

# Minding the gap

## Women's views of independence in 2014



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# Summary

**Women are less likely than men to say they will vote Yes to Scottish independence this September. This paper uses data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) to explore this ‘gender gap’. It looks at where the gap is greatest and what, if anything, might explain it.**

## How big is the gender gap?

The ‘gender gap’ in men and women’s support for independence has arguably become one of the best known and most frequently discussed research findings in the lead up to Scotland’s referendum in September 2014. Both sides of the referendum debate now have organisations focused specifically on bringing their case to women (Women for Independence and Better Together Women). Meanwhile, media commentators have suggested that women may ‘hold the key’ to the outcome of September’s vote.<sup>1</sup>

ScotCen’s Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA)<sup>2</sup> – the only survey to have asked the same question on support for independence since 1999<sup>3</sup> – has consistently found a ‘gender gap’ of around 6 to 7 percentage points (Table 1). In 2014, based on fieldwork conducted from 12<sup>th</sup> May to 17<sup>th</sup> July, the gap in the proportion of men and women who say that independence is their preferred option was a particularly sizeable 12 points.

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<sup>1</sup> See for example Libby Brooks writing in The Guardian, 2 May 2014 ‘Scottish independence debate: women hold the key far from Westminster’, online at <http://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/02/scottish-independence-debate-women-key-far-westminster>

<sup>2</sup> For a brief summary of SSA methods, see Curtice, J (2014) *Has the Referendum Campaign Made a Difference?*, ScotCen Social Research

<sup>3</sup> Our question asks people to choose from 5 options which position best describes how they think Scotland should be governed. The first 2 options (combined in row 1 above) cover independence, either within or without the European Union; the second 2 (combined in row 2 above) relate to devolution, either with or without tax-raising powers; and the final option (row 3 above) refers to the status quo ante (Scotland remaining within the UK, without its own parliament).

		99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	09	10	11	12	13	14
		%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Independence</b>	<b>Men</b>	30	34	31	35	27	35	38	34	29	31	25	36	27	32	39
	<b>Wom.</b>	24	27	24	25	24	31	32	27	19	25	22	29	20	26	27
<b>Devolution</b>	<b>Men</b>	57	53	57	48	51	43	41	51	58	57	61	57	58	53	48
	<b>Wom.</b>	60	57	61	55	60	47	46	56	65	56	61	58	63	56	52
<b>No parliament</b>	<b>Men</b>	11	12	9	13	17	20	16	12	11	9	11	5	11	10	8
	<b>Wom.</b>	9	11	9	12	9	16	12	6	8	8	10	6	10	7	6
<b>Don't know</b>	<b>Men</b>	2	1	2	4	4	3	5	3	3	3	2	2	4	5	5
	<b>Wom.</b>	7	5	5	8	7	7	10	11	8	11	8	7	7	11	15
<b>Sample size unweighted</b>	<b>Men</b>	667	691	645	736	659	687	658	701	645	656	662	529	561	669	585
	<b>Wom.</b>	815	972	960	929	849	950	891	893	863	826	833	669	668	828	754

The precise question to be asked in the referendum was agreed in February 2013, so we have two years' of SSA data for on referendum voting intention (Table 2). The proportion of both men and women who say they will vote Yes is a little higher in 2014 compared with 2013 (though for women, not significantly so). But a significant gender gap is still apparent, with just 20% of women compared with 31% of men stating they intend to vote Yes. If undecided voters are excluded (as has become common practice in reporting referendum opinion polls), the proportions of women and men intending to vote yes are 31% and 43% respectively.

