Identities and Politics in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum: The Polish and Pakistani Experience

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The Scottish independence referendum on 18 September 2014 was couched around the implicit assumption that it was a homogenous group of ‘Scots’ voting on Scotland’s future. However, various groups with varying identification with Scotland were eligible to vote in the referendum. Scotland has five significant ‘immigrant’ groups that make up, collectively, 11.8% of Scotland’s population. They are growing, between 2001 and 2011 Scotland’s population, mainly due to immigration, grew by 5 per cent – the fastest rate of growth for 100 years. The Scottish Government projects that the Scottish population will rise by another 10% to 5.76 million by 2035.1

In terms of political participation many immigrants are usually thought of as largely invisible, assumed to be less prone to political activism and economically marginalized. Implicit is perhaps the notion of a kind of devoir de réserve (duty not to interfere) in host country political processes, partly due to an assumption of temporary rather than permanent migration. Though this psychology has a temporal dimension – whilst relatively new migrants may be ill inclined to participate in their new host country’s political processes, the second generation are more likely to be inclined towards engagement.

While there is a body of sociological literature on minority communities’ identification with Scottishness and Britishness, there is little research about their political attitudes and views about the constitutional question.2 Race, 

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1 Scotland’s main immigrant groups today are White (other British) 7.9% 417,000, White Polish 1.2% 81,000, Pakistani 0.9% 49,000, Indian 0.6% 33,000, Chinese 0.6% 34,000, African 0.6 29,000. Scotland Census (2011) available at: http://www.scotlandsfencensus.gov.uk/.
ethnicity, immigration, social attitudes and electoral choice in Scotland is relatively under-explored in the political science literature. Ethnicity has not featured heavily in Scottish identity sociological studies, relative to those in England.3

This chapter seeks to fill a gap in the literature. It examines the political attitudes of two key minority groups in Scotland – those of Pakistani heritage and Poles in Scotland. These two were chosen as the ‘most different’ groups. The bulk of Pakistanis in Scotland are at least second-generation and as a group they have become an established part of Scottish civic, cultural, social and political life. There were clearly identifiable leading politicians on both the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ sides of the referendum debate of Pakistani heritage. In contrast, most of the Poles in Scotland are relatively recent arrivals, coming only after the expansion of the European Union (EU) in 2004. They are largely economic migrants who have utilized the ability to freely move within the EU’s borders and gain access to relatively better employment opportunities in the Scottish labour market.

The chapter examines both of these groups and their attitudes towards questions around the recent Scottish independence referendum. Specifically, do their identities and attitudes differ from the rest of the population? In terms of the referendum, did they turn out to vote? Vote ‘Yes’ or ‘No’? Which political parties do they identify with? Do they identify more as British or Scottish? What issues matter to them? Are Pakistanis and Poles different from each other in their political behavior?

Prior to outlining this data the chapter will clarify who Scotland’s migrants are and reflect on what the literatures has to say on the subject of migrants, nationalism and identity in the context of Scotland.

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3 Scottish society was, of course, not penetrated to the same degree by the 20th century post-war waves of immigration from the Caribbean, Asia and Africa. Whilst English cities had substantial waves of immigration from Commonwealth colonies in these areas the numbers arriving in Scotland were more limited. Beyond Glasgow (where it was largely an Asian influx) the impact on Scottish politics and society was negligible. See Joseph Rowntree Foundation, “Who Feels British? The relationship between ethnicity, religion and national identity in England” (2013), available at: http://www.ethnicity.ac.uk/census/CoDE-National-Identity-Census-Briefing.pdf.