

**UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING**



A myth of popular participation?

Discourse and the politics of representation in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum

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Abstract

This thesis examines the mythologisation of popular participation during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum debate. Specifically, it analyses how the referendum was constructed, represented, and performed as a participatory moment in media and political discourse. On this basis, it examines how an elite-driven myth of mass political participation was enacted and (re-)claimed by different actors within the public sphere. It demonstrates that participatory engagement with “indyref” was incorporated into identarian and partisan political narratives of progressiveness, empowerment, and democratisation during and after the referendum debate, and finds that the Scottish political, media, and cultural spheres were discursively situated alongside and in conflict with each other.

Using a mixed-methods approach, this thesis combines oral history interviews, public engagement, and an analysis of literary texts with media and critical discourse analysis to address popular participation in the referendum. Whereas previous studies have celebrated a colourful image of popular participation as a self-evident sign of democratisation and empowerment, this thesis attends to its discursive production.

By contextualising the referendum historically and politically, this thesis first shows that public debate adhered closely to established myths of Scottish political culture circulating in the mediated Scottish public sphere. Against this backdrop, it analyses representations of popular participation in the press and in indyref literature, scrutinising the referendum as a media spectacle and discursive moment. The analysis of media and literary representations of popular participation suggests that the referendum rarely facilitated political deliberation and dialogue and instead identifies elite prescriptions of popular participation. This thesis discusses these limitations to popular participation, public debate, and political voice in relation to grassroots mobilisation and activism, informed by interviews with campaigners and public engagement activities. Building on the rhetorical limitations and elite performances of popular participation identified in literary and media representations as well as online and offline grassroots activism, popular participation is shown to be performed by political, media, and cultural elites and articulated through cultural representatives and symbolism. Although the myth of popular participation remains compelling, it has yet to affect the progressive politics it imagines.

Ethical approval



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Dear Maike

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Thank you for your submission of the above ethics application and subsequent amendments.

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Yours sincerely,

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Introduction

*This was Scotland as I had never seen it before.*¹

The 2014 referendum on Scottish independence was widely viewed as a colourful explosion of political energy, activity, and popular participation. As journalist Fintan O'Toole wrote in *The Guardian*:

Scotland at the moment is what a democracy is supposed to be: a buzzing hive of argument and involvement, most of it civil, respectful and deeply intelligent. This energy has been unleashed not by atavistic tribal passions but by a simple realisation: for once, the people have some power.²

Representations of the referendum campaign as “an eruption of political activity”³ and a “celebration of democracy”⁴ have, I will show, contributed to its mythologisation. In this thesis, I will examine the referendum debate as constituting a myth of popular⁵ participation. I will argue that the referendum was actively constructed, enacted, and mythologised as a historic, highly participatory moment – a “once in a lifetime opportunity”⁶ of popular participation and, in the words of Jim Sillars, former leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), popular “sovereign power.”⁷ This myth, as I understand it, is a shared belief in a set of cultural aspirations, namely of Scotland as politically and socially inclusive, progressive, open, and just – primarily in comparison with England. It is, I will show, rooted in Scottish identity and civic nationalism⁸ rather than the practical arrangements for participation during the referendum.

¹ Peter Geoghegan, *The People's Referendum: Why Scotland Will Never Be the Same Again* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014), 9.

² Fintan O'Toole, “Scotland's Vote Is Not About Braveheart or Kilts or Tribal Nationalism: It's About Democracy,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/12/scotland-vote-braveheart-nationalism-democracy-independence>.

³ Iain Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom: How Westminster Won a Referendum but Lost Scotland* (Glasgow: Cargo Publishing, 2014), 14.

⁴ Eberhard Bort, “The Annals of the Parish: Referendum Year 2014,” *Scottish Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2015): 2, <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2015.0051>.

⁵ In this thesis, I understand “popular” as “of the people.” Therefore, it does not necessarily denote popularity or being widespread, but focuses on the involvement of members of society.

⁶ Paul Hutcheon, “It Failed to Win Independence but Yes Transformed Politics in Scotland and Changed the UK Forever,” *Sunday Herald*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13181050.failed-win-independence-yes-transformed-politics-scotland-changed-uk-forever/>; Scott Macnab, “Scottish Independence: No Repeat Referendum – Salmond,” *The Scotsman*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence-no-repeat-referendum-salmond-1526285>; The Herald, “Once in a Lifetime Opportunity to Cast a Future that Meets the Aspirations of Scots,” September 16, 2014.

⁷ Jim Sillars, *In Place of Fear II: A Socialist Programme for an Independent Scotland* (Glasgow: Vagabond Voices, 2014), 1.

⁸ Civic nationalism is generally considered an inclusive form of nationalism based on shared political and civic values and institutions rather than an “exclusionary” form of nationalism based on national culture and ethnicity. Emerence Hild, “Renegotiating Scottish Nationalism after the 2014 Independence Referendum,” *Études*

Myth, as suggested by David McCrone, is “a guide to help interpret social reality.”⁹ As such, it allows me to analyse the practical and political limitations of popular participation in the context of the referendum. The mythologisation of popular participation in the referendum indicates where Scotland’s “progressive” vision of an inclusive politics falls short of its own claims. By considering how participation was framed but not realised, I examine a myth that is continually talked about but not made real. In fact, part of this myth of popular participation holds that Scottish politics are more participatory than British – that is Westminster-based – politics. This myth has been mobilised as a nationalist argument but is frequently divorced from its political realities. On this basis, I demonstrate in this thesis that the myth that Scotland is participatory, open, and progressive contrasts with a frequently exclusionary political reality. An understanding of these tensions and the mythologisation of popular participation is crucial to enacting the empowering and progressive qualities imagined and performed in the myth of popular participation – in light of the ongoing debate over Scotland’s constitutional future, and in considering how political change can be implemented.

1. The referendum: “Should Scotland be an independent country?”

On 18 September 2014, the people of Scotland¹⁰ were asked to vote on whether Scotland should be an independent country. Following the Scottish National Party’s (SNP) success in the 2011 Scottish Parliamentary Elections, which “gave it the majority and the mandate required to press for a one-question referendum on independence,”¹¹ the Edinburgh Agreement (October 2012) temporarily granted the Scottish Government the power to hold a referendum on independence.¹² The pro-independence *Yes Scotland* and the pro-Union *Better Together*

écossaises 18 (2016): 153, <https://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/1134>; cf. Jonathan Hearn, *Claiming Scotland: National Identity and Liberal Culture* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2000), 7-8.

⁹ David McCrone, *Understanding Scotland: The Sociology of a Nation*, 2nd ed. (1992, London, Routledge, 2001), 91.

¹⁰ In this thesis, the phrase “people of Scotland” is preferred over “Scottish people” as it does not rely on factors such as citizenship (political, legalistic), belonging (culture), or heritage (ethno-nationalist). I am aware that this phrasing perpetuates the “progressive politics” promoted by the Scottish Government and Parliament under SNP leadership and contributes to the mythmaking on Scottish identity that I scrutinise in this thesis.

¹¹ Peter Lynch, “Bottom-up versus Top-down Campaigning at the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014,” *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* 20, no. 2 (2015): 1, <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.405>.

¹² The agreement “ceded to the Scottish Government the precise wording of the referendum question, the details of the franchise (which extended the vote to 16- and 17-year-olds), the precise date of the referendum and the rules and limits of campaign financing,” with the latter being overseen by the UK Electoral Commission. Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 1. Cf. Michael Keating and Nicola McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” in *Debating Scotland: Issues of Independence and Union in the 2014 Referendum*, ed. Michael Keating (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 10; James Mitchell, “The Unexpected Campaign,” in *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media: National and International Perspectives*, eds. Neil Blain and David Hutchison with Gerry Hassan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), 3-4.

(initially, *UK Together*) campaign had already been launched in May and June 2012 respectively. They kicked off a long campaign which emphasised popular participation from the outset,¹³ and was thought to provide significant space for public debate and deliberation. The historic referendum turnout of 84.59% seemingly rewarded these efforts.¹⁴

However, assuming a causal relation between mobilisation and turnout would be too simplistic. Against the backdrop of growing participation and grassroots momentum over the duration of the campaign, I demonstrate that the referendum debate – despite its progressive political credentials – failed to engage different segments of society. The high turnout instead reflects the “salient and emotive” issue at stake in independence referendums.¹⁵ Already ahead of the groundswell of public activity in the summer of 2014, this emotional investment suggested a high voter turnout was likely,¹⁶ based on “familiar arguments and long-established preferences on independence.”¹⁷ Despite – or because of – these long-standing allegiances, the referendum debate raised “broader issues about the type of society and type of state to which people aspire,”¹⁸ in addition to questions of political self-governance, economic viability, borders, and EU membership.¹⁹ Neither of the campaigns engaged heavily with tropes of cultural nationalism to address these issues.²⁰ Instead, both campaigns tried to promote practical and civic arguments while making gains through different campaigning strategies: the elite-driven economic argument – or “scaremongering” – of the pro-Union campaign²¹

¹³ E.g., Severine Carrell, “Alex Salmond Predicts Million-strong Movement for Scottish Independence,” *The Guardian*, May 25, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/may/25/alex-salmond-yes-scotland-independence>; Robbie Dinwoodie, “No Vote Campaign Launch Give Citizens Centre Stage,” *The Herald*, June 26, 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13063053.no-vote-campaign-launch-gives-citizens-centre-stage/>.

¹⁴ This was the highest turnout in a Scottish or General Election since the introduction of universal suffrage. Stephen Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics: Popular Democracy in Britain after the Scottish Referendum,” *The Political Quarterly* 86, no. 2 (April 2015): 226, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.12161>; Bort, “The Annals of the Parish,” 2; Iain Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 11; Robert Liñeira, Ailsa Henderson and Liam Delaney, “Voters’ Response to the Campaign: Evidence from the Survey,” in Keating, *Debating Scotland*, 165.

¹⁵ Liñeira, Henderson, and Delaney “Voters’ Response to the Campaign,” 166.

¹⁶ Willie Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland: Why Over a Million Scots Choose Not to Vote and What it Means for Our Democracy* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014), 24; Tom Mullen, “Introduction,” in *The Scottish Independence Referendum*, eds. Aileen McHarg et al. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 23.

¹⁷ Lindsay Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism: Scotland’s Choice,” *Scottish Affairs* 24, no. 1 (2015): 23, <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2015.0052>; Liñeira, Henderson, and Delaney, “Voters’ Response,” 167.

¹⁸ Liñeira, Henderson, and Delaney, “Voters’ Response,” 165.

¹⁹ Mitchell, “The Unexpected Campaign,” 9-10.

²⁰ If anything, the No side was seemingly more concerned with traditional, culture-based tropes of national identity than the “nationalist” pro-independence side. Cf. Hild, “Renegotiating Scottish Nationalism,” 151.

²¹ Bort, “The Annals of the Parish,” 7. Cf. 8-9; Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 19. Cf. also Michael Higgins, Anthony Ridge-Newman, and Fiona McKay, “Scotland, Wales, and Press Discourses Amid the 2016 EU Referendum,” in *Reporting the Road to Brexit: International Media and the EU Referendum 2016*, eds., Anthony Ridge-Newman, Fernando León-Solís, and Hugh O’Donnell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 53.

seemingly contrasted with claims to democratisation and progressive social politics on the pro-independence side, discursively associated with livelier grassroots activism.²²

Popular participation was increasingly linked to pro-independence support in popular and media discourse and, in its growing partisan meaning, contributed to what Lindsay Paterson describes as the dominant “belief that independence would lead to radical social change.”²³ The Yes campaign, generally termed more successful than its pro-Union counterpart,²⁴ thus came to represent what Ben Jackson calls an opportunity on the left to further “Scotland’s long-standing egalitarian and democratic traditions.”²⁵ As I demonstrate in this thesis, the apparent success in mobilising “forgotten” and marginalised segments of the national community was increasingly articulated through arts-based activism, political progressiveness, and agency on the Yes side: in short, a compelling socio-politically informed myth of popular participation.

Seeing the referendum as an opportunity for participation, political empowerment, and change contrasts with Michael Keating and Nicola McEwen’s assertion that the most “striking feature of the long campaign is that it did not, by and large, pitch radically different visions of Scotland’s future against each other.”²⁶ Following the implicit suggestion that the referendum offered little that was politically new, I show that the idea and image of people “mobilised into political activism”²⁷ was as discursively powerful as its legacy was short-lived. The official and most alternative campaign organisations have disappeared (despite initial claims to maintain activism²⁸), the nominal openness of the Smith Commission that re-negotiated additional powers for Scotland after the referendum was overshadowed by a “return to elite-driven deal-making,”²⁹ and even the “dramatic” membership surges of the pro-independence

²² MacWhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 11; Lynch “Bottom-up,” 2-3; Nicola McEwen, “Welfare: Contesting Communities of Solidarity,” in Keating, *Debating Scotland*, 89-90.

²³ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 33.

²⁴ James Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” in McHarg et al., *The Scottish Independence Referendum*, 75; Michael Keating and Nicola McEwen, “Beyond the Referendum,” in Keating, *Debating Scotland*, 194-195; MacWhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 10-11.

²⁵ Ben Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence: A History of Nationalist Political Thought in Modern Scotland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 2.

²⁶ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 16.

²⁷ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

²⁸ Alternative campaigning organisations *National Collective* and the *Radical Independence Campaign* had promised to continue campaigning in September 2014, but their national organisations have since folded. One exception is *Women for Independence*, which has grown into a more party-political organisation, closely aligned with the SNP party, politics, and politicians. For more details see [chapter 3](#) on alternative campaigners.

²⁹ Silvia Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum and the Participatory Turn in UK Constitution-making: The Move Towards a Constitutional Convention,” *Global Constitutionalism* 6, no. 2 (2017): 186, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381717000119>; Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 232; Tom Mullen, “The Scottish Independence Referendum 2014,” *Journal of Law and Society* 41, no. 4 (December 2014): 640, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-6478.2014.00688.x>.

parties after the referendum did not radically transform political activity.³⁰ The durability of the “status-quo” echoes the triumph of the campaign that ran on maintaining it: *Better Together* secured a majority of 55.3% to 44.7% in favour of staying in the United Kingdom.³¹ However, I argue that already during the campaign, participation and its transformative power were both wielded and limited in elite discourse and were shaped by specific interests within the context of Scottish national politics and, more specifically, the referendum debate from 2012 to 2014. The research questions and rationale that form the basis for this argument are introduced in the next section (section 2) and provide the foundation of the theoretical framework established in section 3 of this chapter.

2. Research questions and rationale

This thesis examines mythologisations of the referendum as a “festival of democracy,”³² political debate, and popular participation. It argues that the referendum as a participatory moment was constructed, represented, and performed in elite media and political discourse in the lead-up to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. On this basis, it examines how this elite-driven myth of wide-reaching political participation was enacted and (re-)claimed by different actors within the public sphere. Accordingly, I understand the referendum debate (2012-2014) as a discursively created event and moment. Therefore, I differentiate between the referendum and its campaign³³ – the practical, political side – and the popular shorthand “indyref” as a socio-cultural phenomenon and (mediated) discourse. Against this background, I argue that the political importance of popular participation was established in elite media and political discourse (representation) and claimed by the people (participation). This dialectic

³⁰ Whereas SNP membership increased from 25,000 to 80,00 shortly after the referendum, membership of the Green party had risen by 600% in May 2015 in comparison to numbers from August 2014. Lynn Bennie, James Mitchell, and Robert Johns, “Parties, Movements and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum: Explaining the Post-referendum Party Membership Surges,” *Party Politics* 27, no. 6 (2021): 1188; 1195, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068820939799>. Cf. Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

³¹ Electoral Management Board for Scotland, “Result of the Scottish Independent Referendum 2014,” <https://www.emb.scot/scottish-independence-referendum-2014-3/scottish-independence-referendum-18-september-2014>.

³² Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 14; Severin Carrell, Nicholas Watt, and Patrick Wintour, “The Real Story of the Scottish Referendum: The Final Days of the Fight for Independence,” *The Guardian*, December 16, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/news/2014/dec/16/sp-real-story-scottish-referendum-final-days-fight-for-independence>.

³³ In this thesis, I use “referendum” as consisting of its campaigning period from spring 2012 till September 2014, in contrast to the (referendum) “vote” on 18 September 2014. Where I speak of campaigns (plural), this refers to the campaigns run by the official campaigning organisations *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* respectively.

rhetorically contributed to a myth that went beyond political activism on the ground and instead enacted long-standing narratives of identity (performativity). My research questions have been:

- What is the myth of popular participation in Scottish political culture?
- How was it discursively constructed and circulated?
- Where does political experience of the public contribute to or contrast with this myth and its construction in (elite) media and political discourse?
- To what extent was participation in the referendum campaign a performance or rhetorical claim, stage-managed for and co-created by the media?
- How do underpinning notions of democratic representation, progressiveness, and cultural identity operate within this myth of popular participation?
- What political functions did it play across media and literary texts, and with what repercussions?

Based on these research questions, I determine how participation was framed but not fully realised in Scottish political discourse. I suggest that it is merely rhetorically claimed it becomes performative while, arguably, failing to create the reality it seeks to evoke. On this basis, I highlight some of the exclusionary political realities of the idea, or myth, that Scotland is participatory, open, and progressive. In addition to Scottish self-identification with a politics of participation, the emphasis on participation in public debate was, I suggest, partially shaped by the participatory format of the referendum itself.

Referendums, as formats of direct democracy and participatory politics,³⁴ allow citizens to come together “in a direct exercise of self-determination, reclaiming power from their elected representatives.”³⁵ “[A]s a means of allowing the electorate a direct say on some specific policy or constitutional issue,”³⁶ referendums highlight “people’s popular sovereignty and the political equality of all citizens.”³⁷ In a binary referendum every vote counts.

³⁴ Lawrence LeDuc, *The Politics of Direct Democracy: Referendums in Global Perspective* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2003). In contrast, Matt Qvortrup suggests that referendums are better understood as “a complement to indirect” or representative democracy, since voters vote on (but do not initiate) legislation. Matt Qvortrup, *A Tale of Two Referendums: Elite Manipulation or Civic Engagement* (London: The Constitution Society, 2015), 7.

³⁵ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 228. Referendums are generally called, firstly, to resolve political conflict or gridlock, secondly, to resolve internal tension within governing parties and coalitions (e.g., Brexit referendum), thirdly, to decide on and implement constitutional change and, fourthly to accommodate citizen initiatives and pressures. Donatella Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums from Below: Direct Democracy in the Neoliberal Crisis* (Bristol: Policy Press, 2017), 4. Cf. Qvortrup, *A Tale of Two Referendums*, 16-17.

³⁶ John Bochel, David Denver, and Allan Macartney, “The Background to the Referendum,” in *The Referendum Experience: Scotland 1979*, eds. John Bochel, David Denver, and Allan Macartney (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1981), 2.

³⁷ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 228.

Practically, the discursive emphasis on political voice, popular beliefs around Scottish national politics as democratic and egalitarian, as well as the structural opening of political debate online (i.e., via social media) likely contributed to high levels of participation in the 2014 referendum.

In their mythologisation of popular participation as inclusive, creative, and politically “progressive”, public and media discourse promoted a one-dimensional reading of participation – a reading that rarely discussed “active” silences and alternative forms of political participation. By focussing on these discursive limitations of participation, this thesis also responds to a question posed by Arianna Introna, namely “[w]hich aspects of indyref politics and culture [...] will the progressive imagination deem fit to be extracted and preserved as legitimate recipients of the faithfulness of future generations in Scotland?”³⁸ The importance of this question, Introna asserts, lies in the “context of post-vote indyref exceptionalism and re-assertion of party politics as the norm,” which indicate that it will be “increasingly difficult to detach the significance of the referendum from the progressive flourishing it enabled.”³⁹

Against this backdrop, I argue that apparent success in mobilising “forgotten” segments of the national community was often traced to the dynamism of Scottish cultural activism and progressiveness, depicted by political activists and commentators as a compelling alternative to the official, party-directed campaigns.⁴⁰ As discursive claims to participation and democratic revival, they contributed to a myth of popular participation that mobilised notions of equality and progressiveness rooted in Scottish cultural self-identification.

3. Theoretical framework

The theoretical framework of this thesis is rooted in a constructivist, post-structuralist approach to meaning-making. It actively engages with neo-Marxist and post-structuralist

³⁸ Arianna Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past: The Missing Scotland as Indyref Heritage,” *Journal of Scottish Thought* 8 (2016): 119.

³⁹ Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 119.

⁴⁰ Ross Colquhoun, “Scotland is a Young, Vibrant Nation, Ready to Meet the Future Head On with Our Minds, Our Hands and Our Creativity,” *Sunday Herald*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13180113.ross-colquhoun-scotland-young-vibrant-nation-ready-meet-future-head/>; Lesley Riddoch, “A Radical and Unexpected Shift in Scots Has Taken Place ... Perhaps as Significant as the Big Vote Itself,” *Sunday Herald*, September 14, 2014; Gerry Hassan, “The Close Vote Is Not a Bold Reaffirmation of the Union,” *Sunday Herald*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13181067.close-vote-not-bold-reaffirmation-union/>; Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 26; Cf. Libby Brooks, “Scottish Independence Referendum: The Common Weal Festival and Yestival,” *The Guardian*, July 13, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/scottish-independence-blog/2014/jul/13/scottish-independence-referendum-the-common-weal-festival-and-yestival>.

conceptualisations of cultural production, ideology, discourse, and power while acknowledging the situatedness of the referendum in a context of neoliberal economic pressures, which directly impact media and news production cycles. Thus, Scotland and the referendum are understood as shaped by a nationalist movement for political and socio-cultural uniqueness embedded within a global economy and transnational flows of information. As such, the referendum and its culture-political contexts are considered from a critical cultural theory and media studies perspective. Against this backdrop of opposing, yet related pressures, I discuss the referendum as a political decision, a socio-political opportunity, a discursive event,⁴¹ and “media spectacle,”⁴² shaped by cultural practices of meaning-making. These different modes of reading the referendum are conceptualised through the productive tension between participation, representation, and performativity. Indeed, participation (in the referendum) is considered as largely constituted by elite representations and discursive performances which have given rise to its national mythologisation. All three concepts are introduced in more detail below.

3.1 Participation

The mythologisation of the referendum prioritised the role of participation. Generally, political participation denotes citizens’ right and duty to partake in political life.⁴³ In contrast to political “engagement,”⁴⁴ it describes ways “through which the influence on the political system and on public policy can be exercised: examples being voting, campaigning, protesting, expressing opinions or dissent through the use of social media, actively joining a political movement,

⁴¹ According to Fisk, “[w]e can know an event only by putting it into discourse, so an event is always continuous with its discursive construction, but it still always contains the potential to be differently constructed. This continuity between event and discourse produces a ‘discursive event’ or ‘media event,’ not a discourse about and event.” John Fiske, *Media Matters: Everyday Culture and Political Change* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 4 (emphasis original).

⁴² In reference to Dayan and Katz’s conceptualisation of “media events”, Kellner defines media spectacles as corporate media practices of “sensationalistic tabloidiz[ation]” that “attempt to attract maximum audiences for as much time as possible” in an environment of media (over-)saturation. This “spectacular form” of coverage “may also embody key societal conflicts, and so [...] a contested terrain,” as was visible in coverage and framings of the referendum across different media outlets. Douglas Kellner, “Media Spectacle and Media Events: Some Critical Reflections,” in *Media Events in a Global Age*, eds. Nick Couldry, Andreas Hepp, and Friedrich Krotz (Abingdon: Routledge, 2010), 76; 78. Cf. Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, *Media Events: The Live Broadcasting of History* (1992; repr., Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1994), especially 1-5.

⁴³ Phil Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation: A New Politics for a Disengaged Era,” *Res Publica* 24 (2018): 32-33, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11158-017-9382-1>.

⁴⁴ Martyn Barrett and Ian Brunton-Smith define political engagement as “having an interest in, paying attention to” or “having feelings about either political or civil matters.” Martyn Barrett and Ian Brunton-Smith, “Political and Civic Engagement and Participation: Towards an Integrative Perspective,” *Journal of Civil Society* 10, no. 1 (2014): 6, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17448689.2013.871911>.

etc.”⁴⁵ Referendums provide the electorate with a “direct say” on a specific issue but differ from elections and related political activism in various respects.⁴⁶ As such, referendums often engage “people not normally involved in political activity” in addition to those with a “long-standing commitment” to the issue.⁴⁷ This mobilising potential of referendums was heightened by the binary choice and the narrowing gap between both sides in polling of the 2014 referendum, which emphasised the importance of every single vote (more so than in elections). Separate from this practical openness of referendums, participation in the 2014 campaign was explicitly framed through the “extraordinary” popular activism and debate described at the beginning of this chapter. The related preoccupation with debate and activism emphasised, I argue, a specific idea of participation which was discursively constructed, articulated – and subsequently mythologised – through the progressive politics prominently associated with myths of Scottish identity, politics, and, particularly, the pro-independence argument. Thus, I hypothesise that spaces for participation were both created and limited through strategic political interest and “performative” – that is largely tokenistic – activism in elite political discourse as defined in section 3.3 of this chapter.

However, where political participation is linked to enfranchisement and empowerment, various problems ensue. A need for empowerment *from above* indicates power imbalances, rather than acknowledging political agency.⁴⁸ It separates some parts of society, those that do not partake in institutional political processes or public political debate, from political power altogether. During the referendum campaign the notion of empowerment – especially from within left-leaning political commentary and pro-independence advocates – became a compelling trope in public discourse. Related to its discursive use during the referendum, empowerment, in the context of this thesis, is understood as “a facilitation or encouragement of civic voice.”⁴⁹

⁴⁵ Cristiano Bee, *Active Citizenship in Europe: Practices and Demands in the EU, Italy, Turkey and the UK* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 70.

⁴⁶ Bochel, Denver, and Macartney, “The Background to the Referendum,” 2. Bochel and Denver describe referendums – in contrast to elections – as marked by: involvement of campaign organisations, political parties as well as *ad hoc* groups with long-standing or newly founded commitment to the issue; diverse referendum positions within parties; largely devoid of party passions; voting focuses on a single key issue; referendums do not have local candidates and do not elect government. John Bochel and David Denver, “Local Campaigning,” in Bochel, Denver, and Macartney, *The Referendum Experience*, 43-44.

⁴⁷ Bochel and Denver, “Local Campaigning,” 43.

⁴⁸ Cf. Roman Gerodimos et al., “Introduction to the Media, Political Participation and Empowerment,” in *The Media, Political Participation and Empowerment*, eds. Richard Scullion et al. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 1.

⁴⁹ Gerodimos et al., “Introduction,” 2. Gerodimos et al. provide an alternative definition which frames civic empowerment as “refer[ring] to the acquisition of power by the citizen, with a view to restoring, strengthening or serving a model of democratic governance” – this definition is dismissed here as less applicable to the discursive use of “empowerment” in the referendum debate. Gerodimos et al., “Introduction,” 1.

The progressive agenda to empower the “forgotten” segments of society was frequently expressed through the trope of giving voice, and through the idea of the “missing million” or the “missing Scotland” by left-leaning commentators.⁵⁰ Describing those members of the public who are not registered to vote or no longer engage in political processes, this part of society was discursively located outside political power and explicitly targeted through various forms of activism based on their potential to swing a Yes vote in the referendum.⁵¹ This practice points to the discursive limitations of popular participation, shaped by elite media representations and (tokenistic) empowerment, as defined in the following section.

3.2 Representation

Representations of participation in newspaper coverage and literature of the referendum indicate how participation was understood and negotiated. Broadly speaking, “[t]o represent is [...] to re-present the absent as if it were present; to give voice to the silent; to conjure into being an aggregation of public interest, preferences and values.”⁵² Representation thus makes present that which is absent but also involves practices of “giving voice” (see the notion of empowerment above) and has a constitutive cultural and political function. As proposed by Stuart Hall, representation consists of processes of meaning-making and exchange between “members of a culture.”⁵³ These processes can be either reflective or mimetic (i.e., reflecting meaning as it exists in objects and in the world), intentional (i.e., meaning is created by a speaker and imposed on the world through language) or constructivist (i.e., members of the public use the conceptual framework of their culture to construct meaning).⁵⁴ In line with the conceptual framework of this thesis, the constructivist approach to meaning-making and representation is prioritised. It crucially highlights textual and media practices as socially and culturally constructed expressions of reality. As such, representation holds an important mobilising potential. According to Pierre Bourdieu, cultural producers and intellectuals are instrumental in “their capacity to produce a systematic and critical representation of the world

⁵⁰ Gerry Hassan, “After the Landslide: Scotland Still Marches to a Different Politics, Only Slightly Less So,” *The Political Quarterly* 88, no. 3 (2017): 377; Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 118.

⁵¹ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 90.

⁵² Stephen Coleman, “Representation and Mediated Politics: Representing Representation in an Age of Irony,” in *Political Communication in Postmodern Democracy: Challenging the Primacy of Politics*, eds. Kees Brants and Katrin Voltmer (Houndsmill: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 39.

⁵³ Stuart Hall, “The Work of Representation,” in *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*, ed. Stuart Hall (London: Sage, 1997), 15.

⁵⁴ Jendele Hungbo, “Audience Empowerment and the Politics of Representation in Two Radio Talk Shows in Post-apartheid South Africa,” in Scallion et al, *The Media*, 224; Hall, “The Work of Representation,” 24-25.

in order to mobilize the virtual force of the dominated and to help to subvert the established order in the field of power.”⁵⁵ This mobilising power, however, is also limited through the underlying cultural and interpretative processes at play.

Like discourses, which “systematically form the objects of which they speak,”⁵⁶ representation always adds to and “partly determines” that which is represented.⁵⁷ This discursive and increasingly mediated practice of representation also defines the “media event,” which, according to John Fisk, merges “the real” with its “mediated representation.” As a result, it can no longer be assumed that “the ‘real’ is more important, significant, or even ‘true’ than the representation.”⁵⁸ The interpretative act of making sense of media events as well as the discursive practice of representation is contingent on dynamics of culture, knowledge, and power; its political relevance manifests in the cultural hegemony of interpretation and the political giving of voice. Here, representation not simply re-presents, but claims to be representative. This duality describes “claims of the represented to become present on their own terms and the claims of politicians – and other, less accountable mediators – to know and speak for the public.”⁵⁹ Representation then describes a conferring of power onto a representative – conceivable through a wider elite, rather than politicians and governing bodies only⁶⁰ – in a paradoxical move to gain political agency.⁶¹ These interrelated processes of popular claims to political agency and elite claims to represent the public are crucial for my reading of popular participation and its representation in elite media and political discourses during the referendum.

Definitions of who constitutes the frequently cited political, cultural, and media “elites” and intelligentsia in contemporary Scotland are slippery and, inevitably, shifting. As Mitch Miller, Johnny Rodger, and Owen Dudley Edwards propose, the Scottish elites are generally seen as including “writers, thinkers, poets, politicians and academics who engaged directly with the question of democracy in Scotland.”⁶² The notable emphasis on democracy attaches a

⁵⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (1992; Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 252.

⁵⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge and the Discourse on Language*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (1969; New York: Pantheon Books, 1972), 49. According to Foucault, discourses themselves are systems of representation.

⁵⁷ Coleman, “Representation and Mediated Politics,” 40.

⁵⁸ Fiske, *Media Matters*, 2.

⁵⁹ Coleman, “Representation and Mediated Politics,” 40.

⁶⁰ Hanna Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation* (1967; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1972), 2.

⁶¹ Norman Fairclough, *Media Discourse* (London: Arnold, 1995), 182.

⁶² Mitch Miller, Johnny Rodger, and Owen Dudley Edwards, *Tartan Pimps: Gordon Brown, Margaret Thatcher & the New Scotland* (Glasgow: Argyll Publishing, 2010), 22-23. Cf. Gerry Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind: Elite Narratives; Public Spaces and the Making of a Modern Nation* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 18. Cf. also the recent in-depth inquiry “Who runs Scotland” by the investigative journalism platform

specific political function to these elites and positions them within politically progressive nationalist context, relying on what Zygmund Bauman describes as the “combined effect of mobilization and self-recruitment.”⁶³ Even where, in Gerry Hassan’s words, “Scotland’s ‘community of communicators’ act as a gated community reproducing a selective, self-validating story of who and what we are,”⁶⁴ their function is more clearly apparent through their engagement with the political processes mentioned by Miller, Rodger, and Dudley Edwards above.

Intellectuals’ public political role is also addressed in Edward Said’s conceptualisation of the intellectual as outsider and critic with a “specific function” in and for public debate.⁶⁵ Said’s definition builds on Antonio Gramsci’s earlier conceptualisation of the intellectual, which distinguishes between the “organic intellectual” and the “traditional intellectual.” Whereas the organic intellectual is class-bound and constitutes a specialisation of said class, traditional intellectuals are tied to public institutions and help maintain societal structures.⁶⁶ Within the context of the referendum, this distinction allows for the theorisation of shifting power dynamics throughout the campaign. Notably, established spokespeople from the fields of media, politics, and literature – those more closely fitting the category of the “traditional intellectual” – were complemented by emerging “organic intellectuals,” who created a new platform for themselves within the context of various forms of activism and campaigning. This did not, however, lessen their claims to being representative of the middle or working classes from which they emerged. According to Gramsci, organic intellectuals are associated with but also challenge dominant hegemonies on behalf of the class they claim to represent – a recurring claim of some of the campaigning efforts of the *Radical Independence Campaign*, for example – while traditional intellectuals are key in maintaining social and political hegemony in society.⁶⁷ Indeed, the role of these traditional representatives is instrumental in “fostering loyalty and a sense of national unity through their own person” and manifests as “symbolic representation”⁶⁸ within the nation.

The Ferret which addresses different levels of political, economic, and cultural influence in Scotland. The Ferret, *Who Runs Scotland*, July 12-17, 2021, <https://theferret.scot/tag/who-runs-scotland/>.

⁶³ Zygmunt Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters: On Modernity, Post-modernity and Intellectuals* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1987), 2.

⁶⁴ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 147.

⁶⁵ Edward W. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual* (1994; New York: Vintage Books, 1996), 4.

⁶⁶ Antonio Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” in *Prison Notebooks*, repr. in *An Anthology of Western Marxism: From Lukács and Gramsci to Socialist Feminism*, ed. Roger Gottlieb (1948; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 114-15.

⁶⁷ Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” 114.

⁶⁸ Pitkin, *The Concept of Representation*, 226.

3.3 Performativity

This thesis uses the concept of performativity to describe interactions between participation and representation, which contribute to the construction of the myth of participation. This approach allows for the identification of the discursive construction of the myth of participation in the referendum context, shaped by rhetorical claims, rehearsed argument, and routine repetitions in public debate. The conceptualisation of performativity has its roots in the context of linguistic speech act theory, specifically with John Austin. The idea gained more prominence in the post-structuralist and post-modernist work of Jacques Derrida, Jean-François Lyotard, and, particularly, Judith Butler's conceptualisation of gender. Performativity creates reality based on speech acts⁶⁹ and is rooted in "discursive practice that enacts or produces that which it names."⁷⁰ As such, it relies on "the reiterative and citational practices by which discourse produces the effects that it names."⁷¹ Following Michel Foucault's conceptualisation of discourses as systems of representation and knowledge which constitute and limit the reality they create,⁷² the notions of popular participation that shaped the referendum debate can be seen as emerging from and limited by discourses on political power.⁷³ Thus, the performativity of popular political participation is discursively produced, limited, and actualised through the rhetorical emphasis on popular participation in media and public debate.

However, in the context of political mobilisation, specifically where pertaining to social media, alternative readings of performativity have recently emerged. In this context, "performative activism" is understood as "shallow or self-serving support for social justice causes"⁷⁴ rather than constitutive of a reality based on speech acts. Describing insincere and tokenistic "attempts to jump on the antiracist bandwagon mainly to self-promote and build one's own personal or corporate progressive credibility,"⁷⁵ performative activism on social

⁶⁹ John Austin, *How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered in Harvard University in 1955*, ed. J. O. Urmson and Marina Sbisa (1962, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2011); Jacques Derrida, "Signature Event Context," in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. with additional notes by Alan Bass (1971; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984).

⁷⁰ Judith Butler, *Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of "Sex"* (New York: Routledge, 1993) 2; 13. Here, Butler refers to Foucault's work on discursive practice.

⁷¹ Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 2.

⁷² Fairclough proposes the merging of the post-structuralist, Foucauldian use of "discourse as a social construction of reality" and the linguistic notion of "discourse as social action and interaction." Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 18. This proposal finds partial realisation in the conceptual link between discourse and performativity advocated throughout this thesis. Cf. also Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49; 183.

⁷³ Cf. Michel Foucault, *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (1972-1977; New York: Pantheon Books, 1980).

⁷⁴ Freya Thimsen, "What Is Performative Activism?" *Philosophy and Rhetoric* 55, no. 1 (2022): 83, <https://doi.org/10.5325/phlrrhet.55.1.0083>.

⁷⁵ Thimsen, "What Is Performative Activism?" 83. Note the similarities between performative activism and slacktivism, performative allyship and performative wokeness. Cf. also Mariah Wellman, "Black Squares for

media gained attention in the context of the Black Lives Matter demonstrations after the violent deaths of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor in 2020. More closely aligned with an artificiality of performance, such readings of performative activism are rooted in a preoccupation with authenticity and suggest “that real activism cannot be said; it must be done.”⁷⁶

Rather than proposing that performative activism necessarily lacks reality and consequence, I argue that the discursively produced performative element of activism is constitutive of reality, relevance, and power beyond political action itself. By combining recent popular readings of performativity with post-structuralist, linguistic speech act theory, I suggest that participation in the referendum was performative in two intersecting ways: firstly, in as much as it was discursively created – and limited – through rhetoric and language. Secondly, performativity is limited in its persuasiveness where it is merely rhetorically claimed but neither matches nor creates the reality it references. Based on this duality, I argue that participation during the referendum campaign was highly performative in its discursive creation but also in as much as it found powerful expression in elite claims about popular participation. The tensions between these rhetorical claims and the reality they (fail to) create feed into an ensuing myth of popular participation. Shaped by elite readings and performances of popular participation, this myth routinely excluded alternative forms of participation while evoking and mythologising “silenced” or “forgotten” segments of society through notions of progressiveness in the referendum context.

3.4 Myth and the nation

Myth here is treated as a shared belief in a set of cultural aspirations, namely for Scotland as shaped by a progressive government, and a strong and inclusive public sphere. Thus, I consider myth through its imaginative narrative potential, based on cultural practices of meaning-making, rather than in terms of truth claims. The routine performance of myth, its “ritual adjustment,” emphasised by Hugh Trevor-Roper, follows discursive practices of sense production that rely on “a continuing capacity for invention.”⁷⁷ In line with what Eric Hobsbawm describes as the “invention of tradition,”⁷⁸ this ritualised performance is constituted

Black Lives? Performative Allyship as Credibility Maintenance for Social Media Influencers on Instagram,” *Social Media + Society* (2022): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051221080473>.

⁷⁶ Thimsen, “What Is Performative Activism?” 84.

⁷⁷ Hugh Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), xx.

⁷⁸ Eric Hobsbawm, “Introduction: Inventing Tradition” in *The Invention of Tradition*, eds. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Roper, 10th ed. (1983; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1-14.

and limited by practices of sense production rooted in national culture and identity. National myth, then, is “a set of social, self-evident values, a social ethos, a celebration of sacred beliefs about what it is to be Scottish.”⁷⁹

In the context of this thesis, I treat myth as a shared belief in cultural, social, and/or political aspirations. In their cultural and discursive production, myths do not stand in opposition to reality or fact but are cultural expressions of it. The myth of popular participation, which I see emerging as part of the referendum, draws on Scottish cultural identity and political argument, namely notions of egalitarianism and progressiveness. Indeed, myths of “Scottish exceptionalism” persistently claim Scotland is “more left-wing, more Europhile and more civic” than England.⁸⁰ However, the “egalitarian myth” has, according to David McCrone, “proven largely impervious to falsification, not because appropriate data are not always available, but because ‘myth’ in essence cannot be ‘disproved.’”⁸¹ All the more powerful is its cultural meaning, as was visible during the referendum campaign, in which “[t]he Yes side drew on longstanding myths of Scottish egalitarianism.”⁸² Indeed, Catherine Frost argues that the referendum debate in 2014 was significantly organised “around myth and projections [...] because the referendum ballot was a forceful binary of a kind that tends to polarize positions,” which do not account for nuanced debate.⁸³

According to Keating and McEwen, claims to universal values evident in the “longstanding myths of Scottish egalitarianism”⁸⁴ are typically employed in modern nationalism.⁸⁵ These universal values of egalitarianism contribute to Scottish national identity⁸⁶ and a notion of Scottishness that, since the 1960s, has heavily relied on “civic”

⁷⁹ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 102.

⁸⁰ Malcom Harvey, “A Dominant SNP in a Unionist Scotland? The 2019 UK General Election in Scotland,” *The Political Quarterly* 91, no. 1 (January-March 2020): 56.

⁸¹ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 92. Keating and McEwen emphasise that social liberalism in Scotland and England is largely similar, despite a “slight but persisted tendency for Scotland to be to the left on issues of social equality and redistribution” – in fact, the deciding outlier here might be the south of England. Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 6.

⁸² Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 17. Cf. McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 79; 91-92; 102-103; Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 139-54; Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 148. Cf. also Frost’s reference to the important role of the myth of Scottish progressiveness in the referendum debate. Catherine Frost, “Scotland’s Festival of Democracy,” in *Language, Democracy, and the Paradox of Constituent Power: Declarations of Independence in Comparative Perspective* (New York: Routledge, 2021), 123.

⁸³ Frost, “Scotland’s Festival,” 123.

⁸⁴ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 17.

⁸⁵ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 6.