		2013	2014
		%	%
<b>Yes</b>	<b>Men</b>	25	31
	<b>Women</b>	16	20
<b>No</b>	<b>Men</b>	42	41
	<b>Women</b>	42	45
<b>Undecided</b>	<b>Men</b>	29	25
	<b>Women</b>	37	32
<b>Sample size (unweighted)</b>	<b>Men</b>	669	585
	<b>Women</b>	828	754

Forty commercial opinion polls also asked about referendum voting intention between January and the end of July 2014. While the size of the 'gender gap' varies between companies and from poll to poll, the majority of polls over this time period recorded a sizeable gender gap, averaging

10 percentage points. Most recently, in June and July the gap has ranged from 1 percentage point (ICM's July poll) to 15 points (Panelbase, June 2014).<sup>4</sup>

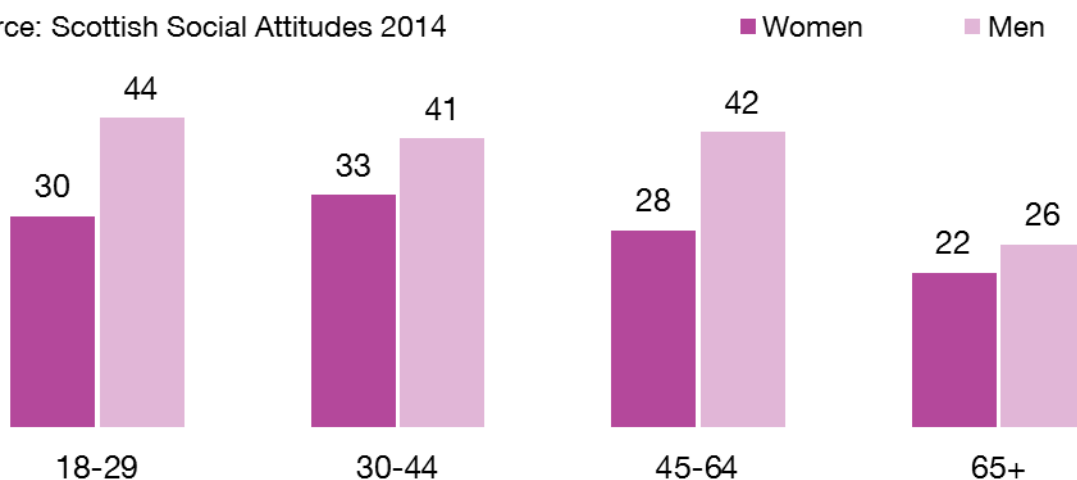
However, a careful reading of Tables 1 and 2 reveals that the gender gap on independence does not necessarily mean that women are much more enthusiastic about sticking with devolution than are men. In fact, at 52% the proportion of women in 2014 who say that devolution is their preferred option is only a little higher than the 48% of men who say the same (Table 1). But women are more likely than men to say they do not know which constitutional option they prefer (15%, compared with 5% of men), and to say that they are as yet undecided how they will vote in September (32%, compared with 25% of men). Even after the undecided are (in polling terms) 'squeezed' to say which way they are most likely to vote, 19% of women insist they are completely undecided, compared with 11% of men.

## Which women?

The figures above look at all women compared with all men. But of course women are not a homogenous group and the gender gap could be bigger or smaller among particular sections of society. As Figure 1 shows, there is very little gender difference in the views of the oldest age group – the age group least likely to support independence. Just 22% of women and 26% of men aged over 65 plan to vote Yes in September. This is largely the result of a big gap in the voting intentions of older and younger men – there is far less variation in women's voting intention by age.

Figure 1 % intending to vote Yes\*, BY age AND gender

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2014



Sample sizes (unweighted): Women 18-29 = 89; Men 18-29 = 70; Women 30-44 = 189; Men 30-44 = 129; Women 45-64 = 256; Men 45-64 = 216; Women 65+ = 219; Men 65+ = 168

