Québec and Scotland's Sovereignty Referendums: A Comparative Analysis

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines and compares the sovereignty referendums held in Quebec in 1995 and Scotland in 2014. Both referendums could be considered unsuccessful, as they yielded majorities to remain within Canada and the United Kingdom respectively. I identify the explanatory variables for each result as well as provide a brief discussion on the impact of identity within each nation. I argue that Quebec voters opted to remain as a result of the unresolved status of the Quebec-Canada relationship in the event the referendum yielded a clear mandate to separate. I proceed to argue that in Scotland, the value placed on membership within the European Union was sufficient to persuade Scottish voters to remain in the United Kingdom in order to retain this membership.

Introduction

An important indicator that a state is democratic is the way its people may seek political mobilization through the use of the referendum. Referendums, as exercises in direct democracy, are consultations with the voting public about important public policy issues (Pammett 2001; Gvortrup 2018). Evidence of direct democracy in action can be first traced back to ancient Greece, where in fourth century BC Athenians who attended the meetings of the general assembly passed decrees via a majority of the vote (Qvortrup 2018). However, it would not be until the 16th century in France when this political institution resembled anything like the present day referendum, and not until the era of the French Revolution where the link between self-determination and referendum was to be more formally established (Qvortrup 2018). In his influential work, scholar Johannes Mattern writes in regards to the referendum or 'plebiscite':

The people are the state and the nation; the people are sovereign. They have a right to decide by popular vote, all matters affecting the state and the nation. A people held by force under the sovereignty of any state are not in reality part of that state as a nation. The French Revolution proclaimed the dogma that we now term self-determination […] it prescribed as the mode of expression of this self-determination [to be] the plebiscite (Mattern 1920).

While separatist referendums throughout history have been official or unofficial and successful or unsuccessful, voter turnout for this type of plebiscite is significantly higher than general election votes, at an average of 79% (Qvortrup 2013). Separatist referendums therefore demonstrate the application of direct democracy through the will of the people. These 'sovereign people', as defined by Mattern (1920), evidently agree on the notion of self-determination when the question of separation arises within a state.

The focus of this paper will be a comparison of two sub-state sovereignty referendums, held in Quebec in 1995 and Scotland in 2014, which categorically demonstrate the application of direct democracy. Belanger et. al (2018) argue that a comparative look at these two specific cases justifies itself easily, as both can be characterized as nations with distinct institutions and traditions that exist within the framework of a larger, multilevel state. Both societies have experienced the rise of modern nationalist movements in the time period following WWII, which saw widespread international decolonization, particularly in countries that had been former French or English colonies (Mendez & Germann 2018; Belanger et al 2018). This argument accurately describes the situation in Quebec, in which the former French colony wanted to separate from an Anglo-dominated Canada. The decolonization hypothesis could also be applied to the separatist movement in Scotland, where Scots began to reject England's consolidation of power and central executive authority in the United Kingdom.

Evidently, both of these sovereignty movements and subsequent referendums were unsuccessful, as voters opted to remain within their national, or federal, governing body. As such, this paper will analyze why these two distinct nations each saw a majority of voters decide to

remain within their respective states. In Quebec, the separatist movement failed as a result of provincial premier Jacques Parizeau's low popularity in addition to perceived uncertainties surrounding the future of Quebec if the referendum were to be successful. In Scotland, however, central causes for the failed referendum are due to the country's desire to remain a member of the EU, as well as fears that Scotland would not constitute a viable state on its own without the help of the greater United Kingdom's economic and political institutions. In accordance with contemporary analysis, the primary drivers of both failed referendums include voter anxiety surrounding the unknown economic consequences that would result due to removal from the existing political and socio-economic institutions in Canada and the UK (Clarke & Kornberg 1996; Fox and Dubonnet 1999; Bieri 2014; Chikhoun 2015). However, the key distinction between the two cases lies in the fact that Scotland was afraid of the consequences of leaving the European Union, whereas Quebec was dissuaded by its contentious relationship with Canada and the risk that this relationship would sour further during talks of sovereignty and ultimately leave the province to fall by the wayside.

The Case of Quebec

The province of Quebec has voted on the question of separation twice since Canadian confederation. The period of the 1960s in Quebec saw the emergence of a 'Quiet Revolution' in which Quebec developed into a confident, assertive province insistent on greater governmental powers in order to protect its language and culture (Clarke 1996). Regional cleavages based on these sociocultural and linguistic particularisms nurtured the growth of Quebecois nationalism, and radical voices in turn demanded a sovereign state (Clarke 1996). Despite growing nationalist sentiment, the 1980 separatist referendum produced a 'non' result, with Pammett and Leduc (2001) identifying a belief in the "Canadian political community", reluctance in engaging in major institutional change, as well as a simple effect for the country of Canada as reasons for this result. Pammett and Leduc (2001) further argue that the widely held respect and high approval of Canadian federalist prime minister Pierre Trudeau had an effect on the result as well. While provincial premier Rene Lévesque, leader of the 'oui' campaign, was at the height of his popularity, Trudeau also maintained a high degree of support in the province. As the two key leaders of both sides of the campaign, their coinciding popularity likely blunted any potential dramatic effects that either might have had in affecting voter outcome (Pammett & Leduc 2001).