⁸⁶ For an insightful discussion of national identity cf. David McCrone and Frank Bechhofer. *Understanding National Identity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015). For claims to cultural distinction, and Scotland as more democratic, equalitarian and libertarian cf. e.g., Marina Dekavalla, “Framing Referendum Campaigns: The Scottish Independence Referendum in the Press,” *Media, Culture & Society* 38, no. 6 (2016): 796, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443715620929>; Gerry Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming: The Quest for a Different Scotland* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014), 31-37.

qualities. In the Scottish context, this reliance on “political identification” is complicated by Scotland’s status as a stateless nation.⁸⁷ However, in their nationalist iteration the mythicization of these values demonstrates the nation’s “need for a narrative of ‘identity’”⁸⁸ and that “no nationalism can in practice restrict itself to a purely political national identity” without substantiating and legitimising it through history and culture.⁸⁹ Building on these theorisations, I argue that, even though feeding on “universal” notions of openness, egalitarianism, and progressiveness, the myth of popular participation displays identarian as well as cultural nationalist qualities.

The notion of nationalism that underpins this thesis, adopts Benedict Anderson’s definition of the nation as “an imagined political community,”⁹⁰ actively constructed by and simultaneously binding its members. Anderson, like Ernest Gellner, sees nationalism as a product of modernity and explicitly linked to territory.⁹¹ However, Anderson emphasises the specific role of text for the creation and maintenance of the nation and highlights print-capitalism’s crucial function in nation-building processes. Within this context, he attributes a key role to novels and newspapers in communicating and routinely performing national continuity and belonging.⁹² This conceptualisation is essential for later sections of this thesis, which discuss the role of literary and media text in facilitating and shaping the referendum discourse in 2014. Like Anderson, who suggests that the routine consumption of newspapers creates and performs the “remarkable confidence of community in anonymity,”⁹³ Michael Billig emphasises national belonging as routinely and iteratively performed through media text.⁹⁴ Both Anderson and Billig, as well as Karl Deutsch and Ernest Gellner,⁹⁵ propose that

⁸⁷ Graeme Morton, *Unionist Nationalism. Governing Urban Scotland, 1830-1860* (Phantassie: Tuckwell Press, 1999), 2; Michael Gardiner, *Modern Scottish Culture* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2005), 12.

According to Jackson, Nairn attested Scotland an absent nationalism, despite having all “the necessary ingredients” form folklore and culture to national independence, civil society, an upwardly mobile middle class and intelligentsia. Scotland reached “economic development before the rise of nationalism.” Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 39.

⁸⁸ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, rev. ed. (London: Verso, 2006), 205.

⁸⁹ Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 3.

⁹⁰ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

⁹¹ According to Gellner’s definition of nationalism, the political and the national unit are “destined for each other.” Cf. Ernest Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 6. In contrast, Tom Nairn’s and Michael Hechter’s explicitly Scottish definitions of nationalism prioritise a left-leaning, (culturally rooted or ethnic) class argument. Tom Nairn, *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (London: Granta, 2000); Michael Hechter, *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (1975; repr., London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1978).

⁹² Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25-36.

⁹³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 36.

⁹⁴ Michael Billig, *Banal Nationalism* (London: Sage, 1995).

⁹⁵ Karl Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication: An Inquiry into the Foundations of Nationalism*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1966); Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.

the “nature of their internal communications” is a key feature of (national) communities.⁹⁶ Based on this conceptual framework, the nation and its underpinning nationalism are understood within this thesis as culturally founded, textually reproduced, and routinely performed principles of political organisation.

The nation provides a powerful paradigm of “cultural sense-production”⁹⁷ and framework for representation, expressed in what is communally claimed as a distinct national culture.⁹⁸ Culture, in the context of this thesis, is understood in two ways: firstly, as describing cultural production, including visual art, creative practice, and literature – this is particularly relevant where arts-based activism and campaigning are discussed. Secondly, culture is referenced as a framework of meaning making, national sense production, and the site of ideological and political struggle. Following Gramsci, institutional power manifests not through violence and coercion but through hegemonic culture.⁹⁹ Informed by this perspective of hegemony, artistic practices play, according to Chantal Mouffe, a key role in the constitution and maintenance of a given symbolic order. Thus, Mouffe emphasises the powerful political function of artistic practice and national culture.¹⁰⁰ Linking politics and artistic practice in this way has direct implications for interpretations of the referendum if understood, as I do here, as a complex socio-cultural and political moment in recent Scottish history which was politically defined but largely shaped by discourse, text, and cultural practice. These different socio-cultural, political, and discursive practices, processes, and tensions are analysed within the context of the public sphere, as defined in chapter 1 of this thesis.

Following on from this introduction to the overarching themes (section 1), research questions and rationale (section 2), and the theoretical framework (section 3) of this thesis, the next section surveys relevant literature to establish the context (section 4). Section 5 introduces the methodology of this research. The different chapters and the overall thesis structure are outlined at the end of this introductory chapter in section 6.

⁹⁶ Philip Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution and the Media,” *The Political Quarterly* 69 (1998): 55, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923x.00192>.

⁹⁷ Stefan Berger, “Introduction,” in *Narrating the Nation: Representations in History, Media and the Arts*, eds. Stefan Berger, Linas Eriksonas and Andrew Mycock (2008; repr., New York: Berghahn Books, 2011), 1.

⁹⁸ Cf. Nairn, who argues that the UK nations adopted collective expressions of “Gaelicism” and “Highlandism” through tartanry, clannic identification, Highland scenery, Celtic language, and artefact etc. to manufacture a collective identity. Nairn, *After Britain*, 251.

⁹⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, ed. and with an introduction by Joseph Buttigieg, vol. 1 (1975; New York, Columbia University Press, 1992), 235-36.

¹⁰⁰ Chantal Mouffe, *Agonistics: Thinking the World Politically* (London: Verso, 2013), 91.

4. Research context

Public debate framed the referendum in 2014 as an opportunity for change and political engagement, while relying on long-standing debates, arguments, and myths that would justify the split from – or continued union of – the UK. Thus, the referendum debate drew on a corpus of prestigious critical works, while producing a growing amount of popular and academic literature. To establish the context for this research, some of these contributions are surveyed below; a more detailed introduction to specific areas follows as part of the individual chapters throughout. This review of the literature is divided in four key categories: the constitutional debate and the referendum campaign; popular political participation and the referendum; media coverage and analysis of the referendum; cultural devolution, Scottish writers, and “indyref” literature. As this focus demonstrates, this thesis is not concerned with the legal or economic facts underlying the referendum, nor does it aim to provide a political history or political or policy evaluation. Neither are pertinent to the questions posed in this thesis, which is concerned with the creation and circulation of culture-political myth.

4.1 The constitutional debate and the referendum campaign

The constitutional question, and its reiteration in the 2014 referendum, is informed by long-standing arguments and a substantial body of foundational texts. In the context of developing Scottish nationalism, this includes most notably Michael Hechter’s *Internal Colonialism: The Celtic Fringe in British National Development, 1536-1966* (1975); Christopher Harvie’s *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics from 1707 to the Present* (1977); Keith Webb’s *Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* (1978); Tom Nairn’s *The Break-Up of Britain* (1977) and *After Britain: New Labour and the Return of Scotland* (2000); Tom Devine’s *The Scottish Nation 1700-2000* (1999); and Hugh Trevor-Roper’s *The Invention of Scotland: Myth and History* (2008). These works framed the referendum and its debate, as have the contributions of a “whole generation of nationalist writers, activists and politicians” who “constructed a powerful and influential ideology of Scottish nationalism” since the 1960s.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 161. According to Jackson, this group includes Neal Ascherson, Winnie Ewing, George Kerevan, Isobel Lindsay, Neil MacCormick, Margo MacDonald, William McIlvanney, Stephen Maxwell, Tom Nairn, George Reid, Alex Salmond, and Jim Sillars.

Notions of a distinct Scottish national identity that resonate through the above works have been explicitly expressed by McCrone¹⁰² and Jonathan Hearn.¹⁰³ Hearn suggests that calls for greater political autonomy, namely devolution in the 1990s, gained rhetorical significance and political legitimacy through their grounding in the particularities of Scottish culture and, most notably, in egalitarian values. Similarly, McCrone identifies a myth of Scottish egalitarianism and Scottish working-class radicalism, with specific emphasis on the role of social institutions (e.g., education) in keeping alive this myth. In continuation of this argument, this thesis shows that this popular idea shaped the referendum debate in 2014, particularly the pro-independence side. It draws on the political impetus of long-standing cultural myths on leftist values and egalitarianism in their rhetorically “demythologised” function as identified by Hearn and McCrone. In contrast to Craig Smith, who analyses whether the Enlightenment period provides an answer to the constitutional question, this thesis proposes that Enlightenment values have been retrospectively manufactured into a compelling myth of Scottish political – and socio-cultural – difference (see [chapters 1](#) and [6](#)).¹⁰⁴

Rather than supporting distinctions between civic and ethnic nationalism and their normative reading as “good” and “bad”, Hearn sees Scotland’s civic nationalism as a moral critique of neoliberalism informed by Scottish culture, national political thought, and identity. My work here is directly indebted to the theoretical framework outlined by Hearn, in as much as it critically engages with the narrative – or myth – of Scottish civic nationalism and suggests that its cultural rootedness was denied in the performative rhetoric of and political claims to progressiveness in the referendum discourse. In contrast to Hearn’s explicitly ethnographic and ethnohistorical – and McCrone’s sociological – approach to Scottish nationalism in the context of devolution, my approach to the referendum debate is informed by critical cultural theory and a media studies perspective.¹⁰⁵

Gerry Hassan, too, addresses contemporary Scottish identity, politics, and culture across a variety of publications. In *Independence of the Scottish Mind: Elite Narratives, Public Spaces and the Making of a Modern Nation* (2014), Hassan considers whose voices and opinions have influenced public debate in Scotland over the last decades and views the constitutional debate

¹⁰² McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*. For a more detailed account on Scottish identity, cf. Frank Bechhofer and David McCrone, eds., *National Identity, Nationalism and Constitutional Change* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

¹⁰³ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*.

¹⁰⁴ Craig Smith, “The Scottish Enlightenment and Scottish Independence,” *Economic Affairs* 33, no. 3 (2013).

¹⁰⁵ Hearn’s publication is based on extensive interviews as well as ethnographic participant observations and autoethnographic reflection. Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*. This thesis, in contrast, addresses the cultural construction, negotiation, and performance of Scottish myths within live social debates as mediated through media and, more broadly, text.

in the context of historical continuities, elite narratives, and collective memory. These are also key considerations in this thesis. However, while I agree with Hassan (McCrone and Hearn) on the importance of elite narratives and myth in shaping public Scottish discourse and the elite institutions that sustain it, I am less concerned with defining the origin and nature of “elite narratives” or myths and their implications for Scotland’s distinctiveness and uniqueness.¹⁰⁶ Instead, I examine the continued influence of Scottish myths of identity on public political debate through their routine cultural performances (see [chapters 1 and 6](#)). The myths Hassan seeks to debunk in favour of a different Scotland are, I argue, themselves shaped by a myth of participation and progressiveness prominently employed in the referendum discourse for democratic change.

The notion of distinctiveness that seemingly underpins Hassan’s argument is explicit in Cairns Craig’s appraisal of Scotland’s cultural “wealth.”¹⁰⁷ Craig maintains that a distinct cultural identity has been shaped alongside Scottish nationalism by its artists and writers during the last century.¹⁰⁸ The connection Craig draws between cultural agitation after the devolution referendum in 1979 and deferred political representation supports the notion of “cultural devolution” as predating and facilitating political devolution (see [section 4.4](#) of this section). The essentialist reading of national culture proposed by Craig¹⁰⁹ was conspicuously absent in the referendum debate in 2014 and differs significantly from the understanding of culture as a form of meaning-making and ideological struggle adopted in this thesis. Indeed, this thesis focuses on the cultural production and performance of myths as a prism through which the people of Scotland see themselves and their nation, even though it recognises that concessions must be made in the study of a political event marked by conflicting national identities and political (self-)interests.¹¹⁰

The complex relationship between internal Scottishness and external Britishness as part of Scotland’s role within the Empire discussed by Craig also influences Murray Pittock’s

¹⁰⁶ The title of the book, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, itself gestures towards Scottish exceptionalism.

¹⁰⁷ Cairns Craig, *The Wealth of the Nation: Scotland, Culture and Independence* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2018).

¹⁰⁸ Cf. also David Torrance, *Standing Up for Scotland: Nationalist Unionism and Scottish Party Politics, 1884-2014* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020). Torrance evaluates in detail the shifting connections between Scottish (secessionist) nationalism and unionism and emphasises its interconnectedness in notions of “nationalist unionism”.

¹⁰⁹ Cf. Eleanor Bell, *Questioning Scotland: Literature, Nationalism, Postmodernism* (Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004).

¹¹⁰ I recognise that the focus on cultural practices of meaning-making may risk appearing essentialist. Through a broad approach to culture and Scottishness, I aim to mitigate essentialist practices of analysis. Accordingly, I prioritise observable cultural practice over generalising definitions of Scottish culture and presumed distinctiveness.

analysis of changing Scottish nationalism since the 1960s.¹¹¹ Such concerns influenced the referendum debate in 2014, as demonstrated by Emerence Hild's examination of Scottish and British national identity in the referendum campaign.¹¹² In her analysis of campaign representations and political speeches prior to the vote, Hild argues that both *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* defended diverging and indeed irreconcilable visions of British and Scottish identity respectively rooted in claims to "universal values" of civic and inclusive nationalism. I would suggest that this practice indicates a distinct rhetorical and cultural function in conceptualising national identity and communicating national distinctiveness – within and beyond the referendum discourse.

Such a perspective resonates with Pittock's suggestion that the growing attention to the independence debate has changed Scotland's sense of distinctiveness ahead of the SNP's political watershed and the conception of the referendum in Pittock's societal history of the modern Scottish nation. This broader approach to modern Scottish nationalism is also echoed in Jackson's intellectual history of nationalist, often radical, thought in Scotland. Jackson, who positions himself in continuation of Hearn and Hassan, draws attention to key arguments articulated by Scottish nationalists from the 1960s to 2014 – less in their circulation but in their conceptualisation and theocratisation.¹¹³ The tradition of Scottish thought outlined by Jackson, as well as its circulation in public debate, underpins this thesis; however, it is considered in its contributions and challenges to national myths that shaped the debate in 2014.

Cyclical cultural influences and attempts at redefining persistent myths of Scottish egalitarianism and, ironically, difference also link to the cyclical, or spiral, reading of the Scottish nationalist movement proposed by Paterson.¹¹⁴ Paterson's reading of Scottish history suggests that the referendum and the processes that brought it about are the latest iterations in a pattern of protest and compromise that have shaped Scotland's relationship with the British state. Paterson identifies a fluctuation between Scottish "radical challenge" and "pragmatic adjustment" as key in maintaining a (however unsatisfactory) Union. These spiral iterations not only point to the continuity of mythical claims about nation and identity, but also emphasise British, and Scottish, *realpolitik* shaped by compromise and concessions. The latter extends to the political realities of the referendum. As Keating and McEwen highlight, neither campaign

¹¹¹ Pittock mentions economic and social shifts as key contributions to this changing nationalism. Murray Pittock, *The Road to Independence? Scotland Since the Sixties* (London: Reaktion Books, 2008).

¹¹² Hild, "Renegotiating Scottish Nationalism."

¹¹³ Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 8.

¹¹⁴ Paterson, "Utopian Pragmatism."

proposed radically different policies.¹¹⁵ Instead, they argue that a referendum in which both sides ultimately favoured a middle ground of limited independence or more devolution prioritised valence issues, i.e., issues on the importance of which voters agree independent of their party-support (e.g., educational standards; economic and social welfare performance).¹¹⁶

In his description of the referendum, James Mitchell makes a similar argument: he highlights the relevance of valence issues in the referendum and contextualises them through a “revival of Scottish democracy” as marked by a significant turnout and an unprecedented level of engagement.¹¹⁷ This impression is shared by Iain Macwhirter who, viewing the referendum debate from a media standpoint, not only proposes that the referendum has changed Scottish politics and culture, but suggests that an unprecedented level of engagement and activism turned the referendum into a festival of politics and political participation.¹¹⁸ Such observations set the context for my analysis of the referendum as shaped by a myth of popular participation. The functions of participation in the referendum – both practical and rhetorical – will be outlined in more detail below.

4.2 Popular political participation and the referendum

Stephen Tierney proposes that the referendum may have transformed how participatory politics are viewed in the UK and might increase direct democracy in constitutional politics.¹¹⁹ He particularly stresses the empowerment felt by citizens and argues that the referendum challenged two issues established in political science, namely “elite control” and a

¹¹⁵ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 16. Other contributions to *Debating Scotland*, ed. Keating, detail issues of the economy, taxation, currency, welfare, EU membership, defence, and security etc. For comparable studies on the practicalities of the referendum and constitutional implications, cf. Iain McLean, Jim Gallagher and Guy Lodge, *Scotland's Choices: The Referendum and What Happens Afterwards* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013); Aileen McHarg et al., eds., *The Scottish Independence Referendum: Constitutional and Political Implications* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016). For a detailed analysis of voter choice, cf. Ailsa Henderson et al., *The Referendum That Changed a Nation: Scottish Voting Behaviour 2014-2019* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022).

¹¹⁶ Valence issues and the governing party's delivery on these impact constitutional preferences in Scotland. Robert Johns et al., “Valence Politics in Scotland: Towards an Explanation of the 2007 Election,” *Political Studies* 57 (2009): 208-212, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00762.x>; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 78.

¹¹⁷ Mitchell, “The Unexpected Campaign,” 13.

¹¹⁸ Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*. Macwhirter provides a personal account of the referendum, informed by his close ties with media, cultural, and political actors. Cf. also David Torrance, *The Battle for Britain: Scotland and the Independence Referendum* (London: Biteback Publishing, 2013).

¹¹⁹ Note that a significant part of the academic debate on political participation is concerned with defining the concept and practice of political participation, e.g., Cristiano Bee, *Active Citizenship in Europe. Practices and Demands in the EU, Italy, Turkey and the UK* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017); Barrett and Brunton-Smith, “Political and Civic Engagement”; Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd, Paul Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain: Value, Participation and Democracy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 78-79.

“deliberation deficit.”¹²⁰ Along similar lines, Silvia Suteu discusses the referendum as part of a participatory turn in Scottish and global politics.¹²¹ Relatedly, Oliver Escobar suggests that a move to more participatory governance aligns with new approaches in Scottish politics.¹²² However, in the context of the referendum, the participative element was, Suteu acknowledges, soon undermined by a return to default politics of elite control.¹²³ This latter observation more closely aligns with the position of this thesis, which suggests that any spaces for participatory politics in the referendum were, at best, short-lived. I suggest that the emphasis on participation aligns with strategic political interests and, at least partially, with recent research into “performative activism” by government institutions.¹²⁴

Nonetheless, belief in the transformative role of political participation during the referendum has been persistent. Margaret Malloch, Bill Munro, and Ashley Rogers explore how far civic participation was sustained following the vote and suggest that the referendum contributed to a reimagining of Scottish society within which notions of justice could be reconsidered.¹²⁵ While contextualising their argument through political and theoretical continuities, Malloch, Munro, and Rogers emphasise the referendum was a “unique” political opportunity, based on research interviews. Donatella Della Porta et al. put forward a similar reading of the Scottish referendum, with an explicit focus on movement politics.¹²⁶ In comparison to the Catalan case for independence, they emphasise the political opportunity of what they call a “referendum from below” shaped by civil society actors. Accordingly, they highlight the participatory potential of the referendum mobilisation and advocate for a different approach to studying movements, which centres on citizens – rather than elites and the media – as producers of messages. While they crucially highlight the campaign’s potential to empower underrepresented segments of society, their optimistic reading suggests large levels of participation and deliberation based on social movement activism, rather than strategic campaigning approaches by political actors.¹²⁷

¹²⁰ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 229. Examples of an extensive body of work on the referendum format and its application in the Scottish context include Qvortrup, *A Tale of Two Referendums*; Lawrence LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” *Electoral Studies* 38 (2015), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.electstud.2015.02.007>.

¹²¹ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 184.

¹²² Oliver Escobar, “Between Radical Aspirations and Pragmatic Challenges: Institutionalising Participatory Governance in Scotland,” *Critical Policy Studies* 16, no. 2 (2022), <https://doi.org/10.1080/19460171.2021.1993290>.

¹²³ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 186; 214.

¹²⁴ Thimsen, “What Is Performative Activism?” Wellman, “Black Squares for Black Lives?”

¹²⁵ Margaret Malloch, Bill Munro, and Ashley Rogers, “Justice, Civic Engagement and the Public Sphere: Mapping Democratic Transformations in Scottish Society”, *Funding Report* (University of Stirling, 2017).

¹²⁶ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*.

¹²⁷ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 126.

The participative potential of movement politics is also explored by Peter Lynch in his detailed account of the umbrella campaign *Yes Scotland* and related pro-independence grassroots campaign organisations.¹²⁸ Arguing that the broad activism of top-down (*Yes Scotland*) and bottom-up campaign initiatives (e.g., the *Radical Independence Campaign*) created for the first time a mass political movement for independence in Scotland, Lynch emphasises the hybrid nature of the campaign: consisting of an electoral campaign machine and a loose social movement. Elsewhere, Lynch also considers the larger shifts in citizen engagement and their implications for traditional political players and parties in his longitudinal analysis of the political dynamics between the three Scottish referendums in 1979, 1997, and 2014.¹²⁹ The emerging social movement and alternative campaigning practices described by Lynch directly link to what Hassan conceptualises as “the third Scotland.” It denotes “a body of activities [...] which sat outside formal structures and establishment Scotland” and is consistent with soft power, radical (but not necessarily nationalist) voices, and flat networks rather than elite power of public bodies.¹³⁰ Such observations on political power and elite intervention in contemporary Scotland are conceptualised in chapter 6 of this thesis through dynamics between “organic intellectuals” and “traditional intellectuals.”¹³¹

The implications of political movement activism and campaigning emphasised by both Lynch and Hassan – as well as the long-term effects for political participation anticipated by others as detailed above – are addressed by Lynn Bennie, James Mitchell, and Robert Johns.¹³² Against the backdrop of post-referendum party membership surges of the SNP and the Scottish Greens, Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns argue that a sense of belonging during the referendum campaign contributed to this surge, with the referendum additionally functioning as an advertising platform for party objectives. Importantly for this thesis, they suggest that few of those joining these parties were politically active during the referendum – nor were many of the new joiners interested in maintaining political activism post-referendum. These findings run contrary to a sense of large-scale politicisation but also raise questions about who those

¹²⁸ Lynch, “Bottom-up.” This perspective is informed by Lynch’s experience as a pro-independence campaigner in the referendum, which he details in the auto-biographic reflection *IndyRef to ScotRef: Campaigning for Yes* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2017). For comparable accounts of on the ground activism and discussions, cf. Geoghegan, *The People’s Referendum*; Andrew Redmond Barr, *The Summer of Independence: Stories from a Nation in the Making* (Edinburgh: Word Power Press, 2016).

¹²⁹ Peter Lynch, *Aye or Nae: The Referendum Experience in Scotland 1979-2014* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2019).

¹³⁰ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 221; Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming*, 220; Gerry Hassan, “The Emergence of the Third Scotland,” *Scottish Literary Review* (September 2013), <https://www.gerryhassan.com/blog/the-emergence-of-the-third-scotland>.

¹³¹ Gramsci, “The Intellectuals”; cf. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*.

¹³² Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements.”

becoming politically active were – with direct implications for the inclusivity and representativeness of political participation in the referendum.

The inclusiveness of the referendum mobilisation itself has been largely overplayed, as this thesis will demonstrate. Craig McAngus and Kirstein Rummery¹³³ and Christine Bell and Fiona Mackay¹³⁴ respectively criticise the mainstream campaigns for failing to pay sufficient attention to women's issues. While McAngus and Rummery discuss whether and how mobilisation for Yes and No aligned with the wider women's movement, Bell and Mackay inquire into the opportunities and challenges for gender equality in the 2014 constitutional debate – not least in comparison with the inclusivity promoted ahead of devolution in the 1990s.¹³⁵

Additionally, some headway has been made regarding mediated gender representations (and representativeness) in analyses of the referendum campaign. David Patrick analyses newspaper coverage of the referendum with a focus on authorship in weekday coverage of news and comment articles.¹³⁶ Based on statistical analysis of contributions to eight newspapers in Scotland between August and September 2014, Patrick found that, where authors were named, news and comment outputs were dominated by a small number of mostly male commentators. These findings point to an elite dominance and marginalisation of female voices in the debate; interventions by female commentators were largely limited to interventions by high profile politicians. Similarly, Marina Dekavalla and Alenka Jelen-Sanchez found that male-dominated political elites constituted the most frequent sources for the BBC's regional news bulletin *Reporting Scotland* during the final month of the debate – even relative to their statistical presence in this group.¹³⁷ The underrepresentation of non-elite contributors – from members of non-profit organisations and grassroots campaigns to members of the public more widely – and, among them, women counters arguments for the progressive

¹³³ Craig McAngus and Kirstein Rummery, "Campaigning for the Female Vote in the Scottish Independence Referendum: Comparing Women for Independence and Women Together," *Scottish Affairs* 27, no. 2 (2018).

¹³⁴ Christine Bell and Fiona Mackay, "Women and Constitutional Debates: Engendering Visions of a New Scotland," in *After Independence: The State of the Scottish Nation Debate*, eds. Gerry Hassan and James Mitchell (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2013), 197. For a longitudinal analysis of women's representation during British elections cf. Emily Harmer, *Women, Media, and Elections: Representation and Marginalization in British Politics* (Bristol: Bristol University Press, 2021).

¹³⁵ For a discussion of larger issues on gender representation in constitutional debates, cf. Tània Verge, Marc Guinjoan, and Roni Rodon, "Risk Aversion, Gender, and Constitutional Change," *Politics & Gender* 11, no. 3 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1743923X15000264>.

¹³⁶ David Patrick, "Who Writes the News? Authorship and Gender Representation in Press Coverage of the 2014 Referendum," *Scottish Affairs* 29, no. 1 (2020), <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2020.0306>.

¹³⁷ Marina Dekavalla and Alenka Jelen-Sanchez, "Whose Voices Are Heard in the News? A Study of Sources in Television Coverage of the Scottish Independence Referendum," *British Politics* 12, no. 4 (2016): 465-66.

nature and political inclusivity of popular participation at the time and indicate the limitations of the persuasive myth of participation and democratisation associated with the referendum.

Willie Sullivan explores the class argument in the referendum debate through the notion of the “Missing Scotland.”¹³⁸ This idea, promoted by Hassan during the referendum campaign, suggests that around 400,000-500,000 eligible voters were not registered to vote prior to the referendum and were, as part of the (not quite) “Missing Million,” not participating in elections. Sullivan aims to determine who those non-voters were and what dissuaded them from participating in Scotland’s democracy. In addition to reviewing election data, which suggests people living in deprived areas and highly mobile student populations are least likely to vote in elections, focus groups with non-voters indicated that practical obstacles were less relevant than the impression that no one was representing their interests or engaging with them. Respondents felt the referendum was a different case altogether and aimed to participate – findings to which my public engagement format adds in [chapter 3](#).

Sullivan’s findings here link to larger reflections on how politically “forgotten” parts of society are represented in public and media debate. Analysis by James Morrison suggests that in the aftermath of the 2016 Brexit referendum a rhetoric around the “left behind” voters – primarily represented as working class, pro-Brexit, white males from former industrial areas – framed them through a neoliberal economic, rather than cultural diagnosis.¹³⁹ These rhetorical claims that shaped media discourse bear marked similarities with the political diagnosis of the missing Scotland in 2014: in both cases, segments of society have been defined as absent from mainstream political discourse through elite framings of political or economic realities. In both instances, the culturalist readings as well as analyses of elite narratives that aid these portrayals of parts of society as “missing” or “left behind” are underexplored. However, such elite narratives have determined the version of political participation on offer and its relevance for a more democratic and progressive future. Crucially, thus, Gordon Asher and Leigh French criticise the referendum debate “as a process of closure, where independence is posited as *ipso facto* ‘progressive’” and, as one might add, an expression of mainstream left-nationalist political ideology.¹⁴⁰

Such representations of the campaign are also explored by Della Porta et al. who argue that a “tendency to downplay the national-identity discourse” in favour of notions of

¹³⁸ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*.

¹³⁹ James Morrison, *The Left Behind: Reimagining Britain’s Socially Excluded* (London: Pluto Press, 2022).

¹⁴⁰ Gordon Asher and Leigh French, “Crises Capitalism and Independence Doctrines,” *Concept* 5, no. 1 (2014): 1 (emphasis original).

democracy and “political regeneration”¹⁴¹ was fuelled by “the creation of a popular national narrative of a distinct Scottish identity” that “cast austerity and neoliberalism along national lines as an English phenomenon.”¹⁴² Claims to civic nationalism that conversely contribute to the creation of a specific cultural identity – as discussed above – found their iteration in specific notions of democratic revival and political participation in the referendum discourse. However, as Asher and French as well as Introna suggest, the link to notions of progressiveness is highly problematic in its rhetorical presumptuousness. Accordingly, Introna links the experience of grassroots empowerment to narratives of progressiveness rooted in a prescribed emancipation of the “Scottish psyche from a ‘miserabilist’ outlook and of the Missing Scotland from political disengagement.”¹⁴³ Cast as “the other”, against which the pro-independence campaign defined itself, the missing Scotland as an iteration of Scottish miserabilism remained, according to Introna, outside the rhetoric and imagination of progressiveness. The resistance towards nationalist identification in favour of democratic renewal from a perspective of progressiveness actively “made missing” segments of society (i.e., the “missing Scotland” mentioned above) and may leave progressiveness both as the unifying feature and most powerful legacy of the pro-independence side.

The rhetoric inherent in these discursive performances of progressiveness also extends to the notion of independence itself, which, according to French and Asher, became a utopian category for the hopes and dreams of the public – who, in consequence, deferred to the elites to define the meaning of independence and societal change. These interrelations of discursive political power and popular participation, their representation, and performance across popular and media debate have direct significance for my argument. Popular participation, as viewed through notions of progressiveness and national identity, indicates the discursive limitations of said participation’s representation in political and media discourse. These limitations are suggestive of its performativity rather than its inclusivity.

4.3 Media coverage and analysis of the referendum

The notion of representation is particularly significant where the media is concerned. Indeed, the media itself became the focus of debate in 2014 when it faced complaints about (structural)

¹⁴¹ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 101.

¹⁴² Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 117.

¹⁴³ Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 117.

bias.¹⁴⁴ However, in her framing analysis of the referendum in the press, Dekavalla finds that despite differences in these political events, the coverage largely mirrored practices established in the context of elections – framing the referendum as a “strategic game” or through policy concerns. According to Dekavalla, this allowed the press to emphasise the referendum as a pragmatic decision but meant that it was still framed like other political contests.¹⁴⁵ The significant rhetorical emphasis on the referendum as a “once in a generation”, “historic event” in press coverage¹⁴⁶ also meant that the press struggled to adapt its coverage to the format and activism of the referendum. Indeed, it largely failed to cover the debate outside established channels of political communication,¹⁴⁷ even though press editorials in the final week of the referendum campaign increasingly communicated a wish for change prominent among the public, as Dekavalla notes elsewhere.¹⁴⁸ In many ways, the press lacked the tools to cover emerging, alternative forms of debate and activism; this is where this thesis’s analysis of representations of participation in the press (as discussed in [chapter 2](#)) makes an important contribution to understanding the restrictions of mediated public discourse.

In addition to practical shortcomings, the referendum coverage also revealed structural shortcomings within the media as identified by Christopher Silver.¹⁴⁹ Silver draws particular attention to a “media deficit” in Scotland and proposes that the Scottish media not only lack plurality, but effectively do not meet the structures required of a modern nation. From a perspective affiliated with and sympathetic to pro-independence activism, Silver maps out the

¹⁴⁴ Considerations around bias and neutrality are explored in relation to larger challenges for the press in Michael Wayne, “Beneath the Bias, the Crisis: The Press, the Independent Media and the Scottish Referendum,” *International Journal of Media & Cultural Politics* 12, no. 3 (2016), https://doi.org/10.1386/macp.12.3.323_1. Cf. also Alex Law, “Mediating the Scottish Independence Debate,” *Media Education Journal* 56 (2015). Relatedly, Birch and ElSafoury have conducted research into allegations of fraud in the online referendum debate. Sarah Birch and Fatma ElSafoury, “Fraud, Plot, or Collective Delusion? Social Media and Perceptions of Electoral Misconduct in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum,” *Election Law Journal: Rules, Politics, and Policy* 16, no. 4 (December 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1089/elj.2016.0393>.

¹⁴⁵ Dekavalla, “Framing Referendum Campaigns,” 794.

¹⁴⁶ Hutcheon, “It Failed to Win Independence”; Macnab, “Scottish Independence”; The Herald, “Once in a Lifetime Opportunity.”

¹⁴⁷ Marina Dekavalla, “The Scottish Independence Referendum, Political Journalism and the News Media Landscape,” in *Routledge Companion to Political Journalism*, eds. James Morrison, Jen Birks, and Mike Berry (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), 79; cf. Law, “Mediating the Scottish Independence Debate.”

¹⁴⁸ Dekavalla discusses how the referendum was framed as a choice between independence and further devolution in the editorials of five daily morning and five Sunday titles (both Scottish titles and Scottish editions of London-based titles) in the week before and after the vote in September. According to Dekavalla, these framings represented pre-existing uncertainty about independence as well as the public’s wish for change. Marina Dekavalla, “The Scottish Press Account: Narratives of the Independence Referendum and Its Aftermath,” in Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*. Cf. also Marina Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum in the Scottish Press,” *Scottish Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2018), <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2018.0222>.

¹⁴⁹ Christopher Silver, *Demanding Democracy: The Case for a Scottish Media* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2015).

role of cultural activism and alternative media platforms within the referendum debate. His insights into the shortcomings of the media in the constitutional debate align with suggestions by Neil Blain and David Hutchison that the contemporary media fail to “provid[e] the platforms required for fully informed, fair-minded discussions about the final decisions for Scottish, and indeed British, democracy.”¹⁵⁰ Despite the rise in alternative online platforms, Blain and Hutchison further question whether the available “financial, intellectual and imaginative resources” will suffice to adequately cover and frame contemporary political challenges. A question that, like the constitutional question itself, remains live and relevant in contemporary Scotland.

In light of the rise of alternative and social media platforms, various studies have emphasised the continued influence of traditional media for the referendum debate.¹⁵¹ The close relationship between traditional and new media as part of the campaign has been discussed by Sarah Pedersen et al. who indicate that televised referendum debates stimulated simultaneous content creation on social media.¹⁵² Their analysis of reactions to three televised debates in autumn 2014 suggests that social media discussions “responded most strongly to ‘moments of political theatre’ rather than thoughtful debate.”¹⁵³ Echoing the role of theatrical performance identified by Paterson as part of the referendum (mentioned above), this practice reiterates the debate’s reliance on rehearsed argument and routine repetition. These performative iterations and their discursive limitations are key to my understanding of the referendum as a discursive media event and simultaneously link to the role of deliberation and participation online. Their limitations challenge notions of democratisation popularly associated with the referendum.

Despite the shared belief that these qualities would be prevalent during the referendum debate, a study by Stephen Quinlan, Mark Shepard, and Lindsay Paterson on the BBC Have Your Say forum found a lack of deliberative characteristics and interaction online.¹⁵⁴ Their study further reveals a clear gender bias and conversation dominance from select users.

¹⁵⁰ Neil Blain and David Hutchison, “The Media Landscape in Scotland,” in Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*, 24.

¹⁵¹ For an overview over the role of media in the referendum debate across different media outlets, contexts, and countries, cf. Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, eds., *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*. Cf. also David Hutchison, “The Media and Politics in Scotland” in *Politics in Scotland*, ed. Duncan McTavish (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016) and, for a general overview, Law, “Mediating the Scottish Independence Debate.”

¹⁵² Sarah Pedersen et al., “Backchannel Chat: Peaks and Troughs in a Twitter Response to Three Televised Debates During the Scottish Independence Referendum Campaign 2014,” *Aberdeen Business School Working Papers* 7, no. 2 (2014).

¹⁵³ Pedersen et al., “Backchannel Chat,” 2.

¹⁵⁴ Stephen Quinlan, Mark Shepard, and Lindsay Paterson, “Online Discussion and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum: Flaming Keyboards or Forums for Deliberation”, *Electoral Studies* 38 (2015).

However, they also found little “flaming”, “online emotion”, and abuse on this tightly regulated forum with a select audience. Such practices are more commonly associated with other online platforms, including Facebook and Twitter. Indeed, Margot Buchanan emphasises this risk of abuse and criticism online in relation to referendum analysis on Facebook and Twitter, but also highlights a focus on change rather than nationalism in online posts – in accordance with newspaper editorials’ emphasis on change mentioned above.¹⁵⁵

As pointed out by Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, contributions and interaction online displayed clear discussion dominance. Network analysis can provide crucial additional insights into discussion dominance on platforms such as Twitter; however, no sustained network analysis of activity on Twitter during the referendum has been published, nor has online activity by grassroots campaigners been analysed.¹⁵⁶ Data collected in relation to the hashtag #indyref¹⁵⁷ as part of this thesis thus builds on network analysis of Twitter activity conducted in other political contexts. Both Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe¹⁵⁸ and Julian Ausserhofer and Axel Maireder¹⁵⁹ suggest in their respective network analyses that Twitter is dominated by already established actors. Whereas Larsson and Moe analyse Twitter activity and online deliberation in the context of the Swedish election campaign in 2010, Ausserhofer and Maireder employ network analysis outside of political campaigning to contextualise dominant Twitter users in Austria regarding profession and relation to mass media (2011-2012). They, too, find that Twitter rarely facilitated conversation online and that networks were dominated by a gendered elite of political professionals. Nonetheless, they argue that the relative openness of these networks can increase citizens engagement with political discourse.

¹⁵⁵ Margot Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Re-tweeted: The Referendum Campaign on Social Media,” in Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*. Buchanan provides a general discussion of social media activity as well as a semiotic analysis of “profile pictures” used by the campaign organisations online. The parameters of her study and analysis are otherwise not clearly defined.

¹⁵⁶ Shepard and Quinlan stress a lack of social media analysis during the referendum campaign. Mark Shepard and Stephen Quinlan, “Social Media and the Scottish Independence Referendum 2014: Events and the Generation of Enthusiasm for Yes,” in *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, eds. Axel Bruns et al. (2016, repr. in paperback; New York: Routledge, 2018), 489. Their own study analyses Facebook and Twitter accounts by *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* to determine the role of social media as a campaign tool and to map the levels of (online) popularity over the final year of the referendum debate (based on follower numbers, like and post counts on weekdays from August 2013 till 18 September 2014).

¹⁵⁷ Andrew Tickell raises questions as to how social media use – as marked by the hashtag #indyref – should have been regulated in accordance with the sixteen-week pre-poll regulated period beginning in June 2014. Andrew Tickell, “Regulating #indyref: Social Media and the Scottish Independence Referendum Act 2013,” *The Edinburgh Law Review* 18 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3366/elr.2014.0234>.

¹⁵⁸ Anders Olof Larsson and Hallvard Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging: Twitter Users in the 2010 Swedish Election Campaign,” *New Media & Society* 14, no. 5 (2011), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444811422894>.

¹⁵⁹ Julian Ausserhofer and Axel Maireder, “National Politics on Twitter: Structures and Topics of a Networked Public Sphere,” *Information, Communication & Society* 16, no. 3 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.756050>.

Concerns around deliberation and inclusive debate in the media are essential to my approach to popular participation in the referendum. In the context of the public sphere as a potent framework for political debate,¹⁶⁰ political opinion formation processes are contingent on media representations. Within this context, Michael Higgins draws attention to the use of lexical location tokens in the Scottish and British press based on analysis on the first Scottish election in May 1999.¹⁶¹ With reference to Michael Billig’s “banal nationalism,”¹⁶² Higgins identifies the “nation” – or rather national coverage – as a selling point for news and politics. Intriguingly, Higgins also points to the use of an inclusive rhetoric to mobilise the national community ahead of the election and suggests, elsewhere, that the indigenous Scottish press has provided more background information, advice, and opinion than its London-based counterparts to foster political deliberation and decision-making.¹⁶³ This has implications for a specifically Scottish public sphere as a framework for political debate, deliberation, and mobilisation in 2014 as discussed in chapter 1.

The inherent claims of the press to represent the nation and its people are also addressed by Jen Birks. Against the backdrop of newspapers’ claims to speak for the people, Birks questions the potential of newspaper campaigns to facilitate political engagement through the politics of protest – between populist outrage and (rhetorically legitimised) protest. In particular, the distinction between legitimate protest and manipulative populism that Birks draws is significant for representations of political participation during the referendum campaign.¹⁶⁴ Informed by Birks’s reading of newspaper campaigns,¹⁶⁵ chapter 2 suggests that populist claims to speak for the people during the referendum depended on the representation of “silent” and disempowered segments of society (such as the “silent majority” and “missing million”) as well as cultural forms of participation that added colour to the debate but could easily be dismissed as naïve – in their political tameness and appealing visuality.

¹⁶⁰ Jürgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*, trans. Thomas Burger and Frederick Lawrence (1962; Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991).

¹⁶¹ Michael Higgins, “Putting the Nation in the News: The Role of Location Formulation in a Selection of Scottish Newspapers,” *Discourse & Society* 15, no. 5 (2004), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0957926504045035>. Cf. also Michael Higgins, “The Articulation of Nation and Politics in the Scottish Press,” *Journal of Language and Politics* 3, no. 3 (2004).

¹⁶² Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, especially 6.

¹⁶³ Michael Higgins, “Substantiating a Political Public Sphere in the Scottish Press: A Comparative Analysis,” *Journalism* 7, no. 1 (2006), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884906059426>.

¹⁶⁴ Jen Birks, “The Politics of Protest in Newspaper Campaigns: Dissent, Populism and the Rhetoric of Authenticity,” *British Politics* 6, no. 2 (2011).

¹⁶⁵ Birks, “The Politics of Protest,” 131-132; Jen Birks, “The Democratic Role of Campaign Journalism: Partisan Representation and Public Participation,” *Journalism Practice* 4, no. 2 (2010): 216-17, <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780903407437>.