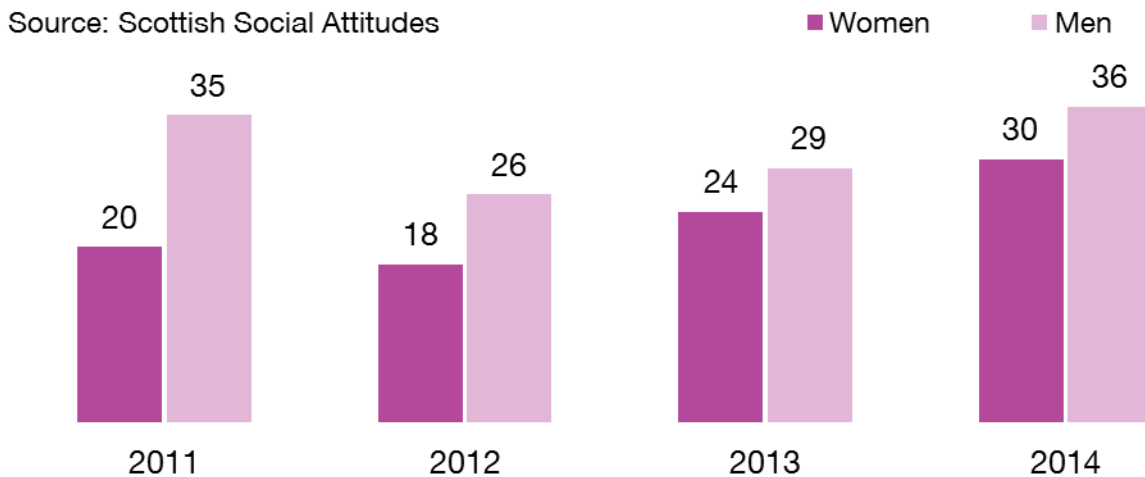
\*Yes vote includes those who initially say they are undecided but then say are most likely to vote Yes when 'squeezed'. Those who were still undecided after this 'squeeze' question are included in the base for these figures.

The size of the gender gap also varies with education. In particular, it is insignificant among graduates, with 31% of women and 35% of men qualified to Higher Education level saying they will vote Yes. This 4 point gap compares with a gap of 14 points for non-graduates (41% of male non-graduates compared with 27% of female non-graduates plan to vote Yes).

<sup>4</sup> This is based on the figures for Yes/No vote excluding those who are undecided or do not intend to vote from the base.

However, male and female graduates have not always held similar views on independence. In 2011, there was a 15 percentage point gap in the proportion of women and men with Higher Education who supported independence. Figure 2 suggests that the gender gap has narrowed for this group because women graduates have moved towards independence over the last four years (while the views of male graduates appear much the same). So while the Yes campaign has not succeeded in closing the gender gap overall, it may have had some success in persuading highly educated women of the merits of independence (albeit limited, with only 31% of female graduates indicating they will probably vote Yes at this point).

**Figure 2** % support for independence\*, Graduates only BY gender AND Year



Sample sizes (unweighted): Women graduates 2011 = 210; Male graduates 2011 = 173; Women graduates 2012 = 257; Male graduates 2012 = 192; Women graduates 2013 = 306; Male graduates 2013 = 203; Women graduates 2014 = 270; Male graduates 2014 = 214

\*As measured by the long-standing question detailed in footnote 2, above.

Given the debate around the impact on women’s votes of promises on childcare included in the Scottish Government’s independence White Paper, *Scotland’s Future*<sup>5</sup>, there may be some curiosity about whether women (and indeed men) with children appear more or less likely to vote Yes. However, there is little evidence of any campaign impact on the views of this group specifically – there is no statistically significant difference in the views of parents<sup>6</sup> and non-parents (whether male or female) in 2014, and there has been no change in the voting intentions of parents since 2013. So if the commitments around childcare in the White Paper were intended to appeal particularly to women with children, on this evidence they have yet to convert this into more votes for Yes.

## Explaining the gap

The glut of opinion polls all showing a continuing gender gap in support for a Yes vote in September has been accompanied by considerable speculation about the reasons why this gap exists. If women do indeed ‘hold the key’ to the referendum, then understanding why more of

<sup>5</sup> Scottish Government (November 2013) *Scotland’s Future: Your guide to an independent Scotland*, available at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2013/11/9348/downloads>

<sup>6</sup> Those with a child of their own aged 0-15 living at home with them. Unfortunately we are not able to identify in our data those with children who do not live at home with them.

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them do not plan to vote Yes and what, if anything, might persuade them to change their mind is arguably crucial to both sides.

A 2013 SSA paper on the same theme<sup>7</sup> explored various possible explanations for the gender gap. This cast doubt on some of the explanations suggested at the time, either by political commentators or by existing analysis of attitudes to independence. Women's policy priorities were not necessarily substantially different from men's. Women were no less likely to feel strongly Scottish than were men. Meanwhile, if Alex Salmond has not necessarily been the Yes campaigns greatest asset with women, evidence of a gender gap in years when he was not SNP leader suggest the blame cannot be entirely laid at his feet.

