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The 'Tinman' referendum: the EU debate in Scotland is lacking heart

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10 key factors shaping opinion ahead of the referendum

The referendum on UK membership of the European Union (EU) takes place on June 23rd. While opinion polls in Scotland show a consistent lead for remaining in the EU, they do not consider the attitudes of Scots to the EU and the key issues in depth.

Therefore, Ipsos MORI Scotland and IPPR Scotland conducted a series of focus groups to consider the key issues which are shaping public opinion in Scotland ahead of the vote. We have identified 10 key factors.

1. A vote to 'Remain' will not be made with much conviction...

- opinion polls in Scotland place 'Remain' ahead of 'Leave' in the run-up to the referendum. Although many people are negative and critical towards the EU, as set out in this report, this research goes some way to reinforcing the evidence from the polls.
- for many of our participants this is because they are unconvinced about the impact of a vote to leave the EU and are likely to stick with 'the devil you know'.

"It is a bit of a gut thing at the moment. I don't know much about it, but my sort of natural inclination is to remain"

"I felt, with the Scottish independence vote, there were that many people the same, sitting on the fence, and when it came they took the 'devil you know,' and they fell that way, rather than take the risk. "

"I don't think anyone knows how the whole thing operates, but I still think it's a good thing, but I think it needs to be reformed."

2...and the remaining weeks of campaigning may still change minds

- in other words, while the research suggests that the Remain lead looks strong, it may not be secure, and may change over the short campaign, depending on the nature of arguments that are presented.

"I'm on the fence. I want to stay in. I want to be convinced. It was a bit like the independence referendum."

"I'm on the fence as the arguments for and against are so strong. I need something that's going to tip me in the balance to say yes, or to definitely say no."

3. The EU referendum is seen as lower key and less important than indyref

- voters do not feel as impassioned about the EU referendum as they did about indyref. The latter was regarded as having been more important for Scotland, and the associated 'Yes' and 'No' campaigns more prominent, vigorous and engaging:

"I think the Scottish independence referendum felt more important because it's deeply based on a sense of patriotism, you know; it's very 'heart'. Whereas [with] the EU referendum...lots of people don't feel British, they don't feel European, it doesn't tap into that nationalism."

- that said, voters draw parallels between the two events in terms of the 'scaremongering' that they felt characterised campaigning in both cases.
- it feels to voters that the EU debate lacks a specifically Scottish dimension. This is mainly because voters see the issues at stake as relating to reserved rather than devolved matters (security, immigration, trade). That said, agriculture and fisheries are seen as policy areas of importance to Scotland and over which the EU holds sway.
- some voters think that Scottish politicians are using the EU referendum to get mandate for a second independence referendum

'There's a double negative psychology for us, you know, [Scotland has] got to vote to stay in, and England has to vote to get out, so that they would be dragging us out, and there's cause for a referendum'.

4. The question of a future indyref is not a major influence over voter intentions

- despite some perceptions about politicians' motives, most voters that we spoke to – including many of those who voted 'Yes' in September 2014 – say that their decision on how to vote in the EU referendum will not be significantly influenced by what the result might mean for a second independence referendum.

'If I thought it would make a difference, if the chess game was set up in that way, that we could get another independence vote, I would vote whichever way it was going to help, but I don't think it's going to do that.'

5. Scots don't identify with the EU or see themselves as European

- there is no clear strong European identity among Scots – most think that mainland Europeans identify more strongly with the continent than people in the UK
- there is limited knowledge about the EU, what it does, how it operates, its institutions and key figures. Very few participants understood what UK membership entails and what the UK gets in return for its investment. Almost no one could name their MEP
- the EU is seen as 'remote', with no clear, obvious impact on peoples' day to day lives. Further, it is widely seen as undemocratic – and, among some, as unelected

"It's a negative image that it's giving, that it's something over there, a bunch of foreigners that make up the rules."

- the UK is felt to lack influence within Europe. The more central the UK is seen to be to the EU, the more relevant the EU is to some. Conversely, the more the UK is on the sidelines of the EU the less people see its relevance

"There's a constant battling back and forth all the time... just an endless battle."

"We had huge influence in the beginning...our influence is dripping away, and that's all I see in the future...until we're one of the smaller voices in Europe"

"Countries like Germany and France are getting stronger, we're getting weaker and weaker... and there's a 'them and us' mentality We're on the outskirts."

6. Both campaigns are perceived to be scaremongering voters...

- both campaigns are seen as being prone to 'scaremongering' and focussing too much on personalities rather than issues

"There's a lot of scaremongering, as well, that's going on. The same, with the referendum for Scotland. There was talk about security and, you know, MI5 and whatever, and we won't have that if we leave - in Scotland. "

"For me, most of what they do is fear. The No campaign is all about fear. Staying in is all about fear. "

"It's more about the people and the tensions in the Conservative party more than the actual EU referendum itself, I'd say."