4.4 Cultural devolution, Scottish writers, and “indyref” literature

As detailed above, Scottish nationalism and identity have repeatedly been linked to Scottish culture, specifically to a literary elite or vanguard. This connection has shaped both a public understanding of politics and writers’ and critics’ outlook on what constitutes Scottish literature and, more so, the role of writers and artists in the agitation for pro-devolution and pro-independence political change. Although the role of culture and identity was less prominently discussed in the referendum debate in 2014,¹⁶⁶ a persistent cultural myth aligns the nationalist cause with the vanguardism of Scottish writers.¹⁶⁷ This argument is explicitly put forward in Robert Crawford’s historical approach to Scottish literature and bears similarities to Craig’s argument mentioned above.

Crawford creates a literary history of continuity from early Scottish literature to its contemporary forms. He gives particular attention to the political function of Scottish writers and their vanguard position in writing into existence the nation. Rather than assuming that Scottish writers “would have achieved [independence] long ago,”¹⁶⁸ this thesis adopts a constructivist, rather than literal, reading of “cultural devolution.” In doing so, it aligns with readings of Alex Thomson and Scott Hames. Both suggest that the quasi-political national function of Scottish writers in the absence of political representation fulfils a primary narrative function. As discussed in [chapter 6](#), it is relevant in its cultural significance, rather than in political – or historical – practice. Accordingly, Hames distinguishes the largely self-referential cultural empowerment of Scottish writers and intellectuals as “the dream” from what he calls “the grind” of political and electoral strategy in his critical analysis of devolution history.¹⁶⁹ Instead of discrediting the role of Scottish writers and intellectuals in shaping intellectual debate on Scottish self-determination, such scrutiny allows it to be seen in its cultural function. In line with this, Eleanor Bell challenges uncritical notions of Scottishness, of essentialist

¹⁶⁶ One exception here is a publication by Alexander Moffat and Alan Riach that makes an explicit case for the role of arts and culture in the context of the referendum. Alexander Moffat and Alan Riach, *Arts of Independence: The Cultural Argument and Why It Matters Most* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014). Cf. also Ross Colquhoun and Christopher Silver, eds., *Inspired by Independence* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2014).

¹⁶⁷ Publications that have asked writers and artists for their evaluation of national politics and the constitutional question reproduce this tendency, e.g., Scott Hames, *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2012); Bryan Beattie and Gerry Hassan, eds., *ImagNation: Stories of Scotland’s Future* (Dumfries: Big Sky Press, 2011); Val McDermid and Jo Sharp, eds., *Imagine A Country: Ideas for a Better Future* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020).

¹⁶⁸ Robert Crawford, *Bannockburns: Scottish Independence and the Literary Imagination, 1314-2014* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 11. Cf. also Gifford Douglas and Alan Riach, eds., *Scotlands: Poets and the Nation* (Manchester: Carcanet Press, 2004).

¹⁶⁹ Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics of Scottish Devolution: Voice, Class, Nation* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020).

cultural nationalism, and readings of Scottish literature as history.¹⁷⁰ The exclusionary nature of such self-definitions, Bell argues, is frequently produced in critical discourse rather than in Scottish literary texts. Indeed, the “paradoxical need” to assert a culture understood as fabricated, has, she argues, frequently been avoided by writers in their work. An “obsession” with “finding Scotland” in literary texts and with mapping it onto reality for political purposes is thus primarily established by critics.¹⁷¹

This critical or, rather, popular practice has continued into the referendum debate based on what Thomson describes as a “longstanding nationalist claim that the arts” have actively contributed to “political identity-formation in Scotland since at least the Renaissance movement in the 1920s and 1930s.”¹⁷² According to Thomson, even in 2014 “the language of aesthetics” allowed the Yes side to maintain energetic grassroots support and minimise any semblance of political threat by engaging in “depoliticised” art and creativity.¹⁷³ The practice of external legitimation that Thomson stresses here is what I read with Pierre Bourdieu as a practice of political legitimation based on merits achieved within the cultural or literary field.¹⁷⁴ This practice, I argue, is fuelled by a myth of identity rooted in the vanguardism of Scottish artists and writers or, in the words of Hames, “the dream.” In as much, I agree with Thomson’s argument that discussions on the democratisation of Scotland and pro-independence politics specifically need to contend with Scottish expressions of identity.

In line with the depoliticization of Scottish literature mentioned by Thomson, Marie-Odile Pittin Hédon proposes that Scottish literature and criticism have moved away from an alignment with nationalism since 1979 and have abandoned an associated “representational trope.”¹⁷⁵ While this notion can be contested as produced in public discourse rather than in Scottish literature – as suggested by Bell – analysis of emerging “indyref” literature conducted in chapter 4 of this thesis defies such a reading. I propose, instead, that Pittin-Hédon adapts notions of change and progressiveness that dominate recent performances of Scottish

¹⁷⁰ Bell, *Questioning Scotland*.

¹⁷¹ Bell, *Questioning Scotland*, 39; 45.

¹⁷² Alex Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum? Literature and Critique in Scotland, 1918-2014,” *Journal of Scottish Thought* 8 (2016): 63. Cf. Sarah Paterson-Hamlin, “Poetic Politics: Writers and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum” (PhD diss., University of Glasgow, 2016). In this PhD dissertation, Paterson-Hamlin considers the works of six important Scottish literary figures (Edwin Morgan, J.K. Rowling, Liz Lochhead, Alasdair Gray, Kathleen Jamie, and John Burnside) in relation to their engagement with the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and argues for reading their works as expressions of larger themes predating the writers’ involvement in the referendum debate.

¹⁷³ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 84.

¹⁷⁴ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 129.

¹⁷⁵ Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon, “Reconstructing the Future: Contemporary Scottish Literature and the Nation,” *Études écossaises* 20 (2018). <http://journals.openedition.org/etudesecossaises/1416>.

“depoliticised” national identity prominent during and beyond the referendum debate as highlighted throughout the discussion so far. Indeed, she emphasises new imaginings of the nation and Scottish writers’ potential to create new myths of the “social body”, or indeed, the national body. In as much, Pittin-Hédon’s analysis does not move beyond the nationalist and political context it challenges and which powerfully (re-)emerged in indyref literature and poetry.

In contrast, Hames, who emphasises the similarities between public political debate and literary text as part of indyref experience, argues that emerging indyref novels largely follow the same patterns, argument structures, and rhetoric limitations visible in public discourse.¹⁷⁶ This “grid” of indyref literature contrasts, according to Hames, with the “festival” experience of indyref as highly engaging, individualistic, and culturally meaningful. Along similar lines, I perceive the referendum as a discursive event marked by an “explosion of text.” This understanding influences my reading of indyref fiction and poetry (see [chapter 4](#)), which I locate in tensions between representations of participation and performances of national belonging. Beyond the dual forces identified by Hames, I argue for the rhetorical limitations of the referendum discourse as rooted in performative iterations of cultural myth and identity expressed in claims to participation and progressiveness during the referendum in 2014.

As the above discussion demonstrates, this thesis is rooted in considerable, live interest. The constitutional question as well as notions of political participation continue to stimulate debate in political science and beyond. However, little has been said about the realities of participation and the segments of society to which this enfranchisement was discursively granted. Indeed, I suggest that the discourse on popular participation that emerged from the referendum debate was largely restrictive while seeking to rhetorically empower specific segments of society through notions of progressiveness and democratisation. These notions must themselves be seen as powerful expressions of cultural identity and nationalism, rather than as “depoliticised” universal values. Although this reading is inspired by research on persistent myths of Scottish national identity pertaining to political progressiveness and literary vanguard, little research

¹⁷⁶ Scott Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” in *Scottish Writing After Devolution: Edges of the New*, eds. Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon, Camille Manfredi, and Scott Hames (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022). Note that little analysis has been conducted on literary texts emerging as part of the referendum. For a rare inquiry into theatrical responses to the referendum, cf. Sila Güvenç, “‘Yae, Nae, or Dinnae Ken’: Dramatic Responses to the Scottish Referendum and Theatre Uncut,” *New Theatre Quarterly* 33, no. 4 (November 2017), <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266464X17000501>.

has been conducted on how claims to participation in the referendum discourse played out beyond the high referendum turnout and rise in party membership post-vote. By combining different influences across politics, culture, and media, a complex image of the 2014 referendum as a discourse, media event,¹⁷⁷ political opportunity, and socio-cultural reality emerges. This research's unique approach to the referendum as a textually mediated and culturally performed event crucially positions it in a context of national continuity and rupture and reveals its socio-political and cultural significance.

5. Methodology

The question of Scottish independence is a complex social, political, cultural, and economic issue, which has received significant attention across disciplines. However, many of these studies are limited by their own disciplinary context. Similarly, this thesis is rooted in the context of the Arts and Humanities. Within this context, however, it presents the first sustained critical analysis of the referendum from a cross-disciplinary perspective – combining oral history interviews, public engagement, and analysis of literary texts with media and critical discourse analysis, as detailed below. This multi-method approach captures the referendum experience as a complex, mediated political and socio-cultural event, media spectacle, and discursive moment, which requires sustained analysis from a variety of perspectives. I frame these different perspectives through contributions to the public sphere, captured in elite interventions of political and media discourse, cultural production, and individual voices by artists and writers as well as members of the public. The combination of different contributions to the public sphere – by individuals and groups, members of the public and elites, written and oral, via traditional and social media – mitigates shortcomings of singular qualitative and quantitative methods and addresses public (culture-)political communication in its complexity. All procedures for data collection were approved by the General University Ethics Panel of the University of Stirling.

5.1 Oral history interviews

Newspaper debate concerning the referendum repeatedly discussed the central function of cultural commentators, campaigners, and high-profile Scottish writers and artists in the

¹⁷⁷ Fiske, *Media Matters*, 2.

political mobilisation for the referendum. I address the involvement of these figures in the debate and their contribution to the one-dimensional construction and performance of the referendum experience through a myth of popular participation, by analysing how this cultural elite has retrospectively conceptualised their own role in the referendum.

Oral histories describe “the product of the interview situation,” a methodology and a theoretical framework.¹⁷⁸ In their exploration of live, people-centred history,¹⁷⁹ oral histories are particularly well-suited to capture otherwise poorly preserved, evolving histories such as the popular campaigning experience of the referendum.¹⁸⁰

Where oral histories are frequently used to speak to the experiences of those routinely marginalised and silenced in society,¹⁸¹ I use oral histories to collect memories of “elite” actors to help contextualise dominant media tropes on participation. These testimonies indicate how these actors actively interpret their own positionality within national culture and politics in hindsight; they indicate what people “wanted to do, what they believed they were doing, what they now think they did.”¹⁸² Accordingly, particular attention is given to how the interviewees’ “personal ‘truth’ may coincide with collective ‘imagination’”¹⁸³ and national myth. Crucially, the ways in which the referendum is (mis-)remembered by these actors extends to their positionality as cultural figures, who themselves became symbols of popular participation and co-created the myth that constitutes and legitimises their role within it (see chapter 6).

For oral history interviews, the practice of remembering is key: it needs to balance critical remove from past events with participants’ ability to actively remember their experience of these events. In the referendum context, this remembering is further complicated by the ongoing constitutional debate in Scotland and related political events,¹⁸⁴ which impact how the referendum is evaluated retrospectively. This project is well placed to engage with reflections on the past referendum with some critical remove, prior to a potential second independence

¹⁷⁸ Angela Bartie and Arthur McIvor, “Oral History in Scotland,” *The Scottish Historical Review* XCII, no. 234 (2013): 109, <https://doi.org/10.3366/shr.2013.0170>.

¹⁷⁹ Paul Thompson, *Voices of the Past: Oral History*, 3rd ed. (1978; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 23.

¹⁸⁰ Exceptions to these are campaign diaries and live reports by observers, commentators, campaigners and key actors published shortly after the vote, e.g., Barr, *The Summer of Independence*; Geoghegan, *The People’s Referendum*; Lynch, *IndyRef to ScotRef*; Alex Salmond, *The Dream Shall Never Die* (London: William Collins, 2015); David Torrance, *100 Days of Hope and Fear: How Scotland’s Referendum Was Lost and Won* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014).

¹⁸¹ Alessandro Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” *History Workshop* 12 (1981): 97.

¹⁸² Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 99-100; cf. Thompson, *Voices of the Past*, 6.

¹⁸³ Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 99; Donald Matheson, *Media Discourses: Analysing Media Texts* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2005).

¹⁸⁴ E.g., the 2016 referendum on EU membership (Brexit), the promise of a second independence referendum and the Supreme Court case on Scottish referendum powers in 2022 as well as the SNP leadership contest in 2023.

referendum. In so doing, it addresses a critical gap in the material, as reflective accounts or oral histories have rarely emerged since.¹⁸⁵

Nine oral history interviews with Scottish cultural commentators, campaigners, and high-profile Scottish writers and artists were recorded as part of this project. Due to the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions, all interviews were conducted online, using video conferencing software (Microsoft Teams or Zoom).¹⁸⁶ Interviewer bias was mitigated by prioritising the stories the interviewee wanted to share.¹⁸⁷ Interviewees comprise author, playwright, and campaigner Alan Bissett; artist and poet Alec Finlay; poet and campaigner Jenny Lindsay; musician, journalist, and activist Patrick “Pat” Kane; writer, broadcaster, and activist Billy Kay; author and activist Mary McCabe; crime writer and playwright Denise Mina; journalist and newspaper editor Richard Walker; as well as one anonymous campaign manager. All individuals were chosen based on their involvement during the referendum through media interventions, literary publications, and grassroots activism, as well as their willingness to speak about their experiences. Interviewees are (except for the anonymous contributor) cited against their names.

Interviewees were identified based on their contribution to and visibility in the public debate – as grassroots or elite activists and culture-political representatives. While some activists, campaigners, writers, and commentators were eager to speak about their experiences, others who were heavily involved in campaigning did not want to speak about the referendum – due to timing issues, personal investment, or “quasi-traumatic” memories that meant they sought to actively distance themselves from this experience. The purposive sampling was thus based on public contributions and visibility as well as the interviewees’ willingness to participate. Despite these minor limitations, interviewees’ diverse positions capture some of the nuance of the public debate at the time and align with Portelli’s notion that few “‘quality’ informants [...] might be worth more than ten statistically selected ones.”¹⁸⁸ Within the context of this thesis, this means engagement with a comparably small interview sample as well as a

¹⁸⁵ Only one oral history interview on the 2014 Bus Party was recorded and archived by the University of Stirling’s Scottish Political Archive (SPA) as part of their substantial referendum collection. The national referendum collection of the National Library of Scotland, Edinburgh, does not hold any. Bartie and McIvor note that there is a lack of oral histories dealing with politics and protest in Scotland, including the changing nature of Scottish nationalism during and, arguably, since the Thatcher years. Bartie and McIvor, “Oral History in Scotland,” 131.

¹⁸⁶ All interviews were conducted following the University of Stirling’s Ethics guidelines and guidelines by the British Oral History Society, cf. Oral History Society, “Is Your Oral History Legal and Ethical?” <https://www.ohs.org.uk/legal-and-ethical-advice/>.

¹⁸⁷ Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 103. To further mitigate interviewer bias and leading questions, interview questions were peer reviewed by other researchers and experts in the field. Nonetheless, it is crucial to note that, as with all interviews, the interviewer/researcher shapes participants’ testimony: it is always communicated to the interviewer and published by them. Cf. Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 105.

¹⁸⁸ Portelli, “The Peculiarities of Oral History,” 104; cf. Thompson, *Voice of the Past*, 6.

broad definition of what oral history testimonies can contribute to the research project: they are utilised as personal reflections on experiences of cultural and political significance. Excerpts from these interviews are analysed in their contribution to a myth of popular participation throughout this thesis.

5.2 Referendum Café: public engagement format

The referendum debate's nominal focus on popular participation frequently failed to create deliberative spaces for ordinary citizens. Thus, elite and ordinary experiences of the referendum differ. I address the experiences of ordinary people through statements by members of the public, captured by my public engagement through two methods: an online, individual response format and a focus group. As such, the public engagement format replicates the reflective potential of the oral history interviews stressed above. The individual response format was added as a more inclusive and accessible option for participation. It invited participants to write down their experiences and memories of participation in the referendum in response to various prompts (see [Appendix](#)), including questions and excerpts from literature and newspapers.¹⁸⁹ Instructions and prompts were available as MS Word and pdf files from the project website¹⁹⁰ and on request, with participants emailing back their completed documents. The format was publicised alongside announcements for the focus groups, using the same channels as detailed below. In contrast to the focus group, participants could contribute to this format in their own time and without any interference or pressure from others.

Delayed due to restrictions of the Covid-19 pandemic and an unsuccessful online option,¹⁹¹ the focus group ran under the title “Scottish Referendum Café” as part of the UK-wide Being Human festival¹⁹² on 16 November 2022. The focus group, designed for 8-10

¹⁸⁹ These writing prompts included excerpts from Geoghegan *The People's Referendum*; Lynch's *IndyRef to ScotRef*; Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, Mary McCabe's novel *Two Closes and a Referendum* (Glasgow: Ringwood Publishing, 2017); James Robertson's *365 Stories* (London: Penguin Books, 2014), Calum Rodger's poem “A Voter's Reflections in Rhyme” in *Aiblins*, eds. Katie Ailes and Sarah Paterson (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2016).

¹⁹⁰ The project website is available here: <https://campuspress.stir.ac.uk/indyrefproject/>.

¹⁹¹ Despite between 6-9 sign-ups for two proposed focus groups in June 2021, only one person attended each session. While one participant proceeded to contribute an interview instead, the other submitted a written response. Contributing factors to the low engagement might include: the summer break, Zoom fatigue, and the easing of Covid-19 restrictions.

¹⁹² Being Human is the UK's national festival of the humanities, run by the University of London's School of Advanced Study with Research England, the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and the British Academy. A key incentive of the festival is moving research out of the University context and make it accessible to the public and promote inclusion. Cf. Being Human, <https://beinghumanfestival.org>.

participants, provided a space to creatively engage with personal stories and memories of the referendum. It was kindly hosted by the National Library of Scotland (NLS).

The ninety-minute focus group was attended by eight participants (out of eleven sign-ups) and consisted of two key elements: an introduction to the NLS's referendum collection by archivist Heidi Egginton and a writing and discussion session. The collection's materials set the scene for the focus group and were met with significant interest by the participants, who happily browsed, read, and discussed. This level of engagement and exchange continued during the focus group. For the writing session, I shared writing prompts, consisting of different textual excerpts and images capturing the referendum, via PowerPoint slides (see [Appendix](#)) to direct participants' responses. A key benefit of this group activity was the rich and passionate interaction of participants, who communally negotiated their personal experiences, values, and positions. The engaging discussion required little intervention on my part. The evolving group dynamic added another layer to individual reflections from interviews and the individual response format and revived some of the arguments and passions – as well as potential peer pressure – from the referendum debate. As such, it was difficult to accommodate within the allocated timeframe and the participants were eager to continue their discussions¹⁹³ and provided very positive feedback.¹⁹⁴

The focus group and individual response format invited contributions from any member of the public, with the only specification being that participants had experienced the referendum themselves. Both formats were initially advertised on social media in June 2021, where they received a high level of interaction and positive feedback.¹⁹⁵ As a result, the announcement was picked up by *The National* newspaper on two occasions.¹⁹⁶ Despite this positive response, people were hesitant to participate in the project itself and instead referred me to activists, local politicians, and commentators, who they thought would provide a “better” account of what happened. In many ways, this is indicative of the role of participation in the

¹⁹³ Two of the five prepared prompts were discussed during the focus group. All prompts and materials are included in the [Appendix](#). Even after the end of the official focus group (about 30 minutes later than scheduled), many participants stayed on to discuss further.

¹⁹⁴ As part of the Being Human festival evaluation, participants were asked to evaluate how likely they would recommend this event to a friend. All six respondents rated the event between 7 and 10 (on a scale from = 0 not at all likely, to 10 = extremely likely) with an average of 8.2). Organisers at the NLS have since aimed to replicate some of the elements from my focus group for the library's outreach activities.

¹⁹⁵ Within the first five days after publishing the announcement on Twitter on 3 June 2021, the tweet was shared 78 times and liked 55 times. Six Twitter users shared their experiences in the comments. During these first days, Twitter statistics registered 948 “total engagements” and 25,501 “impressions.”

¹⁹⁶ Martin Hannan, “Research Project Needs Your Memories”, *The National*, June 5, 2021; Judith Duffy, “Researcher Asks for Your Memories of 2014 Indyref to Find ‘Missing’ Voices,” *The Sunday National*, June 6, 2021, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/19352910.call-memories-2014-referendum/>.

referendum more generally: whereas a high level of enthusiasm for participation became visible, tangible popular participation was often more limited. Members of the public actively undermined the audibility of their own voice and sought representation through members of a “local” elite. These initial small-scale observations already confirmed assumptions of a widespread deferral of political public voice and an internalisation of political representativeness – themes I discuss throughout this thesis.

In addition to my personal networks, the focus group was also promoted through the NLS’s communication network as well as those of the Being Human festival and internal networks of the Universities of Stirling and Strathclyde. Thus, it is worth noting the bias inherent to these promotional activities, which were likely to attract primarily educated middle-class audiences due to institutional standings, reach, and location. Despite an open and inclusive location, the timing of the event (on a weekday, 14:00-16:00) was another limiting factor, excluding certain demographics from participation due to work or caring responsibilities. Thus, it is unsurprising that the event attracted a politically interested, middle-class demographic of largely middle-aged participants. These limitations were in part mitigated by the individual response format, which was more flexible and inclusive and was designed as an alternative to in-person participation. In both cases a bias of the writing prompts and questions must be acknowledged – all prompts were used to ask participants about their memories of a specific element in the referendum, namely participation. While the individual response format allowed contributors to reflect on their own experiences without distractions and being influenced by others, it did not allow contributors to ask questions. In both cases, materials were used to encourage creative reflection to move beyond headlines and arguments that dominated media and public debate.

Six out of eight participants from the focus group submitted their responses and written memories for analysis as part of this project. The submissions by participants (via the *Referendum Café* focus group) and contributors (via the individual writing format) are treated anonymously by default. Submissions have been numbered as follows: participant 1-6 and contributor 1-7.¹⁹⁷ The personal experiences of the referendum debate and participation within it are analysed in [chapter 3](#).

¹⁹⁷ This distinction between participants and contributors was maintained to reflect the different materials made available to the two groups and to distinguish between arguments that emerged in a group setting and those based on individual reflection.

5.3 Critical discourse analysis

In addition to the participatory methods discussed so far, the research explored representations of the referendum and participation in the press. The discussion of the textual foundations of myth reveals that text and language have nuance of meaning and are part of historically and politically constituted discourses. I employ critical discourse analysis (CDA) of media text to examine how participation was represented in the Scottish and British press and to analyse the linguistic and discursive rootedness of a “myth” of popular participation.

CDA is based on the close relation between language and power, with a specific focus on improving societies and their realities. Indeed, Norman Fairclough stresses that CDA is not simply “a critique of discourse, it is a critique of the existing social reality (including its discourse) which *begins* with a critique of discourse.”¹⁹⁸ As such, “CDA combines **critique** of discourse and **explanation** of how it figures within and contributes to the existing social reality, as a basis for **action** to change that existing reality.”¹⁹⁹ In its application, CDA demonstrates “how a group of words carries a particular meaning, which we can then identify as performing a political role in reinforcing or challenging power.”²⁰⁰ Thus, CDA is uniquely placed to reveal some of the underlying power dynamics and their role in representing and performing “elite” visions of participation during the referendum. Its application indicates how media practices contributed to the construction and circulation of a myth of popular participation.

I apply CDA to Scottish and British press coverage of key “participatory” events (see [chapter 2](#)). Although opinion pieces and general reflections on grassroots activism and popular participation emerged at various times during the campaign, these were generally few and far between. Coverage of the following events was chosen for analysis:²⁰¹

- the launch events of the Yes and *Better Together* campaign, which highlighted the role of popular participation;
- the Independence Marches and Rallies of 2012 and 2013, and the 2014 Orange Order March in Edinburgh, which saw the first significant public involvement of larger crowds;

¹⁹⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 3rd ed. (1989; Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 7.

¹⁹⁹ Fairclough, *Language and Power*, 6 (emphasis original).

²⁰⁰ Matheson, *Media Discourses*, 7.

²⁰¹ These events were chosen due to their significance in terms of participatory action and involvement. For an alternative approach cf. David Hutchison, “Broadcasting and the Press: Some Key Moments,” in Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*. Hutchison singles out key mediated events of the official campaign (i.e., the publication of the White Paper in November 2013 and two televised debates in August 2013) and considers press responses to these.

- the protests outside the BBC Scotland studios at Pacific Quay in Glasgow, which were the first spontaneous protest against some of the perceived shortcomings of the debate;
- the final weeks ahead of the referendum day and the week after it (1-26 September), which are conceptualised as a “*single narrative spectacle*”²⁰² made up of smaller, participatory activities and large-scale reflections on the two years of campaigning. The “spectacle” at the height of the debate includes the Orange Order march and the September protest in front of BBC Scotland.

I chose the above events based on their “participatory” quality. I selected and cross-checked them via a keyword search for “participation”, “activism”, and “grassroots” campaigning on LexisNexis to verify their significance. The priority given to opinion pieces over news articles in the following analysis reflects the fact that the subject of popular participation was more frequently discussed in comment and opinion articles than in news pieces in the papers studied. The latter tended to focus more on the reporting of campaign-related events, speeches, and polling. Therefore, comment and opinion articles provided more prominent discursive spaces in which mythmaking about popular participation was constructed and, as such, form the basis for analysis in chapter 2.

The analysis focuses on *quality papers* to reflect more explicitly on elite framings of the political debate and avoid the sensationalism more commonly associated with tabloids.²⁰³ Given the thesis’s interest in examining how intellectual discourses of the political campaigns and their media representations constructed a myth of popular participation, the newspaper analysis prioritises those papers that claim to shape elite political, social, and cultural debate and often claim a national function within the public sphere(s) – even if this means excluding news and opinion pages accessed by large segments of the public via the tabloid press. Within the scope of this thesis, the side of more popular engagement with the media is addressed through analysis of active participation in creating and circulating information on the social media platform Twitter (see below). The reason for analysing popular participation on Twitter is based on the assumption that members of the public had more agency in contributing to the mediated political debate via social media platforms than they did via traditional media formats.

²⁰² Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz, “Performing Media Events,” in *Impact and Influences: Essays on Media Power in the Twentieth Century*, eds. James Curran, Anthony Smith and Pauline Wingate (London: Methuen, 1987), 174 (emphasis original).

²⁰³ Douglas Kellner, “Media Spectacle,” 76.

In line with my focus on quality papers for the CDA here, the newspaper sample includes Scottish and British papers as well as their Scottish and/or online editions. The Scottish sample comprises a total of nine different newspapers. Four of these are Scottish quality papers, namely *The Scotsman*, *The Press and Journal*, *The Herald*, and *The Sunday Herald*. The three quality weeklies plus one of their Sunday editions are based in the largest Scottish cities, Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Aberdeen. *The Scotsman* and *The Herald* have a particular claim to being “national” newspapers while maintaining a local focus. Aberdeen’s *Press and Journal* is a quality paper from outside the Central Belt. Located in the North of Scotland and in Scotland’s third largest city, it balances the selection of the other papers geographically, as well as politically.²⁰⁴ The choice to include the *Sunday Herald* as the only Sunday paper is based on its unique editorial support for a Yes vote from May 2014.²⁰⁵ The British sample includes *The Guardian*, *The Daily Telegraph* (and its more extensive online publication *The Telegraph*) as well as the “national” and Scottish edition of *The Times*. These papers were chosen to reflect political variety: the politically conservative, right-wing *The Daily Telegraph/Telegraph*, the centre-right paper *The Times* as well as the centre-left paper *The Guardian*. All five editions repeatedly discussed the referendum and continue to have an influential presence in Scotland.²⁰⁶

The referendum coverage around the campaign events detailed above has been sampled by using the general search terms “Scotland/Scottish” and “Independence” in LexisNexis searches. The timeframe for the search on each event was limited to a week, including the Sunday after the event to ensure coverage in the Sunday paper. One exception are the final weeks of the campaign in September as detailed above.²⁰⁷ The articles for analysis were selected through critical analysis of the larger sample based on the prominence of key terms (e.g., participation, grassroots activism, protest, demonstration, democratic, progressiveness). Articles covering related issues are included for reference.

²⁰⁴ In contrast to presumed “Yes cities” Glasgow and Dundee (where the fourth significant city paper, *The Courier*, is located), Aberdeen, shaped by oil industry and finance, was commonly expected to favour “No”.

²⁰⁵ Apart from the *Sunday Herald*, which has been singled out based on its editorially distinct position – namely its unique pro-independence support – Sunday papers are excluded due to their different focus on commentary, analysis, and feature articles, often expanding on news items from the previous week.

²⁰⁶ With 5 and 4 per cent of their total circulation *The Times* and *The Guardian* and *The Daily Telegraph* maintain a “real presence as well as significant influence in Scotland” and account “for over half of daily sales” in Scotland. Karen Williamson and Peter Golding, “The English Press and the Referendum,” in Blain and Hutchison with Hassan, *Scotland’s Referendum and the Media*, 110.

²⁰⁷ The timeframes for each search were as follows: *Yes Scotland* campaign launch: 21-28 May 2012; *Better Together* campaign launch: 22 June-1 July 2012 (slightly longer to include the Sunday edition after the Monday launch); Independence Marches and Rallies: 17-24 September 2012 and 16-23 September 2013; BBC Protest: 29 June-6 July 2014; 1-26 September (including Orange Order march and later BBC Protest).

5.4 Literature and text

Whereas newspaper texts are indicative of public participation, highlighting the discursive construction of a myth of participation as well as underlying power dynamics between established commentators and emerging agents, the analysis of indyref novels and poetry demonstrates how creative practice has fictionalised societal debates on contemporary politics and, specifically, participation. Chapter 4 analyses eight examples of poetry and political verse. All examples were either publicly performed or published in the press and pamphlets during and shortly after the campaign. They were chosen based on their public visibility and contribution to the public debate at the time; their authors; and these authors' engagement with key themes interrogated in this thesis. Thus, all chosen texts were written either by well-known Scottish poets or activist who came to be prominently associated with the arts-based campaign, particularly *National Collective*, and directly address the referendum through notions of activism, political voice, participation, and progressiveness.

The corpus of novels discussed in the same chapter was chosen based on the novels' representation of popular participation and the referendum experience of ordinary, that is "non-elite," Scotland (Craig A. Smith's *The Mile* (2013); Mary McCabe's *Two Closes and a Referendum* (2017)) and their attention to culture-based activism and elite intervention in the debate (James Robertson's *To Be Continued...* (2016); Allan Cameron's *Cinico: Travels with a Good Professor at the Time of the Scottish Referendum* (2017); Kirstin Innes's *Scabby Queen* (2020)). The selection of this sample was informed by a review of secondary literature on current "indyref literature", on detailed searches, and discussions and interviews with those writing and publishing in the field (e.g., interviewees for this project). The sample is comprised of the majority of realistic novels published on the 2014 referendum to date.²⁰⁸ The chosen literary texts further contextualise how a myth of participation has been created and circulated by highlighting how key arguments and motifs from the public debate were fictionalised and thus contributed to the narrativization and mythologization of the referendum as well as its participatory legacy. They indicate how writers and poets contributed to representations of Scottish political concerns as well as elite claims to speak for others – as representatives of the referendum experience and its mobilising power as well as self-proclaimed national symbols.

²⁰⁸ Cf. Hames, "Democracy and the Indyref Novel."

5.5 Social media analysis

An exception to the otherwise qualitative approach of this project is the method applied to social media data, i.e., Twitter activity in September 2014. Social media platforms allow for the surveying of large numbers of participants, which, in the case of Twitter, are structured through communication networks around hashtags.²⁰⁹ Quantitative network analysis of tweet activity specifies the positionality and interaction of agents online. It shows the “distribution of relational power” online²¹⁰ and who contributes to emerging communities there and how.

The rapidly expanding role of the micro-blogging platform Twitter,²¹¹ founded in 2006, played a significant role in spreading information about the referendum and politically engaging Scotland’s public.²¹² The analysis focuses on Twitter for three main reasons. Firstly, Twitter has been likened to political participation and deliberation online,²¹³ which facilitated more access to large-scale political debate than comparable social media platforms in 2014.²¹⁴ Secondly, Twitter has been ascribed an emancipatory potential: the “inclusion of non-traditional political voices” is crucial for wide-reaching popular participation.²¹⁵ It promotes inclusivity and emancipation of routinely marginalised parts of society – even if also perpetuating elite dominance and giving rise to gender imbalances,²¹⁶ micro-publics, echo chambers, bias, anonymity, and abuse.²¹⁷ Thirdly, Twitter is routinely used by politicians, journalists, activists as well as political, media, and cultural organisations to broadcast their

²⁰⁹ Hashtags, i.e., the combination of the # character with one or more words and numbers, connect a tweet to a specific theme and make it searchable. Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 731.

²¹⁰ Shannon McGregor and Rachel Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter: Gender, Elections, and Social Networks,” *Social Media + Society* (July-September 2016): 2, <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116664218>.

²¹¹ Although the platform has since been renamed X under the ownership of Elon Musk, the analysis here focuses on the legacy platform, specifically its use in 2014. Thus, I maintain the name Twitter throughout.

²¹² Tickell, “Regulating #indyref,” 406; Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 490.

²¹³ Ariadne Vromen, *Digital Citizenship and Political Engagement: The Challenge from Online Campaigning and Advocacy Organisations* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 58-59; Axel Bruns and Tim Highfield, “Is Habermas on Twitter? Social Media and the Public Sphere,” in Bruns et al., *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 60; 65; Gwen Bouvier and Judith Rosenbaum, “Communication in the Age of Twitter: The Nature of Online Deliberation,” in *Twitter, the Public Sphere, and the Chaos of Online Deliberation*, eds. Gwen Bouvier and Judith Rosenbaum (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), 1-2; 6.

²¹⁴ Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 74. Cf. Jakob Linaa Jensen, Jacob Ørmen, and Stine Lomborg, “The Use of Twitter in the Danish EP Elections 2014,” in Bruns et al., *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 504. Bouvier and Rosenbaum, “Communication in the Age of Twitter,” 2-3.

²¹⁵ Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*, 58-59; Bouvier and Rosenbaum, “Communication in the Age of Twitter,” 5; McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 3. Cf. Jakob Linaa Jensen, Jacob Ørmen, and Stine Lomborg, “The Use of Twitter in the Danish EP Elections 2014,” in Bruns et al., *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 504.

²¹⁶ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 3; Petros Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere, Social Networks and Public Service Media,” *Information, Communication & Society* 14, no. 5 (January 2011): 624, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2010.514356>.

²¹⁷ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 3. Bouvier and Rosenbaum, “Communication in the Age of Twitter,” 5; Elizabeth Dubois and Grant Blank, “The Echo Chamber Is Overstated: The Moderating Effect of Political Interest and Diverse Media,” *Information, Communication & Society* 21, no. 5 (2018): 731, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1428656>.

messages to a large audience.²¹⁸ Despite a related bias towards those who are more educated, politically left leaning, and “progressive”,²¹⁹ Twitter provides an alternative environment for political debate, which bypasses traditional political convention and media coverage. In the context of the referendum, it facilitated visibility for a range of political campaigners, including grassroots organisations and interest groups – from *LGBT Together* to *Sport for Yes*.

My Twitter analysis is based on data collected for the period from 1 to 30 September 2014. Engagement with the referendum debate culminated in the final three weeks of the campaign and days shortly after the referendum vote on 18 September.²²⁰ No period is thus better suited to examine claims to large-scale political participation online. Tweets²²¹ tagged with the most-prominently used and non-partisan hashtag #indyref were chosen for collection.²²² Through access via the Twitter Application Programming Interface (API), tweets tagged with the hashtag #indyref were extracted from Twitter using the statistical computing software R between December 2022 and January 2023. I accessed the Twitter API via a developer profile.²²³ This API allows the running of queries for specific keywords, search terms (e.g., hashtags), accounts etc. to capture “live” or archived data. For analysis of tweet activity in 2014, I used the Twitter archive. Running the AcademicTwiTeR script on R, data (i.e., handles and Twitter ID of senders of tweets and recipients tagged in replies, mentions, and quoted tweets) was extracted from Twitter in aggregated form for 1-30 September 2014. Only

²¹⁸ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 3; Ausserhofer and Maireder, “National Politics on Twitter,” 293-94; Bouvier and Rosenbaum, “Communication in the Age of Twitter.”

²¹⁹ Vergeer, Hermans, and Sams determine a dominance of members of progressive political parties online in their analysis of politicians running for the European Parliament in 2009. They define “progressive” parties as those advocating for a changed role of the state and the welfare state. Maurice Vergeer, Liesbeth Hermans, Steven Sams, “Online Social Networks and Micro-blogging in Political Campaigning: The Exploration of a New Campaign Tool and a New Campaign Style,” *Party Politics* 19, no. 3 (2011): 485, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354068811407580>. Ausserhofer and Maireder also identify activity dominance by the Green party in the Austrain Twittersphere in July/August 2011. Ausserhofer and Maireder, “National Politics on Twitter,” 299.

²²⁰ Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 489. Cf. Martin Williams, “The Power of Social Media and Its Impact on the Independence Referendum,” *The Herald*, September 19, 2014.

²²¹ Referencing Kwak et al., Larsson and Moe define tweet types as follows: “a tweet can be classified as a Singleton (a statement form a specific user, no @ sign present); a Mention or a Reply (@ sign followed by a user ID) or a Retweet [...] (marked with RT).” Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 731. Cf. Kwak et al. “What is Twitter, a Social Network or a News Media?” *WWW’10: Proceedings of the 19th International Conference on World Wide Web* (Raleigh, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1145/1772690.1772751>.

²²² According to Rory Cellan-Jones, this hashtag was used in 5.4 million tweets in the year ahead of the vote. Other prominent hashtags include: #bettertogether; #nothanks, #YesScotand; #VoteYes. Rory Cellan-Jones, “Who Has Won the Social Referendum?” *BBC News*, September 17, 2014, <https://www-bbc-co-uk.ezproxy-s2.stir.ac.uk/news/technology-29235876>. Cf. Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 14; Williams, “The Power of Social Media.”

²²³ Until February 2023 researchers were able to apply for access to the Twitter API free of charge.

public figures and organisations with an expressed interest in engaging with a public audience are named – e.g., media platforms, politicians, and campaigning organisations.²²⁴

I used network analysis to examine the community, or digital “public”, formed around #indyref and to demonstrate the inherent elite bias of this network. Based on the data sets organised by tweet type, I constructed different network visualisations using visualisation software Gephi²²⁵ to map the relationships of retweets and quoted tweets as well as @reply/mention interactions. Contrary to the structural openness and accessibility of social media platforms, my analysis shows that Twitter rarely facilitated inclusive, participatory political debate during the referendum. Instead, my network analysis points towards dominant elite actors within large networks with tightly connected centres. Specific networks of communication with members of the public were also created for the three campaigning organisations *National Collective*, *Radical Independence Campaign*, and *Women for Independence*, all of which are discussed in more detail in chapter 5. This analysis allows me to demonstrate the limited reach and online interaction of alternative campaigning organisations with the wider public. Practical limitations to political participation, debate, and deliberation online point to discrepancies between popular participation and its compelling mythicization during the referendum.

Three limitations pertaining to visibility and agency in Twitter networks need consideration here: firstly, collecting only tweets using a specific hashtag considerably limits the scale and inclusivity of the data, as tweets are frequently sent without hashtags. Especially, contributions from less experienced users are likely not included.²²⁶ Although this challenges the inclusivity of the network approach and perpetuates elite bias, organising large Twitter data sets on political campaigning in this way is common.²²⁷ Importantly, however, the use of hashtags indicates political awareness, active participation in the public sphere, and “deliberately public communication.”²²⁸ Secondly, some content published online is circulated

²²⁴ This practice acknowledges that publicly shared content on social media is not necessarily intended or perceived as “public” by its authors. Cf. Bonacchi, *Heritage and Nationalism*, 26; Bruns and Highfield, “Is Habermas on Twitter?” 64.

²²⁵ The following layout algorithms were used: Fruchterman Reingold (small data set: quoted tweets; campaign organisations) and Open Ord (large data set: retweets; @replies/mentions) as well as, in a second step, Force Atlas 2. These are recommended layouts for the data type and scope I analysed.

²²⁶ Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess, “Researching News Discussion on Twitter,” *Journalism Studies* 13, no. 5-6 (2012), 805, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1461670X.2012.664428>; Eveline D’heer and Pieter Verdegem, “Conversations About the Elections on Twitter: Towards a Structural Understanding of Twitter’s Relation with the Political and the Media Field,” *European Journal of Communication* 29, no. 6 (2014): 725, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323114544866>.

²²⁷ Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 744; D’heer and Verdegem, “Conversations About the Elections,” 725.

²²⁸ Bruns and Highfield, “Is Habermas on Twitter?” 65.

by non-human agents, specifically retweet bots.²²⁹ As network analysis maps digital actors, bots, “fake” accounts, and multiple accounts by the same individual may be included. The data set can be further limited where content is deleted by users or the platform administrators at any time.²³⁰ This is particularly problematic when accessing archived Twitter data which may have been subject to larger levels of (self-)censorship. Thus, political communities online are permanently changing and provide the option for conscious withdrawal.

6. Thesis structure

Chapter 1, “Representing Scotland: media, politics, and the public sphere,” establishes the historical and theoretical context for this thesis. It introduces the 2014 independence referendum as a discourse and moment that has been shaped by a complex interplay between cultural and political concerns and proposes that this complexity as well as the role of participation in the referendum are best understood within the framework of the public sphere as a realm of public political and cultural debate. Within this context, it explores the idea of Scotland as a country of reasoned argument and its productive link to agonistic political debate in politics and the press. Chapter 1 further examines the structural and cultural origins of a myth of popular participation: specifically, it discusses how participative politics in post-devolution Scotland as well as compelling myths of Scottish socio-political difference have contributed to its creation and circulation. By arguing for the practical and discursive limitations of popular participation and the public sphere as well as their reliance on performances of cultural mythology in public and media discourse, this chapter identifies the central function of the Scottish press in communicating political difference and framing popular participation in the referendum debate.