However, one area where women and men did differ was in their level of certainty about the consequences of independence – women were more likely to say they were unsure what would happen (whether good or bad) if Scotland became independent. And this greater uncertainty did appear to be a factor in explaining why support for independence was lower among women.

Now the 2014 SSA data are available, we can repeat some of these analyses and explore whether the factors underpinning the gender gap are any different in this referendum year.

## Differing expectations?

As outlined in John Curtice's paper on attitudes to independence in 2014 (*op cit*, footnote 2), people's expectations about the consequences of independence – and in particular the economic consequences – are very strongly associated with their voting intention. Moreover, economic expectations and voting intention are even more closely aligned in 2014 than in previous years. If women are more negative than men about the potential consequences of independence, then this might explain the gender gap.

In 2014, respondents were asked whether, if Scotland were independent, things would be better, worse or no different across four economic areas (Scotland's economy in general; Scotland's ability to protect customers money in the event of a government bank bail-out; the gap between the rich and the poor in Scotland; and respondent's own personal finances) and two non-economic areas (how much pride people in Scotland would have in their country; Scotland's voice in the world).

As Table 3 shows, women's and men's expectations about the consequences of independence are very similar in relation to the impact of independence on Scotland's voice in the world, inequality (the gap between rich and poor) and their own finances. While it looks as though women are a little less likely than men to say that Scotland's economy would be better as a result of independence, in fact this difference is not statistically significant,<sup>8</sup> and women are in any case no more likely than men to think the economy would be worse. Women are somewhat less likely than men to expect independence to lead to an upsurge in national pride (43% compared with 51%). They are also slightly *less* pessimistic than men about how able an independent Scottish Government would be to bail out a failing bank (49% of women compared with 57% of men thought Scotland would be in a weaker position to ensure the bank's customers did not lose any money).

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<sup>7</sup> Ormston, R (2013) *Why don't more women support independence?* ScotCen, available at <http://www.natcen.ac.uk/media/270731/ssa-2012-gender-and-independence.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> P = 0.10, indicating that it this difference is not significant at the 95% level.

Given that, overall, women’s expectations of independence are not very different to men’s we should not be surprised that including expectations of independence in our analysis<sup>9</sup> does not explain the gender gap.<sup>10</sup> However, before moving on it is perhaps worth noting the higher level of *uncertainty* among women about the consequences of independence – for example, 19% of women compared with 10% of men say they do not know if Scotland’s economy will be better or worse under independence (Table 3). Moreover, the level of uncertainty among women in particular seems to have increased a little since 2012.<sup>11</sup> The impact of uncertainty on support for independence is explored in more detail later in this paper.

	Women				Men			
	More/ better	No diff	Less/ worse	Don't know	More/ better	No diff	Less/ worse	Don't know
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scotland's Economy	23	15	44	19	28	17	44	10
Scotland's ability to bail out a bank	15	21	49	14	14	21	57	8
Gap between rich and poor*	15	34	29	21	19	41	30	10
Own finances	9	36	40	14	10	42	37	11
Pride in Scotland	43	40	7	9	51	39	5	4
Scotland's Voice in the world	31	23	36	9	34	22	40	4

\* More/better = smaller gap between rich and poor; less/worse = bigger gap between rich and poor  
 Sample size for all questions except personal finances: Women = 728; Men = 550 (all who completed self-completion section)  
 Sample size for personal finances (asked face-to-face): Women = 754; Men = 585

## Scoring our leaders

Political commentators have long noted that Alex Salmond has something of a ‘women problem’. Even in the period immediately following the 2011 Scottish Parliament election, when his high approval ratings as First Minister of Scotland must have been the envy of his Westminster counterparts, he was nonetheless markedly less popular with women than with men (see

<sup>9</sup> A logistic regression with intended referendum vote as the dependent variable and expectations about the consequences of independence and gender as independent variables.

