

# When it comes to campaign strategy, the Ayes have it

Scottish residents go to the polls on Thursday 18 September to decide on their future, with implications for the rest of the UK's international standing and economy. You could be forgiven for thinking that this has only been realised in the last two weeks. With the natural progression of the campaign, those living outside Scotland will have noticed a spike in debate as polling day gets closer. This UK-wide spike hides the relentless conversation that's been going on in pubs, workplaces and households across Scotland. Scots aren't taking this decision lightly and we should expect one of the highest electoral turnouts in modern times. According to a YouGov survey conducted between 9-11 September, 90% of those polled said they're 'absolutely certain' to be voting.

The wake up of the political and media establishment to the realisation that the Yes campaign has a good chance of winning is, frankly, surprising when you look at the voting habits in the past two Scottish parliament elections – the SNP has a habit of making strong and late surges in the months before polling day. The SNP attracted voters with a social democratic message that preyed upon a lacklustre Labour Party, which meant that a bulk of those who voted for the SNP in the 2007 and 2011 Scottish elections did not support independence – the party's *raison d'être*. The Yes campaign of course includes political parties in addition to the SNP but it's the SNP that is the strategic driver.

## Message and strategy

Fast forward to today's constitutional predicament and the Yes campaign's message for voters isn't much different to their previous elections – a 'new school' way for Scotland in a modern world. Despite the SNP's socialist background, its current mantra is a school of politics that has bridged the far-left, centre-left and centre-right of the political divide to appeal to the mainstream.

Whether you agree with their intentions or not, there's no denying that the Yes team have run a remarkable campaign – some polls had them 30 points behind in 2013. Despite the blip of the first TV debate, the ground level campaign work has cut through to the population and the aspirational message has appealed to many Labour and Lib Dem voters. The Yes campaign realise that with a population of five million, media opinion, while influential, is not the only way to win elections. They have cleverly tapped into micro campaigning and bottom up movements by harnessing groups such as Lawyers for Yes, NHS for Yes, English Scots for Yes, and Veterans for Yes.

Developing an economic case against independence is undoubtedly the primary focus of the No campaign but it's one that has been messaged in negative terms – rather than as a positive aspiration of Scotland as part of the Union. However, the momentum of the Yes campaign undoubtedly slowed last

week due to big businesses finally raising fears of independence. No doubt there were some high-level phone calls between UK politicians and UK businesses to get big business off the 'official' fence.

Looking at the No campaign, it's of course harder to campaign for a 'no' message as opposed to 'yes' but there are other issues that disadvantage their campaign. Bringing together opposing and diverse parties, political leaders, business leaders and lobby groups is not the same as mobilising your own political troops. A logistical and organisational genius should have been sought from the private sector if necessary, not to front a campaign but to manage the troops – from the prime minister through to local activists. The strong groundwork by the Yes campaign has meant that No are fighting a campaign in which it's almost unfashionable to admit you're a no voter in Scotland. This is due to aggressive and positive campaigning by Yes and displays their strong ground level operation. This enforced feeling of shyness by many no voters is something the No campaign should have tapped into and turned it into a stronger counter campaign message – 'Proud to say No!'

The polls showing the Yes campaign as holding a narrow lead were a watershed moment and briefly kicked open panic stations in Westminster. Cue the first real and coordinated engagement by the PM, the Deputy PM, and Labour leader Ed Miliband. The Labour Party also brought out their big Scottish beasts in the shape of Gordon Brown and John Reid. With the Labour Party in prime position to save the Union by getting out their once significant party machine it's surprising that they weren't deployed earlier. Both still have strong credibility across Scotland and Brown performed reasonably well in Scotland at the 2010 general election.

## The undecided

The key to this referendum result is, of course, the undecided voter. The number of undecided voters varies according to which poll you look at – some quote at 4%, others at 17%.

The polls will no doubt continue to flick between favouring Yes and No until Thursday, but what's been clear is that there's a strong male/female divide in voting behaviour. A recent poll by YouGov showed that men now divide 54% in favour of independence, whereas women were sitting at 46% in favour. It's fair to say that broader female scepticism towards independence could in fact save the Union. The messages of big UK businesses are also undoubtedly cutting through now, hence the slowing of Yes momentum last week.

When looking at other variables (and there are many), business and economic arguments are of course hugely important. But it would be a mistake of the No campaign to

believe that this alone will overcome an emotional-based feeling of Scottish identity that could sweep the nationalists to victory.

## Future gazing: political implications

Whatever the result, an impressive thing has happened in Scotland that will change its political landscape for ever – a whole country has become politically engaged. Some things to consider as we move forwards:

Scotland: whatever the result there is likely to be some serious inward reflection by both Labour and the SNP. This vote has been the wake-up call Scottish Labour have needed to develop fresh ideas; perhaps a fresh generation, that can challenge the 'alternative' offered by the Yes campaign and the SNP. For the SNP, a no result would likely result in Nicola Sturgeon taking over from Alex Salmond as leader of the SNP. If she can hold the SNP together after a no vote, and retain the yes anti-establishment message – some safe Labour Scottish seats may not look as solid. The SNP splitting into factions after a yes or no vote is entirely possible also – which would only benefit Labour.

2015 general election: while Scotland's political landscape has undoubtedly changed, the reactionary affects in England are worth considering as well. There are already calls for increased regionalisation across England and many Conservative backbenchers are unhappy with increased devolved powers being offered on a plate to Scotland without a parliamentary vote. If it's a yes vote, whoever is serving as prime minister in 2016 would presumably need to call an election or form a new government once the formal separation processes are complete (lined up for 24 March 2016). The scenario would be particularly tricky if we find Ed Miliband as prime minister – 49 out of 51 Scottish constituencies are currently Labour. For David Cameron, there are likely to be calls for his resignation should Yes succeed.

The political futures of both the Labour leader and the Conservative leader are on the line here and this makes their underestimation of the Yes campaign all the more surprising. If Scotland votes no, it is likely to be despite the No campaign, not because of it.



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