On this basis, chapter 2, “Writing participation: indyref as a media event and spectacle,” develops the idea that popular participation was represented and performed in elite political and media discourse. It identifies links between elite representations and performances of popular participation in national newspaper discourses that promoted and sanctioned specific forms of participation – while condemning others. On this basis, activists’ popular participation and contributions to political debate can be established as secondary to and framed by the construction of the myth of popular participation in the political campaigns and their media

²²⁹ Chiara Bonacchi, *Heritage and Nationalism: Understanding Populism Through Big Data* (London: UCL Press, 2022), 20.

²³⁰ Bonacchi, *Heritage and Nationalism*, 23.

representations. Despite this elite framing of popular participation in political discourse and media representations, the referendum provided opportunities for activists to reclaim some of this participatory agency as part of their mobilisation.

The role of participatory politics in the referendum is addressed in chapter 3, “Activism, voice, and the limitations of political participation.” In introducing popular participation and activism as crucial to the popular representation – and performance – of the referendum, this chapter conceptualises participation within this thesis. It analyses different forms of participation and voice in the referendum and considers their presence, absence, and limitations. Specifically, it considers representative claims of arts-based campaigning organisation *National Collective* and compares it with feminist campaigners *Women for Independence* and the socialist *Radical Independence Campaign*. NC’s activism is further contextualised through the comparison with small-scale arts-based activism and reflections by members of the public on their participation and political agency in the referendum debate.

The role creative practice played in the political activism and mobilisation for the referendum is analysed in more detail in chapter 4, “Fiction(s) of popular participation: political verse and indyref literature.” This chapter focuses on the narrativization of the debate through fiction and poetry. Building on claims that arts-based campaigning holds transformative power, it examines how literary texts were used to mobilise politically and how they represented popular participation. It suggests that participation has been rarely fictionalised through transformative politics and more frequently through tropes of nationhood and national symbolism, thus limiting spaces for political deliberation through literary imagination and reflection.

The tensions between elite representations and popular political agency are analysed in chapter 5, “Digital publics: political participation and networks of communication on Twitter.” Considering the role of social media platforms in providing an alternative forum for public political debate, this chapter questions whether social media opened spaces for more varied political participation and deliberation. It analyses networks of communication on Twitter and, inquiring into the participative potential of alternative media, demonstrates the continued impact of elite networks on social media.

Notions of elite influence are further developed in chapter 6 in the context of Scottish nationalism and identity. Entitled “Creative elites and public intellectuals: representing the people, writing the nation?”, this chapter combines the idea of elite involvement in the constitutional debate with the role of public intellectuals – and among them, prominently, Scottish writers. Specifically, it considers myths of literary vanguardism and egalitarianism

and addresses the role of public intellectuals in shaping discursive practices around cultural identity, elite power, and representations and performances of participation discussed throughout.

Chapter 1

Representing Scotland: media, politics, and the public sphere

*[I]f there was to be a Scottish motto, you'd have the saltire, and the lion rampant, and [...] you'd have a very simple motto: "Hey wait a minute – that's no' fair!"*²³¹

Representations and performances of popular participation in the 2014 referendum are, this thesis argues, inseparable from Scottish mythologies of national identity and political difference. This approach adds to a more nuanced understanding of the referendum as a complex culture-political event, addressed in its richness and complexity. On this basis, this chapter proposes that popular participation as well as its representations and performances during the referendum are best understood in the context of a specifically Scottish public sphere. The concept of the public sphere, as employed in this thesis, encompasses the arena for interaction between political, cultural, and media elites and the public. As closely aligned with and contingent on political processes and media structures in Scotland, the concept will be introduced and developed alongside these contextual introductions in section 1.1 of this chapter. Specifically, the concept will be discussed in as much as it provides a crucial potentiality for political debate and popular participation, while mobilising mythologies of Scottish national debate and identity. By contextualising participation in the referendum through the public sphere, I argue for an integrated perspective that moves beyond one-dimensional framings of participation through politics, civil society, or art and emphasises the central political role of the Scottish media – particularly, in the historical absence of an independent national Parliament. Further to being a crucial bearer of national identity, a distinct Scottish press has been perceived as increasingly politically relevant in providing a distinct “Scottish frame of reference” from the 1960s onwards.²³² As such, the press has sustained the idea of a different, more progressive, and participatory politics in Scotland, as I will discuss below. But while socio-political distinction and mobilisation for Scottish self-government have been repeatedly aided by the Scottish press,²³³ growing support for increased measures of independence have paradoxically coincided with the press's decline.²³⁴ This development has

²³¹ Speech by William McIlvanney (19 March 1994) qtd. in Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 1.

²³² Keith Webb, *The Growth of Nationalism in Scotland* (London: Pelican, 1978), 74; Christopher Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism: Scottish Society and Politics from 1707 to the Present*, 4th ed. (London: Routledge, 2004), 146; David McCrone, *The New Sociology of Scotland* (London: Sage, 2017), 45; 573.

²³³ Maurice Smith, *Paper Lions: The Scottish Press and National Identity* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1994), 15.

²³⁴ Iain Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy: The Scottish Press Since Devolution,” *Scottish Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2018): 33-34, <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2018.0220>; McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 549; Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 14.

threatened the representative political and national function of the press and of a politics of popular participation post-devolution, during the 2014 referendum, and beyond.

Against this backdrop, I discuss the changing engagement of the Scottish press with Scottish national politics and its constitutive role for a distinct public sphere, public debate, and popular participation. I propose that political debate in Scotland is shaped by two identarian arguments, which have contributed to the myth of popular participation in the referendum debate. Firstly, an intellectual distinction premise retrospectively rooted in Enlightenment notions of education and reasoned argument. This premise has arguably nurtured the modern political function of Scottish newspapers as well as the national identity and socio-cultural mythology they have sustained. Secondly, this includes the performative political openness of post-devolution Scotland which draws on related notions of egalitarianism and paved the way for the participatory politics promoted in the referendum debate; it has simultaneously contributed to institutional change and has limited spaces for public debate and deliberation, as I discuss below. Both arguments manifest in the assumption of a strong, Scottish national public sphere, culture of argument, and the belief in political difference sustained by a distinct “Scottish” press. These narratives of national, political difference have also shaped notions of popular participation in the 2014 referendum debate and thus necessitate further analysis.

To examine the structural origins of the compelling emphasis on participation in the referendum, this chapter firstly discusses claims to a distinct Scottish mediascape and how the media interact and sustain a Scottish public sphere. Furthermore, it discusses the public sphere as a category of potentiality for national political debate in Scotland. The public sphere, I argue, provides a crucial framework for the complex negotiations of popular participation between the public and elite actors, between public political voice and elite representations in the referendum debate. Within this context, I argue, secondly, that larger trends of a declining print media have specific ramifications in Scotland, based on the identarian and political function (i.e., as “quasi-representatives” of national politics) discursively ascribed to the Scottish press. This function needs to be considered, I argue below, in the context of shifting constitutional politics. Thirdly, this chapter further establishes the origins and circulation of the myth of popular participation. It discusses how assumptions of strong deliberative and participatory politics and political openness in post-devolution Scotland relate to a polarising culture of argument: as determined by the political left-right spectrum, party-support, and the constitutional question. Thus, this chapter establishes how notions of popular participation have been constituted by national mythology, institutional politics, and the Scottish press – wider implications of these for popular participation are addressed in the following chapters.

1. Political renewal and media decline: negotiating Scotland

Growing political self-determination and a decline in newspaper circulation are two of the curiosities of a devolved Scotland. Christopher Silver claims that “[t]he biggest abnormality about post-devolution Scotland is that just as the Scottish Parliament was signalling a genuine sense of democratic renewal, one of the most vital aspects in a democracy – a vigorous, multi-channel media” began to crumble.²³⁵ In reference to the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, McCrone emphasises that only 40 per cent of Scots said that they regularly read a newspaper in 2014 compared to 75 per cent in 1999.²³⁶ This trend aligns with a general decline in newspaper readership and production as well as challenges to traditional newspaper circulation and an increasing shift from print to online media across the UK and Europe.²³⁷ However, there are identarian and political reasons why this change, which coincides with increased political self-determination, has been perceived as particularly challenging in Scotland.

Much like national literatures that “express the political aspirations of a nation”²³⁸ (see [chapter 4](#)), having a strong, independent press which is different from the UK or, more specifically, London-based press has been an important marker of self-identification in Scotland. Writing in 1973, James Kellas confidently claimed that “Scotland has a strongly differentiated mass media network, which reflects and emphasises the particular characteristics of its society and its political system.”²³⁹ Echoing this sentiment, Gerry Hassan remarked, more than 40 years later, that “[t]he Scottish newspaper industry has long prided itself on its distinctiveness, Scottish character and regional basis of some of its main titles.”²⁴⁰ Thus, claims about the distinction and national importance of the Scottish newspaper press and media have remained largely unchanged. In fact, according to Peter Lynch, the Scottish media “reflect Scotland’s distinctiveness in areas such as education, religion, legal system, politics and government structure.”²⁴¹ The “three bulwarks of Scottish culture (church, law, and

²³⁵ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 14.

²³⁶ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 558. Cf. Marina Dekavalla, “The Scottish Newspaper Industry in the Digital Era,” *Media, Culture & Society* 37, no. 1 (2015): 108, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443714553565>.

²³⁷ E.g., Dekavalla, “The Scottish Newspaper Industry,” 108; Karl Erik Gustafsson and Lennart Weibull, “European Newspaper Readership: Structure and Development,” *Communications* 22, no. 3 (1997), <https://doi.org/10.1515/comm.1997.22.3.249>; Eiri Elvestad and Arild Blekesaune, “Newspaper Readers in Europe: A Multilevel Study of Individual and National Differences,” *European Journal of Communication* 23, no. 4 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323108096993>; Bob Franklin, “The Future of Newspapers,” *Journalism Practice* 2, no. 3 (2008), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512780802280984>.

²³⁸ Paul Gilbert, “The Idea of a National Literature,” in *Literature and the Political Imagination*, eds. John Hornton and Andrea Baumeister (London: Routledge, 1996), 199.

²³⁹ James Kellas, *The Scottish Political System*, 4th ed. (1973; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 197.

²⁴⁰ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 47.

²⁴¹ Peter Lynch, *Scottish Government and Politics: An Introduction* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001), 184.

education)”²⁴² have traditionally been viewed as contributing to Scotland’s self-perception “as a nation distinct from their southern neighbour.”²⁴³ As an expression of and together with a local Scottish civil society,²⁴⁴ they have been used to justify – and sustain – a distinct Scottish media.²⁴⁵ Thus, the Scottish media and, specifically, the Scottish newspaper press “provid[e] a forum for political debate”²⁴⁶ and have performed an important role in “making sense” of Scotland.²⁴⁷

This traditional function of the newspaper press is essential to theories of nationalism and national identity (see Introduction). Benedict Anderson and Michael Billig stress the ritualised, daily consumption of newspapers in bringing together and performing the nation, with national communities being set apart by the “nature of their internal communications.”²⁴⁸ Building on this idea, the press influences how Scotland’s people see themselves and their nation, and how a sense of national identity is communicated²⁴⁹ – both internally and externally.²⁵⁰ The nationalist function of the press as generative of a national political framework has been complicated by Scotland’s status as a stateless nation: while the press historically operated outside a Scottish institutional political framework, the (re-)establishment of the Scottish Parliament and Government in 1999, as a new representative body, arguably challenged the political and, to a lesser extent, identarian function of the press in post-devolution Scotland as well as the mythology that has sustained it. To address how these institutional shifts have directly influenced representations of participatory politics and the nation, I, firstly, turn to the press’s function for the public sphere before, secondly, considering its “Scottishness” and role for national identity.

²⁴² Trevor-Roper, *The Invention of Scotland*, 20; cf. Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 5; Morton, *Unionist Nationalism*, 6.

²⁴³ Both the 1603 Union of Thrones and the political Union in 1707 failed to unify the people and their (respective) cultural traditions. Mullen, “The Scottish Independence Referendum 2014,” 628-29; Gardiner, *Modern Scottish Culture*, 13-14; Nairn, *After Britain*, 13; Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 11; Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate” 5; Lindsay Paterson, *The Autonomy of Modern Scotland* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1994), 44.

²⁴⁴ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 45; 101.

²⁴⁵ Peter Meech and Richard Kilborn, “Media and Identity in a Stateless Nation: The Case of Scotland,” *Media, Culture and Society* 14 (1992): 258.

²⁴⁶ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 184.

²⁴⁷ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 549.

²⁴⁸ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 55. Cf. also Deutsch, *Nationalism and Social Communication*; Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*; Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25; Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

²⁴⁹ Stephen Kendrick, “Scotland, Social Change and Politics,” in *The Making of Scotland: Nation, Culture and Social Change*, eds. David McCrone, Stephen Kendrick, and Pat Straw (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1989), 79.

²⁵⁰ Smith, *Paper Lions*, 8.

1.1 The Scottish political public sphere and the media

The public sphere presupposes a “coherent body of government” or “civic authority” that is held accountable through public debate, facilitated by the media.²⁵¹ In the absence of an independent state prior to the establishment of the Scottish Parliament, “the media was effectively where Scottish politics existed.”²⁵² Consequently, political representation was partly resolved in the evaluative process between citizens and the (civic) political elite “built into media discourse on politics” of the public sphere.²⁵³ In the absence of a national political institution, the press fulfilled a crucial representative function for national politics and identity. This legacy continues to shape Scottish mythology – including the myth of popular participation in the referendum. The complex political and cultural processes that have constructed and circulated the myth of popular participation in 2014 are contextualised below through the concept of the public sphere as the arena of productive tensions between the public and national (quasi-)representative political, cultural, and media elites.

As a category of potentiality for political debate, the public sphere itself is informed by “a view of politics as a process of dialogue, and is meant to describe a platform for negotiating and reconciling competing interests” by members of the public.²⁵⁴ Following Jürgen Habermas’s influential theorisation, the public sphere is a space between public politics and the private sphere, a space where a “reasoning public” comes together and “organises” to form public opinion.²⁵⁵ It constitutes the framework for public political deliberation, participation, and activism based on the exchange of information between institutions and the public. The aim of said political dialogue is the establishing of consensual public opinion or policy, which might, in itself, be undesirable in as much as it forces a singular result – more on this below. For now, it is worth pointing to influential criticism by Nancy Fraser who challenged the structural limitations of this idealised public sphere. Fraser specifically criticises Habermas’s restrictive description of the public sphere as a unified forum for political deliberation, which originated in eighteenth-century coffeehouses: these provided the space for political debate by the engaged, male bourgeoisie.²⁵⁶ Fraser emphasises instead the existence of a plurality of

²⁵¹ Michael Higgins, *Media and Their Publics* (Maidenhead: Open University Press, 2008), 27.

²⁵² Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 184.

²⁵³ Higgins, *Media and Their Publics*, 27.

²⁵⁴ Higgins, *Media and Their Publics*, 27.

²⁵⁵ Jürgen Habermas, “The Public Sphere: An Encyclopedia Article (1964),” trans. Sarah Lennox and Frank Lennox, *New German Critique* 3 (1964; 1974): 50.

²⁵⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*. Note that Habermas has on various occasions revised the conceptualisation of the “contemporary” public sphere, while maintaining a focus on consensual plurality.

conflicting publics and counterpublics – both past and present – and ascribes to the bourgeoisie a political interest in limiting access to political debate and popular participation.²⁵⁷

Particularly in its critically revised form, the concept of the public sphere remains highly relevant in contemporary discussions of politics, media, and public political debate. While historically a space of direct encounters, the public sphere soon adopted the press as its “preeminent institution.”²⁵⁸ Newspapers form the basis for public political deliberation and criticism of state politics. As a tool for “private individuals assembled into a public body,” newspapers are “use[d] against the public authority itself”²⁵⁹ and facilitate “criticism and control” towards the state.²⁶⁰ The public sphere presupposes engaged and informed citizens who rely on “newspapers and magazines, radio and television” for transmitting information and debate across a large public body.²⁶¹ More recently, this has also included digital communication technologies (see [chapter 5](#)).

Despite the globalising impact of digital communication technologies, that have changed “how publics might be imagined,”²⁶² and various attempts to adapt the concept to a transnational scale (e.g., on EU level), the public sphere(s) continue(s) to be predominantly framed in national terms – grounded in national media and constitutive of national political debate.²⁶³ In the Scottish context, this constitutive function for national political debate adds to the press’s function as political representatives and “guardians” of national identity. According to Lynch, the press is the outlet that most differentiates the Scottish from the English media.²⁶⁴ As such, it will be discussed as a crucial marker of national identity and distinction in the following section.

²⁵⁷ Nancy Fraser, “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy,” *Social Text* 25/26 (1990): 61; 67-68.

²⁵⁸ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 181.

²⁵⁹ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 52.

²⁶⁰ Note that Habermas conceptualises this function through a political public sphere. In the following discussion public sphere and political public sphere are used interchangeably. The shortened version is favoured for readability. Although used in the singular, I understand the public sphere not as a purely consensus-driven singular sphere but as including counterpublics, conflict, and plural vision.

²⁶¹ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 49.

²⁶² Philip Schlesinger, “After the Post-public Sphere,” *Media, Culture & Society* 42, no. 7-8 (2020): 1555, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0163443720948003>.

²⁶³ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 58.

²⁶⁴ Cf. Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 195. Although Scottish broadcasting also serves a Scottish audience through specifically “Scotticized” content, it has never been as independent nor distinct from its English or UK-wide counterpart as has the Scottish press.

1.2 The Scottishness of the Scottish press

While the “Scottish newspaper press has a long history, with four of its current morning dailies dating back to the eighteenth or early nineteenth centuries,”²⁶⁵ it first became politically relevant in the interwar years. Growing Scottish self-awareness and valuation of national culture alongside societal shifts – from the waning British Empire to the cultural and political revival of the Scottish Renaissance – created more specifically Scottish content and an audience for it. As a result, the Scottish press became more attractive as a distinct, national institution.²⁶⁶ Its emergence “was both cause and effect of cultural and political change”²⁶⁷ and a crucial “medium through which a changing Scotland was portrayed, explained and amplified.”²⁶⁸ Thus, the press justified and strengthened its own position by highlighting and promoting a politics of the nation and by communicating national distinction. These evocations of the nation are both a performative and political act.

Indeed, more so than through “specifically Scottish content” – i.e., coverage of national organisations and events²⁶⁹ – the nation is routinely expressed through the presentation and organisation of news content. By talking about “*the* nation – with *the* president or *the* economy or, even, *the* weather” a specific context for representation and a framework of shared belonging (of “we” and “us” and “our”) to a place and community are evoked.²⁷⁰ According to Billig, these language patterns represent daily “ideological habits” which reproduce established nations through the use of a “nationalized syntax of hegemony.”²⁷¹ This “banal nationalism” reminds the citizenry of their belonging to a specific nation. Similar practices find expression in the use of location markers and newspaper branding as “Scottish”.²⁷² These markers localise content and contributors and thus communicate national belonging as does the inclusion of symbolic national imagery: for example, both *The Scotsman* and *The Herald* have advertised to be “Scotland’s (national) newspaper,” with *The Scotsman* additionally depicting the national

²⁶⁵ Kellas, *The Scottish Political System*, 200. Aberdeen’s *Press and Journal* (1747), *The Glasgow Advertiser* (1783)/*Glasgow Herald* (1805), *The Scotsman* (1817), *Daily Record* (1895). A distinctly Scottish press had significant geographic advantages into the 20th century because this meant long transportation times – and thus delayed news coverage – could be avoided. Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 255.

²⁶⁶ Cf. Liam Connell, “The Scottishness of the Scottish Press: 1918-39,” *Media, Culture and Society* 25, no. 2 (2003): 189, <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437030252003>.

²⁶⁷ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 551.

²⁶⁸ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 551. Cf. Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 74.

²⁶⁹ More recently, *The National* has aimed to cover specifically Scottish content, as I discuss below.

²⁷⁰ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 109. Crucially, Michael Rosie and Pille Petersoo highlight that “the ‘pointing’ habits”, i.e., the way the nation is flagged in the UK media is complex and fuzzy due to the persistence of more than one framework of national identification. Michael Rosie and Pille Petersoo, “Drifting Apart? Media in Scotland and England after Devolution,” in Bechhofer and McCrone, *National Identity*, 128.

²⁷¹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 114-15.

²⁷² Connell, “The Scottishness,” 193.

symbol of the thistle.²⁷³ These practices of banal nationalism reiterate the crucial role the Scottish press has played for Scottish identity and as a political frame of reference. However, the use of Scottish symbolism and content also fulfils a specific economic role: it works as a marketing tool and sales-strategy both internally and externally.²⁷⁴

Despite “centralising impulses in the British press,”²⁷⁵ the London-based press has so far failed to replace “Scottish” newspapers. Instead, most large London-based papers currently produce a Scottish edition of their paper which differs in varying degrees from their English edition.²⁷⁶ Readers in Scotland thus largely continue to consume content from indigenous titles or heavily Scotticized editions of London-based papers.²⁷⁷ Newspapers that do not produce a Scottish edition have been less successful in Scotland.²⁷⁸ These persisting “local loyalties”²⁷⁹ are “indicative of Scottish sociological distinctiveness”²⁸⁰ and manifests as an economic and culture-political statement. As early as the 1970s, Kellas stressed what has been expedited by a globalised economy: “[w]hile few major papers published in Scotland are now Scottish-owned, all display distinctly Scottish characteristics.”²⁸¹ However, the Scottish characteristics of the press have less to do with ownership²⁸² and content but are determined by cultural practices and economic decisions, as shown above. These realities limit the unique “Scottishness” of the Scottish press.

Additionally, the Scottish press is – despite attempts at labelling and branding it as national – in many ways primarily regional and local. All four big Scottish quality newspapers *The Courier*, *The Herald*, *The Press and Journal*, and *The Scotsman* predominantly sell in the

²⁷³ Connell, “The Scottishness,” 193; Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 187; Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 257. Similar trends around labelling are visible among the tabloid press: the Mirror Group advertised “Your papers – made in Scotland” and the *Daily Record*’s promoted lines such as “Edited, printed and published in Scotland.” Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 257. Cf. also “Real Scots read the *Record*” and “Scotland’s champion.” Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 187. Meanwhile, *The Scottish Sun*, temporarily claimed it was “Fighting for independence” in the early 1990s, before embracing the slogan “Dedicated to the people of Scotland.” Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 187.

²⁷⁴ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 552; Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 187. When unable to compete with the price cuts instigated by the London *Times* in 1993 and the consequent “price-cutting battle” among other London-based papers, the Scottish quality press instead turned “their distinctiveness as Scottish titles” into a key selling point. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 152.

²⁷⁵ Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 146-47.

²⁷⁶ Some newspapers, like *The Guardian* and *The Independent*, change little in their Scottish copy, while “the *Sun*, for example, badges itself as *The Scottish Sun* with substantially different stories.” McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 559. *The Times* and the *Telegraph* have done more to accommodate their Scottish readers and were “the bestselling ‘English’ broadsheets in Scotland” in 2014. McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 560.

²⁷⁷ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 560.

²⁷⁸ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 573.

²⁷⁹ Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 255.

²⁸⁰ Connell, “The Scottishness,” 188.

²⁸¹ Kellas, *Scottish Political System*, 200.

²⁸² Apart from Dundee-based D.C. Thomson, the Scottish press is externally owned. For details on changing Scottish press ownership, cf. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 243-47; Kellas, *Scottish Political System*, 198.

respective cities of Dundee, Glasgow, Aberdeen, and Edinburgh, and do not have the cross-country reach expected from a truly national newspaper.²⁸³ Both *The Herald* and *The Scotsman* have long competed for the status as Scotland's national newspaper. While they continue to outsell the five London-based dailies, namely the *Times*, *Telegraph*, *Guardian*, *Independent*, and *Financial Times* in Scotland,²⁸⁴ their sales are heavily regionalised and have been overtaken²⁸⁵ by “the unashamedly provincial *Aberdeen Press and Journal* and *Dundee Courier*”²⁸⁶ as well as the Glasgow-based tabloid, *The Daily Record*.²⁸⁷ The press is further regionalised through the circulation of local newspapers and free advertisement-based papers with high circulation and a significant audience. The local press is a space for extensive engagement with politics, situates politics in a familiar context, makes politicians more relatable, and strengthens political debate and deliberation.²⁸⁸ At the same time, it adds to the complex nature of the Scottish press in which competing claims to Scottishness are flagged in the regional and local context and co-produced by segments of the London-based press.

In the absence of a national Parliament, Scottish newspapers historically provided a crucial function as a flexible identarian and political framework,²⁸⁹ which contributed to the circulation of a large number of Scottish newspapers with a traditionally extensive readership.²⁹⁰ Indeed, Lynch identifies this traditionally high newspaper circulation and readership as one of the four key features of the Scottish press, alongside its regional rather than national organisation; its partisanship; and its competitive, oversaturated newspaper market.²⁹¹ These features explicitly challenge and define the organisation, understanding, and, crucially, mythologisation of the Scottish public sphere as a framework for political debate and activity – on the basis of the Scottish press's performance of national distinction.

The belief in the “special” function of the Scottish press as guardians of national identity is performatively rooted in the Enlightenment paradigm of intellectual distinction, polite social interaction, and social freedoms of civil society.²⁹² These Enlightenment values are selectively

²⁸³ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 188; Smith, *Paper Lions*, 157.

²⁸⁴ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 62. This was still the case in 2012. Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 77.

²⁸⁵ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 558.

²⁸⁶ Smith, *Paper Lions*, 155.

²⁸⁷ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 558. In 2015, *The Daily Record* sold more copies than all four Scottish quality papers together. However, sales of the “once leading paper in Scotland, *The Daily Record*, have been overtaken by *The Scottish Sun*,” Wayne, “Beneath the Bias,” 333. Cf. Rosie and Petersoo, “Drifting Apart?” 139.

²⁸⁸ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 192-95.

²⁸⁹ Cf. Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 184.

²⁹⁰ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 188. Before the Scottish Parliament was (re)instated, the press played an important role in “setting a new ‘frame’” of reference for Scotland. McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 573.

²⁹¹ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 188-91.

²⁹² C. Smith, “The Scottish Enlightenment.”

mobilised to explain the traditionally high newspaper readership in Scotland, namely that the roughly five million people in Scotland read more newspapers per head than the rest of the UK.²⁹³ This paints an image of a politically interested and aware public body; in the absence of a national Parliament, an active national media and persistent myths of political difference have arguably sustained an image of a lively public sphere.

More recently, however, the central national/ist function of the Scottish press has been challenged as many have switched from newspapers to television and online media sources in Scotland and the rest of the UK. The declining numbers of sales of specifically Scottish papers, however, indicate that Scotland's "large number of newspapers"²⁹⁴ (in proportion to the size of its population) may at last have outgrown the demand by its readership.²⁹⁵ As stated above, the drastic decline in readership and circulation of all four Scottish quality papers as well as the paper with the largest national reach, the *Daily Record*, has coincided with growing support for Scottish self-government.²⁹⁶ This development challenges the Scottish press's historically significant function in communicating national identity discussed above. Thus, it questions perceptions of Scottish difference, such as the notion of a strong culture of public debate sustained by a large newspaper circulation and readership. Specifically, the quasi-representative political function prominently claimed by cultural and media elites and civil society actors in the pro-devolution mobilisation of the 1980s-90s has arguably been challenged by the new "Scottish frame of reference"²⁹⁷ of the Scottish Parliament established in 1999 (for which the press mobilised). As the below section argues, values of political difference (e.g., open, progressive, participatory politics) have been institutionally framed in the Scottish Parliament. This development, together with the marketisation of the press, has contributed to its increasingly apolitical function and a weakening of the (traditional) public sphere.²⁹⁸

²⁹³ Smith, *Paper Lions*, 1. Cf. Kellas, *Scottish Political System*, 197; Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 188.

²⁹⁴ Dekavalla, "The Scottish Newspaper Industry," 108. Cf. McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 558.

²⁹⁵ While people do no longer buy multiple titles, this practice has decreased ever since the Second World War. McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 558. The impact of ownership on sales is contradicted by the disproportionate decline in nominally Scottish papers in contrast to Scotticized editions.

²⁹⁶ Using Kellas's figures from his 1973 report as a benchmark, McCrone highlights that the circulation of four out of five Scottish-based newspapers declined by more than 60 per cent in comparison to the 2015-16 figures from the Audit Bureau of Circulation: "*The Scotsman* has lost 72 per cent of its sales, the *Daily Record* 69 per cent, *The Herald* 62 per cent, *The Courier* 65 per cent, with the *Press and Journal* losing a 'mere' 48 per cent." McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 549. Macwhirter states that by 2017 even the *Daily Record*, which once had a circulation of about a million copies went down to about 155,000 daily copies. Macwhirter, "Own Worst Enemy", 33. Cf. Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 80; McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 557.

²⁹⁷ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 553; cf. 549; 557. Cf. also David McCrone, "Afterword: 2014 and After; The Changing Anatomy of Civil Society and the Media in Scotland," *Scottish Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2018): 112, <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2018.0229>.

²⁹⁸ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 204.

2. A new politics for Scotland: the media and political participation post-1999

Following the second referendum on Scottish devolution in 1997, Philip Schlesinger enthusiastically wrote that the new Scottish Parliament would become the focal point of the media, strengthen a sense of Scottishness,²⁹⁹ and promote “the creation of an increasingly distinctive political culture.”³⁰⁰ The 1990s had seen a period of broad political consensus across the media and politics in Scotland in favour of devolution, which the Labour party was to deliver. This broad support hinged on the belief that increased measures of self-determination would entail a strengthening of the Scottish public sphere – or an *institutionally framed* Scottish public sphere. Indeed, the framework of the Parliament was believed to facilitate strong public political debate and to reinforce the Scottish media’s *raison d’être*. This belief was not expressed through nationalist sympathies but through a general Labour alignment (or neutrality) across the Scottish (and British) press in the late 1990s.³⁰¹ Preceded by a “sense of unity during the referendum campaign,” the second referendum on devolution held in September 1997 became a strong demonstration of pro-devolution support.³⁰² The double Yes vote of 75% for devolution and 65% for Scottish tax-varying powers,³⁰³ marked, according to Tom Nairn, “the return of Scotland [...] from her long, enforced self-exile in the nether regions of British Union and Empire.”³⁰⁴

Indeed, the Scottish devolution agreement established “Scotland as a political entity and its people as a democratic polity as never before.”³⁰⁵ With the establishment of the new Parliament, Schlesinger suggests, focus on national developments would increase further in the indigenous press with the Scottish press already having “penetrate[d] everyday life” during the pro-devolution mobilisation of the 1990s.³⁰⁶ Many assumed that *The Scotsman* would finally establish itself as the national newspaper with the (re-)convening of the Scottish Parliament in Edinburgh. Although both *The Scotsman* and *The Herald* had long “provide[d] the forum for serious debate of Scottish public affairs,”³⁰⁷ Meech and Kilborn argue that only with devolution a crucial political function for a national newspaper became available: “the reporting of a Scottish parliament in Edinburgh.”³⁰⁸ However, neither *The Scotsman* nor *The Herald* truly

²⁹⁹ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 69.

³⁰⁰ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 71.

³⁰¹ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 189-90.

³⁰² Nairn, *After Britain*, 112.

³⁰³ Nairn, *After Britain*, 192.

³⁰⁴ Nairn, *After Britain*, 113.

³⁰⁵ Higgins, “The Articulation of Nation,” 465.

³⁰⁶ Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 63.

³⁰⁷ Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 256.

³⁰⁸ Meech and Kilborn, “Media and Identity,” 256.

established themselves as “national” papers.³⁰⁹ Instead, the Parliament seemingly pre-empted the representative political role of the Scottish press post-devolution.

Additionally, the late 1990s saw a convergence of media and political support in England and Scotland under New Labour’s governance and pathed the way for political disengagement. Political radicalism was abandoned in favour of “compromise and negotiation [that] had now attached themselves to the cause of self-government and were validated by its progress.”³¹⁰ The hopes for the expansion of lively political debate in the public sphere and a strengthened indigenous press through the establishment of a more radical and participatory Scottish Parliament were largely disappointed. Instead of politicising Scotland and its political and media institutions, the establishment of a Scottish Parliament seemingly contributed to an increasingly apolitical climate of consensus – and highly-critical media that limited political deliberation. Rather than strengthening the public sphere and political debate through the plurality, openness, and participatory politics advocated by the new Parliament,³¹¹ its early years have given rise to an increasingly apolitical debate and media as I will discuss below.

2.1 Institutionalising openness, deliberation, and participation

The practical arrangements for the new Scottish Parliament were informed by the intellectual debates of the 1980s and 1990s, which followed on from the first, unsuccessful referendum on devolution in 1979.³¹² The subsequent calls for more radical devolution politics emerged from an “intense exchange between the cultural and political spheres in Scotland.”³¹³ On a political level, this dynamic links back to the short-lived revolt of the Scottish Labour Party (SLP)³¹⁴ against the Labour Party in 1975, who did not support significant economic powers for a

³⁰⁹ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 185; 188.

³¹⁰ Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 197.

³¹¹ Emily St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament and ‘New Politics’ at Twenty,” in *The Story of the Scottish Parliament: The First Two Decades Explained*, Gerry Hassan, ed. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2019), 76-77.

³¹² The referendum returned a majority of 32.85% (to 30.78%) in favour of independence but did not cross the required 40% hurdle of pro-devolution support among the electorate. Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 186-87; Qvortrup, *A Tale of Two Referendums*, 12; Nairn, *After Britain*, 209. Harvie suggests that the following factors impacted the result: “nationalist misgivings, trade union misbehaviour, government unpopularity, inept organisation on the ‘Yes’ side and truly arctic weather.” Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 187. Cf. also Hassan, *Caledonian*, 129; McLean, Gallagher, and Lodge, *Scotland’s Choices*, 199-200.

³¹³ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 132.

³¹⁴ Not to be confused with the Scottish branch of the Labour Party (formerly known as the Scottish Council of the Labour Party and the Labour Party in Scotland) that is active in Scotland today.

devolved Scotland.³¹⁵ Under the joint leadership of former Labour MP Jim Sillars and journalist Bob Brown,³¹⁶ the party's media-savviness translated into high publicity and made it an immediate sensation,³¹⁷ with increasingly fluid boundaries between the political party and newly politicised journalists of *The Scotsman* and the *Glasgow Herald*.³¹⁸

At the same time, political magazines, such as *Radical Scotland*, became “a crucial site of these exchanges” on a new, radical politics.³¹⁹ Working as political micro-publics, these culture-political publications brought together the Scottish intelligentsia, including political journalists and activists, who became increasingly accustomed to their “agenda-setting”³²⁰ role. United in their campaigning for a more radical, participatory, and socially just devolution politics, political, cultural, and media elites shaped the debates of the late 1980s – and a second renaissance in Scottish literature³²¹ – which culminated in “[t]he complex relationship between this quasi-representative body [of the Scottish Constitutional Convention] and the popular energies in whose name it made its *Claims of Right*.”³²² These intellectual debates and interventions, which allowed closely-connected political, cultural, and media elites to claim to politically represent “the people” in the absence of an independent political institution, have informed the cultural politics and activism of the 2014 referendum and gave rise to campaigners such as NC (see chapter 3) and have discursively legitimised political interventions in the debate by a cultural elite (see chapter 6). In fact, this legitimisation of political representativeness by cultural and media elites has been partially sustained by their crucial constitutional and policy contributions of the late 1980s and 1990s.

At the time, the Scottish Constitutional Convention's (SCC) rather elitist “gathering of a significant part of the Scottish political class and institutional elites [...] invoked a language of

³¹⁵ Henry Drucker, *Breakaway: The Scottish Labour Party* (Edinburgh: EUSPB, 1978), 20-21; 39. Cf. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 31. In the meantime, both Labour and the SNP embraced a more radical pro-devolution or pro-independence position respectively, which infringed on the SLP's *raison d'être*. Drucker, *Breakaway*, 133-36.

³¹⁶ Drucker, *Breakaway*, 20-21.

³¹⁷ Drucker, *Breakaway*, 2.

³¹⁸ Drucker, *Breakaway*, 50-52. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 31.

³¹⁹ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 132.

³²⁰ McCrone, *The New Sociology*, 573. Cf. Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 133.

³²¹ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 72.

³²² Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 163. Following the referendum in 1979, the Campaign for a Scottish Assembly (CSA, later: Campaign for a Scottish Parliament) was formed. It contributed to a process of pro-devolution agitation. Emerging from this process, the Constitutional Steering Committee was to represent the intellectual elite and civic institutions, whose “widely publicised report to the CSA,” *A Claim of Right for Scotland* (1988), offered an overview of Scotland's political position and proposed plans for a Constitutional Convention (SCC). Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 59-60. The document, that declares the sovereignty of the people of Scotland, was signed by political and civic leaders at a subsequent meeting of the SCC in March 1989. The SCC included all but the Conservatives and the SNP, who abandoned negotiations short of independence. Nairn, *After Britain*, 218; Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 221-24; Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 190.

popular sovereignty, legitimacy and politics”³²³ via *A Claim of Right for Scotland*.³²⁴ In the SCC’s report “Scotland’s Parliament, Scotland’s Right” (1995) “the re-establishment of a parliament in Scotland, was strongly associated with notions of democratic renewal.”³²⁵ The Constitutional Steering Group, formally tasked with devising the political structures for a parliament in 1997, aimed to design an open and accessible institution based on power sharing between the executive, legislators, and the public, which would allow for more popular “democratic participation in the deliberative and decision-making process.”³²⁶ To realise this deliberative and participatory democracy, “[c]oalition would be enforced by the new [proportional] electoral system”³²⁷ and provisions were made to increase citizen debate and participation.³²⁸ However, rather than embracing radically “new” politics, a culture of openness and consensual, deliberative politics was explicitly pitted against – and partially reproduced – the antagonism associated with Westminster adversarialism.³²⁹

The “deliberative” spirit of the devolution debates also informed media coverage of the first Scottish parliamentary election in 1999, which achieved significant attention in the Scottish and British press.³³⁰ According to Higgins, Scottish papers provided crucial information and advice ahead of the vote; in contrast to their British counterparts, they actively contributed to a deliberative public sphere and facilitated political participation in Scotland.³³¹ These findings add to similar patterns of political communication identified by Schlesinger ahead of the 1997 referendum, which contributed to an informed public in Scotland and a “bewildered” one in England, where the subject received little and primarily superficial media attention.³³²

³²³ Gerry Hassan, “Who Speaks for Scotland? Entitlement, Exclusion, the Power of Voice and Social Change,” in Hassan and Mitchell, *After Independence*, 227.

³²⁴ The title references the Claims of Right of 1689 and 1842. Cf. Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 60.

³²⁵ St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 75.

³²⁶ St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 76. Cf. Escobar, “Between Radical Aspirations,” 148.

³²⁷ Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 235.

³²⁸ This includes public “prelegislative consultation, a strong committee system in which ‘civic Scotland’ can guide policy-makers, and a public petition system.” E. Crawford, “A New Sort of Democracy? The Opinion Pages in the Scottish Daily Quality Press,” *Journalism* 10, no. 4 (2009): 452, <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464884909104951>. Cf. St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 76. Paul Cairney and Neil McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 2nd ed. (London: Red Globe Press, 2013), 11-12.

³²⁹ St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 75; David Arter, “The Scottish Committees and the Goal of a ‘New Politics’: A Verdict on the First Four Years of the Devolved Scottish Parliament,” *Journal of Contemporary European Studies* 12, no. 1 (2004): 73, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1460846042000207097>.

³³⁰ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 200-201.

³³¹ Higgins, “Substantiating a Political Public Sphere,” 26-30.

³³² Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 71. This level of political deliberation facilitated by the Scottish media and public debate in the 1990s contrasts with a “Scottish electorate [that] was confused, divided and apathetic” ahead of the referendum in 1979. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 31-32.

The significant shift in the tone of media coverage from positive support pre-devolution to fierce criticism of the new Parliament post-devolution came largely as a surprise.³³³ While providing extensive media coverage of the new institution,³³⁴ press criticism “seemed to portray an almost exclusively negative image of the Scottish Parliament, marked by scandals and political divisions.”³³⁵ Making ample use of their role “as a critical fourth estate within Scottish politics,”³³⁶ the media claimed that they were representing the scepticism of “the ordinary voter”³³⁷ even if this meant that political coverage at the time was, according to Crawford, “far from a reasoned debate about public affairs.”³³⁸ The overwhelming media criticism thus resonates more closely with the idea of “ruling elites who resent the erosion of their power,”³³⁹ and indicates the Scottish press’s difficulties in finding their role in a new political set-up.

Indeed, the press increasingly struggled to provide spaces for further public debate and political participation post-devolution. Their ability to facilitate deliberative political debate seemingly declined with its circulation. As indicated in Ewan Crawford’s analysis of *The Herald* and *The Scotsman*, both “national” papers already struggled in 2007 to live up to the press’s crucial function as “a forum for an inclusive, rational debate.”³⁴⁰ Examining both papers’ provisions for such a public forum based on comment and opinion pages, Crawford identifies elite bias and a lack of engagement from the wider public. Dominance by established professionals meant that neither paper successfully provided a forum for citizen debate and deliberative democracy.³⁴¹ Nor did either newspapers’ opinion pages make a “meaningful contribution to a new sort of democracy in Scotland”³⁴² – these limitations have continued to shape newspapers’ contributions to the referendum debate, as shown in chapter 2.

³³³ The surprise at this openly hostile coverage of the new Scottish Government and Parliament is rooted in the pro-devolution consensus among political and media elites as well as their historically close links, as evident in personnel movements between *The Daily Record* and the Labour Party (particularly during the papers prime from 1973 to 2006). Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 78. The close relationship of politicians and political journalists, especially during the pro-devolution mobilisation of the 1980s and 1990s, is also evident in the short history of the Scottish Labour Party between 1976 and 1981. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 31.

³³⁴ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 204.

³³⁵ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 202. The negative coverage was such that David Steel, the Parliament’s Presiding Officer at the time, filed a formal complaint with the Press Complaints Commission in 1999. Cf. Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 28-29

³³⁶ Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 184.

