**Does Scotland Want IndyRef2 This Year?**

POSTED ON 17TH JANUARY 2020 BY JOHN CURTICE

The outcome of [**last month’s general election**](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2019_United_Kingdom_general_election) has paved the way for a constitutional confrontation between the UK and the Scottish Governments. The success of the Conservatives in winning an overall parliamentary majority of 80 has ensured that the UK will leave the EU at the end of this month. But equally, the success of the SNP in winning 80% of the seats north of the border has emboldened it to pursue its demand that Scotland, where a majority voted in 2016 to Remain in the EU, should now be able to hold a referendum on becoming an independent country.

The first steps in that battle have now been played out. On December 19, the Scottish Government [**published a document**](https://www.gov.scot/publications/scotlands-right-choose-putting-scotlands-future-scotlands-hands/) outlining the case for holding another independence ballot and [**made a formal request**](https://www.gov.scot/news/independence-referendum-transfer-of-power-demanded/) to the UK government that it should enter into talks with a view to its authorising a referendum that would take place this year. On January 14, [**the Prime Minister replied**](https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/857586/Nicola_Sturgeon_20200114.pdf) rejecting that request. We now await to see [**what steps**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-50813510) the Scottish Government will take in response to that refusal.

In pursuing its case, the SNP argues that it has a ‘mandate’ to hold another referendum because [**its manifesto**](https://d3n8a8pro7vhmx.cloudfront.net/thesnp/pages/5540/attachments/original/1461753756/SNP_Manifesto2016-accesible.pdf?1461753756) for the 2016 Scottish Parliament election stated that Holyrood should be able to hold another ballot ‘if there is a significant and material change in the circumstances that prevailed in 2014, such as Scotland being taken out of the EU against our will’. That mandate, it argues, has been further strengthened by its success in winning 80% of Scotland’s seats in the 2019 general election, a result that in its view affirms its claim that a majority of people in Scotland now want to be able to revisit the issue.

In contrast, the UK government argues that the Scottish Government and SNP politicians indicated at the time of the 2014 independence referendum that the ballot would be a [**‘once in a generation’ event**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-51120175), and that they should stick to that commitment. [**Some critics**](https://www.scotlandinunion.co.uk/post/majority-of-scots-vote-for-pro-uk-parties) of the Scottish Government’s stance have also argued that, as the SNP won less than half the vote in Scotland in December’s UK general election (45%), the outcome did not demonstrate that a majority of Scots now want another ballot to be held.

But, of course, inferring people’s attitudes towards a specific policy proposal on the basis of the outcome of an election is always a highly dubious exercise. References to seats won ignores the potentially distorting effect of the way in which the electoral system turns votes into seats. Citing shares of the vote, meanwhile, ignores the fact that voters have to choose at an election between packages of policy proposals, and may not endorse every detail of the manifesto of the party for which they voted.

There is, however, rather more direct evidence from the polls on what people in Scotland think about the prospect of holding another ballot in the near future. During the election, two polls asked their respondents directly about the Scottish Government’s proposal that a referendum should be held in the next year, or at least before the next Scottish Parliament election that is due to be held in May 2021.

One of these polls came from **[Ipsos MORI](https://www.ipsos.com/ipsos-mori/en-uk/scotland-voting-intention-snp-pole-position-run-election" \t "_blank)**, the other from **[Panelbase](https://www.drg.global/our-work/political-polls/panelbase-scotland-poll-6th-december-2019/" \t "_blank)**. [**The former asked**](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/do-you-support-or-oppose-a-second-referendum-on-scottish-independence-being-hel/) people whether they supported or opposed holding another independence referendum within the next year. While 42% said that they supported the idea, as many as 50% indicated that they were opposed. Meanwhile, **[Panelbase reported](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/do-you-support-or-oppose-holding-a-referendum-on-scottish-independence-before-t/" \t "_blank)** that only 38% backed the idea of holding a referendum before the next Scottish Parliament election, while as many as 51% were opposed. On the basis of this evidence it is difficult to argue that there is a clear majority support for holding a referendum on the timescale proposed by the Scottish Government.

But that, of course, does not mean that people necessarily think Scotland should have to wait a ‘generation’ before another ballot is held. Ever since the EU referendum **[Panelbase has been asking people on a regular basis](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/when-do-you-think-anotherscottish-independencereferendum-should-be-held-asked-a/" \t "_blank)** whether or not there should be an independence ballot at some point in the wake of the UK’s withdrawal from the EU – either while the negotiations are taking place or once they have concluded. The responses to this question immediately after the EU referendum suggested that opinion was more or less evenly divided between those who did not think there should be an independence referendum at all and those who thought there should be one at some point in the wake of Brexit, albeit maybe not until the negotiations had concluded. Support for a ballot fell, however, in the wake of the reverse that the SNP suffered in the 2017 general election and the First Minister’s decision to put [**the idea of holding another ballot on ice**](https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-40415457). However, more recently opinion has become more or less evenly divided on the subject once again, a mood that was confirmed when Panelbase asked the question [**once more during the election campaign**](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/when-do-you-think-anotherscottish-independencereferendum-should-be-held-asked-a/).

A similar trend has also been [**identified by YouGov**](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/in-principle-do-you-think-there-should-or-should-not-be-a-referendum-on-scottis/) in response to a question that asks whether another referendum should be held within the next five years. Two years ago, a clear majority rejected that proposition, but more recent readings suggest that opinion is now more evenly divided about the idea. Meanwhile, when shortly before the election **[Survation asked](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/when-if-at-all-do-you-think-there-should-be-another-referendum-on-scottish-inde/" \t "_blank)** when another independence referendum should be held, 44% said one should be held within the next five years, slightly more than the 41% who said that a ballot should not be held for at least ten years.

Of course, we might wonder exactly what timetable people have in mind when they say a referendum should be held when the Brexit negotiations have concluded. But given that the UK government is determined that the UK’s long-term relationship with the EU should be settled by the end of this year, it might be thought that those expressing that view would consider it appropriate to hold a ballot at some point relatively soon thereafter. In any event, it does seem clear that there has been an increase in support for holding a referendum within a rather shorter time frame than ‘a generation’, even if only to leave the country more or less split down the middle on the subject.

That this is the picture we uncover should not surprise us. After all, [**most polls suggest**](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/questions/how-would-you-vote-in-the-in-a-scottish-independence-referendum-if-held-now-ask/?removed) that support for independence itself is (after leaving aside Don’t Knows) close to 50% too – and attitudes towards whether a referendum should be held largely reflect people’s views about independence itself. For example, Ipsos MORI found that as many as 92% of those who say they would vote No in a second referendum are opposed to another ballot within the next year, while 86% of those who would vote Yes are in favour. It is the fact that Yes supporters are slightly more hesitant in their support for a second referendum than No supporters are in their opposition that ensures that, when it comes to an immediate ballot at least, opponents somewhat outnumber supporters.

This suggests that much now rests on how public opinion in Scotland reacts to Brexit being put in place. Does it result in [**a further swing**](https://whatscotlandthinks.org/2019/10/can-the-snp-meet-the-three-conditions-for-an-independence-yes-vote/) in favour of independence beyond that already in evidence last year such that the polls start to register majority support for the idea on a regular basis? If so, it can be anticipated that a majority for holding another ballot is likely to emerge too. Or does the UK government persuade people north of the border is going to work out to the country’s advantage, in which case maybe the increased support for independence that was in evidence last year could melt away – and with it support for another ballot. Neither side in the debate can be sure of what the answers to these crucial questions will be.