7...so voters need more (trustworthy) information

- the referendum was mentioned spontaneously as one of the key issues affecting Scotland, albeit as less important than key 'domestic' issues, particularly, hospitals, schools and social justice issues such as homelessness. But most have not fully engaged with the debate and/or do not know enough to make an informed decision
- there was a consensus that more public information is required to inform voters' decisions

"It shows you how confused it is when top politicians like Boris Johnston take one side and David Cameron takes another...They are the most informed people in the country, these guys, and they're on opposite sides of the fence."

- there is a perceived lack of 'factual', 'objective', 'trustworthy' or 'balanced' information about the referendum. Scots therefore find it difficult to believe information provided by either politicians or the media

"Even net migration figures...by the time they're filtered and watered down and they get to us, they're moulded to suit whoever's putting the argument."

"I think trust in the media has gone, as much as in trust in politicians, because...they've got their own agendas, and are becoming polarised in their field."

8. Negativity towards the EU outweighs positivity and is felt with more passion

- when invited to spontaneously outline the pros and cons of EU membership, people generally find it easier to be critical and express those criticisms with feeling and passion. Perceived cons include:
 - excess bureaucracy/red tape
 - a lack of clarity over the EU's purpose and how it operates
 - a lack of transparency in the costs of the EU and what we get in return
 - the increasing power and politicisation of the EU
 - decisions being made remotely, with the UK's interests lost among, or indeed, subjugated by, other members

"We've just become a very small voice, and Scotland within that"

- there are perceived benefits of EU membership but participants are generally less passionate and vocal about these:
 - free trade
 - freedom of movement of people
 - improved workers' rights (for example the working time directive)
 - economic migration
 - sharing of information/research (for example security intelligence, academic research)

9. Arguments to leave the EU are cutting through more than arguments to remain

- voters are engaging with the debate in terms of key policy issues rather than party affiliation or key personalities
- the arguments to leave appear to have cut through, while arguments to remain seem more difficult for people to express clearly, comprehend or agree on.
- the key theme underpinning 'Leave' support is ensuring the UK has greater 'control' over its affairs, particularly its borders/immigration; laws; trade and investment; and currency. For some, such control trumped any financial benefits of EU membership.

"Everything, for me, is about control. If we leave the EU, we are in charge of our own destiny."

- even those who self-identify as likely 'Remain' voters feel that the arguments to maintain the status quo in our membership of the EU are more difficult to express; they are focussed on the positive impact of EU membership on security/defence, human rights, workers' rights, freedom of movement/economic migration and trade.

10. Immigration is a key issue for people on both sides of the argument

- immigration is the key issue across all ages and could have easily dominated the conversations
- voters see positive *and* negative aspects of immigration. Some have concerns about immigrants claiming benefits, eroding British culture and driving down wages. But others see immigration as good for business, providing a bigger pool of skilled employees and creating a melting pot of cultures in Britain.

"Immigration is most certainly a big topic... we had all the European countries joining, coming over, [with] very little control over[this]. I can imagine people who are native, well, for instance, you know, up here, would feel quite threatened or would feel all these people coming over getting free hand-outs, what about us?"

"Immigration could be a positive, and can be a positive, and is a positive, because [it brings] thousands of foreign doctors, nurses, you know. We have got lots of skilled labour come in that we need."

"I think immigration, for me, is definitely a big one. I'm probably a bit different to most people in that I don't think we do enough. I think the EU could possibly make us do more. There's 3,000 unaccounted children sitting in Europe right now, and we won't take any of them."

Methodology note

Ipsos MORI carried out a series of three focus groups with members of the public in Scotland to explore attitudes towards the European Union (EU) and the upcoming referendum on the UK's membership. The groups covered a range of issues, including views and awareness of the EU in general, attitudes towards the referendum, likelihood of voting, perceptions of the campaigns, and the key issues influencing participants' voting decisions.

Three groups were carried out between 9th and 11th May 2016, in Edinburgh, Elgin and Perth. The Edinburgh group comprised older voters, aged 55 and over; the Elgin group voters aged 35 to 54; and the Perth group younger voters, aged 18 to 34. Recruitment of the participants was undertaken face-to-face (door-to-door and in-street) in each location.

In total, 25 people took part: 15 males and 10 females. Participants were recruited to be broadly representative of their respective age groups in socio-demographic terms, and to reflect the full range of opinion on the EU – pro, anti and undecided. Quotes used in the report are anonymised not attributed to any specific focus group since views were consistent throughout.

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