<sup>10</sup> When only gender is included in a regression of referendum vote, gender is very highly significantly related to referendum vote ( $p = 0.008$ ). When expectations are added to the model, the significance of gender reduces, but only very slightly ( $p = 0.03$ ). A significant gender gap remains.

<sup>11</sup> For example, in 2012 12% of women and 6% of men said they did not know what impact independence would have on Scotland’s economy. In 2014 the equivalent figures were 19% and 10%.

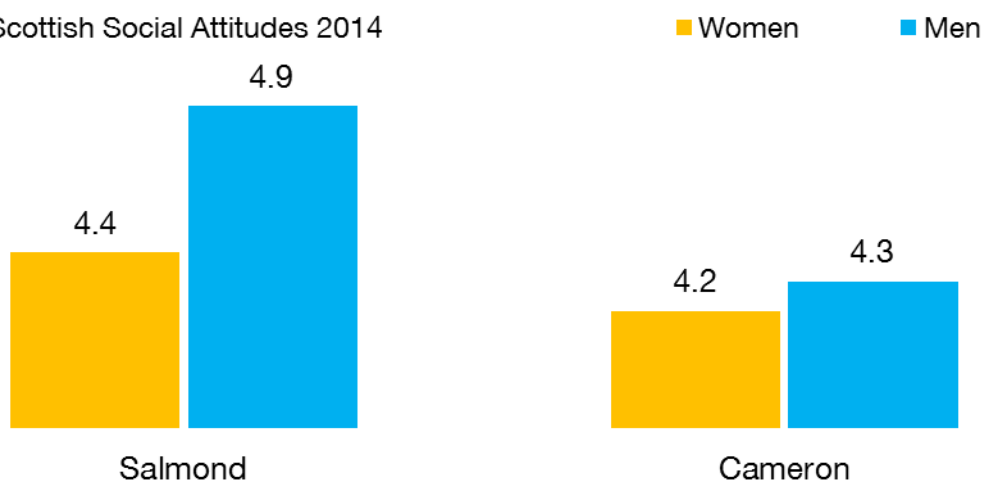


Ormston, 2013). Although Salmond has arguably taken something of a step back from fronting the Yes campaign, leaving this to his deputy Nicola Sturgeon, some commentators continue to argue that Salmond's personal style is a factor in turning women off independence.<sup>12</sup>

SSA 2014 asked people to score both Alex Salmond and David Cameron on a scale of 0 to 10 based on how good a job they thought they were doing as First Minister and Prime Minister respectively. Neither is now particularly popular – overall, Salmond was given a mean score of 4.6 compared with a mean score of 4.3 for Cameron. However, while Cameron gets the lower mean score overall, there is no difference in how he is viewed by men and women (Figure 3). Salmond, in contrast is significantly less popular with women, who give him a mean score of 4.4 compared with 4.9 from men.

Figure 3 Views of Salmond and Cameron – mean scores (out of 10), BY gender

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2014



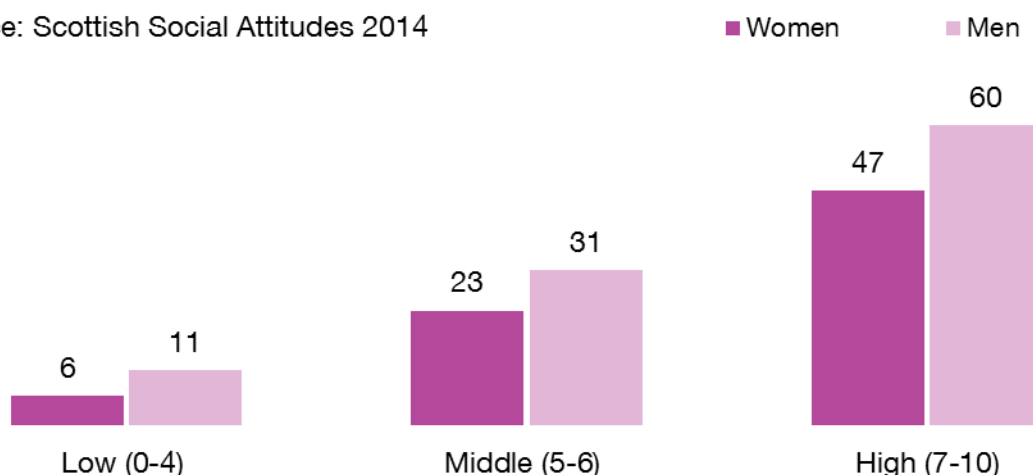
Base = all those giving a score from 0 to 10.  
Sample sizes (unweighted):  
Salmond: Women = 717; Men = 563  
Cameron: Women = 732; Men = 571