³³⁷ Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 30.

³³⁸ E. Crawford, “A New Sort of Democracy?” 461.

³³⁹ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 169.

³⁴⁰ E. Crawford, “A New Sort of Democracy?” 468.

³⁴¹ E. Crawford, “A New Sort of Democracy?” 468-69.

³⁴² E. Crawford, “A New Sort of Democracy?” 469. Cf. Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221.

Even though increasingly popular policy measures such as free care for the elderly seemingly afforded the Parliament a better standing in the eyes of the press,³⁴³ the difference in policymaking was, according to Emily St Denny, overstated. In a pre-devolution context of political disenchantment, the Scottish Parliament was to provide as distinctly “new politics”³⁴⁴ by being “less remote, more participative and inclusive” and informed by political consensus.³⁴⁵ This sentiment of radical political change was further nurtured by a narrative of a consensus-driven Scottish political tradition,³⁴⁶ which resonates with Enlightenment values and the identarian narrative of reasoned argument sustained by an independent press discussed above. Indeed, the intellectual debates among media, political, cultural “civic society” actors that informed the devolution campaign nurtured the “desire that devolution be accompanied by a wider democratization of Scottish politics.”³⁴⁷ However, the “new politics” debate and its emphasis on the Parliament’s deliberative and consensual politics “presented unrealistic expectations about the level of consensus in Scotland and the ability to maintain it through political institutions.”³⁴⁸ Instead, St Denny suggests, that the Scottish Parliament “echo[ed] the adversarialism of ‘old’ Westminster”³⁴⁹ and struggled to deliver the political changes it had promised. These realities challenge associations of the Scottish Parliament with a radically different, consensus-driven participatory politics and point to the practical limitations and performativity of this discourse and the visions of a politics of difference.³⁵⁰

Despite the pronounced emphasis on progressive and open politics – on doing politics differently – established in the devolution process, thus neither the press nor the political institutions sustained the participatory and inclusive qualities of this “new” politics in the public sphere. Political debate was now secured in the new political framework of the Parliament which, ironically, excluded the public as inactive bystanders of a narrowing and often “elitist” debate – despite institutional provisions for further participation.³⁵¹ Thus, devolution and the new Scottish Parliament contributed to what Hassan calls a “narrowing of

³⁴³ Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 32.

³⁴⁴ Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 10-11.

³⁴⁵ Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 12.

³⁴⁶ Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 12.

³⁴⁷ Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 11.

³⁴⁸ Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 13.

³⁴⁹ The Scottish Parliament also replicated the institutional Westminster politics and party system and relied on civil servants and politicians trained in the Westminster system. St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 78; cf. 77-79. Cf. Cairney and McGarvey, *Scottish Politics*, 13; Arter, “The Scottish Committees,” 81.

³⁵⁰ Provisions for citizen contributions and the committee system have been widely criticised in recent years. Arter, “The Scottish Committees”; Mark Shepard, “The Committee System of the Scottish Parliament,” in Hassan, *The Story of the Scottish Parliament*, e.g., 98-99.

³⁵¹ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 189.

public life.”³⁵² In line with Fraser’s theorisation cited above, elite interest that had emerged as part of the pro-devolution mobilisation translated into an institutionally driven limitation of access to the public sphere. “Scotland’s liberal class” who had been key in promoting institutional openness and political change became its “main beneficiar[y].”³⁵³ This self-serving elitism contributed to the depoliticization of public debate which challenges institutionally advocated participatory politics.

The idea of political difference has persisted, however, and shaped the messaging of the referendum in 2014. Indeed, the Scottish Government’s rhetoric emphasised the referendum as a democratic opportunity and “as a way of moving towards a prosperous and fair society.”³⁵⁴ More so than in the early days of the Scottish Parliament, this emphasis on political change is undermined by the devolved authority’s own shortcomings in social service and health provisions, education, the economy, and political emancipation³⁵⁵ and “the insufferable caution and conservatism of Scottish civil society.”³⁵⁶ The promises of political change that informed the rhetoric of the referendum must also be seen in permanent tension with the socio-political shortcomings of a devolved Parliament and Scottish civil society’s conservatism that informed this rhetoric. Indeed, the rhetorical game of pitching against each other “competing forms of nationalism” and “of civil society and democracy”³⁵⁷ in the official referendum communication struggled to create the participatory politics it sought to promote, rendering these claims largely performative.

2.2 Political consensus and a press in crisis

Much like official political communication at the time, the press struggled to engage with the participatory realities the pro-independence campaign sought to elicit. Macwhirter suggests that one key oversight of the press was failing to account for the “real referendum story” by not giving enough consideration to the growing support for a Yes vote and the pluralist participation it advocated.³⁵⁸ Fellow pro-independence supporter Silver seconds this assessment and claims that “the Scottish press has sacrificed much of its credibility and

³⁵² Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 189.

³⁵³ Smith, *Paper Lions*, 21.

³⁵⁴ Malloch, Munro, and Rogers, “Justice, Civic Engagement,” 5.

³⁵⁵ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 27-28.

³⁵⁶ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 33; Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 2.

³⁵⁷ Malloch, Munro, and Rogers, “Justice, Civic Engagement,” 7.

³⁵⁸ Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 33-34.

influence [...] in an effort to preserve union” over the course of the referendum debate.³⁵⁹ In fact, Silver argues that “[n]owhere was the post-devolution development of a narrow and elitist view of Scottish public life more apparent than in the reluctance of Scottish newspapers to reconsider the question of independence.”³⁶⁰ Instead the press largely perpetuated a predominantly conservative, pro-establishment perspective. Informed by the practices of elite-driven politics, the press has been neither used to nor eager to engage more fully with the participatory politics promoted institutionally through the new Scottish Parliament and, importantly, the pro-independence mobilisation in the referendum (see [chapter 2](#)) – this reluctance can undoubtedly be linked in part to their own position in the independence discourse, which saw them dismiss and underplay the participatory activism emerging on the Yes side. The reluctance of the press to promote or to obtain a more politically radical position in the referendum further links to their depoliticization and prevalent market pressures since devolution.

Informed by their prevalent role in the pro-devolution context, the press was eager to retain its politically representative function,³⁶¹ while displaying a reluctance to assume a strong political position so as not to alienate their dwindling readership in post-devolution Scotland.³⁶² The logic of commercialisation inherent in this practice, resonates with criticism by Habermas, who links the demise of the media as a quasi-public sphere for political debate to its commercialisation. This “refeudalization” of the press attested by Habermas has increasingly turned the public into spectators rather than participants³⁶³ and contributed to “apathy and to disaffection with political participation.”³⁶⁴ Within the context of mediated public debate Birks finds, in her analysis of newspaper campaigns, that only tabloids encouraged direct participation by their readers in what Birks calls an attempt to “stir up” readership rather than encourage public deliberation.³⁶⁵ The use of newspaper coverage to agitate its readership

³⁵⁹ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 145.

³⁶⁰ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 15.

³⁶¹ Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221.

³⁶² Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 215.

³⁶³ Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 44; Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, e.g., 142; 232.

³⁶⁴ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

³⁶⁵ Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221. This tabloidization also affects the public’s understanding of political news. According to Elizabeth Bird the “tabloidization” of the press becomes problematic where it “swamps the other important dimensions of what journalism can and should be,” namely its political relevance and function. S. Elizabeth Bird, “Tabloidization: What It Is, and Does It Really Matter?” in *The Changing Faces of Journalism: Tabloidization, Technology and Truthiness*, ed. Barbie Zelizer (London: Routledge, 2009), 49. Cf. James Morrison, “From Community to Commerce? Analytics, Audience ‘Engagement’ and How Local Newspapers Are Renegotiating News Values in the Age of Pageview-Driven Journalism in the United Kingdom,” in *The Routledge Companion to Local Media and Journalism*, eds. Agnes Gulyas and David Baines (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Andrew Chadwick, Cristian Vaccari, and Ben O’Loughlin, “Do Tabloids Poison

partially contradicts the increasingly cautious stance of editors towards demonstrations of party political support but is also a sign of the same tendency, i.e., a move away from political deliberation and towards populist agitation.³⁶⁶ The related focus on sensationalism is itself a symptom of the press's commercial crisis and their struggle to remain relevant.

The sense of political disconnect and commercial precarity visible in the early 2000s carried over into the referendum debate, during which “every daily newspaper indulged in reactionary and partisan headlines about the impact of a Yes vote.”³⁶⁷ Walker, editor of the *Sunday Herald* in 2014, states that when he “brought the newspaper out in May 2014 in support of a ‘Yes’ vote in the independence referendum” he thought other newspapers would follow this lead and declare their pro-independence sympathies.³⁶⁸ However, none of them did. Instead, the lack of political diversity communicated in the traditional press during the referendum campaign may have further contributed to Scottish newspapers' decline.³⁶⁹

The hesitancy to voice pro-independence support may have been further complicated, according to Walker, by the SNP's peculiar position as the party in government which is, at the same time, anti-establishment – at least with respect to independence.³⁷⁰ Although the Scottish press had been supportive of the SNP in previous elections, this support focused on the party's delivery on valence issues but not independence.³⁷¹ Despite the strong public support of the SNP established with election successes in 2007 and 2011 which was confirmed by the subsequent General Elections in 2015 and 2019,³⁷² the party has struggled to attract the partisan political support typical of the Scottish and British press.³⁷³ Instead, in 2014, any media support for the SNP triggered, Walker claims, immense criticism which meant that once the *Sunday Herald* had announced its Yes support, readers demanded ever greater measures of SNP scrutiny. According to Walker, support for independence – in contrast to Unionism – was perceived as a corruption of journalism.³⁷⁴

the Well of Social Media? Explaining Democratically Dysfunctional News Sharing,” *New Media & Society* 20, no. 11 (November 2018), <https://doi.org/10.1177/1461444818769689>.

³⁶⁶ Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221. Cf. Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 50.

³⁶⁷ Cf. Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 15.

³⁶⁸ Richard Walker, “Whatever Happened to the Independence Press?” *Scottish Affairs* 27, no. 1 (2018): 64, <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2018.0224>.

³⁶⁹ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 145.

³⁷⁰ Richard Walker (journalist, former editor of the *Sunday Herald* and *The National*, and editor of *The Sunday National*), interviewed by the author, April 2022.

³⁷¹ Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 49.

³⁷² Hutchison, “The Media and Politics,” 244-45; Harvey, “A Dominant SNP in a Unionist Scotland?” 57.

³⁷³ One of the most curious examples of the importance attributed to a partisan press were plans by the Conservative party to buy a Scottish title (namely the *Glasgow Herald* or *The Scotsman*) when they struggled to get the message across to their Scottish voters in the late 1980s. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 15; 72-73.

³⁷⁴ Walker, “Whatever Happened,” 66; Walker, interview.

This SNP scepticism and an alleged pro-Union bias in the press contributed to a seemingly underexplored market on the pro-independence side.³⁷⁵ In response, the highly partisan newspaper *The National* was launched in late 2014 to capitalise on the unexpectedly vocal pro-independence support during the referendum. Despite a disappointing “circulation below 10,000 and falling,”³⁷⁶ the paper has sustained itself (as of 2023). *The National* and, specifically, its sister paper the *Sunday National* replaced the *Sunday Herald* in 2018 as the Scottish pro-independence sheet and aims to “build the case for independence,” to “praise it” but also “criticise” it.³⁷⁷ These minor shifts confirm that the Scottish newspaper landscape outside its comparably weak Sunday market has stayed surprisingly stable,³⁷⁸ and that one pro-independence newspaper saturates the market – at least in a context of alternative online news sites and social media debates.

Given this limited demand for a pro-independence perspective in the traditional press, the notion of pro-Union bias works foremost as a compelling narrative of (mis-)representation. It maintains the notion of political and social difference while externalising blame through a predominantly foreign and British dominated media – as vocal criticism of the BBC suggests (see [chapter 2](#)). Despite the relative absence of a pro-independence editorial line in the Scottish press, columnists in the Scottish quality dailies provided spaces to a wide range of commentators, including pro-independence politicians such as Alex Salmond, Joan McAlpine,³⁷⁹ and Nicola Sturgeon during the referendum debate.³⁸⁰

In the context of a perceived media bias during the referendum, “[a]lternative digital platforms and intensified use of social media emerged to fill what was perceived as a gap in the mainstream press.”³⁸¹ This included growing engagement with alternative online platforms and news media sites, such as *Bella Caledonia* (2007) and *NewsNet Scotland* (2010),³⁸² as well as pro-independence blogs and websites *Wings Over Scotland* (2011) and *Common Weal* (2013). Social media, too, was quickly valued as a more inclusive “means to correct perceived

³⁷⁵ Walker, interview.

³⁷⁶ Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 33.

³⁷⁷ Walker, interview. Cf. Macwhirter, “Their Own Worst Enemy,” 33. *The National* and *Sunday National* are, according to Walker, better placed to advance the case for independence than was the *Sunday Herald* (with only one weekly edition and continued affiliation with *The Herald*). Walker, interview.

³⁷⁸ Such as the *Sunday Scot*, *Scotland Today* and the *Sunday Standard*. Lynch, *Scottish Government*, 191. Cf. Smith, *Paper Lions*, 173-75; Schlesinger, “Scottish Devolution,” 63; Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 76-77.

³⁷⁹ Note that McAlpine was deputy editor of *The Herald* prior to her career as a Scottish SNP MSP (2011-21).

³⁸⁰ Hutchison, “The Media and Politics,” 255. *The Daily Record* included weekly opinion columns by former SNP MSP Joan McAlpine and gave editorial control of one issue each to the leaders of the respective campaigns, Alex Salmond and Alistair Darling. Wayne, “Beneath the Bias,” 334.

³⁸¹ Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 49.

³⁸² Walker, interview.

media bias in more traditional media formats” by many Yes supporters.³⁸³ Coupled with the wide-reaching access to social media platforms, the idea of a more inclusive and open, that is less biased, digital “public space for political discussion”³⁸⁴ promoted significant social media traffic related to the referendum debate on platforms like Facebook and Twitter.³⁸⁵ However, the potential of social media to provide an alternative space for political discussion, or a digital public sphere, is limited by technological affordances as well as concerns about access, reliability, partisanship, and its deliberative potential – as I argue in more detail in chapter 5.

In fact, growing social and digital media platforms have yet to create an entirely digital(ised) public sphere and have largely reproduced exclusionary structures of public debate, while further contributing to its compartmentalisation.³⁸⁶ Trends on these platforms then reproduce what Fraser describes as the plurality of the public sphere rooted in counterpublics. The emerging micro-publics, however, are not only biased on the grounds of class, ethnicity, gender and, relatedly, access, but revolve more specifically around political interests. In the referendum context, political bubbles and “echo chambers”³⁸⁷ facilitated by alternative media platforms and, particularly, on social media largely reproduced existing affiliations and power dynamics (see chapter 5), which added to the “divisive” dynamics of the referendum, rather than contributing to more deliberative and participatory politics. In fact, segmented online platforms – as well as activists on the ground – frequently “spoke to the converted and were narrowcasting.”³⁸⁸ This narrowcasting contributed to the development of polarised and partisan micro-publics, despite the potential of digital news and social media platforms to offer a direct way for citizens, civil society, and political elites to confer with a growing public online.³⁸⁹ Instead, the emerging micro-publics largely engaged in separate opinion formation processes on the referendum that have shown to be exclusionary, highly partisan, or adversary – as later chapters will detail.³⁹⁰

³⁸³ Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 498.

³⁸⁴ Zizi Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere: The Internet as a Public Sphere,” *New Media & Society* 4, no. 1 (2002): 22.

³⁸⁵ Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Re-tweeted,” 70. Karrie Gillett, “10 Million Scottish Independence Facebook Reactions,” *The Scotsman*, September 16, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/10-million-scottish-independence-facebook-reactions-1526161>; Chris Marshall, “World’s Eye on Scottish Independence Referendum,” *The Scotsman*, September 19, 2014; Williams, “The Power of Social Media.”

³⁸⁶ Cf. Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 624-25; Manuel Castells, “Communication, Power and Counter-Power in the Network Society,” *International Journal of Communication* 1 (2007): 254.

³⁸⁷ Dubois and Blank, “The Echo Chamber,” 731.

³⁸⁸ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 85.

³⁸⁹ Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 453.

³⁹⁰ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 85.

However, according to Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, a lack of dialogue, debate and deliberative spaces was also an issue in the traditional media in 2014. News coverage on television facilitated little dialogue and engagement between the opposing sides of the constitutional question,³⁹¹ even in the context of more tightly regulated and “non-partisan” broadcasting.³⁹² This lack of engagement and deliberation across the media limited the potential for political debate in the public sphere and thus for popular participation. Where the traditional media failed to promote popular participation and political deliberation, it found more explicit expression in alternative activism of pro-independence campaigners and the romanticism of “physical” public spheres of the coffeehouse culture described by Habermas.³⁹³ Importantly, one of the most “striking feature[s] of the 2014 independence referendum campaign was how little influence the press had.”³⁹⁴ The Scottish media, as a key facilitator of political debate in the public sphere, remained elitist, conservative and male-dominated, with the most utilised sources being “male elites advocating a No position.”³⁹⁵ At a time when declining party affiliations increased the public’s need for a plurality of information,³⁹⁶ the traditional press failed to embrace media diversity as the basis for democratic participation during and beyond the referendum campaign.³⁹⁷

Despite the press’s predominant pro-Union alignment, pro-independence support grew substantially. Fuelled by tensions between a one-sided media alignment, a lack of representativeness, and, importantly, a related sense of “unjust” treatment, the constitutional question and an allegedly biased press instilled new passion into public debate. In fact, the public response to the one-sided press support contributed to the expansion of the Scottish media sphere, of the public sphere, and a pluralist political debate. Rather than the reasoned argument of consensual opinion formation processes proposed by Habermas,³⁹⁸ the lively agonism of adversarial debate proposed by Mouffe as a key feature of a functioning public sphere and democracy seems to have added to a sense of popular empowerment in the referendum debate. Indeed, Mouffe argues for the politically productive nature of “conflicting points of view [that] are confronted without any possibility of a final reconciliation”³⁹⁹ within the context of liberal values and reasoned debate.

³⁹¹ Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 464.

³⁹² Note here the recurring allegations against BBC Scotland’s biased referendum coverage.

³⁹³ Cf. Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 458.

³⁹⁴ McCrone, “Afterword,” 113.

³⁹⁵ Dekavalla, “Whose Voices,” 464.

³⁹⁶ Hutchison, “The Media and Politics,” 244.

³⁹⁷ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 172.

³⁹⁸ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 55.

³⁹⁹ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 92.

Against a persisting sense of political disconnect in mainstream media and establishment politics, the performative conflict of the referendum inserted new passion into the political debate. Challenges to a presumed political consensus encouraged wider political interest and a sense of political agency among (vocal parts of) the public. This shift in public debate and growing pro-independence support contributed to a change in newspaper coverage during the referendum identified by Dekavalla. Dekavalla attributes this shift to the growing public pressures based on the dissatisfaction with “the constitutional setup of the UK.”⁴⁰⁰ Although the Scottish press had rejected independence, one week before the referendum the editorials of *The Scotsman*, *The Herald*, the *Daily Record*, and their Sunday stablemates (except the *Sunday Herald*) all acknowledged a wish for change and increased powers for the Scottish Parliament among the Scottish population. The desire for constitutional change within the Union developed from being a “SNP project” to representing the “wish of the people” in newspaper coverage.⁴⁰¹ This shift can, according to Dekavalla, in part be attributed to the press’s economic concerns: to maintain the largest possible readership, the press adapted to public opinion.⁴⁰² Echoing findings by Birks mentioned above, these results demonstrate the continued depoliticization of the Scottish press in a context of market pressures, which has meant that “newspapers are responding to readers’ (perceived) political behaviour.”⁴⁰³

When the strength of the Yes side grew in the final weeks ahead of the referendum, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats co-signed a commitment promising increased powers within the framework of devolution should the public vote against independence. This commitment, which soon became known as the “Vow,”⁴⁰⁴ was published on the front page of the Labour supporting, No-leaning *Daily Record* on 16 September 2014. It became a crucial press intervention in the public political debate.⁴⁰⁵ This “middle option” of increased devolution measures aligned with the public’s preference for political change prior

⁴⁰⁰ Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 48.

⁴⁰¹ Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 50.

⁴⁰² Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 49.

⁴⁰³ Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 215.

⁴⁰⁴ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 96; Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 9.

⁴⁰⁵ David Clegg, “David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg Sign Joint Historic Promise which Guarantees More Devolved Powers for Scotland and Protection of NHS if We Vote No,” September 15, 2014, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/david-cameron-ed-miliband-nick-4265992>. Given the *Daily Record*’s substantial readership, the Vow can further be assumed to have reached a large popular audience from day one. Greenslade discusses whether the publication of the “Vow” is to be seen in terms of a clever journalistic scoop or covert political spin. Cf. Roy Greenslade, “‘The Vow’ and the Daily Record – Creative Journalism or Political Spin?” *The Guardian*, October 31, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/media/greenslade/2014/oct/31/daily-record-scottish-independence>. Cf. also Murray Foote, “Inside the Vow: How Historic Daily Record Front Page which Changed the Course of Britain’s Constitutional Settlement Was Born,” *Daily Record*, September 17, 2015, <https://www.dailyrecord.co.uk/news/politics/inside-vow-how-historic-daily-6464878>.

to the referendum.⁴⁰⁶ However, the Edinburgh Agreement which temporarily granted the Scottish Government the power to hold a referendum and detailed the political terms of the referendum had explicitly excluded a third or “devo max” option.⁴⁰⁷ The preferred public choice was strategically not given as an option,⁴⁰⁸ which, according to Mitchell, initially prevented what Vernon Bogdanor described as the public “articulation of a submerged consensus.”⁴⁰⁹ Only the final weeks of the referendum debate allowed for the re-emergence and “articulation of a submerged consensus” in public political and media debate – even if short-lived.⁴¹⁰

3. Conclusion: a Scottish culture of argument?

The difficulties of the press in communicating the diverse positions on the constitutional question have both limited public debate and contributed to the expansion of the mediated public sphere. Undoubtedly cautioned by its precarious situation, the Scottish media adopted an economically conservative position. As such, it seemingly adapted to popular public opinion, which meant that it slowly gave more attention to debates in favour of constitutional change, culminating in the publication of “the Vow” on 16 September 2014. Nonetheless, pro-independence support in the press remained the exception – not least since it called into question the foundation of the political and media establishment cemented in the British state. As such, the largely unanimous perspective of the traditional press failed to convincingly represent and advocate for alternative or, in the words of Mouffe, “adversarial” political positions for most of the referendum debate. Instead, economic concerns of the press posed obstacles for political deliberation. When growing parts of a dissatisfied public turned to alternative media formats, the economic – even more so than political – pro-establishment position in support of the status quo was increasingly undermined. While less controlled and

⁴⁰⁶ Dekavalla, “The 2014 Referendum,” 50-52; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 96; Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 9.

⁴⁰⁷ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 9-10. Note that definitions of what “devo max,” i.e., increased, or maximal levels of devolution entail, are rare. Keating and McEwen suggest that this option seems to include, firstly, “a post-sovereigntist conception of authority, in which Westminster supremacy is challenged. Second is control of most taxation powers. Third is Scottish control over large areas of welfare policy.” Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 8.

⁴⁰⁸ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 81; Keating and McEwen suggest that by insisting on a binary referendum question – without a “devolution max” option – the Unionist parties “anticipat[ed] an easy win.” Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 9. For a detailed account on further devolution and practical considerations on constitutional change, cf. McLean, Gallagher, and Lodge, *Scotland's Choices*, 84-117; 205.

⁴⁰⁹ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 98.

⁴¹⁰ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 98.

prone to misinformation and radicalisation, spaces on social media and alternative media platforms had challenged a presumed media consensus.

A subsequent mobilisation aligns with what Mouffe describes as a “call for radicalization of liberal democratic institutions” rather than their rejection. This wish for more participative spaces should, according to Mouffe, be resolved by creating “the conditions for an agonistic confrontation where the citizens would be offered real alternatives.”⁴¹¹ In contrast to Habermas’s consensus-driven, dialogic conception of the public sphere, Mouffe’s agonistic pluralism emphasises the productive nature of political dissensus. Political deliberation is vitalised by unresolved debate, rather than by the pursuit of unattainable consensus. Although united by shared principles of “liberty and equality for all,” “[a]dversaries fight against each other because they want their interpretation of the principles to become hegemonic, but they do not put into question the legitimacy of their opponent’s right to fight for the victory of their position.”⁴¹² As such, the “adversary” is central to the agonistic model of democratic politics and prevents “apathy and [...] disaffection with political participation.”⁴¹³ The unresolvable Scottish political argument of pre-devolution Scotland was revived in the referendum debate and seemingly enlivened the public sphere. By moving beyond the consensual complacency of institutionally secured devolution and a depoliticised press, the public political agitation and argument – even if largely elite-driven – was revived in a debate which pitted two political ideals against each other and created a “discursive” adversary in the contested media.

Within a context of pro-Union bias, the traditional press, as well as most notably the BBC, became a crucial adversary in public debate and, ironically, contributed to an, arguably temporary, revitalisation of political deliberation and participation in the Scottish public sphere. The expression of new political passion reconnected segments of the public with Scotland’s elite players and (self-stylised) political representatives, namely political, media, and cultural elites. As the arena of public political debate and of interaction between elite players and the public, the public sphere is, as I have shown above, a crucial framework for understanding the role of popular participation as well as its representation and mythologisation in Scottish national debate. Facilitated and constituted by the media and elite players who have claimed a politically representative function in Scotland – including the political, media, and cultural elite – the public sphere also provides a crucial framework for negotiations of national identity and cultural mythologies. These complex processes of representation and meaning

⁴¹¹ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 119-20.

⁴¹² Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

⁴¹³ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

making are informed by specific national beliefs which historically attributed, in the absence of a Scottish Parliament, a representative political function to civil society, an indigenous press, and a cultural elite with continued vested interest in how Scottish politics are conducted. Indeed, the Scottish cultural and (see [chapter 6](#)) media elites as well as the Scottish press have repeatedly claimed to speak on behalf of “the people”. As Birks has shown, the depoliticised post-devolution press has frequently advocated to speak for “the people” and portrayed “formal representative politics as inaccessible” while “dismiss[ing] alternative participation through civic society.”⁴¹⁴ This populist claim to representation sees “newspapers compete with political decision makers for the legitimacy lent by ‘the people’”⁴¹⁵ and, in the Scottish tradition, mobilises and discursively reproduces national mythology.

As I have suggested in this chapter, the complex processes of claims to popular political representation – by political, media, and cultural elites alike – have fulfilled a consistent, if changing, role in Scottish public political debate and performances of national unity and distinction. These elite players have claimed for themselves an “unofficial” agenda-setting function. The resulting complexities of representation and performance exist in dynamic tension with institutional political and media powers and are, as such, best understood within the framework of the public sphere, which “provides a site where [cultural,] political and media elites speak to each other.”⁴¹⁶ More importantly, the public sphere is also the site of popular voice, activism, and participation. Indeed, “the public sphere is always structured in terms of power relations”⁴¹⁷ and thus not only organises different levels of elite communication but also frames and performs the limitations of popular agency. Where popular participation has largely been framed through representative claims and quasi-missionary empowerment by various elites and, crucially, through civil society as well as the institutional framework of the devolved Scottish Parliament, such a fractional approach disregards national identity and myths routinely performed by key players in the public sphere and public political debate and, in turn, highlights the benefits of the integrative approach employed in this thesis. This approach further pays explicit attention to the contribution of the Scottish press to an increasingly differently imagined community – in contrast with England – with concrete political and social consequences that will arguably continue to challenge the Union.⁴¹⁸

⁴¹⁴ Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221.

⁴¹⁵ Birks, “The Politics of Protest,” 132; cf. 128. Cf. also Higgins, *Media and Their Publics*, 44.

⁴¹⁶ Heather Savigny, “Media, Politics and Empowerment: In Whose Interest?” in Scullion et al., *The Media*, 21.

⁴¹⁷ Schlesinger, “After the Post-public Sphere,” 1547.

⁴¹⁸ Rosie and Petersoo, “Drifting Apart?” 142.

Indeed, the Scottish press has long prided itself as a carrier of national identity, as shown above. This sensibility has shaped the organisation of the Scottish public sphere and the Scottish perception of civic nationalism, and political and intellectual distinction. Specifically, the latter evokes values popularly linked to the Scottish Enlightenment. Their mythologisation has contributed to perceptions of Scottish political culture as open, just, participatory, and marked by reasoned and fair debate. This resonates with the performative post-devolution openness and participatory politics postulated in the set-up of the Scottish Parliament, and arguments that “an independent Scotland would be a more left-wing, more social democratic and kinder place.”⁴¹⁹ The mobilisation of Enlightenment values for Scottish nationalism sits uneasily with the historical period of the Enlightenment marked by strong Unionism and a liberal market ideology.⁴²⁰ Instead, a one-sided contemporary reading of the Scottish Enlightenment culture and politics indicates its mythologisation in popular political discourse. Within the referendum context, the routine performance of these civic qualities as a marker of national distinction was routinely articulated with popular participation and progressiveness by the Yes side. The related self-image of the Scottish press as a guarantor of a strong, democratic culture of argument and the public sphere has been mobilised by the press and its (elite) defenders. This notion, however, has been challenged by the perceived shortcomings of the press during the independence referendum in 2014, during which its hesitancy to represent political plurality forfeited the trust of segments of the public.

However, the decline of the press predates their performance in the referendum debate. In fact, Silver suggests that the “advent of the Scottish parliament” was not met by the desperately needed revival of its media.⁴²¹ Instead, the Scottish press has become increasingly depoliticised post-devolution: as a result of larger market pressures and the institutionalisation of political representation in the new framework in the Parliament. As long as the Scottish press had to mark its distinction against a larger British press and adopted the role of quasi-political representation, it was able to construct a collective “we” against an external “they” as a way to communicate a Scottish collective identity.⁴²² According to Mouffe, this performance of distinction is not exclusionary but constitutive of pluralist politics. A recognition of this plurality is a “recognition and legitimation of conflict” which is essential to a working liberal democratic politics as long as this “conflict does not take the form of an ‘antagonism’ (struggle

⁴¹⁹ C. Smith, “Scottish Enlightenment,” 340.

⁴²⁰ C. Smith, “Scottish Enlightenment,” 341.

⁴²¹ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 135.

⁴²² Cf. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 5.

between enemies) but the form of an ‘agonism’ (struggle between adversaries).”⁴²³ Both the expression and realisation of such a productive agonism has been complicated, if not limited, since the Scottish Parliament set a new frame for participatory, consensus-oriented politics, while maintaining structures of political dominance. Indeed, the performance of a nominally open and participatory politics in post-devolution Scotland has promoted a narrative of political progressiveness and difference which, in its identarian mythologisation, pre-empts criticism of political exclusion and elite dominance. How this myth of political difference and, specifically, popular participation was (re-)constructed in media representations of the referendum will be addressed in the following chapter. Further to the press’s crucial role in co-creating and circulating a myth of popular participation, media representations of popular participation performed a specific and limiting vision thereof: by framing popular participation through elite-sanctioned colourful activism in the streets, these representations pre-determined how popular participation was discursively enacted in the referendum.

⁴²³ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 6.

Chapter 2

Writing participation: indyref as a media event and spectacle

*It is impossible to have visited Scotland in recent days and not to have been exhilarated by the sheer vigour of democratic engagement.*⁴²⁴

The 2014 referendum was a mediatised political event and media spectacle.⁴²⁵ While having faced a declining newspaper readership over the previous decades, the press facilitated public access to the political (referendum) debate⁴²⁶ and maintained a crucial agenda-setting role during the referendum.⁴²⁷ Newspapers are read by political elites and media professionals who influence public discussion through print and digital editions as well as, crucially, on social media platforms such as Twitter.⁴²⁸ This agenda-setting function shaped the public's perception of the referendum as a festival of popular participation, democracy, and political debate.⁴²⁹ Such representations of the referendum discursively (co-)produced and performed a myth of popular participation which draws on narratives of Scottish political and civic distinction (see [chapter 1](#)), the visibility of alternative, culture-based campaign activism (see [chapter 3](#)), and the advocacy of popular participation and political mobilisation by artists and activists (see [chapter 4](#) and [6](#)). This chapter further develops the role of elite representations of the referendum discourse and their mythologisation of popular participation; I expand on this practice in the following chapters. Indeed, the press was crucial in uniting influential public voices and in developing and giving credence to the myth of popular participation. It constructed – largely retrospectively – indyref experience through an image of a nation immersed in debate, popular political activity, and democratic renewal during the final days of the campaign in September 2014 and after polling day.

This chapter focuses on the coverage of some key events during the campaigning period from May 2012 to September 2014 that challenged or represented popular participation in the debate. Using critical discourse analysis, this chapter discusses representations of popular participation in the Scottish and British press (see [Methodology](#)). It analyses the language used

⁴²⁴ O'Toole, "Scotland's Vote"; James Naughtie, "Whatever the Result, Our Politics Has Changed Permanently: For all the Name-calling and Emotion, the Campaign in Scotland Has Had a Profound and Clarifying Effect," *The Guardian*, September 17, 2014.

⁴²⁵ Kellner, "Media Spectacle," 76; 78.

⁴²⁶ Dekavalla, "Framing Referendum Campaigns," 794.

⁴²⁷ Maxwell McCombs, *Setting the Agenda: The Mass Media and Public Opinion* (Cambridge: Polity, 2004); Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, "The Agenda Setting Function of Mass Media," *Public Opinion Quarterly* 36 (1972).

⁴²⁸ Dekavalla, "Framing Referendum Campaigns," 794.

⁴²⁹ Mitchell, "The Unexpected Campaign," 7.

to define popular participation to determine how representations and elite performances of political participation in the press contributed to its mythologisation. On this basis, this chapter argues that the press largely described popular participation through two rhetorical frameworks: firstly, through visible, colourful, and engaging activism and, secondly, through a rhetoric of threat, violence, and negative mob mentality. The first framework was largely used where participation followed elite prescription by politicians or a pro-Unionist media stance. Where (mostly Yes-supporting) participation was perceived to threaten institutional politics or political and/or media elites, it was predominantly phrased in negative terms. Thus, the latter, more organic, “authentic” expressions of popular political agency exist in tension with the popular empowerment advocated by politicians and in the press since the campaign launched in 2012. Accordingly, I argue that a specific version of participatory action was initially prescribed and performed as a key trope of progressive politics and democracy in sections of the Scottish and British press.

As the following discussion will show, most extracts analysed consist of opinion rather than news articles. This is a result of the analysis, rather than a methodological choice. Indeed, the preoccupation with popular participation in opinion articles is indicative of the discursive construction of popular participation and its related myth in elite media debate. Often written by “interested politicians, or from accomplished literary figures,” opinion and comment pieces perform an evaluative function within public political debate and the public sphere which sets them apart from factual news reports.⁴³⁰ Consequently, these commentators tell the public what events to think about as well as *how* to think about them, indicating their agenda-setting role and their function in shaping public opinion – not least on popular participation. In contrast, news articles were generally found not to engage with the thesis’s central concern – the framing of the referendum as a singular, empowering “democratic moment” of popular participation. The discrepancies between the attention given to popular participation in news coverage and opinion pieces indicates the mythmaking practices around popular participation and “participatory” events present in representations of the campaign in the media and, as such, determined the selection of samples analysed below. The key participatory events chosen for analysis (as defined in the Methodology section) include:

⁴³⁰ Higgins, “Substantiating a Political Public Sphere,” 33; cf. also 31-33.

- the launch events of the *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* campaign;
- the Independence Marches and Rallies (2012 and 2013) and the Orange Order March (2014) in Edinburgh;
- the protests outside the BBC Scotland studios at Pacific Quay in Glasgow;
- as well as the “*single narrative spectacle*”⁴³¹ of the final weeks prior and in the immediate days following on from the vote.

In the first section, I will analyse how popular participation was introduced as a key issue of the referendum during the campaign launches, before analysing its framing as a positive – if feeble – demonstration of popular support during pro-independence and Orange Order marches ahead of the referendum. In the second section, I analyse events dating from September 2014. Based on this analysis, I argue that more organic, unplanned, and anti-elitist participatory activities and protests were framed predominantly negatively through a rhetoric of violence and abuse, while moments of elite-sanctioned participation and activism were prescribed ahead of the referendum and retrospectively mythologised into an image of the referendum as a festival of organic, empowering popular participation.

1. The campaign launches and participation *from above* (2012)

The respective launches of the Yes and No campaign in 2012 were the official starting point for the long campaigning period of more than two years. The following analysis focuses on how the campaigning organisations *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together* introduced the importance of popular participation into the campaign through a rhetoric of empowerment, sovereignty, and political inclusion. I argue that this emphasis on participation worked largely as prescription *from above* at this point of the campaign.

1.1 The *Yes Scotland* campaign launch

The LexisNexis search for the week of the Yes campaign launch from 21 to 28 May 2012 returned 235 results. 48 of these directly addressed the launch event across the seven selected newspaper publications. The early coverage of the Yes launch already introduced comparisons with the anticipated *Better Together* campaign launch scheduled for June. Whereas the Yes campaign launch was marked by celebrity endorsement, press commentary at the time already

⁴³¹ Dayan and Katz, “Performing Media Events,” 174 (emphasis original).

predicted that “the pro-UK campaign will be more uplifting, detailed and have a broader range of voices from across Scotland.”⁴³² The *Better Together* launch and campaign was thus discursively constructed in response to the Yes launch, determining a vision of the *Better Together* campaign as – nominally – more inclusive and diverse. Although the Yes campaign advert, published shortly after the launch, featured “a number of ordinary people,”⁴³³ it was unable to shift the Yes campaign’s initial image of elitism. This image had emerged after select members of the political and media elite assembled behind closed doors to launch a campaign for *the people*. In this fashion, news reporters assembled in Edinburgh – first at a cinema for the Yes campaign launch in late May, then at Napier University for *Better Together* one month later – to convey to the public crucial information and the relevance of the launch events.

Described as an exclusive “press launch” by Hamish Macdonell for *The Times*, the Yes – as well as the No – launch event united the national political media, and cultural elites in a mediated event which matches Daniel Boorstin’s definition of a “pseudo-event.”⁴³⁴ Such events are essential to mediated political campaigns and fulfil an integral function in Western democracy, where they facilitate the routine “questioning of [government] officials by reporters.”⁴³⁵ Following the logic of mediatisation, namely the idea that “the shape and delivery [of political decisions] will be determined by the organising principles of media rather than those of politics,”⁴³⁶ pseudo-events are explicitly planned and planted for the “purpose of being reported or reproduced” for the convenience of the media.⁴³⁷

The Yes launch further followed a logic of newsworthiness rather than one of authenticity typical for pseudo-events.⁴³⁸ Thus, popular participation was prescribed by the political elite (rather than enacted), and it fell to the press to promote it to the absent public. Contrary to claims by the organisers that the cinema venue was chosen “because it’s a place where real

⁴³² Michael Settle and Kate Devlin, “Slogan for No campaign,” *The Herald*, 28 May 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13059580.slogan-no-campaign/>.

⁴³³ Sunday Herald, “McConnell’s Chief of Staff Among First 100 to Sign up for Independence: Labour Spindoctor, Tory Fundraiser, Writers and Actors Put Their Names to Yes Campaign’s First Declaration of Support,” May 27, 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13059452.mcconnells-chief-staff-among-first-100-sign-independence/>.

⁴³⁴ Daniel Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America*, 50th anniversary ed. (1961; New York: Vintage Books, 2012), 9; 11-12.

⁴³⁵ Martha Joynt Kumar, “‘Source Material’: Presidential Press Conferences: The Importance of Evolution of an Enduring Forum,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 35, no. 1 (2005): 166.

⁴³⁶ Michael Higgins, “Mediatisation and Political Language,” in *The Routledge Handbook of Language and Politics*, eds. Ruth Wodak and Bernhard Forchtner (London: Routledge, 2017), 385.

⁴³⁷ Boorstin, *The Image*, 11.

⁴³⁸ Boorstin, *The Image*, 11.

people go,”⁴³⁹ the marker “real people” used in the excerpt denotes an elite tone of difference, which underlines the categorisation of the event as a press launch – rather than an inclusive, public event. The exclusionary design of the event thus contrasts with representations of the Yes campaign in the press. An article for *The Scotsman*, for example, associates the pro-independence campaign with a path to equality, social justice, and community engagement and echoes the campaign message that “People here are best qualified to run Scotland.”⁴⁴⁰ The quoted headline clearly defines and localises its audience. Through the location marker “here,” the national community is reproduced through what Billig terms the routine flagging of the nation.⁴⁴¹ The lexical choice positions the localised Scottish public at the centre of democratic decision-making and naturalises their qualification – rather than their right – to “run” the country. This claim is discursively established through a naturalised claim to self-governance by Salmond as an article for the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* demonstrates:

The organisers of the Yes Scotland movement have promised the “largest and most exciting community-based campaign in Scotland’s history.” [...] First Minister Alex Salmond said: “We unite behind a declaration of self-evident truth – the people who live in Scotland are best placed to make the decisions that affect Scotland.”⁴⁴²

The rhetoric of national unity, empowerment, and legal sovereignty is associated with a “self-evident truth” in the allusion to the US Declaration of Independence. Both the more populist headline in *The Scotsman* and this excerpt emphasise the Scottish public’s political agency – and sovereignty – in making decisions about their country. This political power is justified (“qualified”; “placed”) through civic notions of place (“here”; “live in Scotland”) and territory, which echo definitions of the nation-state.⁴⁴³ Through its pairing with notions of “community-based support”⁴⁴⁴ in (former) First Minister Salmond’s quoted speech, this phrasing grounds political decisions in popular support. The attribution of this quote bestows due credit but, more

⁴³⁹ Hamish Macdonell, “Independence Campaign to Share Offices with Moonie ‘Peace Embassy’,” *The Times*, May 25, 2012, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/independence-campaign-to-share-offices-with-moonie-peace-embassy-rtwn2qp2rv0>.

