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Elections in Scotland

2014 Independence Referendum

Frequently Asked Questions

Europe and Asia

International Foundation for Electoral Systems

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Disclosure:

*These FAQs reflect decisions made by the Electoral Commission of the United Kingdom, to the best of our knowledge, as of September 17, 2014.
This document does not represent any IFES policy or technical recommendations.*

What is the significance of the Scottish independence referendum?

On September 18, voters in Scotland will cast their ballots to decide whether or not Scotland should be independent from the United Kingdom and Great Britain, and end its 307-year long union with England. The Scottish National Party (SNP) committed to holding a referendum on devolution and independence as part of their 2011 election manifesto, and, upon winning the majority of seats in that election (69 of 129 seats), were given the mandate to hold a referendum on independence. If a majority vote "Yes" to independence, Scotland and the rest of the United Kingdom (UK) will hold negotiations to decide upon the final independence settlement, which will include a timeline for independence, as well as several technical questions, such as the status of the England-Scotland border and issues pertaining to Scottish and dual citizenship.

Following UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Scottish First Minister Alex Salmond signing the Edinburgh Agreement, the Scottish Parliament was granted temporary powers by Westminster to hold a legal referendum.¹

What are the issues being voted on?

The independent Electoral Commission tested the initially-proposed question "Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?" on members of the public, but found it to be leading. The question has since been amended to "Should Scotland be an independent country?" which was agreed on by the Scottish parliament.

The "No" camp has run on the slogan "better together" and promotes the view that Scotland is a better and stronger country as part of the United Kingdom. The "Yes" campaign believes that Scotland's future should be decided by residents of Scotland.

When is the referendum?

The referendum will take place in Scotland on Thursday, September 18, 2014.² Polling places will be open for voting from 7 a.m. until 10 p.m.

Who is eligible to vote in the referendum?

In order to be eligible to vote, one must be at least 16 years of age or older and living in Scotland. This is the first time 16 and 17 year olds will have the vote extended to them. Voters must also be a British, Irish,

¹ Carrell, Severin Carrell, and Nicholas Watts. "Alex Salmond Hails Historic Day for Scotland after Referendum Deal." *The Guardian*. October 15, 2012. Accessed September 12, 2014.

<http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/oct/15/alex-salmond-scotland-referendum-deal>.

² Electoral Commission. "The Scottish Independence Referendum." The Scottish Independence Referendum. Accessed September 12, 2014. http://www.aboutmyvote.co.uk/referendum_scotland.aspx.

qualifying Commonwealth or European Union citizen (qualifying Commonwealth citizens are those who have permission to enter or remain in the UK or do not require permission). Those who reside outside of Scotland, regardless of qualifying citizenship, may not vote. Registration closed on September 2, 2014.

Votes will either be cast in person, by post, or by proxy. Proxy votes can be cast by anyone who is 16 years of age or older on September 18, 2014 and a British, Irish, European Union or qualifying Commonwealth citizen. The deadline to register to vote by post and by proxy was on September 3, 2014.

There are 4,285,323 people registered to vote in this referendum, the largest electorate in Scotland for an election or referendum.³

Is there a turnout requirement for the referendum?

There is no turnout requirement for the referendum. If the “Yes” vote gains a simple majority (50 percent plus one vote), that will be enough to move independence negotiations forward.

What body will administer the vote?

The Chief Counting Officer (CCO) convened the Electoral Management Board for Scotland, and will be responsible for the proper and effective conduct of the referendum, including verification and counting of the votes.⁴ The Electoral Commission of the United Kingdom, an independent body, is responsible for registration of campaigners, regulating campaign spending, raising public awareness and information, and accrediting observers.⁵

How many polling stations will there be on Election Day?

There are a total of 2,608 polling places, and a total of 5,579 polling stations across Scotland, with a maximum of 800 voters allocated to each polling station.⁶

³ "Scotland's Referendum | Over 4 Million People Register to Vote in Scottish Independence Referendum." Elections Scotland. Accessed September 12, 2014. <http://scotlandreferendum.info/over-4-million-people-register-to-vote-in-scottish-independence-referendum/>.