If Salmond's relative unpopularity with women explained the gender gap, you would expect that, once people's ratings of Salmond were taken into account, the gender gap in referendum voting intention would either disappear completely or reduce significantly. Figure 4 examines this by showing the proportion who say they will vote Yes by both gender and ratings of Salmond. However, although the gender gap does narrow a little among those who do not rate Alex Salmond particularly highly, it is still there, particularly among those who actually think he is doing a pretty good job. So if even women who like Alex Salmond are less likely than men to support independence it is hard to see how the blame for the gender gap can be laid squarely at his feet. In combination with the finding (reported in Ormston, 2013, *op cit*) that the gender gap existed in years when Salmond was not leader of the SNP, this again suggests that although Salmond is not the SNP's greatest asset when it comes to women voters, neither is he wholly to blame for the gender gap.

<sup>12</sup> See for example Jenny Hjul (11 April 2014) 'Salmond fails to lure the female voter' in The Telegraph, available at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/jennyhjul/100266741/alex-salmond-fails-to-lure-the-female-voter/>

Figure 4 % Yes vote\* BY ratings of Salmond AND gender

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2014



Base = all those giving a score from 0 to 10

Sample sizes: Women low = 367; Men low = 228; Women middle = 181; Men middle = 154; Women high = 169; Men high = 181

\*Yes vote includes those who initially say they are undecided but then say are most likely to vote Yes when 'squeezed'. Those who were still undecided after this 'squeeze' question are included in the base for these figures.

## National identity and gender

A third possible factor in women's lower support for independence is national identity. Previous analysis of SSA has shown that, while feeling Scottish is not always sufficient for supporting independence, it does appear to be necessary – if you do not feel Scottish you are unlikely to support independence (Curtice, 2014, *op cit*). If women are less likely than men to describe themselves as Scottish then this might help to explain the gender gap. However, there is no evidence that this is the case. In 2014, 52% of women and 46% of men said they were either 'Scottish not British' or 'More British than Scottish'.<sup>13</sup>

However, more recent analysis of SSA has suggested that perhaps it is not how Scottish people feel, but whether or not they also feel British, and how strongly attached they are to this British identity that matters most to their willingness to support independence (Curtice, 2013<sup>14</sup>). Perhaps then women feel more strongly British than do men? There is some evidence from SSA 2014 that this may indeed be the case. When asked to place themselves on a 'Britishness' scale from 1-7 (where 1 is least British and 7 is most British), women had a mean score of 4.6, significantly higher than that for men (4.3).

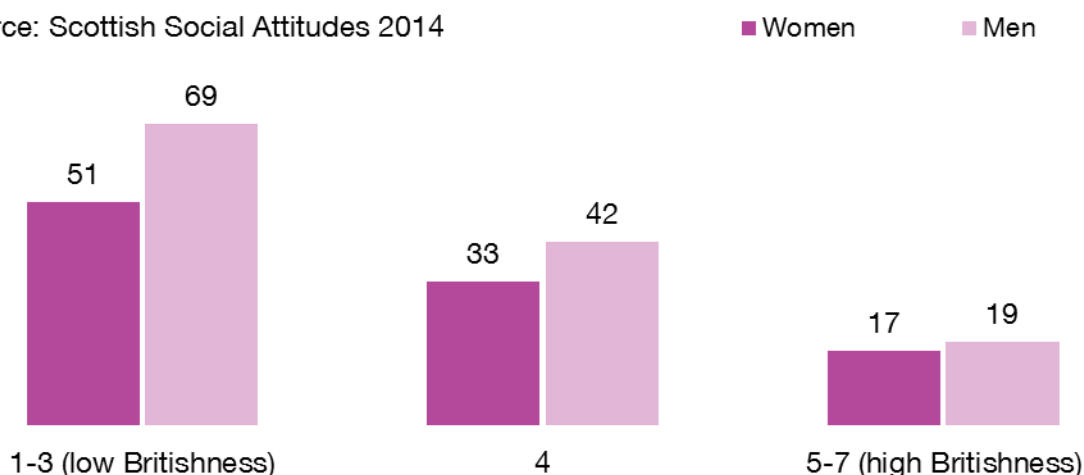
But again, the gender gap in support for independence does not entirely disappear when feelings of Britishness are also taken into account. Although the gender gap is smaller among those who feel the most British (Figure 5), among those who do not feel particularly British women are still less likely to support independence than are men.