⁴⁴⁰ Eddie Barns, “Scottish Independence: People Here Are Best Qualified to Run Scotland,” *The Scotsman*, May 25, 2012, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/uk-news/scottish-independence-people-here-are-best-qualified-to-run-scotland-2508179>. Macwhirter identifies a significant overlap between this declaration and the Claim of Right, even though the former claimed that decisions about Scotland should be taken by those who “care most about Scotland” while the latter “affirmed the sovereign right of the Scottish people to determine the form of government best suited to their needs.” Iain Macwhirter, “Echoes of the Spirit of 1989,” *Sunday Herald*, May 27, 2012.

⁴⁴¹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 94; 114-15.

⁴⁴² Tim Pauling, “Historic Moment as Campaign for Independence Launched in Capital,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, May 26, 2012. Cf. *The Scotsman*, “Leaders: Yes Scotland Launch Targets Hearts First, Heads Later,” May 25, 2012; Carrell, “Alex Salmond Predicts Million-strong Movement.”

⁴⁴³ E.g., Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*, 6.

⁴⁴⁴ Note the hyperbole of “largest and most exciting community-based campaign in Scotland’s history” which communicates the Yes campaign’s historic importance vis-à-vis the *Better Together* campaign.

importantly, works as a distancing tool. It expresses press scepticism towards the campaign which is emphasised in the lexical choice “promise.” This choice ascribes truthfulness and ambition as well as insecurity to the campaign goals and is indicative of the campaign’s top-down approach to participation. The framing of popular participation as a promise to the people indicates power imbalances and abstract ideas rather than tangible political policy and action. Simultaneously, the popular support claimed in political speech and press coverage contributed to the discursive construction of the pro-independence movement as shaped by popular participation. The various rhetorical juxtapositions point to some of the core issues of the campaign itself, namely being a campaign staged and organised by a political elite with the aim to create a decentralised, (organic) movement of and for the people.

The popular dimension of political participation is further expressed in the framing of *Yes Scotland* as a “movement”. The implied pre-existing, unified support for independence attributes importance and dynamism to it. However, the uncontrolled agency of an undefined mass of supporters already points to the flipside of movement politics – once in motion, movements are less easily controlled by elite strategizing (more on this in [section 3](#) of this chapter).⁴⁴⁵ A reliance on external, elite legitimisation is also expressed in *The Herald*:

Hollywood stars, minor celebrities, prominent businessmen and politicians past and present linked up to endorse the Yes campaign’s launch message that decisions about Scotland’s future are best taken by the people of Scotland.⁴⁴⁶

This newspaper excerpt echoes the campaign message of popular sovereignty, but explicitly frames it through the legitimating power of the assembled political, cultural, and economic elite: they “endorse” not just the launch event but are called upon to legitimise its very message. This juxtaposition of elite legitimisation of popular sovereignty both reproduces a common model of representative democracy and limits the idea and agency of the popular vote. Rather than trusting the public to “run” Scotland, this prescribed empowerment simultaneously limits the political power of the community-based campaign.

More explicitly addressing the centrality of the political elite, days before the launch event an article by *The Scotsman* headlined: “Celebrities and politicians ready to launch their yes campaign.” Although the article itself refers to the campaign as being “designed to build a

⁴⁴⁵ For example, Canetti addresses in detail the internal logic as well as the “destructiveness of the crowd.” Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power*, trans. Carol Stewart (1960; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984), e.g., 19.

⁴⁴⁶ Brian Currie, “A-listers and Well-wishers Line Up for Independence,” *The Herald*, May 26, 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13059329.a-listers-well-wishers-line-independence/>; Tom Gordon, “Campaign for Scottish Independence Launched in Edinburgh: The Formal Campaign for Scottish Independence Has Been Launched at a Celebrity-endorsed Event,” *The Telegraph*, May 25, 2012.

groundswell of support,”⁴⁴⁷ the choice of the possessive pronoun “their” and the word “design” emphasise the campaign’s artificial, elite construction. Thus, these media representations indicate how the popular movement was rhetorically defined and discursively performed by a national elite, or, as in Alan Cochrane’s article for *The Daily Telegraph*, a small group of political eccentrics:

Around 500 assorted nationalists cheered and back-slapped each other yesterday, as they launched their campaign to break up Britain. Not that they like anyone describing it as such, of course; they’d prefer it if we called it “Yes Scotland”. [...]

Oh sure, there was the fiction that this wasn’t a wholly Nat event; it was supposed to involve all sorts of people.

But that’s baloney; Peter Murrell, the owl-like SNP chief executive, was there, where he always is, at the side of the stage acting as puppet master. How was it, then, that the event didn’t take off?

It could be that all that was being tried yesterday was to get everyone who backs independence used to each other’s company, without too much hard thinking involved and few, if any, policy disputes. But in the end the main impression given was of a bunch of people talking to themselves.⁴⁴⁸

The excerpt uses a very strong “us versus them” rhetoric, and particularly stresses the pronoun “they” to convey a disconnect between the launch event and a perceived (English/unionist) readership as well as society at large. A further level of distancing and alienation is conveyed in the zoomorphism (“owl-like”) applied to Murrell. The popular and informal language dismisses the campaign efforts by an exclusionary, but small group of nationalist eccentrics (“assorted”; “bunch”). Their alienation (“they” versus “we”) is further stressed through a language of self-congratulatory triviality (“cheered and back-slapped”) which contributes to the impression of an exclusive in-group mentality: pro-independence supporters are portrayed as a small-scale, exclusionary segment of society which “talk[s] to themselves” and lacks democratic representativeness. Remove from the public and a lack of political agency are further conveyed in the representation of Murrell as an “acting” “puppet-master,” i.e., as a stock character of elite control. The conversational use of informality (“oh sure”; “baloney”) and a minimizing, scornful rhetoric of dismissal (“they’d prefer”; “fiction”; “didn’t take off”; “without too much”; “few”) further discredit the event and its message. As such, this openly pro-Unionist account stands out in as much as it explicitly distances itself from “everyone who backs independence” and uses a rhetoric of trivialised violence, rather than of political empowerment, to frame the referendum.

⁴⁴⁷ The Scotsman, “Scottish Independence: Celebrities and Politicians Ready to Launch Their Yes Campaign,” May 21, 2012, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence-celebrities-and-politicians-ready-to-launch-their-yes-campaign-1626561>.

⁴⁴⁸ Alan Cochrane, “Yes, We Want You to Back Independence, But, No, We Don’t Know What It Will Mean,” *The Daily Telegraph*, May 26, 2012.

Independent of their political stance, all newspapers highlighted the Yes campaign's artificial nature. The limited or exclusionary reality of the launch contrasts with its popular and inclusionary message: it casts the launch event as a discursive performance of participation. Although the national community was called upon in both the rhetoric of the event and its coverage, the wider population had no part in it. The event's reliance on press releases highlights its function as a pseudo-event and pre-determined its messaging already ahead of the event.⁴⁴⁹ Thus, the community effort of popular participation was designed and sanctioned by a cultural and political elite, and discursively constructed and routinely performed in the press coverage of the launch and the campaigning that followed. It indicates some of the limitations of elite-sanctioned and prescribed popular participation that became increasingly evident during the campaign.

1.2 The *Better Together* campaign launch

To distinguish the *Better Together* campaign from the elitism associated with the Yes campaign, organisers made a distinct effort to include the voices of "ordinary" people and to present a positive vision of what has popularly come to be known as the "No" campaign during the launch event.⁴⁵⁰ Of note is not only the emphasis on "ordinary Scots," however, but the repeated mention of the "quiet majority" in the press.⁴⁵¹ Prominently used in the referendum discourse, the term was employed as early as the campaign launch. The discursive use of this routine phrase presupposed that the majority of the public would, firstly, consist of No supporters and, secondly, remain silent. Where political agency is routinely linked to democratic voice, this rhetorical framing advances political representation through absence rather than visible empowerment and participation, as I will discuss in more detail below.

The LexisNexis search for 22 June to 1 July 2012 returned a total of 340 results for the seven sampled newspapers. The slightly longer timeframe, which was chosen to include coverage ahead of the Monday launch date as well as the Sunday issue of the *Sunday Herald*, naturally returned a larger sample than that of the Yes launch. Even relative to the total days in question an increase in coverage is evident, which may indicate a growing interest in the

⁴⁴⁹ E.g., *The Scotsman* had already announced that "celebrities and political figures are to launch 'the biggest community-based campaign in Scotland's history'" with the goal to include "Scots from all walks of life" days ahead of the launch event. *The Scotsman*, "Scottish Independence: Celebrities and Politicians."

⁴⁵⁰ Cf. Cameron Brooks, "Darling Positive Staying in Union is Best Choice," *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, June 25, 2012.

⁴⁵¹ E.g., Mike Wade, "Trusting in People We've Never Heard of: The Silent Majority," *The Times*, June 26, 2012.

referendum. However, the number of articles directly addressing the *Better Together* campaign launch is (with 32) smaller than that of the Yes campaign launch. This difference in numbers is surprising, even if the Yes campaign launch could arguably be expected to provide a more fertile ground for speculation and thus, potentially, news stories. However, coverage of both pseudo-events was remarkably similar, and many articles drew comparisons between the content and style of the campaign launches, as exemplified in the following account by John Curtice for *The Herald*:

Well, this was certainly a campaign launch with a different style from that of the Yes camp. No glitzy celebrity endorsement – just plenty of speeches from well-known politicians and, more interestingly, a video featuring ordinary Scots saying why they want to stay in the Union.

Yet the substance of yesterday’s launch was surprisingly similar to that of the Yes launch. That launch’s key message had been that decisions about Scotland were best taken by those who most care about the country, that is the people of Scotland. It was a clear appeal to Scots’ distinctive sense of national identity. [...]

Equally, Alistair Darling appealed to the patriotism of the quiet majority and tried to draw an analogy between an allegedly distinctive Scottish belief in community and remaining in partnership with our neighbours in England. It seems as though the unionists have decided to meet the Braveheart argument head on.⁴⁵²

In this opinion piece, political scientist and renowned commentator Curtice contrasts the No campaign launch with *Yes Scotland*’s. Conversational language is used to undermine said distance – that boils down to style rather than substance – and to rhetorically perform surprise. Rather than dismissing the campaign message or its significance (see above), the informal tone is used to undermine the performed difference of the two “camps.” Echoing the message of the Yes campaign, *Better Together* emphasised the importance of voices by “ordinary Scots” – this time to express a pro-Union argument rather than popular sovereignty. The inclusion of ordinary voices, which (discursively) sets the two launch events apart, explicitly responds to and challenges the rhetoric and style of the Yes launch and demonstrates how much discursive weight the notion of popular participation had already attained in the media debate. Conversely, the press struggled to capture the popular voices included in the event and more aptly covered opinions of public personas and “glitzy celebrity endorsement.”⁴⁵³

⁴⁵² John Curtice, “Campaign Meets Braveheart Argument Head On,” *The Herald*, June 26, 2012. Cf. also The Scotsman, “Analysis: Positive Versus Negative – Opposing Sides All Charged Up, with Two Years to Go,” June 25, 2012. Wade makes similar comparisons with the *Yes Scotland* launch, but uses more informal and normative language, e.g., “rampant Scottish nationalism”; “as close as Scotland gets to A-list celebrities.” Wade, “Trusting in People.”

⁴⁵³ Where statements from the public were included in newspaper articles, these followed a “sensationalist” angle with, e.g., repeated reference to the contribution by a “former beauty queen” across the sample. This reinforced a focus on celebrity voices and aligns with what Fairclough describes as the press’s predisposition to cover “opinions” from public personas (and “experiences” from private ones). Cf. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 40.

As shown in Curtice's framing, the rhetorical, elite-driven emphasis of both events finds expression in a "distinctive sense of national identity" – be this through notions of political sovereignty or "patriotism" rather than policy issues and political change.⁴⁵⁴ Scottish difference as an argument to remain in the Union with England, rather than for secession, is condensed into the "Braveheart argument."⁴⁵⁵ This popular cultural trope, which is used to emotionally mobilise around Scotland's lost "freedom" and evokes historically-rooted sentiments of cultural nationalism, connects the No side's civic sense of "community" to cultural nationalism but, as the hedging ("tried"; "allegedly"; "seems") and rhetorical distancing ("the unionists"; "our") in this passage imply, lacked persuasiveness. Although Curtice suggests that the No campaign launch largely tried to echo the progressive credentials of the Yes campaign, he distinguishes between an arguably civic national identity on the Yes side, and culturalist "patriotism" on the No side.

An emphasis on national identity and competitive comparisons between the two camps – as routinely employed in political coverage – were also prominent across the British papers, as demonstrated in Lorraine Davidson's article for *The Times*:

Millions of Scots were urged yesterday to take part in the Better Together campaign to save the Union and play their part in "making history" by defeating Alex Salmond and independence.

The pro-Union parties, Labour, Conservatives and Liberal Democrats, revealed plans for an ambitious Barack Obama-style community crusade, in which meetings will be held in a thousand Scottish homes this year alone. The campaign also aims to recruit 20,000 local opinion formers to work alongside an army of trained volunteers in an attempt to convince Scots to preserve the 300-year-old Union with the rest of the UK.

Senior figures from the three parties said they believed that the case for keeping the UK together would be made most powerfully by friends, neighbours and colleagues coming together to discuss the historic independence vote planned for autumn 2014. [...]

Willie Rennie, the leader of the Scottish Liberal Democrats, closed the launch with a call to all pro-Union Scots to consider how they could play a role in the campaign.

"When we wake up each day, I want you to ask what you can do this day to make Scotland stronger in the United Kingdom," he said. "Raise funds, deliver leaflets, answer phones, tweet, whatever you can do."⁴⁵⁶

As the mobilising public call to action (e.g., "save the Union"; "community crusade"; "play their part/a role") indicates, the article operates along the lines of established political coverage

⁴⁵⁴ Dekavalla identifies the policy frame as the second most dominant form of representing the referendum after the strategic game frame across Scottish newspapers in the seven weeks studied (although only overtaken in the last two weeks), suggesting that the constitutional issue was about policy concerns. Dekavalla, "Framing Referendum Campaigns," 802-803.

⁴⁵⁵ Cf. Severin Carrell, "Alistair Darling Launches Coalition Against Scottish Independence," *The Guardian*, June 25, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2012/jun/25/alistair-darling-coalition-scottish-independence>.

⁴⁵⁶ Lorraine Davidson, "Just Say No: Darling Leads the Pro-Union Fightback," *The Times*, June 26, 2012, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/just-say-no-darling-leads-the-pro-union-fightback-pdl7g7gq657>. Cf. Dinwoodie, "No Vote Campaign Launch."

and what has been identified as the “strategic game frame” which “is about opponents’ tactics to win over voters, and the outcome is victory or defeat.”⁴⁵⁷ Although the referendum outcome is about policy, it is explicitly personalised here (to Salmond as a stand-in for the Yes campaign) and framed through a language of attack and defence (“save”; “preserve”; “defeating”; “army”). The large number of active verbs contributes to a dynamism of mobilisation (“urged”; “convince”; “call”), which conveys political agency through a communal (call of) duty and patriotism. The related ideological component (“crusade”; “believed”) adds further weight to this message, as does the emphasis on greatness (“Millions”; “20,000”; “ambition”; “historic” etc.) and skill (“trained”; “Senior”). The surprising emphasis on historic significance from a campaign that advocated the status-quo contributes to a rhetoric of emotion which is channelled through the battle rhetoric and renewed national allegiance mentioned above.⁴⁵⁸ Representations of division and conflict contrast with an emphasis on “community” and (repeated) together-ness. The repetition of the term “together” further reinforces the No campaign’s official name *Better Together*.

Willie Rennie’s quoted speech directly bestows political agency onto members of the public in an emotive appeal to the community and defines how every member of Scottish society can play their part through active political participation. However, the call for popular participation is rooted not in civic empowerment (as with Yes), but in kinship ties and personal connection. In fact, public political obligation becomes personal in a campaign that ostensibly plans political meetings in the homes of its supporters. The related notion of political participation and agency resonates with the appeal to the patriotism of the “quiet majority” referenced by Curtice (see above). In this instance, political empowerment is applied to a “majority” of the population. Referencing Alistair Darling, *The Telegraph* explicitly expresses this through a “giving” of “voice” to the “quiet majority”:

Former chancellor Alistair Darling said the Better Together movement gives a voice to the “quiet majority” in the two years before the planned referendum on Scottish independence.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁷ Dekavalla, “Framing Referendum Campaigns,” 798; 802. Cf. Williamson and Golding, “The English Press,” 116. This practice of strategic framing aligns with election coverage in the UK more widely. Cf. Margaret Scammel and Holli Semetko, “Election News Coverage in the UK,” in *The Handbook of Election News Coverage Around the World*, eds. Jesper Strömbäck and Lynda Lee Kaid (New York: Routledge, 2008), 82. For a similar phrasing of the “Yes agenda” cf. also Carrell, “Alex Salmond Predicts Million-strong Movement.”

⁴⁵⁸ Elsewhere the referendum is portrayed as a historic decision for the public, e.g., Auslan Cramb, “Scottish Independence Would Be ‘One-way Ticket to Uncertainty,’ Darling Warns at Campaign Launch,” *The Telegraph*, June 25, 2012.

⁴⁵⁹ Cramb, “Scottish Independence Would Be.” Cf. Carrell, “Alistair Darling Launches Coalition”; Wade, “Trusting in People”; Curtice, “Campaign Meets Braveheart Argument.”

The excerpt here operates with two preordained contrasting notions which importantly define the campaign from its launch: that of “movement” and “quiet [or silent] majority.” The repeated mention of the “quiet majority” across the newspaper originated in Darling’s speech but is of interest at this early stage of the campaign, as is its implied popular support within the majoritarian political framework of the referendum. The presumed existence of majoritarian support for the status quo challenges the notion of a “movement” and, importantly, the rhetoric of empowerment expressed in the giving of voice. The concept of the “silent majority” which describes “the mass of people whose views remain unexpressed” generally due to “their moderation”⁴⁶⁰ is constructed here as needing political agency – against a Yes-leaning cultural and political elite and the support it promised. The language of prescribed empowerment *from above* rhetorically extends to both the “silent majority” on the No side and the underrepresented “missing million” or “missing Scotland” on the Yes side.⁴⁶¹ As such, the campaign launches – as well as the referendum discourse more widely – mobilised a rhetoric of competing forms of empowerment. In both instances, the rhetoric of empowerment relied on the respective parts of society to remain absent, i.e., within the context of the referendum the notion of a “silent majority” and the “missing Scotland” were rhetorically powerful as long as the majority remained silent, and the missing Scotland was “made missing.”⁴⁶² Indeed, Birks emphasises that “journalists’ very definition of ‘ordinary’ people (or [...] the ‘silent majority’) is that they are *not* politically active or vocal,”⁴⁶³ i.e., that they remain in need of representation from elsewhere.

However, here the trope of the “silent majority” ascribed a need for empowerment to the “majority”. This discursive practice closely echoes the emerging myth of popular participation, equality, and progressiveness promoted in the civic nationalism of the Yes campaign while challenging it by claiming empowerment for the supporters of the dominant political perspective. Retrospectively, the role of the silent majority more closely matches its alternative definition: as the public majority who wins a vote “without speaking in the related debate.”⁴⁶⁴ The role of (individual) silences within political debate on the referendum will be discussed in more detail in chapter 3.

⁴⁶⁰ Oxford English Dictionary, “Silent Majority,” online, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/silent-majority_n?tab=meaning_and_use.

⁴⁶¹ Cf. The Herald, “Just Where Is This Missing Million,” September 2, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13177798.just-missing-million/>; Daniel Sanderson, “‘Missing Million’ Vote Doubt as Support for Yes Surges,” *The Herald*, September 2, 2014. Cf. chapter 3.

⁴⁶² Cf. Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 125; cf. 123.

⁴⁶³ Birks, *The Democratic Role*, 216.

⁴⁶⁴ Oxford English Dictionary “Silent Majority.”

The discourse of prescriptive empowerment *from above* in the press coverage of the campaign launches reverberates with notions of populism and indicates newspapers' self-proclaimed representative public function,⁴⁶⁵ while linking to the mythology of the press's quasi-representative role in pre-devolution Scotland (see [chapter 1](#)). It further pitches two ideologies of the Scottish public against each other and indicates the performative function of political participation within the referendum debate. The agenda of participation was set by both campaign organisations from the beginning; it was expressed by an elite giving of voice based on popular mobilisation. Where press coverage of the *Yes Scotland* launch expressed popular participation through a rhetoric of sovereignty and (civic) empowerment, it framed *Better Together's* launch message on popular participation through a language of kinship, duty, and communal agency. Importantly, both iterations of popular participation play on the Scottish myth of Scottish "egalitarianism"⁴⁶⁶ and "exceptionalism."⁴⁶⁷ The necessary empowerment ascribed to both the majority of the population and its underrepresented segments, however, seemingly indicates a power vacuum. Or, more specifically, raises the question: who holds democratic power?

The establishment of the silent (or quiet) majority at the onset of the campaign indicates its discursive function as a "rhetorical weapon" in the media.⁴⁶⁸ Indeed, the campaign launches as political events were determined by a media logic, namely "by the organising principles of media rather than those of politics."⁴⁶⁹ As such, the representations of the launch events established what was politically desirable and show that the referendum remained largely consistent with established practices of political coverage,⁴⁷⁰ which prioritise coverage of events designed and performed for and by the media.⁴⁷¹

All papers referenced the importance of popular engagement, large-scale campaigning, and democratic representation advocated by the launch events. However, this largely took the shape of routinely mentioned slogans; the media did little to capture the popular aspects and different voices of the debate, whose centrality they helped to establish discursively in their

⁴⁶⁵ Birks, "The Politics of Protest," 132; Birks, "The Democratic Role," 221.

⁴⁶⁶ Keating and McEwen, "The Scottish Independence Debate," 17; Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 139-140. Cf. Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming*, 32.

⁴⁶⁷ Harvey, "A Dominant SNP in a Unionist Scotland?" 56.

⁴⁶⁸ Higgins, Ridge-Newman, and McKay, "Scotland, Wales, and Press Discourses," 53.

⁴⁶⁹ Higgins, "Mediatization and Political Language," 385.

⁴⁷⁰ The prominence of the "game frame" denotes the competition between political opponents and is routinely employed in political coverage. Cf. Dekavalla, "Framing Referendum Campaigns," 800-802.

⁴⁷¹ This became evident in the coverage of the White Paper launch. Although a highly significant document, the number of articles covering its publication is astounding. 162 articles on the White Paper were published across the newspaper sample in the week from 25 November to 2 December 2013, during which it was published.

coverage. This mismatch between a rhetorical emphasis on popular participation and what was deemed newsworthy by the press was increasingly challenged by popular public expressions of support on both sides. The press's inability – or reluctance – to cover popular activism⁴⁷² is evidenced in the limited attention given to the pro-independence marches and rallies taking place in Edinburgh in 2012 and 2013. These crucial signs of popular support constituted a visual and physical presence of popular political agency in the capital but received little attention in the press. Where it did, the press operated with two tropes (i.e., organised colourful enthusiasm or violent crowds) when representing popular participation on the ground – as I will discuss below.

2. The Scottish nation “on the move” (2012-2014)

The first large-scale campaigning events that garnered significant public involvement were the independence marches and rallies in Edinburgh in September 2012 and 2013. For the first time, popular support transformed from a prescribed campaign goal and elite promise to visible public activity in the heart of the Scottish capital. Similar observations can be made about pro-Union support for the Orange Order march discussed in the second part of this section, even though press coverage of these events shows important differences as detailed below.

2.1 Pro-independence rallies and marches

The demonstration of visible popular support of the first pro-independence march and rally in 2012 was quickly dismissed by commentators in *The Scotsman* who emphasised that it had attracted a smaller audience than the average Scottish football match.⁴⁷³ Accordingly, little about these marches and rallies was considered newsworthy by the Scottish and British press. Seemingly forgotten was the emphasis on popular participation in the coverage of the campaign launches. The first march on 22 September 2012 was mainly covered in *The Scotsman*, with few pieces in between by other Scottish and British newspapers. For the one-week timeframe from 17 to 24 September 2012, only thirteen articles addressing the event were published across all seven sampled papers, nine of which in *The Scotsman*. Given the paper's traditional

⁴⁷² Mitchell, “The Unexpected Campaign,” 13.

⁴⁷³ Eddie Barnes and Tom Peterkin, “Scottish Independence: Alex Salmond Hails Independence on Edinburgh March,” *The Scotsman*, September 22, 2012, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-independence-alex-salmond-hails-independence-on-edinburgh-march-2510803>.

Edinburgh focus and reach, this frames the rally and march as a regional curiosity rather than an event of national significance.

In 2012, the disappointing numbers of participants dominated the press coverage⁴⁷⁴ as did the question of institutional dominance, specifically in relation to the involvement of the SNP and *Yes Scotland*, neither of which were organisers of the event.⁴⁷⁵ Press coverage thus routinely aimed to identify the political “leaders” of the campaign, reiterating personifying practices of political coverage mentioned above. One exception is Ross Greer’s⁴⁷⁶ personal reflection on the march for *The Scotsman*, which emphasised the role of popular participation:

Yesterday was unique, though, in that we had something to march for. Yesterday was all about the positives, all about the vision for the future and the hope for what independence can bring.

Historic is not an exaggeration. For the first time in my generation’s lives, those who support independent Scotland have gathered in our thousands and the energy was quite simply spectacular. I had my concerns about the turnout but by noon [...] the Meadows were full of people of all ages, all races and from all across Scotland and much further afield.⁴⁷⁷

The initial scene-setting narratively establishes the relatability and interpretative context of the march and rally. The statement clearly emphasises how the following description is to be perceived: it positions independence as positive, empowering, and marked by a different “vision for the future.” The use of extremes (“unique”; “historic”; “first time”; “spectacular”) highlights the significance of mobilising for the referendum and reiterates the positive experience of the march and the opportunity of (campaigning for) independence. The personal pronoun “we” implies a unified, likely inclusive, community, which assembled in support of independence. As the second paragraph specifies, the unique experience and opportunity pertains to a specific “generation” (of a politicised youth).

This emphasis resonates, again, with the communicated uniqueness of the referendum which was frequently marked as a “once in a generation” vote in political discourse.⁴⁷⁸ The change in possessive pronouns (to “my”) adds sincerity to the account and communicates

⁴⁷⁴ Barnes and Peterkin, “Scottish Independence: Alex Salmond Hails Independence.” The first march had already been announced at the time of the launch event in May but did not trigger large-scale participation. Cf. *The Scotsman*, “Nationalists Call for Pipes and Drums to Beef Up City March,” May 24, 2012.

⁴⁷⁵ Robbie Dinwoodie, “Eyes on Yes Scotland Rally as SNP Remains Cautious About Support,” *The Herald*, September 22, 2012, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13074079.eyes-yes-scotland-rally-snp-remains-cautious-support/>; *The Scotsman*, “Leaders: Voice for Change; On the Right Track,” September 22, 2012.

⁴⁷⁶ Member of the Scottish Youth Parliament and student political activist Greer joined *Yes Scotland* later that year to campaign for Scottish independence and was elected MSP for the Scottish Greens in 2016.

⁴⁷⁷ Ross Greer, “The Energy Was Quite Simply Spectacular,” *The Scotsman*, September 23, 2012, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/ross-greer-the-energy-was-quite-simply-spectacular-2472253>.

⁴⁷⁸ Hutcheon, “It Failed to Win Independence”; Macnab, “Scottish Independence”; *The Herald*, “Once in a Lifetime Opportunity.”

individual agency within the context of popular mobilisation. Personal experience is thus linked to a vague description of growing popular support (“thousands”; “full of people”) and rhetorically centres the public and popular participation. The inclusiveness of pro-independence mobilisation is communicated through a three-part list of age, ethnicity, and location. The use of three-part lists adds normative status and “is sufficient to indicate that we have more than individual instances on their own but instances standing for something more general.”⁴⁷⁹ Thus, different kinds of inclusiveness as well as its normative generalisability are indicated. Another three-part list describes the positive, future-orientated vision of the pro-independence march and project. Both descriptions rhetorically reiterate the Yes campaign’s programme of participation and change (as advertised during the launch event) and, through their representations of participation, contribute to the myth of popular participation.

The positive energy of the first march and the growing enthusiasm for independence became visible at the next big march and rally on 21 September 2013 with an estimated 8,300-20,000 attendees (compared to about 5,000 the previous year). Again, coverage of the event was limited: a total of nine articles covered the event during the week from 16 to 23 September 2013 but was spread more evenly across all seven newspapers. With only one year left to the vote, awareness of the referendum had increased – and was growing in the media ahead of the publication of the White Paper in November 2013. Against this backdrop, Severine Carrell commented in *The Guardian* that “12 months of increasingly frenetic and intense campaigning” can be expected prior to the referendum, starting with a rally that would mean

[c]entral Edinburgh will be awash with the blue and white St Andrew’s cross, the dramatic yellow and red of the erect lion rampant and Yes Scotland placards from the Highlands, urban Glasgow and the prosperous farmlands of Moray and Aberdeenshire.⁴⁸⁰

This emotive description paints a picture of dynamic activity and enthusiasm. The rhetoric of excitement sets the context for an inclusive, nationalist event and literally flags the nation through reference to the Scottish Saltire and the Royal Banner of Scotland. Thus, it directly connects this march to visible symbols of Scottish nationhood and national identity. Written prior to the rally, this article does not describe the event but rather evokes a sentiment – and an imagined community of like-minded supporters, unified by shared cultural nationalism. The emphasis on national community is explicitly expressed in the (hedged) list of three (“the

⁴⁷⁹ Jonathan Potter, *Representing Reality: Discourse, Rhetoric and Social Construction* (1996; repr., London: Sage, 2004), 196.

⁴⁸⁰ Severine Carrell, “Scottish Independence Campaigners Plan Final Push Before Referendum Vote,” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/sep/17/scottish-independence-referendum-vote>. Cf. Tom Peterkin, “Scottish Independence: Salmond Makes Rallying Call,” *The Scotsman*, September 22, 2013, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence-salmond-makes-rallying-call-1560478>; The Scotsman, “Scottish Independence: Thousands Attend March,” September 21, 2013.

Highlands, urban Glasgow, and the prosperous farmlands”), which stresses a national/-ist unity and an expected political mobilisation for independence based on territory. Interestingly, this is the only detailed description of the event in a British paper: it frames the event through an explicitly nationalist imagery (flags, land) and articulates membership and belonging to a national community through nationalist iconography. The recognition of the flags’ iconography is presupposed – belonging is thus constituted based on a recognition of these symbols.

The implied cultural identification of this description is replaced by passionate street activism in the *Sunday Herald*’s account of the event:

Like almost every aspect of the referendum, yesterday’s march and rally for independence through Edinburgh had no sooner got under way than it was swiftly embroiled in a row. Police Scotland and the city council estimated barely 8000 people had tramped from the Royal Mile to Calton Hill, while the organisers claimed more than double that. [...] However, there can be no quibbling over the attendance figures for all the marches and rallies demanding a No vote. We know that number precisely: zero. [...] That it hasn’t tried indicates private doubts. And although yesterday’s gathering was no game changer for the Yes side, it was nevertheless a powerful statement of support and intent. People of all ages and backgrounds from all parts of Scotland came together to express a common desire for a better future.⁴⁸¹

This excerpt normalises the emotional and contested nature of the referendum debate and campaign (“row”). The simile establishing a connection with other aspects of the referendum as well as the informal tone highlight that conflict was to be expected as part of this event and the referendum activism but also marks it as distinctly popular, that is people centred. The forceful language (“row”; “tramped”) used to describe popular participation rhetorically links it to emotion and conflict as a visibly powerful demonstration of “support and intent.” The emotive and conflict-driven side of the event was also evident in coverage of the previous march in 2012, which reported “one small scuffle.”⁴⁸²

Popular disorderliness and the organisers’ unreliability (“claim”) is contrasted with institutional power (“Police Scotland”; “city council”). These institutions are cited to add authority and truth to the scale of participation. The “quibble” over the actual “attendance figures” is both described and linguistically reproduced (“barely”; “double”; “zero”; etc.). As such, it is turned into a conflict between the two campaigns itself: the vagueness of limited – yet visibly powerful – engagement on the Yes side contrasts with the specificity and precision of no notable public participation on the No side. Popular support is framed through a

⁴⁸¹ Sunday Herald, “Thousands March to Show Game’s Not Over,” September 22, 2013, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13124006.thousands-march-show-games-not/>.

⁴⁸² The Scotsman, “Leaders: Voice for Change.”

competition between Yes and No and demonstrates shortcomings on both sides: from the Yes campaign's tendency to exaggerate popular support to the No side's failure to demonstrate public support in more than numbers. Interestingly, however, the significance of this public visibility and popular activism is recognised as "a powerful statement of support and intent," rooted in pro-independence support. Again, the inclusivity of this support is emphasised through a three-part list, which adds to it normative status and generalisability (as discussed above). The powerful presence of visible support in the streets is rhetorically used to contrast the "private doubts" ascribed to the No side. Building on this contrast, popular participation here is defined as visible presence in the streets. It is framed through both a competitive numbers-game and a rhetoric of emotion and conflict. The rhetoric of positive change naturalises a "desire for a better future" as the wish of the "people" ("together"; "common").

The above analysis shows two key trends: firstly, participation was constructed as visible support, connected to elite or institutional sanctioning and progressive qualities. Once popular participation started to emerge through larger crowds – rather than in elite rhetoric – it, secondly, came to be associated with negative passions and conflict. Situated between explicit political organisation and press coverage,⁴⁸³ alternative and more fluid pseudo-events, such as marches and rallies, are "more interestingly ambiguous"⁴⁸⁴ in their meaning. As partially organised public political events, marches and rallies fostered more ambiguous readings of participation. Negative elements of this organised form of participation were quickly dismissed in press coverage. Apart from explicitly personalised accounts, the above examples demonstrate that the press struggled to report popular – even if strategically advocated – forms of participation and reduced them to numbers and, in the British press, nationalist symbolism. Opinion pieces, in contrast, represented participation through a wish for change, community, colourful activism, and excitement. Both a rhetoric of colourful street presence and (the absence of) violence also shaped the coverage of the largest public demonstration of support on the No side: the Orange Order march in September 2014.

⁴⁸³ Boorstin, *The Image*, 30.

⁴⁸⁴ Boorstin, *The Image*, 33.

2.2 Pro-Union support and the Orange Order march

The question of violence was a key factor in the coverage of the Orange Order march in the press, which emphasised that the march had passed more peacefully than previous demonstrations.⁴⁸⁵ The march was covered in nine articles across all sampled newspapers, apart from *The Times*, during the early weeks of September 2014. With about 15,000 marchers this was the biggest gathering “aimed at saving the Union,”⁴⁸⁶ even though the coverage highlighted that *Better Together* had distanced itself from this demonstration of support. This rhetorical distancing was prominent in the coverage of the pro-independence *Sunday Herald*:

The gathering, which passed without any arrests, was distinctly off-message, with one senior Orangeman getting the biggest cheer with his “no surrender to separatism” call. The Lodge is an official No campaigner, but is also shunned by Better Together, which believes the Protestant “fraternity” group is toxic and tarred by a sectarian brush.⁴⁸⁷

The factual description frames the march through a rhetoric of difference (“distinctly off-message”). The unexpectedly peaceful march (“without any arrests”; “gathering”) is contrasted with the Lodge’s image as “toxic and tarred by a sectarian brush.” This phrase, commonly used in Scottish public debate to describe loyalist Unionism, is portrayed through various tensions: in its peaceful delivery of the march, its messaging, and its shunning by *Better Together*. The evaluation of the Lodge itself is represented and justified through *Better Together*’s “belief” which challenges the self-proclaimed fraternity of the group. The paper’s representation thus mirrors the campaign’s distancing from the Lodge as an official campaigner. Official political sanctioning contrasts personal sentiment – in a move away from open nationalism. Nonetheless, the emotive battle cry to fight separatism was, according to the article, passionately received – a description that calls into question how “off message” the event really was. Instead, this framing seemingly mainstreams the Order’s Unionist support and leaves any judgement to the reader – based on the evaluation proposed by *Better Together*.

The Telegraph more explicitly expressed the positive impact of the Orange Order for the pro-Union side and declared that “Five days before the referendum, the No campaign gets a boost from the Orange Order as it brings members from across the UK to march in

⁴⁸⁵ Paul Hutcheon, “Orangemen March in Support of Union ... with a Message Rooted Firmly in Past,” *Sunday Herald*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13179928.orangemen-march-support-union-message-rooted-firmly-past/>. Cf. Libby Brooks and Severine Carrell, “Orange Order Anti-independence March a ‘Show of Pro-union Strength’,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/13/orange-order-march-edinburgh-scottish-independence-vote>.

⁴⁸⁶ Shân Ross, “Orange Order Rally Over ‘Evil’ Threat to Union,” *The Scotsman*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/orange-order-rally-over-evil-threat-to-union-1526380>.

⁴⁸⁷ Hutcheon, “Orangemen March in Support of Union.”

Edinburgh.”⁴⁸⁸ The power of unifying people across the UK in this expression of loyalist nationalism is rhetorically transformed into an expression of visible popular participation and democracy in another article for *The Telegraph*:

For this was the Loyal Orange Order of Scotland thumping its noisy way through Scotland’s capital, determined to demonstrate its opposition to the very idea of an independent Scotland. This was the sound of the No campaign on a very noisy, very colourful march. [...]

This was democracy in action.⁴⁸⁹

This excerpt describes highly vocal – rather than silent – pro-Union supporters. Indeed, the march is represented as a forceful audible (“thumping”; “noisy”: “sound”; “very noisy”) and visible (“colourful”) demonstration of support. The rhetoric of colourful dynamism echoes descriptions of popular pro-independence support: popular participation is equated with a physical and audible presence in the streets. This physical support is further localised in the centre of Scottish power, “the capital,” and linked to its crucial democratic function. The alliteration “determined to demonstrate” infers disagreement and a powerful opposition in the referendum and aligns with the productive adversary of agonistic politics, even if framed as an ideological challenge “to the very idea of an independent Scotland.”

An implicit challenge to political sovereignty notwithstanding, this passionate expression of political belief is linked – through the final exclamation – to “democracy in action” rather than conflict, violence, or threat. In this phrasing, these descriptions of a Unionist march employ the same language of progressive politics – they represent the referendum as a democratic opportunity and mark participation in it through loud and colourful demonstrations of popular support. Although *Better Together* and some segments of the press tried to distance themselves from the nationalist unionist Orange Order and its message, (segments of) the press emphasised its positive role in the referendum and for democratic politics. These representations directly feed into the myth of popular participation, which frames participation through large, joyful, crowds that are visible in the streets. Although through fraternal bonds rather than inclusivity, these representations infer a democratic revival and popular political participation based on visible and audible presence. This framing shows how tropes of audible political voice were discursively mobilised (see chapter 3) and how participation was performed and made “sayable” within the mediated referendum discourse – on either side of

⁴⁸⁸ Jim White, “Orange Order March Brings Members for UK to Edinburgh,” *The Telegraph*, September 13, 2014.

⁴⁸⁹ Jim White, “Passion and Pizzazz as No Campaign Bangs the Drum,” *The Telegraph*, September 13, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scotland/11094757/Passion-and-pizzazz-as-No-campaign-bangs-the-drum.html>.

the constitutional question. However, it also demonstrates that popular participation, once powerfully evoked, is difficult for the elites to contain. This was also visible in the spontaneous protests outside BBC Scotland.

3. Participation through protest: criticism of BBC Scotland (2014)

While some of the autonomously organised marches in Edinburgh were supported by *Yes Scotland* and welcomed speakers like Alex Salmond, spontaneous large-scale gatherings like the protests outside the BBC Scotland studios on Pacific Quay, as well as the Hope Over Fear demonstrations led by Tommy Sheridan in George Square, were not authorised by the Yes campaign.⁴⁹⁰ Instead, they were grassroots expressions of political opinion. The protests in front of BBC Scotland are remarkable in two ways: firstly, they were directed against parts of the British media that covered – or failed to cover – the referendum campaign as well as the protests. Meanwhile, the Yes side criticised the media as an active, and thus no longer “impartial,” participant in the debate. As such, the media became an object of contention and spontaneous protest. Secondly, dissatisfaction with the media fuelled spontaneous, uniquely “negative” protests by Yes supporters during the campaign – in contrast to the positive messaging of planned rallies, marches, and public events.

Small-scale protests in front of BBC Scotland began in spring 2014, with the first significant protest taking place in June.⁴⁹¹ The spontaneous protests on Pacific Quay, however justified, displayed (minoritarian) public sentiment and political activism in practice. Only three articles addressed the protest across the seven selected newspapers from 29 June (the day of the protest) till 6 July 2014.⁴⁹² While previous small-scale protests since May had received hardly any attention, the “biggest in a series of demonstrations at the Pacific Quay studios” resulted in No supporters accusing “the Yes campaign of attempting to ‘bully’ the BBC.”⁴⁹³ In response to this unscheduled demonstration of spontaneous popular action, portrayals of

⁴⁹⁰ The Orange Order march(es) were not officially endorsed by *Better Together* either (see above).

⁴⁹¹ Note that around the same time official events for the 700-year anniversary of the Battle of Bannockburn and the Armed Forces Day in Stirling as well as the Commonwealth Games in Glasgow made an elite-sanctioned case for nationalist cultural identity – both Scottish and/or Unionist.

⁴⁹² One article each was published in *The Herald*, *Sunday Herald*, and *The Telegraph*.