⁴ The Scottish Parliament. "Scottish Independence Referendum Bill 2013." Accessed September 12, 2014. [http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4/Bills/Scottish Independence Referendum Bill/BBV_193.pdf](http://www.scottish.parliament.uk/S4/Bills/Scottish%20Independence%20Referendum%20Bill/BBV_193.pdf).

⁵ The Electoral Commission. "Memorandum of Understanding between the Chief Counting Officer for the Scottish Independence Referendum and the Electoral Commission." Elections Scotland. Accessed September 12, 2014. http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/162770/Memorandum-of-Understanding-between-Chief-Counting-Officer-and-Electoral-Commission.pdf.

⁶ "Scotland's Referendum | Over 4 Million People Register to Vote in Scottish Independence Referendum." Elections Scotland. Accessed September 12, 2014. <http://scotlandreferendum.info/over-4-million-people-register-to-vote-in-scottish-independence-referendum/>.

What are the leading arguments *for* and *against* independence?

The “Yes” campaign has focused heavily on the ideas of democracy and self-determination, but the SNP has also voiced its opposition to nuclear weapons in Scotland (an independent Scotland led by the SNP would see the removal of Trident nuclear weapons), and its desire to make full financial benefits of the North Sea oil and gas reserves.⁷

The “No” campaign is currently being supported by all three of Britain’s largest political parties: the Conservative Party, Labour Party, and Liberal Democrats. The “No” side has stressed the history of the union in its campaign, but has also focused on the economic ways Scotland benefits from remaining a part of the United Kingdom including: keeping the pound sterling as currency; more support for public services and benefits; an increased number of jobs; and maintaining stability by sharing resources and pooling risks.⁸

When will the results be announced?

The announcement of the results will be made as soon as possible by the Chief Counting Officer Designate (CCO), Mary Pitcaithly, for the Scottish Independence Referendum. The CCO anticipates an overnight vote count.⁹

Separate vote counts will be conducted in each local authority area, after which local totals will be reported to the Chief Counting Officer Designate, who will verify them and authorize local announcements. The final result will be made following the receipt, verification, and aggregation of results in all 32 local authority areas.

What do current polls suggest?

While the “No” camp had a significant lead in most polls prior to May 2014, the vote is currently much too close to call. What Scotland Thinks, a non-partisan site that provides information on public opinion on Scottish independence, has compiled results from 91 polls between February 2014 and September 2014 showing the change in responses over time.¹⁰

⁷ “Why vote YES for Scottish Independence?” Independent Scotland. Accessed September 16, 2014.

<http://www.independentscotland.org/content/voting-yes-for-scottish-independence.htm>.

⁸ “Information about the referendum on Scottish Independence.” Her Majesty’s Government. Accessed September 16, 2014. https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/340078/Make_sure_you_have_the_facts_when_you_decide_Scotland_s_future.pdf.

⁹ Chakelian, Anoosh. “When Will We Know the Result of the Scottish Independence Referendum?” *New Statesman*. September 11, 2014. Accessed September 12, 2014. Chakelian, Anoosh. “When Will We Know the Result of the Scottish Independence Referendum?” *New Statesman*. September 11, 2014. Accessed September 12, 2014.

<http://www.newstatesman.com/politics/2014/09/when-will-we-know-result-scottish-independence-referendum>.

¹⁰ “Should Scotland Be an Independent Country?” What Scotland Thinks. Accessed September 12, 2014.

<http://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/should-scotland-be-an-independent-country-1#line>.

Resources

- The Scottish Government ([link](#))
- The UK Government ([link](#))
- What Scotland Thinks ([link](#))
- The Scottish Independence Referendum Voting Guide ([link](#))
- Count Timing for 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum ([link](#))