In response to the increasing popularity of Quebec separatism in the fifteen years since the first failed referendum, Quebec's provincial government decided to call a second referendum in 1995 (Pammett & Leduc 2011). Jacques Parizeau, the 1994 Parti Quebecois leader and newly elected premier, aimed to convince voters that sovereignty would not cost Quebecers the socio-economic benefits that they believed came with membership within the Canadian political system (Clarke & Kornberg 1996). The second sovereignty referendum in Quebec was held on October 30th, 1995 and, as put by po-

litical scientist Harold D. Clarke (1996), failed by a "proverbial eyelash". When Quebec asked its voters if they "agreed that Quebec should become a sovereign nation after having made a formal offer to Canada for a new economic and political partnership", 93.5% of eligible voters turned out at the polls. 50.6% of valid votes were 'non' and 49.4% were 'oui' (Clarke 1996). It was the narrowest of majorities, but nevertheless one that prevented the materialization of a sovereign Quebec.

Scholars suggest that in the case of referendums, long and short term factors are important in explaining the individual behaviour of voters (Pammett & LeDuc 2001). While basic social cleavages can impact which side of the cause the voter will find themselves on, they decline in explanatory power when combined with long and short term attitudinal factors of the movement (Pammett & LeDuc 2001). Short term factors in the 1995 Quebec result included the perceived support of parties and leaders involved in the referendum. The low level of popularity of premier Jacques Parizeau has demonstrably contributed to the underwhelming 'oui' support on voting day (Fox & Dubonnetl 1999). Parizeau was widely perceived to be an ineffective leader and even ceded his role as head of the separatist movement to Bloc Quebecois leader Lucien Bouchard in an attempt to gain support that he himself had not been able to achieve (Fox & Dubonnet 1999; Pammett & LeDuc 2001). Polling data among voters proved that if Parizeau's support had been as great as René Lévesque's in 1980, then the sovereigntists would have secured enough extra votes for the referendum to have narrowly passed

(Clarke & Kornberg 1996).

Long term factors affecting voters attitudes towards the separatist movement involved the uncertainty of the relationship between a sovereign Quebec and Canada, as Quebecers were assured that the province would become a sovereign nation even in the result that talks regarding the proposed new political and economic relationship fell through after the one year time limit expired (Pammett & LeDuc 2001). Support for the sovereigntists had grown tremendously as voting day drew nearer, driving federal politicians to break their strategy of silence and appeal directly to separatists in Quebec. Prime minister Jean Chrétien gave an emotional speech in parliament where he declared that he would not allow Canada to be "shattered by a narrow majority on an ambiguous question" and pleaded to Quebecers on national television to "not take the fatal step of destroying Canada" (Clarke & Kornberg 1996). Finance minister Paul Martin forcefully declared that Canada would not enter into economic partnership with a sovereign Quebec, which would be treated as foreign post-separation (Clarke & Kornberg 1996). In the last weekend before the referendum, thousands of Canadians participated in a massive rally in Montreal to demonstrate the depth of their affect for a united Canada. While sovereignty was indeed a popular concept among Quebecers, 63% of respondents in a survey declared that they were either very or somewhat favourably disposed to sovereignty combined with a continuing association with Canada (Clarke & Kornberg 1996). Since this did not appear to be possible according to top federal officials, it appears as though enough of

Quebecers backed out of their 'oui' support at the crucial time of the vote to instead support a Canada united. 46% of voters polled were in support of outright independence, which seemed at the time to be the only probable outcome if the referendum had been successful (Clarke & Kornberg 1996).

The Case of Scotland

Nearly two decades later, the people of Scotland were given their own opportunity to choose whether or not they wanted to remain a part of the United Kingdom. This referendum was different from Quebec's as it was arranged by the Scottish government in conjunction with the national government of the UK. Its outcome was to be a legally binding, decisive expression of the views of the people in Scotland, and a result that everyone was to respect (Tierney 2013; Bieri 2014). On September 18, 2014, 84.6% of Scots turned out to answer the question 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' and 55.3% answered 'no' (Chikhoun 2015).

The separatist sentiment in Scotland was first mobilized in the interwar years, with the forming of Scotland's Scottish National Party (SNP) in 1934 (Duclos 2020). The SNP, an ideologically coherent, left-wing party, would eventually form a majority government within Scotland's national government and use this majority result as a claim to legitimize the desire to hold a separatist referendum (Bieri 2014; Duclos 2020). The notion of Scottish independence grew stronger at the advent of the 21st century, when key actors in the movement began to promote distinct identities and emphasize differences between Scottish and English societies, serving to further legitimize claims for self-determination (Bieri 2014). The economic crisis in Europe also fanned the desire for autonomy, as the movement believed that independence would bring Scotland certain advantages in the global political economy (Bieri 2014).

