

# Democracy and the Scottish referendum

## Values and assumptions



**Nick Alchin** looks at the many issues underlying the democratic process in relation to your theory of knowledge course

On 18 September 2014, the residents of Scotland were invited to answer the question 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' Of the 85% of the eligible population who voted, 55% said 'No' and 45% said 'Yes'. Scotland remains a part of the United Kingdom.

### Peaceful debate

There were very few violent incidents before, during or after the Scottish referendum, and the contrast with other independence movements around the world is stark in this respect. However, the referendum still raises many interesting questions.

The aim of a referendum is to find out how the population will answer a question. But as those of you who have read the May 2015 essay titles will know, the notion of a 'neutral question' is not straightforward. This is a common methodological issue in the human sciences.

## Asking the right questions

Once we have the 'right' question, we need to ask it. Or more precisely, we need to define who is eligible. No one thinks that we should allow 12 year olds to vote, but a precocious 12 year old might be far better informed about the debate than an uninterested adult. So this is not an entirely straightforward matter, and the theory of knowledge question here is what values or criteria underlie decisions about who is eligible to vote?

Some analogies are interesting to ponder. A country involves a group of people. In this it is similar to a school, university, hospital, perhaps even a family. In these cases, should all stakeholders have a vote on major decisions? In your school, if each student, teacher and member of the support staff had one vote, and all major decisions were taken on the basis of this

### Activity

Which of the following categories of people do you think should have been allowed to vote?

- Those above 18/16/14 years of age.
- UK citizens who are resident in Scotland.
- Citizens of the 52 other Commonwealth countries/27 other European Union countries /196 countries worldwide who are resident in Scotland.
- Convicted prisoners serving jail terms in Scotland.
- Adults with impaired mental facilities living in sheltered accommodation.
- Those owning property in Scotland, currently living as expatriates abroad.
- Scots living outside Scotland.
- Any UK citizen.

What are your underlying values/assumptions about the right to vote? Where do these assumptions come from, and on what ways of knowing do they rely?

### Activity

The Electoral Commission considered this list of questions for the referendum. What are the strengths and weaknesses of each one?

- Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?
- Should Scotland be an independent country?
- Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?
- Should Scotland become an independent country?

Once you have agreed on which one you would choose, you can read the commentary at [www.tinyurl.com/b9zn725](http://www.tinyurl.com/b9zn725)

vote, what would the effects be on the school? On what basis do you assert your answers here?

It would be easy to continue in this vein, picking apart problematic historical decisions made by governments. The aim here is not to dispute or dismiss the referendum, but to better understand it. As we look around the world at political hotspots and conflicts, we should remember Winston Churchill's flippant but probably accurate quip:

“Democracy is the worst form of government except all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.”

### Useful sites

Detailed referendum results:

[www.tinyurl.com/pkmez12](http://www.tinyurl.com/pkmez12)

BBC coverage of the result:

[www.tinyurl.com/mjwgs9s](http://www.tinyurl.com/mjwgs9s)

Find out more about our full range of magazines and online archives of back issues at [www.hoddereducation.co.uk/magazines](http://www.hoddereducation.co.uk/magazines)

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