scotland in terms of policy and outlook on matters such as tuition fees. For some, the solution was Devo-Max. Whilst others, fed up with historically not being heard at the UK level or with Westminster policies, are keener on independence.

Quite a few young people talked about instinctively wanting to vote yes but felt the lack of firm answers about the economic future and sustainability of becoming independent meant they would be voting no. The lack of an option to vote for Devo-Max may also push some to a ‘No’ vote.

This study is unique in that it largely concentrates on the views of minority ethnic young people in Scotland though the views of white young people have also been included in this piece. There is no indication that there is any apathy among young voters but evidence does show that young people, if allowed the opportunity, will take an active interest in political issues. Those with a vote intend to use it. Young people draw their information from a variety of sources including the Internet, social media, peers, school and parents/wider family. Those afforded opportunities to discuss the issues in schools say they are more confident and informed. Young people do not appear to find it incompatible to be both a proud Scot and to be part of the union. No one indicated wanting to opt out of the European Union and many articulated membership of the European Union as a plus.

For more information about the overall project ‘Young people’s everyday geopolitics in Scotland’ visit https://research.ncl.ac.uk/youngpeople/