⁴⁹³ Magnus Gardham, “Pro-independence Campaigners Protest Outside BBC Studios,” *The Herald*, June 30, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13167819.pro-independence-campaigners-protest-outside-bbc-studios/>. Cf. comments by Blair Jenkins, as quoted by Hutcheon, who did not subscribe to the alleged “systemic anti-Yes agenda.” Paul Hutcheon, “I Understand the Unhappiness with Particular Items on Particular BBC Programmes But I Don’t Subscribe to the View That We Are Facing...Some Systematic Anti-Yes Agenda,” *Sunday Herald*, July 6, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13168673.i-understand-unhappiness-particular-items-particular-bbc-programmes-dont-subscribe-view-facing-systemic-anti-yes-agenda/>.

popular participation in the press departed radically from the initial rhetoric of empowerment. What *The Herald* describes as “bullying,” is framed through more violent language in Alan Cochrane’s article “Nats are fighting to bring the BBC in line” for *The Telegraph*, in which he declared the beginning of “[a] battle for the Beeb:”

A demonstration, attended it is claimed by some 350 people, was staged on Sunday outside BBC Scotland’s headquarters where a bunch of assorted Nats and separatists insisted that voters were “sickened” by what they described as the BBC’s “one-sided conveyor belt of scare stories” that contradicted what I’m sure they’d claim was the unalloyed gospel as handed down by Alex Salmond.

Those present lumped in the “mainstream media” with the BBC in their moan, which seems to crystallise around their outrage that whatever the SNP says isn’t accepted uncritically by journalists. [...]

The pressure on the Beeb can only get greater as the summer turns into autumn. With more demos promised – demanding not neutrality but obedience to the Nat-line – it will take resolute minds at Pacific Quay to resist the pressure.⁴⁹⁴

In contrast to previous instances of popular activity, this article frames a peaceful protest through battle rhetoric and violent attack (“fighting”; “battle”; “resist”), rather than through democratic expression and political empowerment. While resonating with earlier representations which saw the Union under attack from the Yes side, this protest against a valued, democratic stronghold (“neutrality”; “resolute minds”; “resist”) was seemingly perceived as a threat to the British way of life. This valuation and closeness are communicated through the BBC’s affectionate pet name “Beeb,” which centralises this beloved British institution in national imagination and the public sphere. This lexicon of familiarity is contrasted with a lexicon of externalised confrontation (“pressure”; “resist”).

At the same time, the presence and success of this protest are minimized to communicate its insignificance (“some”; “bunch”; “assorted”). Additionally, the rhetorically minimised segment of society is othered as “Nats” and “separatists” and through the repetitive use of personal and possessive pronouns (“they describe”; “their moan”). The (ironical) citation of their motivations for this protest adds another level of distancing and, simultaneously implies that these motifs are to be dismissed – especially in their quasi-religious ideological iteration (“unalloyed gospel”; “handed down”) which is marked through interest exposure (“they’d claim”). Indeed, their reasons for staging this protest are undermined through a lexicon of insincerity (repetition of “claim” / “claimed”; “staged”; “lumped in”; “uncritically”; “insisted”). In contrast, the personalised voice of the author is used to convey sincerity and truth (“I’m sure”). This contrast is further emphasised in the reference to the BBC’s own internal policy lexicon (“demanding neutrality”) challenged by the protestors.

⁴⁹⁴ Alan Cochrane, “Nats are Fighting to Bring the BBC in Line,” *The Daily Telegraph*, July 1, 2014.

Framed as a generalised challenge to the mainstream media, the informal language of triviality portrays the protest as an expression of rash, uncritical, and unjustified anger by a minority group of nationalists rather than a political demonstration of popular opinion. This rhetorical contrasting discredits the protesters' voices and democratic rights as well as the Yes campaign, Salmond, the SNP, and the Scottish Government by extension. Instead of focusing on the democratic participation of the public, the press prioritised the involvement of key politicians – whether criticising Salmond's nationalism or detailing politician Kathy Wiles's comparison of the protests with fascism.⁴⁹⁵

Attention to these protests remained small in the press and a protest of – this time – about 1,000 people in September 2014 was covered in only five articles across the sample. *The Telegraph* once again used a rhetoric of conflict and violence to describe this protest: “Hundreds of pro-independence supporters descended on the BBC’s Glasgow headquarters on Sunday to rage against the Corporation’s pro-UK ‘bias’ and ‘lies’.”⁴⁹⁶ The lexical choices “descended” and “rage against” evoke a rhetoric of threat and violence, as does the vague numerical indicator “hundreds”. This description of popular participation thus starkly deviates from notions of colourful activism, empowerment, or “democracy in action.” The quoted terms “bias” and “lies” reproduce the protestors' claims but are also used as a distancing technique to cast doubt on their motifs. Avoiding evaluations of this protest and media criticism, *The Times* prioritised Nicola Sturgeon's reaction to the protests in the headline: “Forget the BBC and fight to last vote, says Sturgeon.”⁴⁹⁷ By resorting to politicians and their evaluation of the events, *The Times* employed traditional practices of political press converge in a renewed move away from portraying popular voices. While positive, colourful street activism and participation were acknowledged in press coverage on other occasions, this predominantly

⁴⁹⁵ Scott Macnab, “Labour Candidate Resigns over Hitler Youth Tweet,” *The Scotsman*, July 2, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/labour-candidate-resigns-over-hitler-youth-tweet-1532593>; Tom Knowles, “Labour MP Hopeful Quits over Her ‘Vile Hitler Youth’ Tweet,” *The Times*, July 2, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/labour-mp-hopeful-quits-over-her-vile-hitler-youth-tweet-j53b56dmvxp>; Catriona Stewart, “It Was Just Ridiculous to Compare My Children to Nazis for Wearing Yes T-shirts,” *Sunday Herald*, July 6, 2014, <https://www.heraldsotland.com/news/13168705.it-just-ridiculous-compare-children-nazis-wearing-yes-t-shirts/>.

⁴⁹⁶ Ben Riley Smith, “Scottish Independence: Nationalists Demand Nick Robinson Sacking in Vocal Anti-BBC Protest,” *The Telegraph*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11095752/Scottish-independence-Nationalists-demand-Nick-Robinson-sacking-in-vocal-anti-BBC-protest.html>.

⁴⁹⁷ Tom Knowles, “Forget the BBC and Fight to Last Vote, Says Sturgeon,” *The Times*, September 16, 2014. This appeal to voters by Sturgeon seems to contrast with Alex Salmond's encouragement of the protests in front of the BBC (as portrayed in the media). E.g., Severine Carrell, “Alex Salmond Backs Protests Against ‘Bias’ Shown by BBC’s Nick Robinson,” *The Guardian*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/15/alex-salmond-bbc-protest-nick-robinson>; Tom Gordon, “Is the BBC’s Coverage Biased? Yes, absolutely ... Don’t Get Me Wrong, I Like These Folk, But They Don’t Realise They’re Biased. It’s the Unconscious Bias which Is Extraordinary,” *Sunday Herald*, September 14, 2014.

organically emerging criticism of the media attracted little attention in the press. This practice indicates some of the discursive limitations of mediated participation. Particularly, the September protest was framed in terms of an unjustified descent into violence and a threat to freedom of information, with little space for positive messaging around popular participation and protest. These practices of representation demonstrate that more organic, unplanned, and anti-elitist forms of participatory action – although partly encouraged by Salmond in this instance⁴⁹⁸ – were negatively framed in the press: through a rhetoric of violence and abuse rather than through empowerment and colourful street festivals of democracy.

These spontaneous and unsanctioned forms of deliberative action became more prominent in the final weeks of the campaign, as did the visibility of physical support in Edinburgh and Glasgow. With this presence and the countdown to polling day, key themes of the referendum campaign intensified, as already exemplified by the Orange Order march and the BBC Scotland protest in September, which both fell into this period. As the following sections will show, popular participation was increasingly portrayed through a negative rhetoric of violence and conflict or through notions of inclusivity, progressiveness, and change.

4. The vote: violence and the limits of political participation

During the weeks from 1 to 26 September, which I conceptualise here as a singular event, street activism and media coverage surged across the UK. The growing use of a rhetoric of conflict and violence in portraying popular participation was said to reveal the “dark” side of the Yes campaign. Particularly the British press now focused on the threatening and divisive elements of the campaign rather than the politically empowering participation by ordinary Scots. While the No campaign had become known as “project fear” over the duration of the campaign due to its negative tone and messaging *against* independence – rather than *for* the status quo –,⁴⁹⁹ violent forms of popular participation were increasingly ascribed to the Yes side. *The Telegraph* and *The Times* were particularly outspoken in their coverage of the negative and divisive referendum activities by pro-independence campaigners.⁵⁰⁰ A significant number of articles that addressed the negative sides of popular participation was based on statements by members of the public, who had experienced, witnessed, or voiced verbal or physical abuse

⁴⁹⁸ Cf. Carrell, “Alex Salmond Backs Protests”; Gordon, “Is the BBC’s Coverage Biased?”

⁴⁹⁹ Cf. Higgins, Ridge-Newman, and McKay, “Scotland, Wales, and Press Discourses,” 53.

⁵⁰⁰ With eight (*The Telegraph*) and six (*The Times*) articles on the negative behaviour of Yes supporters during 1-26 September these papers stand out. *The Scotsman* is the only Scottish paper that published two articles along similar lines. Six pieces across the newspaper sample highlighted negative behaviours on both sides.

towards them or others, based on their voting intentions. The press now changed their reporting and more willingly reached out to the public to find “victims” and “witnesses” of campaign-based abuse, prioritising experience over opinion.⁵⁰¹ The shift towards an increasingly violent language – from peaceful “gatherings” and “marches” to “borderline psychotic,” angry “mobs” – is visible in the below excerpt from *The Times*:

On the scale of terror tactics, the protests scarcely register. But intimidation and the threat of violence are beginning to stain the referendum campaign in Scotland, raising the question of whether the behaviour we are seeing is the ugly face of nationalism.

Routinely, in some areas, No posters are being defaced, Better Together speakers drowned out by chanting mobs, cars with pro-Union stickers damaged, social media used to berate anyone foolhardy enough to voice an anti-SNP opinion: never has the word Quisling been used quite so often as a term of abuse. [...]

It has not, of course, all been onesided. Alex Salmond too has been harassed by No campaigners, and SNP speakers occasionally shouted down. But there is a sinister aspect to the more extreme tactics used and co-ordinated by the Yes side.⁵⁰²

The initial extremization of “terror tactics” as the yardstick for this behaviour – even though rhetorically relativised here – is used to strengthen the association with violence, which is confirmed in its final iteration of “extreme tactics.” Thus, the relative marker “scarcely” is rhetorically challenged by the following conjunction (“but”) which emphasises the negative actions through a language of violence and menace (“intimidation”; “threat of violence”). Inherent in the rhetorical question of whether this behaviour shows the “ugly face of nationalism” is its affirmation. Thus, the exceptionalism of the campaign is framed through a preconceived notion of what constitutes (pro-independence) nationalism – similar framings of Unionist nationalism were uncommon. The lexical choices of “face” and “defaced” further personalise the attacks and contribute to a rhetoric of destruction (“stain”; “defaced”; “damaged”). This is heightened in the emphasis on voice in this excerpt. Rather than representing democratic participation, voice here is linked to disrespect and abuse (“drowned out”; “chanting mob”; “berate”; “shouted down”) and is seemingly limited through participatory action by others. Indeed, a domineering mob mentality is portrayed as silencing.

⁵⁰¹ This aligns with the prominent press practice of consulting popular voices for “experience” and public personas for “opinion,” as identified by Fairclough. Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 40. Birks points to a similar preference for popular advocacy of “individualised” rather than communal change in press reporting. Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 217.

⁵⁰² Magnus Linklater, “In a Dark Corner of Scots Nationalism, Intolerance Lurks,” *The Times*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/in-a-dark-corner-of-scots-nationalism-intolerance-lurks-z8hj8xx9hv2>; Hamish Macdonell and Lindsay McIntosh, “Salmond Is Accused of Failing to Halt ‘Mob’,” *The Times*, September 1, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/salmond-is-accused-of-failing-to-halt-mob-bp6r2r5jrwlc>; Brian Monteith, “Uncivilised Descent into Threats,” *The Scotsman*, September 14, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/brian-monteith-uncivilised-descent-into-threats-1526337>; Martin Kettle, “Don’t Let Salmond Blind You to the Yes Campaign’s Dark Side,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/17/alex-salmond-blind-you-to-yes-campaign-dark-side>.

Deviation from this line is not only ridiculed (“foolhardy”) but also shown to be ideologically condemned (“quisling”, i.e., traitor).

Although the excerpt employs a lexicon of violence and abuse, the “routine” abuse from the Yes side is contrasted with the “occasional” “harassment” towards SNP speakers. The informal language used to rhetorically acknowledge that the abuse has not been confined to one side serves to dismiss the severity of attacks by No supporters. What is more, the extreme tactics on the Yes side are portrayed as “co-ordinated.” Participatory action is thus framed through a rhetoric of (scripted) violence and abuse: the positive visibility and audibility of colourful, politically empowering participation is replaced by the lexical choice “chanting mob,” which, through a rhetoric of violence and threat, emphasises the destructiveness and negative force of a riotous crowd.⁵⁰³ Indeed, these contrasting representations indicate the rhetorical limitations of what was accepted as “participation,” namely: elite-sanctioned, largely scripted gatherings of an attentive and polite public, who listens to pre-planned messages. In accordance with the majoritarian frame of the referendum, participation is then limited to controlled support in numbers, rather than to critical action.

Especially, these later press accounts of the Yes campaign frame participatory activism through a rhetoric of violence, conflict, and uncivilised mob-mentality. This representation indicates some of the discursive limitations of participation in elite media debate. Tensions between popular participation and what was deemed as such in the media discourse lacked the very inclusiveness the campaigns – especially on the Yes side – had advertised for.⁵⁰⁴ It indicates ruptures between the idea of popular participation as stage-managed by a political and media elite and appropriations of popular participation by the public. Simultaneously, it reinforces two distinct modes of representing popular participation in the press: one of colourful, elite-sanctioned enthusiasm conveyed through a rhetoric of empowerment and sovereignty and one of dangerous mobs communicated through a language of threat, violence, and conflict. In contrast to the explicit press criticism of Yes activism, some of the press was less condemning in its coverage of the violent George Square disturbances following the referendum.

⁵⁰³ Cf. Michael Deacon, “Scottish Independence: Glasgow, the Friendly City, Turns Demented,” *The Telegraph*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11090644/Scottish-independence-Glasgow-the-friendly-city-turns-demented.html>.

⁵⁰⁴ This does not mean, of course, that violence and abuse are acceptable forms of democratic participation.

4.1 George Square and the aftermath of the referendum

The disturbances in George Square were covered across all sampled newspapers. Most of the eleven articles provided factual, if overtly neutral, accounts. Thus, both *The Telegraph* and *The Times* reported “clashes” between rival supporters and groups,⁵⁰⁵ whereas *The Guardian* framed the events through a rhetoric of violence and clearly laid the blame with the loyalists in its article headline: “Violence in Glasgow as loyalists attack pro-independence supporters.”⁵⁰⁶ A similar account was given in *The Scotsman*, which contrasted violent attacks by “the 700-strong mob” with the “peaceful Yes rallies” taking place in George Square during the campaign.⁵⁰⁷ Against the backdrop of detailed charges and arrests, guilt and offense are clearly attributed and supported by official evidence.⁵⁰⁸ In contrast, Glasgow’s local paper, *The Herald*, took an explicitly neutral approach, unjustified by the events themselves – it likely did so due to its editorial stance and to avoid taking sides in a city marked by sectarian tensions. It thus stated:

Hundreds of demonstrators gathered last night waving Union flags and chanting Rule Britannia at the top of their voices in celebration of Scotland’s failure to clinch independence. [...]

There were sporadic outbreaks of fighting and shouting as they vented their anger at each other over the referendum result.⁵⁰⁹

The description here paints a dynamic picture of positive activity and trivialised violence. The lexical choice “gathered” resonates with the peaceful pro-independence marches. The waving of flags expands on this image, although the doubling of “Union flags” and “Rule Britannia” not only asserts the dominant national frame but also the political dominance of Britain. The reason for this celebratory gathering is established through negative terms: it is a “celebration” of a “failure” to bring about change or more specifically “to clinch independence.” In this sense, the lexical choice “clinch” suggests that independence has been more violent and divisive than

⁵⁰⁵ Keith Perry, “Scottish Referendum: Three Arrested after Rival Supporters Clash in George Square,” *The Telegraph*, September 20, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/11110439/Scottish-referendum-Three-arrested-after-rival-supporters-clash-in-George-Square.html>; Tom Knowles, “Tensions Rise as Rival Groups Clash in Glasgow,” *The Times*, September 20, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/tensions-rise-as-rival-groups-clash-in-glasgow-s9zb8gmqts8>.

⁵⁰⁶ Libby Brooks, “Violence in Glasgow as Loyalists Attack Pro-independence Supporters,” *The Guardian*, September 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/sep/19/violence-glasgow-scotland-loyalists-attack-independence-supporters>.

⁵⁰⁷ Alastair Dalton, “Police Vow to Catch George Square Rioters,” *The Scotsman*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/police-vow-to-catch-george-square-rioters-1525741>. Cf. Vicky Allan, “They’re Shouting at Us, Calling Us Scum: It’s Awful to Come Here and Feel Threatened,” *Sunday Herald*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13181078.shouting-us-calling-us-scum-awful-come-feel-threatened/>.

⁵⁰⁸ Dalton, “Police Vow.”

⁵⁰⁹ Janice Burns and Victoria Weldon, “Police Swoop on George Square as Trouble Flares,” *The Herald*, September 20, 2014.

the events in George Square. Indeed, the violent clashes are minimised to distort the issue at hand. Violence and public confrontation are thus portrayed as acceptable reactions to democratic decision-making. In fact, the protestors are described as “demonstrators”, emphasising an explicitly democratic motivation of their public presence and activities. This framing of violent protests and attacks as a democratic gathering and communication of political belief then starkly contrasts with the portrayals of angry mobs on the Yes side, that verbally “abused” politicians and those disagreeing with their view. These differences in representing campaign activism and participation discursively limit and sanction acceptable popular participation retrospectively. Similar to the Orange Order march discussed above, press representations seem to evaluate these activities within a more forgiving framework of loyalist nationalism, which contrasts with expectations towards the civic nationalism and self-proclaimed progressive politics on the Yes side.

5. The vote: a democratic revival or myth of popular participation?

The final days of the campaign and the aftermath of the referendum saw a significant emphasis on a democratic renewal in the press.⁵¹⁰ The increase in popular support for the Yes vote had seemingly surprised Scottish journalists, as had the ways in which it was reached – despite the campaign’s nominal people-centred, participatory approach.⁵¹¹ While newspapers had struggled to adapt to the popular dimension of the referendum during most of the campaign, commentators now travelled the country to capture canvassing activities and voting intentions of a diverse public.⁵¹² A more significant effort to record the voices of ordinary but enthusiastic

⁵¹⁰ This echoes with what Dekavalla identifies as the “democratic achievement frame” constituted by “high citizen involvement in grassroots democracy and debate,” voter turnout and the “civility” of the debate. Dekavalla, “Framing Referendum Campaigns,” 804.

⁵¹¹ George Monbiot, “Why the Media Missed the Real Story of the Referendum,” *The Guardian*, September 17, 2014. Cf. also The Telegraph, “Campaign for Scottish Independence Launched in Edinburgh,” May 25, 2012.

⁵¹² The Scotsman, “Scottish Independence: A focus on Dundee’s Voters,” September 7, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence-a-focus-on-dundees-voters-1527025>; Calum Ross, “Island’s Ardent Yes Campaigners Hope to Have the Last Word,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 8, 2014; Calum Ross, “Northern Scots Keep Their Eye on the Future – with View to the Past,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 9, 2014; Russell Leadbetter, “Key Battlegrounds: Falkirk,” *The Herald*, September 10, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13179183.key-battlegrounds-falkirk/>; Calum Ross, “Campaign Gets Down to the Hard Stuff in Whisky Country,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 10, 2014; Robert Crampton, “Desperate Dan’s City Throws Its Weight Behind The Yes Cause,” *The Times*, September 11, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/desperate-dans-city-throws-its-weight-behind-the-yes-cause-9bbrd8cjni>; Daniel Sanderson, “Referendum Fever Takes Hold as Public Flock to City Centre Yes Hub,” *The Herald*, September 13, 2014; Robbie Dinwoodie, “Campaigners out in Their Thousands for Final Few Days,” *The Herald*, September 15, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13180009.campaigners-thousands-final-days/>; Ben Quinn, “Undecideds of Aberdeen Struggle to Make Up Their Minds on Independence,” *The Guardian*, September 16, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/sep/16/>

Scotland is also visible in a larger number of direct quotations – verbal vox pops – from voters and non-voters in these articles.⁵¹³ Nonetheless, Yes activism and grassroots campaigning rarely “made the news”; it was, Walker states, not regarded “as a story to tell” with many fearing the association with nationalism.⁵¹⁴ The substantial number of articles⁵¹⁵ published in the final days ahead of the vote instead aligns with the structure of traditional election coverage and with peaking public interest, as evidenced by social media activity.⁵¹⁶

During these busy days of campaigning, an influx of opinion pieces by established commentators and organic intellectuals largely agreed that the referendum had not only politically engaged the nation but also changed it forever. The notion that the referendum constituted, according to Alex Salmond, the biggest popular uprising against Westminster in modern history⁵¹⁷ was communicated across most newspapers in September 2014. The final weeks of the campaign engaged political elites and activists in a shared sentiment that the campaign had changed Scotland (and British politics). In fact, over the four weeks of September 2014 studied here, 33 articles discussed the role of participation and democratic renewal across the selected newspapers.

David McKay commented in the *Aberdeen Press and Journal* on the exceptional “mass grassroots movement” which “empowered” the electorate “like never before.”⁵¹⁸ *The Herald* also focused on the civic qualities of the referendum and praised – albeit less enthusiastically – its “lack of prejudice,” predominantly “civilised” behaviour, and inclusivity.⁵¹⁹ An altogether more enthusiastic and hopeful account was given in articles across its pro-independence sister paper, the *Sunday Herald*. Writing prior to the referendum, broadcaster, activist, and journalist Lesley Riddoch thus observed a “radical and unexpected shift in Scots:”

undecideds-aberdeen-scottish-independence-vote; Michael Deacon, “Leading Voters to Seal Scotland’s Future, a Plaid Piper,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 19, 2014.

⁵¹³ For the first three weeks of September, I surveyed a total of twenty-two articles across seven newspapers. Ten out of these profiled the voters of specific locations and their concerns (see previous footnote), while another nine provided statements from the public and campaigners, detailing their thoughts on the referendum, their involvement and voting intentions. Only three articles reported on official campaign events etc.

⁵¹⁴ Walker, interview.

⁵¹⁵ Williamson and Golding’s quantitative analysis confirms that the referendum in the English press “was more or less invisible” except for the “period immediately before the vote” and disappeared again quickly after polling day. Williamson and Golding, “The English Press,” 111.

⁵¹⁶ Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 489. Note that the regulated period ahead of the referendum was sixteen weeks and thus still considerably longer than the average regulated pre-election periods of six to eight weeks.

⁵¹⁷ Severin Carrell, “Scottish Referendum: Yes Campaign; Salmond reaches the Line,” *The Guardian*, September 18, 2014.

⁵¹⁸ David McKay, “Referendum Has Changed Scotland Forever – Lochhead,” *Aberdeen Press and Journal*, September 22, 2014.

⁵¹⁹ *The Herald*, “Referendum Debate Is a Credit to the Nation,” September 15, 2014, <https://www.heraldsotland.com/opinion/13179969.referendum-debate-credit-nation/>.

Bystanders have become organisers, followers have become leaders, politics has become creative, women have become assertive, men have learned to facilitate not dominate, and independent action and self-reliance have helped create a fully tradeable Yes currency – a “can-do” approach shared by almost everyone active in the campaign.⁵²⁰

Riddoch paints a dynamic image of mobilisation, which sees members of the public becoming more politically active. Through the rhetorical play with presumed contrasts, she emphasises change. This change is framed through notions of political and social progressiveness, which highlights a move to more (gender) equality, “independent action”, and “self-reliance.” These developments on a societal level are expressed through the language of political pro-independence mobilisation. The increased political agency, empowerment, and change for a different future are demonstrated on a linguistic level through the repetition of “becoming” and the lexical choices “learned”; “helped”; “create”. The list Riddoch uses to express this dynamic political and social change goes beyond that of “threes” discussed above: whereas three-part lists convey a sense of “completeness,”⁵²¹ moving well beyond this number seemingly suggests a development that is not easily contained and in a process of development and change. Conversely, the generalising development of political change is contrasted with the positive approach (and attitude) of specific campaigning activism; this statement both limits the generalisability of this change and affirms the Yes campaign’s (politics) of difference. Importantly, this framing also asserts Riddoch’s own position within the debate as a female political (pro-independence) activist.

The positive case for political change and its relation to grassroots activism and creativity were also emphasised by Ross Colquhoun, co-founder of *National Collective*, who suggested that “Scotland has already changed” as a result of popular participation and vibrant artistic energy.⁵²² This “new reality” of a politically energised nation also featured in commentator, academic, and independence advocate Gerry Hassan’s article for the *Sunday Herald*:

Across Scotland a new energetic, dynamic political culture has emerged which has reshaped public debate and conversations. The idea of the public as passive, inert spectators and with it the notion of politics as a minority pastime, no longer holds. It could be seen in the massive turnouts which saw poorer and disadvantaged communities turn out in record numbers. What I called “the missing Scotland” – those who haven’t voted in a generation or more – re-emerged as a potent political force with the potential to reshape long-term politics. It was also seen in the re-imaging of public spaces, the emergence of flash mobs and protest, and a culture of celebration and carnival on the Yes side.⁵²³

⁵²⁰ Riddoch, “A Radical and Unexpected Shift.”

⁵²¹ Max Atkinson, *Our Masters’ Voices: The Language and Body Language of Politics* (1984; London: Routledge, 1994), 57.

⁵²² Colquhoun, “Scotland is a Young, Vibrant Nation.”

⁵²³ Hassan, “The Close Vote.”

Hassan, as the other commentators above, provides a highly positive and dynamic account of societal and political change initiated by the referendum. The referendum's apparent exceptionalism is inferred through maximising adjectives and (vague) quantitative markers ("new"; "massive turnout"; "record numbers"). Dynamism and change are conveyed through the multiple successive adjectives ("new energetic, dynamic") as well as the repetition of active and transformative verbs ("(re-)emerged"; "reshape/d"). This activity and "force" contrast with elite politics ("minority pastime") condemned to abstract thought ("idea"; "notion") and removed from popular political participation ("passive inert spectators"). The past elitism of a "minority" is further contrasted with the empowerment of "disadvantaged communities" in "record numbers" – this framing attributes more significance to the "missing Scotland's" support than there is evidence for it in numbers. Hassan associates political change with a newfound publicness ("public debate"; "public spaces"), which is explicitly visible (repeat mention of "seen" / "saw"). He credits the political dynamism of change with a redefinition of popular participation through a progressive vision of politics expressed in the street celebrations and the Yes side's arts-based "carnival[s]". Thus, protests are associated with colourful "flash mobs" (cf. also the related emphasis on "culture") rather than angry mobs. Consequently, popular participation is confined to visible, arts-based street activism and progressive politics.

Of particular interest is Hassan's mention of the "missing Scotland" (alternatively, "the missing million") here. As discussed in more detail in chapter 3, this idea emerged as (elite) empowerment of disadvantaged segments of society in left-leaning political circles. It discursively bestowed "potent political force" upon segments of society to mobilise them for a Yes vote. Addressed through quasi-missionary voter drives, these segments of society were explicitly "made missing"⁵²⁴ to fit the vision of a left politics of progressiveness and popular empowerment and participation. As such, the notion of the "missing Scotland" reverberates with James Morrison's reading of the "left behind" as an "empty" or "floating signifier" in the mediated Brexit discourse.⁵²⁵

As a signifier without a fixed signified,⁵²⁶ the idea of the "left behind" allowed, according to Morrison, politicians and journalists to discursively assign it a meaning resonant with their respective ideologies.⁵²⁷ Although largely mobilised for a leftist politics of progressiveness,

⁵²⁴ Introna, "Reveries of a Progressive Past," 125; cf. 123.

⁵²⁵ Morrison, *The Left Behind*, 12; 102-104

⁵²⁶ Amir Dabirimehr and Malihe Tabatabai Fatmi, "Laclau and Mouffe's Theory of Discourse," *Journal of Novel Applied Sciences* 3, no. 11 (2014): 1284.

⁵²⁷ Morrison, *The Left Behind*, 12; 102-104. Cf. also the specific reference to the "silent majority," 170.

the idea of the “missing Scotland” – as well as the “Unionist” trope of the “silent majority” mentioned above – allowed politicians and commentators to discursively assign these ideas the meaning that suited their ideological and political positions in the debate while retaining their own relevance and legitimacy as (quasi-)political representatives.⁵²⁸ This practice highlights the prescriptive and performative quality of popular participation in media and public debate and challenges the purely positive reading of an organically emerging political force and a democratisation of society. In addition to political strategizing and elite interventions in these celebrations of popular participation, commentators such as Hassan have also carved out for themselves powerful interpretative spaces within this myth. Hassan self-positions as the author of the “missing Scotland” and thus rhetorically establishes himself as a member of the progressive, intellectual elite that contributed to the empowerment of a disadvantaged Scotland.

The re-emergence and engagement from those who Hassan describes as the “missing Scotland” is also prominent in the following description of the referendum experience in *The Scotsman*:

In Scotland’s peripheral housing schemes, where turnout is often pitiful, polling stations were busy as Scots who do not normally take part in elections decided to have their say on the future of their country. The question now is whether this was a one-off, a blip, or whether lessons can be learned from the referendum experience to energise our wider democracy at all levels. [...]

Perhaps the most important lesson is a far simpler one, with little to do with the mechanics of political organisation and campaigning. Perhaps it is simply that politics should be about issues that people actually care about.⁵²⁹

The engagement from those who are generally seen as disengaged is at the centre of this extract. Rather than defining these non-voters through social markers, disengagement and deprivation are localised in “peripheral housing schemes,” condemning their inhabitants to the margins of public (that is geographical) and political life.⁵³⁰ However, this excerpt, too, emphasises the change brought about by the referendum experience by contrasting the usual politics with an *exceptional* referendum experience: where turnout is “often pitiful,” “polling stations were busy.” Adverbs of frequency reiterate this further and call into question the nature of political change (“one-off” versus “wider” change).

In contrast to the purely positive readings of this political change, the excerpt critically challenges the transformative power of the referendum by presenting a dual choice between “a

⁵²⁸ Birks, “The Politics of Protest,” 132; Birks, “The Democratic Role,” 221.

⁵²⁹ The Scotsman, “It Took Something Special to Politically Engage Us,” September 18, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/it-took-something-special-to-politically-engage-us-1525931>.

⁵³⁰ Cf. also the implicit connection to the lexical choice “pitiful”.

blip” and “lessons [...] learned.” The rhetorical question and slightly flippant language used to introduce these options minimises⁵³¹ them in contrast to the, maximised, “most important lesson” advocated by the text, namely that “politics should be about issues that people actually care about.” The use of adverbs such as “simply” (also, “simpler”) and “actually” establishes this as a self-evident truth of people-centred politics – even if cautioned and marked as speculative, but desirable (“should”) through the double-framing of “perhaps.” These popular politics are constructed in opposition to the “mechanics of political organisation” and are expressed in the empowerment of otherwise marginalised Scots as the possessive pronouns (“their say”; “their country”) and iteration of popular voice and national belonging indicate.

The representations of these tensions between engagement and marginalisation, between popular empowerment and elite prescription discursively create and limit popular participation in the referendum debate and Scottish politics more widely. Although popular participation was a prominent theme in press coverage of the referendum, disagreement as to what should constitute it persisted among the media (and political) elite. In fact, the press was ill-prepared to cover the popular participation called for in the campaign launches and rhetoric and struggled to cover political expressions that went beyond pre-planned (and elite-sanctioned) pseudo-events, rallies, and artistic performances. Political campaigner, commentator, and pro-independence activist Robin McAlpine makes this point in *The Guardian*:

These meetings do not sound or act like the so-called “mainstream” of politics. Alistair Darling complained bitterly about “being talked over and shouted down.” Welcome to participatory politics.

It has been a telling aspect of the campaign that unionists genuinely believe that if someone with authority (such as Jim Murphy on a milk crate or Nigel Farage in a pub) arrives in a public place and starts to talk, everyone in the vicinity must remain quiet until invited to speak. There is a new generation of people taking an interest in their society and how it is run and no-one has taught them “the rules” of elite politics. I have seen senior politicians sit in these meetings, thinking they will somehow get away with reciting the same-old soundbites. And I’ve seen them demolished by grannies, teenagers, labourers and office workers.⁵³²

McAlpine indicates the crucial tension at the heart of the mediated referendum debate and discourse. In an ironic, slightly mocking undertone, McAlpine contrasts elite, i.e., “mainstream” political expectations with “participatory politics” and a new format of political meetings (e.g., “not [...] like”). Through a rhetoric of mimicked sincerity expectations of elite politics and authority are both challenged and undermined through comical, and mundane

⁵³¹ Potter, *Representing Reality*, 187-88.

⁵³² Robin McAlpine, “Scots Anger to Boil without Change,” *The Scotsman*, September 21, 2014, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/robin-mcalpine-scots-anger-to-boil-without-change-2508070>.

imagery (“milk crate”; “pub”). These old, repetitive, elite ways of doing politics are contrasted with a “new generation” – in the figurative sense – which sees arguably untypical members of society voicing their political beliefs more convincingly by forcefully “demolish[ing]” the established order.

Change and a shift in how politics is being done is not only communicated through the marked difference between its actors, but also through the location of these politics in public places and a lack of awareness of the rituals of elite politics, e.g., “the rules.” An exclusionary, elitist politics is shown to other the public further through personal pronouns. A second “other” in the text consists of the Unionists, who symbolically stand in for elitist politics of authority. This leaves the activist voice of progressive politics as the implied “us,” and rhetorically centres McAlpine’s own experience as an activist and campaigner on the political left. This impression is strengthened through the switch to personal pronouns which add sincerity and truth to the account of the indyref experience as a visible (“seen”) shift to participatory politics. The implied political empowerment of this shift is articulated through an emphasis on voice – as a way of expressing political beliefs in the public sphere.⁵³³ The story of empowerment that McAlpine tells here positions participatory politics as a challenge to “politics as usual”. It is shown to infringe on the comfort and routine of the political (and media) elites, who frequently failed to meaningfully engage with this level of popular political expression. Their stale gestures of approachability – as well as their initial calls for public participation – are thus to be seen as primarily performative and even tokenistic. Nonetheless, they were used to remind the Scottish public of their own political power to either mobilise for larger levels of sovereignty (independence) or reiterate the satisfactory levels of sovereignty they hold (status-quo in the Union).

The focus on participatory politics and democratic excitement was also present in *The Guardian* that featured various articles by well-known Scottish intellectuals and commentators. Whereas *The Telegraph* and *The Times* had little time for this side of the debate,⁵³⁴ the more left-leaning *Guardian* provided a willing platform. Scottish writer Irvine Welsh, for example, reiterates the exceptionalism, political change, and related sense of empowerment felt by the

⁵³³ Note the allusion to an expectation that “everyone [...] must remain quiet until invited to speak,” which, when read in relation to the trope of the “silent majority” reinforces its discursive relevance and denotes a public which has been silenced, permanently ready to be empowered through a generously bestowed public political voice.

⁵³⁴ Exceptions include: David Sanderson and Mike Wade, “Pipes and Pies Bring out the Votes,” *The Times*, September 19, 2014, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/pipes-and-pies-bring-out-the-votes-9vkb598rxd1>; Simon Johnson, “Ours Was Scotland’s Greatest Campaign, Says Salmond,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 18, 2014. Cf. Williamson and Golding, “The English Press,” 113.

Scottish public because of the referendum, namely that “[t]he referendum galvanised and excited Scots in a way that no UK-wide election has done.”⁵³⁵ Journalist and critic Fintan O’Toole describes the same sense of political empowerment and atmosphere of excitement and democratic participation:

It is impossible to have visited Scotland in recent days and not to have been exhilarated by the sheer vigour of democratic engagement. [...] for once, the people have some power.⁵³⁶

O’Toole portrays the political empowerment associated with the referendum as a contagious experience of national excitement. The vigour and implied revival of participatory democracy he attests to Scotland in 2014 reiterates the myth of popular participation and the progressive politics associated with it.⁵³⁷

6. Conclusion: elite representations and the rhetorical limits of popular participation

As demonstrated above, the press identified participation as a core objective of the launch events in its coverage. However, participation was introduced through elite prescription, ascribed to a discursively empowered public. Although the “ordinary Scots” and their democratic representation – in terms of the “quiet majority” and the “missing Scotland” – became core tropes in the ensuing media discourse, these tropes worked largely as discursive tokens and floating signifiers for elite political agenda and ideology. Popular participation was thus largely prescribed *from above* and routinely performed in the media.

Where more organic forms of street activism and protest emerged which did not conform with elite visions of popular participation as pre-planned colourful, but harmlessly naïve arts-based activism, popular participation was routinely condemned in elite media discourse. More radical or contested forms of grassroots activism and protest on, primarily, the Yes side were thus increasingly associated with angry mobs, violent crowds, and abusive behaviour. In short, they were portrayed as the popular politics against which institutional politics are routinely defined. As NC campaigner Barr emphasises, “[p]ro-independence gatherings were denounced by the opposition as chaotic and rowdy mobs.” He claims that this judgement was grounded in a misconception of “mass public engagement” as “something alien to modern British

⁵³⁵ Irvine Welsh, “This Country Is Synonymous with the Possibilities of People Power,” *The Guardian*, September 20, 2014.

⁵³⁶ Fintan O’Toole, “Forget Braveheart, Kilts and Tribal Nationalism, this is About Democracy,” *The Guardian*, September 13, 2014. Cf. O’Toole, “Scotland’s Vote”; Naughtie, “Whatever the Result.”

⁵³⁷ Some of these qualities are even more explicitly expressed in other segments of this article, an excerpt of which is cited at the beginning of this thesis (see [Introduction](#)).

politics.”⁵³⁸ The stronger condemnation of Yes activism – in contrast to (violent) nationalist displays of loyalists Unionism during and immediately after the referendum campaign – may have originated in a media bias towards the status quo or the Yes campaign’s self-proclaimed progressive political vision, of which some of its activism fell short. In either case, the conflicting representations in the press have exposed fissures between popular participation and elite discourses of participation.

In line with the latter, the press applied routine election coverage to the referendum and focussed on pre-planned events. This approach to coverage disregards that referendums are more internally contained and rely significantly on the media in encouraging political participation through the developments in the campaign.⁵³⁹ Political movements need the media to facilitate “mobilisation, validation [...] and scope enlargement” while “giv[ing] media stories a newsworthy focus on drama, conflict action, colour.”⁵⁴⁰ The Scottish press relished the drama and colour of popular participation, but largely failed to cover more organic but highly participatory and, particularly, critical forms of activism. As a result, the press ran the risk of missing the “real” referendum story⁵⁴¹ – this emphasises that the press lacked the tools and words to cover more participatory forms of political expression, as discussed in [chapter 1](#). Where they did, they focused on short factual news items or provided opinion pieces by cultural and political commentators.

Discursive concern for more inclusive democratic representation thus remained highly performative and rarely challenged elite dominance in newspaper coverage. As a result, the temporary realisation that the people “had some power” was only that. Not only did the post-referendum period see a quick return to press coverage as usual, the additional spaces for participation in mediated political discourse that were given to the personal stories of a diverse public disappeared quickly after the vote. Established commentators remained essential in narrativizing the participatory referendum politics: viewing the referendum through a perspective of leftist, progressive politics, they (co-)constructed a narrative of democratic exceptionalism and the referendum’s myth and legacy of popular participation. Political and media elites and left-leaning public intellectuals simultaneously claimed the power to legitimate and sanction popular participation and – largely retrospectively – created and performed the myth of unprecedented popular participation. In how far these elite practices

⁵³⁸ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 86.

⁵³⁹ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 6; 17.

⁵⁴⁰ Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*, 41.

⁵⁴¹ Macwhirter, “Their Our Worst Enemy” 33-34; Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 145.

contributed to political participation on the ground and how different alternative and grassroots players in the public sphere reclaimed their political agency will be addressed in the following chapter. Specifically, this chapter analyses the role of popular participation in relation to political voice and empowerment, as facilitated and restrained by various campaigning organisations and popular activism.

Chapter 3

Activism, voice, and the limitations of political participation

*On 18th September, 2014, between the hours of 7 am and 10 pm, absolute sovereign power will lie in the hands of the Scottish people. They have to decide whether to keep it, or give it away to where their minority status makes them permanently powerless and vulnerable.*⁵⁴²

Discourses and representations of popular participation played a key role in the referendum, as demonstrated by newspaper analysis in the previous chapter. Indeed, Fierke proposes that “participation was one of the most impressive elements of the campaign” and suggests media discourse and activism in the streets contributed to a “reinvigoration of democracy.”⁵⁴³ According to Introna, even years later “the consensus among political and cultural commentators has persisted that the referendum debate was a time of exceptional political and cultural engagement, in which Scotland’s progressive essence was realised.”⁵⁴⁴ Popular commentary thus rhetorically and performatively articulated⁵⁴⁵ political engagement on the Yes side through the notion of a progressive Scotland. The rhetorical alignment of participation and progressiveness continues to shape the discourse and memory of the referendum. It highlights a specific form of participation rooted in street carnivals, popular meetings, and grassroots campaigning which, as I argue below, conversely excluded other forms of participation.

Charles Pattie, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whitelay distinguish between “macro” and “micro participation.” According to their definition, micro participation describes influence exerted on indirect agents of the state, such as teachers, and contrasts with macro participation as “participation aimed at influential actors or organisation which are direct representatives of the state.”⁵⁴⁶ Pattie, Seyd, and Whitelay divide macro participation, which in its direct targeting of political actors and institutions is more relevant for my discussion here, into individualistic forms of participation, contact participation, and collective participation. All three forms were used by the public to participate in the referendum: individualistic forms of participation

⁵⁴² Sillars, *In Place of Fear II*, 1.

⁵⁴³ Karin Fierke, “Introduction: Independence, Global Entanglement and the Co-production of Sovereignty,” *Global Constitutionalism* 6, no. 2 (2017): 170-71, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S2045381717000089>.

⁵⁴⁴ Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 117.