The question remains of why more than half of Scottish voters on that September day voted to remain in the United Kingdom. Arguably the most significant reason was the crucial question of whether a newly independent Scotland would be able to retain EU membership or be forced to submit a new application (Bieri 2014). Never before had a part of an EU member state broken away while simultaneously seeking to remain within the EU (Tierney 2013). The EU commission president at the time said that a new application would indeed be required, and the Spanish prime minister, who had been dealing with separatist sentiment within his own country, publicly stated that a country that separated from an EU member would remain outside of the EU (Chikhoun 2015). The commission president concurred that it would be difficult, if not impossible, to get the approval of all 28 member states, as Spain itself was so publicly against sub-state separation (Chikhoun 2015).

General fears that Scotland would not constitute a viable state also prevailed among the Scottish people, and this great uncertainty of the economic future of Scotland likely dissuaded voters from risking it all to become independent (Chikhoun 2015). Fears that their lives would change in a negative way by being

forced to leave the EU, as well as having to find a new currency, likely contributed to the majority 'no' result (Chikoun 2015). The Scottish independence movement dreamt of a future in which a sovereign Scotland employed a Scandinavian style welfare state with an alternative model to the Westminster system of government (Bieri 2018; Chikhoun 2015). However, the opposition was weary that Scotland would not be able to finance this type of state on its own, arguing that partnership with the UK was the best way for Scotland to prosper (Chikoun 2015). In fact, scholar Chris Kostov asserts that in modern times, the dominant form of political nationalism in Scotland was in truth unionist and not separatist (Duclos 2020). In the Scottish context, unionist nationalism means that political actors do not wish to challenge the legitimacy of an Anglo-Scottish union, but instead want to improve its quality. This is accomplished by defending Scotland's place as a partner to England "equal in dignity", while still remaining within the UK's existing institutional framework (Duclos 2020). Ultimately, the demands for independence served as leverage for the Scottish leaders to apply pressure on the central government in London (Bieri 2018). The promise of additional taxation powers, jurisdictions, and autonomy rights for Scotland, secured by the SNP, served to further diminish support for sovereignty among the voting Scots (Bieri 2018). It is likely that these political gains for the Scottish people, combined with the risk of losing EU membership, and the socioeconomic security that comes with being a member of an economic hegemon, convinced the people of Scotland to remain united.

National Identity and Multiculturalism Scotland and Quebec

While the debate over Quebec's political status has been near the forefront of Canadian politics for decades, the same cannot be said for the Scottish question in UK politics (Belanger et al. 2018). National identity remains a major dimension within independence movements with special regards to diversity and language, and both the SNP and Quebec separatist parties have strongly emphasized immigration and integration in their party manifestos (Belanger et al. 2018). However, each have taken different stances with regard to this integration. The SNP emphasizes the need to recognize and accommodate the cultural and religious diversity that migrants bring to Scotland, whereas the Parti Quebecois has placed more emphasis on the need for migrants to assimilate to a secular society mainstream in Quebec, learn French, and adopt Quebecois values in order to be successfully integrated into its community (Belanger et al. 2018). Whereas Gaelic is spoken by less than 1% of the population and is seen as a peripheral issue in Scotland, the French language is regarded as a cornerstone of Quebec identity, and fears of francophones becoming a minority in their own province have, in part, driven the more assimilationist approach to Quebec culture (Belanger et al. 2018). The sovereignty question in Quebec was a much more polarizing issue among voting Quebecers partly because Canada's multiculturalist approach was a core grievance among nationalists (Belanger et al. 2018). The 'yes'/'no' margin in the Scotland referendum was noticeably wider than Quebec's, and at the time Scotland and the rest

of the UK shared a more similar position on the matter of multiculturalism (Belanger et al. 2018). It appears as though diversity and cultural integration was less central of a concern for the independence movement in Scotland when compared to Quebec.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the key factor for both failed referendums can be understood as the uncertainty of what the future might have held for an independent Scotland or an independent Quebec. Scottish sovereigntists imagined a socialist centric state where EU membership is valued. However, the people of Scotland had the cognizance to recognize that as a small population, they would not have had the resources to independently achieve the type of socio-economic welfare state that they envisioned in the event of independence. Quebecers on the other hand very narrowly opted to remain a part of Canada. This was because the alleged economic and political partnership that Parizeau was proposing had not actually been formally arranged with the Canadian federal leadership. In fact, just two weeks prior to the vote, Paul Martin announced that one million jobs would be jeopardized in the event that the referendum yielded a 'oui' result (Fox & Dubonnet 1999). These fears of economic turmoil combined with general distrust and dislike for premier Parizeau stirred enough uncertainty among Quebecers for them to just barely reject independence, seemingly putting the issue to rest. Scotland and Quebec remain two cases in which distinct cultural nations exist within a broader economic and political territory. At different points in history, both questioned their role and relationship as members of a diverse state, and considered the idea of forging a path where they could be the arbiters of their own future. In the end, both opted to remain.

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