<sup>13</sup> Based on responses to the 'Moreno' question, which asks people to place themselves on a 5 point scale from 'Scottish not British' to 'British not Scottish'.

<sup>14</sup> Curtice, J (2013) Who supports and opposes independence - and why? ScotCen Social Research, available at <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/176046/2012-who-supports-and-opposes-independence-and-why.pdf>

Figure 5 % Yes vote\* BY how British respondents feel AND gender

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2014



Base = all those giving a score from 1 to 7

Sample sizes: Women low = 181; Men low = 169; Women middle = 136; Men middle = 107; Women high = 432; Men high = 308

\*Yes vote includes those who initially say they are undecided but then say are most likely to vote Yes when 'squeezed'. Those who were still undecided after this 'squeeze' question are included in the base for these figures.

## A matter of certainty?

The persistence of the gender gap is confirmed by further statistical analysis of the likelihood of voting Yes, which takes all the factors discussed above into account alongside gender. Although the statistical significance of gender reduces a little when views on the consequences of independence, evaluations of Salmond and how British people feel are taken into account, gender remains significantly and independently related to the likelihood of voting Yes.<sup>15</sup>

However, perhaps support for independence depends not only on what you think the consequences will be, but how *certain* you are that these consequences will follow. In fact, this does appear to be the case. Those who think Scotland's economy would be better, but are unsure about what will happen if Scotland becomes independent are less likely to support independence than those who think things will be better and feel sure about what an independent Scotland will look like (Curtice, 2014, *op cit*).

We saw above (Table 3) that, when asked about the consequences of independence for specific areas (the economy, Scotland's voice in the world, etc.) women were more likely than men to say they did not know whether Scotland would be better off, worse off or no different. Their greater level of uncertainty about what independence will bring is demonstrated even more clearly in responses to a question which simply asks people to say how sure or unsure they are about what will happen in general – either good or bad – if Scotland becomes independent. In 2014, just 27% of women, compared with 37% of men, said they were very or quite sure, while 63% of women (56% of men) were very or quite unsure.

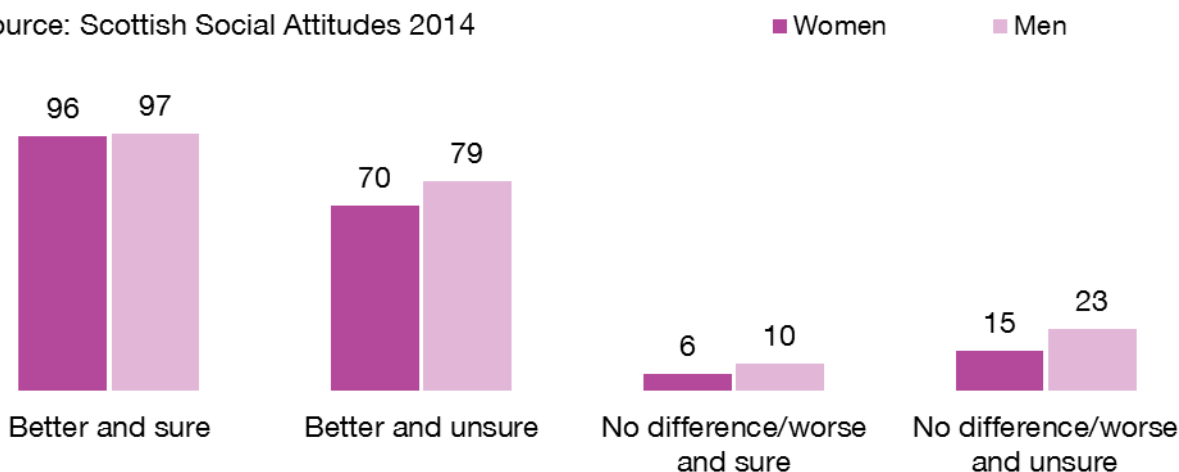
We know that uncertainty about its consequences does appear to hold people back from supporting independence. As Curtice (2014) reports, amongst those who say that Scotland's

