



Guest Editorial

Young people and the Scottish Independence Referendum



On 18th September 2014, the electorate in Scotland's Independence Referendum were asked the question 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' 55.3% of those who voted answered 'no' to this question; turnout was very high at 84.59%. Around 3% of Scotland's population are aged 16 or 17 and the Referendum was the 'first time that people of that age [took] part in a major public ballot in Scotland' (Eichorn, 2013: 3). This therefore seems an appropriate time to (re)consider the place of young people in politics and in political geography.

For over ten years now, a small group of scholars have been emphasising the ways in which young people are a part of, rather than apart from, politics and political geographies (e.g. Hopkins & Alexander, 2010; Kallio & Häkli, 2011; Philo & Smith, 2003). This work has drawn attention to a range of issues including: how young Latinos in Salt Lake City raise questions and reframe debates about the politics of immigration (Cahill, 2010); how discourses of nationalism are reinforced to young people in school classrooms in Argentina and the Falkland Islands (Benwell, 2014); how young Muslim men engage with political issues (including voting and formal politics) in promoting a sense of belonging in Scotland (Hopkins, 2007); and how young people engage with citizenship and democracy in the context of the 'Arab Awakening' in the Middle East and North Africa in 2011 (Staeheli & Nagel, 2012). Work about young people and politics now includes scholarship about formal politics (e.g. voting), research about activism and protest (e.g. Hopkins & Todd, 2015) as well as concerns about critical geopolitics (e.g. Benwell & Hopkins, 2015; Hörschmann, 2008) and transnational citizenship (Hörschmann & El Rafaie, 2014). Furthermore, such issues are also generating interest amongst political scientists (e.g. Sloam, 2012).

In one sense then, there is plenty of work about young people, politics and political geography; reminding political geographers (yet again), that young people *are* active political agents – who engage with and respond to political issues in a whole host of interesting and creative ways – feels rather repetitive of the key arguments contained in the rich vein of scholarship that is summarised above. However, the opening up of the vote to 16 and 17 year olds provides a useful opportunity to revisit the topic of young people's political geographies and to consider what difference the inclusion of young people in the Referendum makes to Scottish politics and to debates about political engagement and participation. I now reflect on the extension of the franchise in the Scottish Independence Referendum to include 16 and 17 year olds, and raise questions about the impact of this significant political change for how we conceive of, and understand, political geography.

In early 2012, a public consultation was launched by the Scottish Government about the Referendum (SPiCe, 2013). 30,219 responses

were submitted and one of the key questions in the consultation (question 7) focused on the extension of the franchise to include 16 and 17 year olds. 24,777 respondents commented specifically on this issue, with 56% generally agreeing with the proposal. For those in support of this move, they made reference to the fact that young people are allowed to marry, work (and therefore pay tax), and join the army at 16 (and so should be entitled to vote). Others who submitted a response to the consultation argued that young people should be able to vote as they are the future of Scotland and some suggested that extending the franchise may encourage young people to become more engaged with political issues and in the political process. However, those who opposed this move were suspicious that it was motivated by the Scottish National Party (SNP) government's view that the young were more likely to vote for independence. Some queried the maturity of young people to participate in the Referendum (and suggested they would be easily influenced by friends, family members and school teachers). Some respondents also pointed out that 16 and 17 year olds are not legally permitted to purchase alcohol or cigarettes, so questioned why they should be given the vote. 11 organisations that work with, or are run by, young people also responded and 10 of these supported the move to include 16–17 year olds. The eleventh expressed mixed views. The SNP, Scottish Liberal Democrats and Scottish Green Party all agreed with lowering the voting age to include 16 and 17 year olds (Griesbach, Robertson, Waterton, & Birch, 2012).

Those opposed to the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds often assume that young people are disinterested in, and disengaged from, politics. However, based upon telephone survey research, Eichorn (2013: 1) notes that 'young people in Scotland do not appear to be any less interested in politics than the overall population, though they are much less likely to identify with a political party'. An additional concern expressed by those opposing the inclusion of 16 and 17 year olds focused on the likelihood that young people's views would be too easily shaped by their parents, teachers or peers (Griesbach et al., 2012). Eichorn (2014) was able to interview young people in addition to consulting their parents about their voting intentions and found that 44% of the young people were planning on voting differently from their parents, although parents clearly have some influence in terms of political socialisation. However, this raises important – as yet unanswered questions – about the role of the family, peer group and others – in shaping the political views and voting practices of young people. Political scientists have been debating the influence that the age profile of the electorate has on the outcome of elections (e.g. Berry, 2014; Davidson, 2014), drawing upon debates about intergenerational relations. Political geographers could usefully therefore engage with debates about relational geographies of age and intergenerationality

(Hopkins & Pain, 2007) and geographies of youth, education and the family (e.g. Hopkins, 2010) in order to explore the multiple and complex influences on young people's political engagements, voting intentions and electoral practices.

In order for 15 year olds who would be 16 on the day of the Referendum to register – as they are not permitted to be included on the Electoral Register – it was necessary to create a Register of Young Voters. The Scottish Independence Referendum (Franchise) Bill – which included provision for the creation of this Register – received Royal Assent in 2013. Although the Scottish Independence Referendum was one of the first major ballots to include 16 and 17 year olds, there are a number of other examples of the franchise being extended to include 16 and 17 year olds in the UK or in self-governing dependencies of the Crown. In 2006, the Isle of Man lowered its voting age to 16 (from 18) and in 2007 Jersey and Guernsey did the same in preparation for their elections in 2008. There have also been pilot Health Board elections in 2010 in Fife and in Dumfries and Galloway where, for the first time in Scotland, the vote was extended to 16 and 17 year olds. These changes – and the motivations behind them – are important for political geographers to consider in their work in order to comprehend the complexity of electoral geographies, party politics and voting practices.

I am involved in ongoing collaborative research about the everyday geopolitics of young people growing up in Scotland who are from diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds. By the time of the Referendum, we had conducted focus groups and interviews with around 300 young people (aged 12–25) from across Scotland. Although some claimed to have no interest in politics, the vast majority were well-informed about the Referendum and were attuned to the different arguments about the benefits and risks of independence. Most young people involved in this research claimed that the information they accessed about the Referendum was from a range of sources including TV news programmes and social media (e.g. Facebook and Twitter), as well as from family and friends. Schools played an important role in generating discussions about this, whether through informal discussions with peers or for those who selected Modern Studies, a subject in the Scottish education system that focuses on contemporary political and social issues. This demonstrates the potential importance of both social media and educational institutions as key spaces for political geographers to engage with in seeking to include young people in their analyses of electoral geographies and political participation.

It was clear from the coverage of the Scottish Independence Referendum that many people – including young people – were deeply involved in, and engaged by, the whole process. Many were active in local campaigning, regularly participating in debates about the Referendum; something about the Scottish Independence Referendum clearly captured the imagination of the Scottish people. From the perspective of young people, the Referendum offered them the opportunity to have a say in a major political decision, and this was often the first chance they had to participate in such a significant decision. The continuing austerity cuts of the UK Government – which are continuing to harm young people's life chances through the withdrawal of funding from a variety of frontline services, educational and employment opportunities – provided a significant, but deeply unfortunate, backdrop from which young people could envision a more hopeful future; a future where they could freely access educational and employment opportunities and be provided with much-needed public services without the risk of further cuts.

The Scottish Independence Referendum demonstrates the benefits of opening up the vote to young people and the ways that a politics of hope may be harnessed to maximise youth political participation; moreover, it highlights the different spaces in which political debate takes place – on social media, in the school classroom, amongst peers and at home (see Pinkerton & Benwell,

2014). Following the call of the Chair of the Scottish Youth Parliament, Louise Cameron, perhaps the lowering of the voting age to 16 across the UK and elsewhere will enable young people to become fully recognised as political agents and for political geographers to integrate consideration of age – the agency of young people – into their work.

Conflict of interest

None declared.

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