<sup>15</sup> In a logistic regression of likelihood of voting Yes vs No by gender, the p-value of gender was 0.008. In a regression of Yes/No including views of the consequences, evaluations of Salmond and how British people feel alongside gender, the p-value of gender was still a highly significant 0.034.

economy would be better under independence and who also say they are sure about its consequences, as many as 96% say that they will vote Yes. But among those who are optimistic about the economic prospects, but who are less certain what the consequences of independence will be, only 72% are currently Yes supporters. Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that once you take account of uncertainty, the gender gap does indeed reduce, albeit it does not disappear altogether (Figure 6).<sup>16</sup>

**Figure 6 % Yes vote\* BY certainty/uncertainty, economic expectations and gender**

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2014



Sample sizes: Women better and sure = 57; Men better and sure = 99; Women better and unsure = 96; Men better and unsure = 59; Women no diff/worse and sure = 125; Men no diff/worse and sure = 94; Women no diff/worse and unsure = 445; Men no diff/worse and unsure = 294

\*Yes vote includes those who initially say they are undecided but then say are most likely to vote Yes when 'squeezed'. Those who were still undecided after this 'squeeze' question are included in the base for these figures.

## Conclusions

Women are significantly and persistently less likely than men to support Scottish independence. At 12 percentage points, the size of this gender gap in SSA 2014, based on data collected between May and July, is if anything particularly large. Women remain significantly more likely than men to say that they are undecided how they will vote in September. Given the importance to both sides of winning over undecided voters, this further highlights the importance of women's votes to the eventual outcome in September.

The gender gap is not uniform across all groups in Scottish society. The views of male and female graduates, and of older men and women are less different from each other than are the views of their less educated and younger counterparts. The gender gap in support for independence among graduates appears to have narrowed since 2011, primarily as a result of a shift towards independence among women graduates (though support still remains a minority position for this group).

<sup>16</sup> The relationship between certainty, gender and referendum vote is confirmed by logistic regression analysis of referendum vote (Yes vs No) which includes how sure/unsure people are about the consequences of independence, their economic expectations, and the interaction between economic expectations and certainty alongside gender. Uncertainty, economic expectations and the interaction between the two are all significantly related to intention to vote Yes, while gender is no longer significant at the 95% level ( $p = 0.08$ ).

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Although various hypotheses have been put forward to explain the gender gap, it remains stubbornly difficult to explain away using actual empirical data on public opinion. While differences (albeit sometimes small ones) in men and women's views of the consequences of independence, their evaluations of Alex Salmond, and how British they feel appear to contribute a little to explaining the gender gap, they cannot fully explain it. What continues to matter rather more is the greater level of uncertainty among women compared with men about what independence will mean for Scotland. Women are less likely to feel sure about what the consequences of independence will be. And this greater uncertainty appears to be a key part of the explanation why women are currently less willing than men to say they will vote Yes.

As discussed in Ormston, 2013 (*op cit*), while the relationship between gender, uncertainty and voting intentions could be stereotyped as women being more risk averse or 'feartie' than men, an alternative reading is that uncertainty is an understandable reaction to an inherently complex debate in which opposing claims are frequently stated as fact by the two sides. How to engender greater certainty among all voters, but perhaps especially women, in the time remaining before September the 18<sup>th</sup> is undoubtedly a huge challenge for the Yes campaign in particular. But on this analysis, without addressing the lingering doubts some women have about the consequences of independence, the gender gap may prove difficult to close.

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