⁵⁴⁵ Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms,” *Media, Culture and Society* 2 (1980): 69. Cf. Laclau and Mouffe, who argue that practices of articulation create a given order and contribute to hegemonic practices. Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, 2nd ed. (1985; London: Verso, 2001), esp. 113; 134.

⁵⁴⁶ Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 265-66.

through voting and donations to campaign organisations and the display of campaign materials; contact participation through letter writing, media commentary, and activity on participatory media platforms; collective participation through group activism, the attendance of political meetings, mass canvassing, and demonstrations.⁵⁴⁷ Political participation can further be divided into “conventional and nonconventional forms of political participation.”⁵⁴⁸ The latter, which includes joining political movements, marches, and demonstrations as well as expressing opinions or dissent on social media and, arguably, cultural activism, is significantly more varied than conventional forms of participation (e.g., voting, party membership, election campaigning etc.).⁵⁴⁹ A focus on nonconventional forms of political participation in the following discussion mirrors the prioritisation of alternative forms of political participation in the referendum debate and discourse. However, the culturally loaded and performative use of participation in the referendum discourse indicates, I argue below, the limitations of broad definitions of political participation – such as the present one – if these do not account for the importance of voice and (strategic) silences within the public sphere. These varied iterations of popular participation are addressed in some of their diversity below.

Against the interpretative backdrop of a media trope of political participation (see also chapter 2), this chapter examines how popular activism and engagement with the referendum have dialectically shaped a myth of popular participation. Through critical engagement with an emerging discourse on popular participation, this chapter analyses underlying power dynamics, political agency, and performative claims. It does so by contrasting how different agents mobilised the potential of political participation through active campaigning, creative practice, and culture on the one hand with absences, silences, and limitations of active citizen involvement on the other. By considering the different voices – noisy and engaging as well as silent and “missing” – of indyref, this chapter explores different forms of political participation – rhetorical, practical, and performative – during the referendum campaign and asks how members of the public narrate their own involvement. Based on rhetorical limitations and practical shortcomings, I argue that the referendum discourse created and simultaneously limited spaces for popular participation and thus contributed to a myth of popular participation.

The first section discusses in more detail the referendum format, its link to popular participation, and how related claims gave rise to performative activism and a discourse of performativity. Informed by this conceptual framing, the following section discusses the

⁵⁴⁷ Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 78-79; 265.

⁵⁴⁸ Bee, *Active Citizenship in Europe*, 70.

⁵⁴⁹ Barrett and Brunton-Smith, “Political and Civic Engagement,” 6-7; Bee, *Active Citizenship in Europe*, 70.

limitations of grassroots activism and widespread popular participation “in the streets.” It focuses on the third means of political participation through group activism and mobilisation introduced above – the second form of participation will be discussed in chapter 5.

Although incorporating the very notion of participatory politics, the cultural, political, and social inclusivity of the largest grassroots campaigning organisations *National Collective* (NC), *Radical Independence Campaign* (RIC), and *Women for Independence* (WFI) will be challenged in the following section. By critically comparing NC’s arts-focused campaigning to small-scale projects that explore the link between politics and creative practice as well as to grassroots organisations RIC and WFI, later sections of this chapter scrutinise the representativeness of political participation and activism. Individual reflections on the referendum by members of the public add crucial insights to this section – as collected by the *Dearest Scotland* project and my own public engagement format (*Referendum Café*).

1. The politics of the referendum: participation through voting and voice

According to Stephen Tierney, the Scottish referendum campaign was “a remarkable process in citizen engagement” as evidenced in voter turnout.⁵⁵⁰ Indeed,

[t]he turnout of 84.7 per cent was the highest for any UK electoral event since the introduction of universal suffrage, significantly trumping the 65.1 per cent who voted in the 2010 UK general election and the 50.6 per cent who bothered to turn out for the 2011 Scottish parliamentary elections. But turnout is only part of the picture. The story we are hearing time and time again from voters and campaigners alike is that citizens felt greatly empowered by the referendum and the role they had in making such a huge decision.⁵⁵¹

In contrast to traditional elections, where participation is often motivated by feelings of duty, the referendum translated into a sense of empowerment for citizens.⁵⁵² Although voter participation in the 2014 referendum was, as Tierney highlights, unprecedented, a high turnout was predicted far ahead of the vote and many traditional “non-voters” saw the referendum as an opportunity to make their voices heard.⁵⁵³ Indeed, independence is a “salient and emotive” issue, and related preferences often predate referendum campaigns.⁵⁵⁴ The referendum was perceived as an opportunity to “make a difference,” especially by those frequently lacking political “representation.”⁵⁵⁵

⁵⁵⁰ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 226.

⁵⁵¹ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 226.

⁵⁵² Cf. Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 24.

⁵⁵³ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 99.

⁵⁵⁴ Liñeira, Henderson, and Delaney, “Voters’ Response,” 166.

⁵⁵⁵ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 24.

1.1 Elite influence, popular uprising or somewhere in-between?

The reality of the 2014 referendum was shaped by familiar arguments and long-established preferences on independence.⁵⁵⁶ Importantly, the related limitations of political debate “triggered political activism rather than apathy”⁵⁵⁷ and found an outlet in alternative forms of political participation. The 2014 referendum countered, according to Tierney, two key issues established in political science: namely that referendums “lend themselves to elite control and manipulation” and that there is a tendency “to aggregate performed opinions rather than to foster meaningful deliberation.”⁵⁵⁸ The countering of both “the deliberation deficit” and “the elite control syndrome” Tierney mentions are not without challenges in the context of the 2014 referendum. While the former will be discussed in more detail below, the nature and design of the referendum does not readily escape “elite control” and the explicit “purpose of settling a particular question.”⁵⁵⁹ In fact, Lawrence LeDuc clarifies that “when a governing party opts for a referendum strategy, it generally does so in the expectation that it will win, by definition placing the emphasis on *votes* rather than *voice*.”⁵⁶⁰ Two key points can be inferred from LeDuc’s statement: firstly, referendums are linked to the political strategizing of those calling them and are, secondly, shaped by a pragmatism that focusses on winning rather than on politically empowering the citizenry. In fact, the 2014 referendum was intended to settle a divisive and highly important political issue.⁵⁶¹

As discussed previously (see Introduction), the 2014 referendum was the result of a political process and growing support for the SNP on an electoral level based on the party’s performance on valence issues.⁵⁶² Accordingly, the pro-independence campaign was shaped by SNP planning and influence, especially in the early stages. Despite growing popular support, it remained a hybrid campaign which relied on “an electoral campaign machine [...] with political communications professionals and strategies, political marketing through the media and online, and electoral database, centralised fundraising and the production of campaign materials.”⁵⁶³ This reproduction of traditional forms of political campaigning combines

⁵⁵⁶ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 23; Liñeira, Henderson, and Delaney, “Voters’ Response,” 167.

⁵⁵⁷ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 1.

⁵⁵⁸ Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 229.

⁵⁵⁹ LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” 140.

⁵⁶⁰ LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” 140.

⁵⁶¹ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 186.

⁵⁶² Valence issues are issues on the importance of which voters agree independent of their party-support (e.g., educational standards; economic and social welfare performance etc.). The governing party’s delivery on these impact constitutional preferences in Scotland. Robert Johns et al., “Valence Politics in Scotland: Towards an Explanation of the 2007 Election,” *Political Studies* 57 (2009): 208-212, <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9248.2008.00762.x>; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 78.

⁵⁶³ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

familiar electoral practices with practices of astroturfing.⁵⁶⁴ The term “astroturf,” which is “borrowed from the synthetic, grass-like product,”⁵⁶⁵ suggests that popular engagement of activist groups is synthetically grown through political strategizing from the top down rather than rooted in organic, popular support. In the case of the referendum a mundane story of the referendum driven by party strategy rather than organically emerging street carnivals thus challenges the idea of “grassroots” groups which acted independently of sponsors and the electoral campaign machine.⁵⁶⁶ However, this is an issue of authenticity rather than of political success. Indeed, party strategizing and elite contributions were essential to the referendum process, set-up, and (initial) campaign. This reiterates LeDuc’s argument that referendums are more concerned with winning votes than with empowering voices. Especially, “[w]hen political stakes are highest, the quest for *votes* crowds out *voice*.”⁵⁶⁷ As the high turnout suggests, however, this did not bar citizens from powerfully re-entering public politics through the vote itself. Arguably this form of traditional participation (voting) operates in tension with more radical, non-institutionalised, and creative activism. Although both are forms of participation, the latter – while potentially lacking institutional impact – gives more space to expressions of creativity, identity, and belonging.

The creative impulse articulated in a newly energised participatory politics soon became such that Della Porta et al. propose that “[w]hile Scottish political elites called for the referendum, social movement organisations appropriated the campaign on self-determination and independence.”⁵⁶⁸ Neither strategy was exclusive to either side of the campaign, but the attractive narrative of street carnivals and large-scale participation attributed to the Yes side explicitly expressed a political awakening and new agency, namely “the power to be able to do something about our situation.”⁵⁶⁹ This is further emphasised in Barr’s claim that No campaigners were not visible “on the ground.”⁵⁷⁰ Activism and progressiveness of a political

⁵⁶⁴ Irina Lock, Peter Seele, Robert Heath, “Where Grass Has No Roots: The Concept of ‘Shared Strategic Communication’ as an Answer to Unethical Astroturf Lobbying,” *International Journal of Strategic Communication* 10, no. 2 (2016), <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1553118x.2015.1116002>. “[T]he term ‘astroturf’ has come to refer to all advocacy campaigns in which participants appear to be voicing the concerns of their sponsors more than their own beliefs; the term elides the possibility, of course, that these two may be (and very often are) aligned.” Edward Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf’: Understanding Mobilization from the Top-Down,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Resistance*, eds. David Courpasson and Steven Vallas (London: Sage Publishing, 2016), 272.

⁵⁶⁵ E. Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf,’” 272.

⁵⁶⁶ E. Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf,’” 272.

⁵⁶⁷ LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” 144.

⁵⁶⁸ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 2.

⁵⁶⁹ Alan Bissett (author, playwright, and campaigner), interviewed by the author, June 2021.

⁵⁷⁰ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 86.

awakening are discursively linked to pro-independence activism and shape the myth of participation. Bissett contributes to this emerging myth in his description of a

democratic, peaceful, popular uprising [that emerged] because in every town and village in Scotland a cell erupted. And people found each other and said “right, okay, let’s campaign together [...] Let’s be activists.” And that is unprecedented in modern times in Scotland.⁵⁷¹

The myth of participation finds expression in this organically emerging, participatory activism which is rhetorically linked to individual and community empowerment and marked as “unique” in the political context of modern Scotland. Creative grassroots engagement and participation are rhetorically wielded against a campaign machinery devoid of people-centred engagement and contributed to a “general atmosphere of hope” on the Yes side.⁵⁷² In this way, non-traditional political participation became associated with one side of the debate, so that the trope of “participation” accrued a partisan meaning in media and public debates of the referendum.

Although the mythologising of the indyref experience visible here actively dismisses the role of political strategizing behind the large-scale campaign, it is important to note the strategic communication on popular participation in the referendum from the onset. Indeed, popular participation was prescribed by politicians and organisers from the campaign launches,⁵⁷³ as demonstrated in [chapter 2](#). Particularly *Yes Scotland* emphasised a participatory, grassroots approach and was set up to mobilise support through local groups, public meetings, and, ideally, individuals’ social circles. This approach also shaped the campaign’s media strategy, which focused on giving significant airtime to non-politicians.⁵⁷⁴ Prescribed or elite-driven participatory politics are not “by default tokenistic”⁵⁷⁵ but often crucial in mobilising citizens⁵⁷⁶ and align with a nominal focus on “participatory forms of governance” in Scotland since devolution (see [chapter 1](#)).⁵⁷⁷ However, the participatory element of the referendum emphasised at the launch events as well as through the Yes declaration, which was designed as a “symbolic device that supporters would sign to demonstrate”⁵⁷⁸ their support, function as performative claims to popular support: here, the very act of publicly declaring one’s support

⁵⁷¹ Bissett, interview; cf. Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 24.

⁵⁷² Bissett, interview.

⁵⁷³ E.g., The Scotsman, “Scottish Independence: Celebrities and Politicians”; Carrell, “Alex Salmond Predicts Million-strong Movement;” Wade, “Trusting in People.”

⁵⁷⁴ Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 458.

⁵⁷⁵ Escobar, “Between Radical Aspirations,” 148.

⁵⁷⁶ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 8.

⁵⁷⁷ Escobar, “Between Radical Aspirations,” 149.

⁵⁷⁸ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 6.

manifests as participation.⁵⁷⁹ The performative element of these claims intersects with the performance of public events during the campaign which frequently replaced substance with “theatrical” performance and visibility.⁵⁸⁰

1.2 Performative participation, transformative politics?

The performance of these events shaped notions of popular participation within the referendum discourse. As established previously (see [Introduction](#)), the reiterative practice of performativity constitutes and limits reality through language and discourse. In the context of the referendum, the rhetorical emphasis on popular participation is performative in as far as it denotes a discursive practice which constitutes political participation. Following Foucault’s proposition of discourses as knowledge systems that are both constitutive and restrictive,⁵⁸¹ notions of popular participation emerge from and are limited by discourses on (institutionalised) political power. The performativity of political participation is discursively produced, limited, and actualised through elite prescription. Where these rhetorical performances distract from more tangible action in the political field, they can be read in alignment and contrast with notions of “performative activism.” Performative activism assumes “that real activism cannot just be said; it must be done.”⁵⁸²

Building on this double meaning of the performative, I suggest that participation in the referendum was performative in two intersecting ways: firstly, it was discursively created through language which constitutes and limits its reality and function. Secondly, performativity is limited in its persuasiveness where it is merely rhetorically claimed but neither matches nor creates the reality it seemingly references. Accordingly, I argue below that tensions between rhetorical claims to popular participation and the reality they created fed into an ensuing myth of popular participation in the referendum debate, which did not match large-scale, popular actions on the ground but was shaped by elite performances of popular politics.

The theatrical performances of key events mentioned above then also function as a series of scripted “pseudo-events,”⁵⁸³ defined by their function and strategic messaging in public and

⁵⁷⁹ Cf. practices of petitioning which aim at registering support in a similar manner. However, they largely lack the same performative character of the word “declaration”. Cf. Austin, *How to Do Things with Words*.

⁵⁸⁰ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 23.

⁵⁸¹ Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 49. According to Foucault, “there is no knowledge without a particular discursive practice; and any discursive practice may be defined by the knowledge that it forms.” Foucault, *The Archaeology of Knowledge*, 183.

⁵⁸² Thimsen, “What is Performative Activism?” 84.

⁵⁸³ Boorstin, *The Image*, 9; 11-12. See also [chapter 5](#).

media discourse. Rather than contributing to an unprecedented “mass movement for independence”⁵⁸⁴ which encompassed political parties and popular activism outside conventional politics,⁵⁸⁵ the performative visibility of support might thus be better understood as a “moment” (extending from early 2012 until shortly after the vote) and a discourse. Marked by its discursive constitution, “indyref” became inseparable from representations of the referendum and participation with it in the mainstream media.⁵⁸⁶

Even where the referendum discourse may have galvanised large sections of society into action, the “moment of 2014”⁵⁸⁷ is contingent on its renegotiation and performance. Indeed, the aftermath of the referendum suggests that experiences of transformative participation and democratisation were short-lived; traditional political structures were quickly reinforced. With grassroots campaigners taking positions within the SNP and Scottish institutional politics, “grassroots activism ended up being swept up by the establishment.”⁵⁸⁸ The creation of the Smith Commission to negotiate future powers for Scotland after the vote similarly suggests a “return to elite-driven deal-making”⁵⁸⁹ and a strengthening of established political structures. Suteu proposes that this “return to ‘politics as usual’” away from popular participation is “symptomatic of political elites’ anxieties and attempts at regaining control when faced with popular claims over decision-making power.”⁵⁹⁰

Political practice of the SNP (and the Yes campaign) only temporarily embraced participatory politics as a rhetorical campaign argument,⁵⁹¹ and instead created the temporary illusion and “illusio”⁵⁹² of popular political change, i.e., the parameters of the public political enthusiasm and engagement imaginable. As a result, “unofficial interventions [are] largely ignored” in a “highly controlled political discourse shaped by elite interest.”⁵⁹³ Political

⁵⁸⁴ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

⁵⁸⁵ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1185-86. Social movements constitute a “networked group of claim-making actors who share a cause and goal.” Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*, 28.

⁵⁸⁶ Karen Boyle, *#MeToo, Weinstein and Feminism* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 6-7. I develop here an argument Boyle makes in her analysis of #MeToo, which she approaches as a moment and discourse.

⁵⁸⁷ James Foley and Ben Wray with Neil Davidson, *Scotland After Britain: The Two Souls of Scottish Independence* (London: Verso, 2022), viii. The “indyref moment” can also be understood as what Dayan and Katz, referencing anthropologist Victor Turner (1969), describe as a “liminal period,” i.e., “the suspension of usual norms and structures and [...] the overflowing of communitas. In Turnerian terms, such periods are characterized by a shift from an “indicative” definition of reality (reality as what is) to a “subjunctive” one (reality as what could or should be).” Dayan and Katz, *Media Events*, 104.

⁵⁸⁸ Jenny Lindsay (poet and campaigner for *National Collective*), interviewed by the author, June 2021; Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 230.

⁵⁸⁹ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 186; Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 232.

⁵⁹⁰ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 186.

⁵⁹¹ Hassan, “After the Landslide,” 377.

⁵⁹² Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 290.

⁵⁹³ Darren Lilleker, “Empowering the Citizens? Political Communication, Co-production and the Harnessed Crowd,” Scullion et al., *The Media*, 36.

culture's "inherent battle for power during elections," or referendums, prevents, according to Darren Lilleker, these occasions of direct democracy from being "empowering."⁵⁹⁴ Few exceptions aside, the participatory potential is then limited by the structural positionality of agents: contributions to the public sphere remain dominated by symbolic capital rooted within the political – and as suggested in [chapter 6](#), cultural – field.⁵⁹⁵

Nonetheless, these political structures benefitted certain forms of participatory activism – aided by discussions and participation online – which contributed to alternative micro-publics within the context of the cultural field. These micro-publics emerged in physical spaces (including "spontaneous" Yes gatherings in George Square or Glasgow's Referendum Café) and populated alternative digital spaces such as *Bella Caledonia* and *Common Weal* as well as social media platforms, including Twitter. Their organisation around alternative, culturally informed, more "radical" political thought can be seen as a continuation of pro-devolution groupings of the 1980s such as leftist arts-based magazines *Cencrastus* and *Radical Scotland* that sustained culture-political ideas throughout the pre-devolution era (see [chapter 1](#)).⁵⁹⁶ The related idea of pro-devolution cultural vanguardism that has been associated with this period of political agitation (see also [chapter 6](#)) manifested in – and culturally legitimised – the emerging grassroots activism of *National Collective* who curated arts- and culture-driven support for independence. The continuation of quasi-missionary arts-based campaigning aimed to bring politics to the people. It follows the third means of political participation through activism introduced above but also actively contributed to the mythmaking around participation. The below discussion elaborates on how the symbolic connection between this self-proclaimed anti-elitist vernacular politics is performatively employed to legitimate calls for political participation.

2. Popular participation through activism: *National Collective*

The grassroots activism and cultural campaigning ahead of the referendum was, individual events aside, mostly confined to the pro-independence side of the constitutional debate. Where the *Better Together* campaign focused on the "air war" of media coverage and official political discourse, *Yes Scotland* embraced more fully the "ground war."⁵⁹⁷ The emerging "loose social

⁵⁹⁴ Lilleker, "Empowering the Citizens?" 36.

⁵⁹⁵ Cf. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 215.

⁵⁹⁶ Pat Kane (musician, journalist, and pro-independence activist), interviewed by the author, June 2021; Hames, *The Literary Politics*, e.g., 133; 145-46.

⁵⁹⁷ Mitchell, "The Referendum Campaign," 87.

movement”⁵⁹⁸ credits the Yes side with mobilising large segments of society into “self-generating,” “autonomous and creative” activism.⁵⁹⁹ This meant, according to Lynch, that “the Yes campaign created a political movement” of established parties (i.e., the SNP, the Scottish Green Party, and the Scottish Socialist Party) and “tens of thousands of non-party individuals and [...] autonomous organisations to promote a Yes vote like National Collective, Radical Independence and Women for Independence.”⁶⁰⁰

This form of mobilisation is remarkable in a political context shaped by individualistic rather than collective forms of participation.⁶⁰¹ It saw, according to pro-independence campaigners like Andrew Redmond Barr, a movement emerging that “carried people out from their quiet domestic lives and into the theatre of national conversation.”⁶⁰² The contribution of these debates to the public sphere and national conversation denotes its performance aspect but fails to acknowledge their inherent performativity. The large-scale popular involvement in political organisations and initiatives as well as a related public spectacle may have contributed to impressions of the campaign as “movement-like” and “organisationally fluid, creative and grassroots-based,”⁶⁰³ but disregards crucial practical limitations and exclusions.

However, the proximity of groups such as NC, RIC, and WFI to the SNP and institutional politics challenges the organic emergence of grassroots-level engagement and indicates the role of strategic political campaigning. In fact, *Yes Scotland* “sought to generate Yes groups across Scotland” which started a community campaign driven – although not exclusively – by SNP members and supporters. Soon, actors closely affiliated with Scottish national and/or institutional politics created more autonomous organisations – including NC, RIC, and WFI – which subsequently registered as campaigners with the Electoral Commission.⁶⁰⁴

The following discussion focuses on the “cultural” campaign of NC, in line with the culture-political focus of this thesis. Smaller non-partisan projects such as the *Bus Party* (a Scotland-wide tour by artists to foster positive engagement with the referendum question) as well as the letter writing project *Dearest Scotland* (which collected letters to a “future

⁵⁹⁸ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

⁵⁹⁹ Kane, interview.

⁶⁰⁰ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2. Independence had remained a niche project well into the 21st century. Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 7.

⁶⁰¹ Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 78-79; 265; Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*, 3.

⁶⁰² Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 5.

⁶⁰³ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1185.

⁶⁰⁴ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 8; Electoral Commission, “Scottish Independence Referendum: Report on the Referendum Held on 18 September 2014,” *Scottish Independence Referendum Report* (2014), 151, https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/sites/default/files/pdf_file/Scottish-independence-referendum-report.pdf.

Scotland”) will provide comparative reference points. Additional comparisons will be drawn with the two other largest grassroots organisations, RIC and WFI. Both aimed at making the political debate more inclusive in terms of class and gender. The nominal focus on engaging those frequently marginalised in politics directly aligns with criticism of NC and its representativeness.⁶⁰⁵ These practical shortcomings demonstrate how NC’s self-positioning contributed to mythmaking about popular participation. Building on the idea of a discursively created “indyref moment”⁶⁰⁶ and an emerging myth of popular participation, I argue below that the participatory potential of referendum activism is significantly limited by how alternative voices were both discursively constituted and restrained.

NC proposed a non-party political “arts campaign for an independent Scotland,” enlisting the support from Scottish artists and creatives to “imagine a better Scotland” and to engage in the “ultimate creative act – creating a new nation.”⁶⁰⁷ *National Collective* was founded in 2011 based on crowdfunding initiatives and quickly became one of the largest grassroots organisations supporting independence. Despite its growing reach and collaboration with many well-known artists, creatives, and commentators – such as contemporary Scots Makar⁶⁰⁸ Liz Lochhead, Alasdair Gray, Alan Bissett, and Alan Riach as well as more than 100 “creatives”⁶⁰⁹ – the running of the group and main events was confined to a small core team. Founded by Ross Colquhoun, Euan Campbell, and Andrew Redmond Barr with the aim to counter “dry economics” with “a cultural campaign of vision, imagination and self-esteem,”⁶¹⁰ the group maintained some level of activity till May 2015. NC’s core aims were to: creatively engage the

⁶⁰⁵ Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁰⁶ Cf. Boyle, #MeToo, *Weinstein and Feminism*, 5.

⁶⁰⁷ Ross Colquhoun, “National Collective: Support the Arts Campaign for Scottish Independence,” March 5, 2013, www.nationalcollective.com/2013/03/05/national-collective-support-the-arts-campaign-for-scottish-independence/.

⁶⁰⁸ Makar is a term used for poets in Scotland, especially those holding an official office. The Scots Makar or national poet laureate of Scotland is given a special position by the Scottish Parliament. The office was introduced in 2004. See also [chapter 6](#).

⁶⁰⁹ Cal Flynn, “Scottish Independence: Aye, Have a Dream,” *New Statesman*, September 26, 2013, www.newstatesman.com/politics/2013/09/scottish-independence-aye-have-dream. Cf. Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 55; Ross Colquhoun, “100 Artists and Creatives Who Support Scottish Independence,” *National Collective*, January 26, 2014, www.nationalcollective.com/2014/01/26/100-artists-and-creatives-who-support-scottishindependence/. In September 2014, NC published an open letter signed by 1,300 artists and creatives in support of NC and Scottish independence. National Collective, “Over 1,300 Artists Sign Letter in Support of Yes Vote,” September 7, 2014, www.nationalcollective.com/2014/09/07/over-1300-artists-sign-letter-in-support-of-yes-vote/.

⁶¹⁰ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 11.

people of Scotland in politics and culture through a variety of creative projects;⁶¹¹ help imagine a new country; and challenge dominant discourses through critical investigation.⁶¹²

The romanticising myth – and creatively performative act – of artists imagining a new Scottish nation,⁶¹³ has been employed to legitimise political claims. Indeed, by claiming to represent the public and embody popular participation, NC discursively rooted its activism in popular agency. The ensuing myth of popular participation as linked to narratives of organically emerging “grassroots” organisations contrasts with Bissett’s statement that NC “initially was an SNP initiative because the SNP were the entirety of the independence movement at the time.”⁶¹⁴ *Yes Scotland* as the official pro-independence campaign, which ran as a conventional board with party support from the SNP, the Greens, the SSP, and other experts, planned a grassroots movement and initiated a meeting to start a “cultural campaign.”⁶¹⁵ While it may have been “impossible for the SNP or the official Yes campaign which also grew out of the SNP [...] to control the grassroots movement” once started,⁶¹⁶ NC emerged out of a context of institutional politics and policymakers.⁶¹⁷ This indicates a seemingly more creative approach to political campaigning, which is crucially influenced by Scottish myths of national identity (see [chapters 1](#) and [6](#)).

Against this background of institutional politics, NC explicitly self-positioned as a collective of “radical thought and storytelling narrators” in their manifesto. In claiming to inspire where politics had failed to do so, they assumed performative political legitimacy based on their rootedness in the cultural field⁶¹⁸ and related narratives of national identity. Thus, they evoked a romantic image of the artist as poised against the politician: “[t]he politician asks his

⁶¹¹ An extensive list of events conducted in 2014 is available on NC’s website. National Collective, “Documenting Yes: Year in Review 2014,” December 30, 2014, www.nationalcollective.com/2014/12/30/documenting-yes-year-review-2014/.

⁶¹² NC’s aim to challenge dominant discourses remained largely confined to their criticism of *Better Together* donor Ian Taylor and related legal action. Flynn, “Scottish Independence;” Kate Higgins, “We Need National Collective,” *Bella Caledonia*, April 13, 2013, <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2013/04/13/we-need-national-collective/>.

⁶¹³ Homi Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” in *Nation and Narration*, ed. Homi Bhabha (1990; repr., Abingdon: Routledge, 1993), 2-3; Homi Bhabha, “DissemiNation: Time, Narrative, and the Margins of the Modern Nation,” in Bhabha, *Nation and Narration*, 297; cf. 313.

⁶¹⁴ Bissett, interview. Cf. Mitchell’s evaluation of developing Yes activism: “*Yes Scotland* attempted to reach out beyond the core of SNP supporters with variable success locally” and while “[t]he SNP leadership dominated the air war on the pro-independence side of the debate,” they “had to concede ground to the variety of local *Yes* campaigns.” Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 87 (emphasis original).

⁶¹⁵ Bissett, interview. According to Bissett this included, amongst others, MSP Joan McAlpine, SNP aid Jennifer Dempsey, Pat Kane, Ross Colquhoun.

⁶¹⁶ Bissett, interview; cf. Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 86.

⁶¹⁷ Kane, interview.

⁶¹⁸ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 51.

people to empower him, the artist asks his people to be empowered.”⁶¹⁹ NC thus claimed to be better placed to mobilise for political change and, what is more, empower members of the public. A “mythical tale of a national journey” and “cultural distinctions”⁶²⁰ discursively naturalised NC’s self-proclaimed activism, which aimed to facilitate “the making of a new democracy,”⁶²¹ representative of its people. Intriguingly, then, NC’s performative political significance – more so than its activism – as well as, arguably, the independence movement more widely are positioned as constitutive of a mythically and culturally informed revival of democracy and political participation. Indeed, this is reflected in what Macwhirter describes as a “potent contemporary democratic myth” rooted in the belief “that through popular engagement, it is possible to create a better, more socially just, society.”⁶²² This popular myth – that political activism would be able to mobilise not simply for the referendum but for a revival of democracy and a more progressive future – continues to shape framings and memories of pro-independence activity and, by proxy, the referendum in popular and academic discourse.⁶²³ In its continuous discursive re-constitution, the emerging myth of “authentic,” popular support thus remains highly performative and, ironically, detached from the transformative street activism it proclaims.

Within the context of NC’s active self-mythologising through which they carved out for themselves a space in the national political discourse, some of its campaigners argued for the necessity to go to “venues and talk to people in person.”⁶²⁴ This incentive shaped the largest and most prominent event run by about twenty members of NC and changing contributors⁶²⁵: the Yestival tour through Scotland in the summer of 2014 aimed “to inspire and engage the Scottish people.”⁶²⁶ Framed in terms of a Summer of Independence, the Yestival was comprised of “[m]ore than 30 days, 1 786 miles, 16 tents and one carnival,” featured a variety of music, art, films and various performances,⁶²⁷ and received significant media attention.⁶²⁸

⁶¹⁹ National Collective, “Manifesto: Imagine a Better Scotland,” first published in *POST magazine*, July 7, 2013, <https://www.nationalcollective.com/2013/07/07/manifesto-imagine-a-better-scotland/>.

⁶²⁰ National Collective, “Manifesto.”

⁶²¹ National Collective, “Manifesto.”

⁶²² Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 68.

⁶²³ Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 117; Bort, “The Annals of the Parish,” 2; Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 14; Geoghegan, *The People’s Referendum*, 9; 163.

⁶²⁴ Lindsay, interview.

⁶²⁵ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 63.

⁶²⁶ Colquhoun, “National Collective.”

⁶²⁷ *The Herald*, “More Than 30 Days, 1786 Miles, 16 Tents and One Carnival...How National Collective Took the Yestival All Over Scotland,” August 3, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13173042.30-days-1786-miles-16-tents-one-carnival-national-collective-took-yestival-scotland/>.

⁶²⁸ The Yestival tour was even covered in the *Financial Times*, with its limited focus on culture and Scotland. John McDermott, “Scotland’s Yestival Highlights ‘Bad Romance’ with UK,” August 1, 2014, <https://www.ft.com/content/82d4627c-1989-11e4-8730-00144feabdc0>.

Despite NC's notable emphasis on fostering political engagement among the public through their visits to communities across Scotland, the public was generally an audience for their performances and rarely became involved through creative formats such as the "Wish Trees," detailed below. Further to that, NC's activism and the Yestival were largely framed through its political potential and historical continuity rather than practical political activism: in the words of Mairi McFadyen, the Yestival was "a microcosm of what Scotland could be: a country that celebrates diversity and creativity, aware of where we have come from and not afraid of where we are going, and with the desire and motivation to make a better future."⁶²⁹ The imagining of a more socially just future is articulated through a sense of national identity and belonging, which discursively emerges from and constitutes Scotland's democratic self-understanding. As such, this self-positioning draws on longstanding myths of national identity (as detailed in [chapters 1 and 6](#)), while actively contributing to the mythologisation of popular participation in the referendum discourse.

2.1 Comparing culture-based campaigning: the 2014 Bus Party

The comparison with the 2014 Bus Party, which followed a similar campaigning format and rationale to the Yestival, is instructive here.⁶³⁰ Organised by Will Storrar with Neal Ascherson, in May 2014 the Bus Party's "Listening Lugs" brought about 30 artists, musicians, and writers together for events across Scotland. With the aim to foster debate, they toured the country and asked locals "what kind of Scotland do you want?"⁶³¹ Despite the similarities between NC's

⁶²⁹ Mairi McFadyen qtd. in *The Herald*, "More Than 30 Days." Cf. Common Cause, "The Common Cause Referendum Tour of Scotland: The Wee Bus for The Big Vote," *Bus Party* (1997), SPA, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31695547>. The 1997 Bus Tour followed a similar idea with the organisers' "bus as a microcosm of the the [*sic*] new kind of civic and civil democracy that could take off in Scotland after the 11th." Common Cause, "The Common Cause."

⁶³⁰ As detailed in the online collection entry for the Bus Party by the Scottish Political Archive (SPA), "the Bus Party Listening Lugs tour went from Stromness to Stirling" in May 2014 and included James Roberson, Karine Polwart, Billy Kay, Hamish Moore, Neal Ascherson, and David Francis. Scottish Political Archive, "Bus Party," <https://www.jstor.org/site/stirling/bus-party/?pagemark=eyJwYWdlIjo0LCJzdGFydHMiOnsiSINUT1JCYNpYyI6NzV9fQ%3D%3D&groupecf=WyJzZWYyY2hfYXJ0aWNsZSIsImNvbnRyaWJldGVkX2NvbnRhaW5lciIsImNvbnRyaWJldGVkX2F1ZGlviY29udHJpYnV0ZWRFaW1hZ2VzIiwY29udHJpYnV0ZWRFdGV4dCJd>. Similar to NC's Wish Trees, the 2014 Bus Party created what David Greig called "Scrolls of Thought", which invited members of the public to write down their hopes and dreams for a future Scotland on scrolls of papers. Neal Ascherson and Will Storrar, interview by Sarah Bromage for SPA, available via SPA. Cf. Bus Party, "Scroll of Hopes," April 18, 2015, SPA, Photograph, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31695597>.

⁶³¹ Libby Brooks, "Artists Embark on 'Listening' Bus Tour of Scotland Before Independence Vote," *The Guardian*, May 1, 2014, www.theguardian.com/politics/2014/may/01/artists-bus-tour-scottish-independence-vote. Ascherson and Storrar, who had discussed the relaunch of the Bus Party since autumn 2012, felt that the issues at stake in 2014 meant that they could not confidently encourage the public to vote for one side. Ascherson and Storrar, interview by Bromage.

and the Bus Party's campaigning activism and discursive practices of self-legitimation within the public sphere, the framing of participation by the 2014 Bus Party openly addressed the performative action visible with NC.

The Bus Party followed the premise that artists and intellectuals could contribute to a more in-depth, layered debate on Scotland's future. Compared to NC's Yestival, the Bus Party operated on a smaller scale, was explicitly non-partisan,⁶³² and built on previous campaigning practice, namely a similar project ahead of the Scottish devolution referendum in 1997. The inspiration for this form of campaigning came from German writer Günter Grass's bus tour ahead of the German election in 1965. Neal Ascherson, journalist in West Germany at the time, was fascinated by this way of campaigning and "doing politics" differently: by reminding members of the public of their political power. To achieve this, Grass toured parts of Germany and sought to discuss politics with those often ignored in political debate while campaigning for a political change and in support of social-democratic candidate Willy Brandt. A similar approach was, according to Ascherson, well-suited to the sceptical population of Scotland – particularly when "outraged confidence" spread after Labour's defeat in the 1992 UK general election, which meant a setback for devolution.⁶³³ Spearheaded by William McIlvanney, the Bus Party campaigned for a Yes-Yes vote in 1997 and consisted of different artists, writers, musicians, and commentators who toured nine towns across Scotland over the last 100 hours of the devolution campaign with the aim to mobilise for the vote and encourage non-party political debate.⁶³⁴ The biggest fear at the time was apathy and a repetition of the 1979 referendum.⁶³⁵

While the political framework and decision at stake had fundamentally changed since 1997, the format of the Bus Party remained largely the same. This, Billy Kay argues, meant that it struggled to foster meaningful debate in a polarized political context while no longer being "radically engaging enough" – the people of Scotland had long started imagining

⁶³² Most of the Bus Party's artists – and hosts – were pro-independence supporters who openly campaigned for a Yes vote outside of the project. Ascherson and Storrar, interview by Bromage.

⁶³³ Ascherson and Storrar, interview by Bromage. Cf. also Neal Ascherson, "A Brief History of the Bus Party," in *The Day After the Referendum: What Kind of Scotland Do You Want?* eds. James Robertson and Neil Ascherson, SPA, Pamphlets 41760 (2014): 15-16, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.31695624>.

⁶³⁴ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 72; Billy Kay (writer, broadcaster, and activist), interviewed by the author, June 2021. Organised by the civic forum Common Cause, which was founded by trustees Neal Ascherson, William McIlvanney, Tom Nairn, Joyce McMillan, Billy Kay, and like-minded writers and intellectuals in April 1992 in response to the frustration felt by the Conservative election win, "The Wee Bus for The Big Vote" toured Scotland 7-11 September (i.e., the day of the referendum). The tour's aim was to create dialogue between the people of Scotland outside of the central belt and to fully embrace the "big vote". Common Cause, "The Common Cause." Cf. Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 63.

⁶³⁵ Common Cause, "The Common Cause." Cf. Ascherson and Storrar, interview by Bromage.

different futures for the nation.⁶³⁶ Kay, who was a key member of the Bus Party in 1997 and 2014, suggests that given its pre-dominantly Yes supporting members, the Bus Party would better have campaigned under the motif of “[t]hese are cultural heroes who are pro-Yes. Come along and hear what they’ve got to say.”⁶³⁷ Kay thus emphasises the notion of the cultural “hero” as instrumental to culture-based political mobilisation and thus points to elite-driven popular participation. Cultural contributors like Neal Ascherson are seen to “promote democracy”⁶³⁸ and engagement – a practice that, despite the format’s dialectical idea, advocates political education *from above*, rather than based on organic, popular activism. The significance attributed to national artists and writers for political mobilisation as based on experiences from the pro-devolution movement is noteworthy here and will be discussed in more detail in [chapter 6](#). It follows the same self-generating discursive mythology as NC’s activism but shifts the agency of the activism from one of performative participation to a missionary form of empowerment. However, at the centre of the Bus Party’s activism and tour across Scotland remained an important focus on fostering debate and political participation across the political spectrum which echoes essential qualities of the public sphere (see [chapter 1](#)). These attempts to foster national debate among diverse members of the public remained largely biased towards culturally interested, middle-class Yes supporters. Representation then remained limited and frequently performative and instead contributed to a myth of a nation engaged in democratic deliberation.

As discussed above, NC’s self-conception exhibited similar claims to cultural representativeness via their manifesto and programme; these claims were nurtured by a myth of a political vanguard of artists and writers. The performative element of this self-asserted arts-based representation manifested in popular criticism denoting a “lack of actual art” in media commentary⁶³⁹ – even if NC had phrased their aims less clearly in terms of artistic production and instead as “a cultural campaign of vision, imagination and self-esteem”⁶⁴⁰ to creatively engage the public in political debate. On this basis, NC was criticised as being run

⁶³⁶ Kay, interview.

⁶³⁷ Kay, interview.

⁶³⁸ Kay, interview.

⁶³⁹ Allan Massie, “Where’s the Art, National Collective?” *The Scotsman*, March 14, 2015, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/alex-massie-wheres-the-art-national-collective-1510279>.

Nonetheless, NC also received some artistic valuation within Scotland when *The List* magazine awarded it second place among the top 100 cultural influencers of 2014. Cf. Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 110. A huge success for NC and the “movement,” this nomination subsumed artists’ own artwork; Bissett, interview.

⁶⁴⁰ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 11.

by amateurs who made “Wish Trees” but no “real” art.⁶⁴¹ One of the few tangible artworks is the publication *Inspired by Independence* (2014), which compiles art and commentary by well-known Scottish artists and writers inspired by their support for NC and independence. The impression of an absence of “visible” art contributed, according to campaigner Lindsay, to perceptions of NC as a “group of students or airy fairy wishy washy middle class artsy people” rather than, more accurately, professionals in their 30s,⁶⁴² who applied their skills and networks to their campaigning activism for independence.⁶⁴³

The different perceptions of NC were problematic for the organisation in various ways: they were thought to be too slick to be authentic, too amateur to be taken seriously, too self-interested to speak to the public interest, and too middle class to represent the public. Two of these critiques demonstrate their difficult position in the public sphere in particular: firstly, NC’s inherent, strategic professionalism, self-promotion and closeness to institutional politics challenged their self-proclaimed grassroots activism. This impacted the credibility of their authentic voice and message within the discourse and, in line with the institutionalism that informed their activism, ran the risk to engage only “those who are already over-represented in the political system.”⁶⁴⁴ Secondly, criticism of NC’s artistic contributions and engagement challenge their political and cultural success and indicate self-mythologising practices. By contrasting their own activities with those on the No side, NC also mythologised their positionality within the referendum discourse. This manifests in discursive claims such as Barr’s dismissal of the “rival unionist arts campaign called Vote No Borders” as an “astroturf” campaign, “run jointly from London by a millionaire Conservative businessman and a marketing firm.”⁶⁴⁵ The rhetorical use of such claims, more so than factual differences, are of interest here: elitism is defined in economic terms and contrasted with NC’s ideologically motivated, because unpaid, labour and personal sacrifice.⁶⁴⁶ This myth of “authentic” participation extended beyond the vote to include the legacy of the respective campaigns: where the No campaign was “paid off,” “community groups [...] take the fight forward.”⁶⁴⁷

⁶⁴¹ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 48. NC’s artistic performances and creative exercises to mobilise political support have been rarely documented and/or preserved.

⁶⁴² Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁴³ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 4-5.

⁶⁴⁴ Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf,’” 271.

⁶⁴⁵ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 59.

⁶⁴⁶ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 68; Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁴⁷ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 109.

2.2 Comparing arts-based activism: The *Dearest Scotland* project

Similar to the arts-inspired activism by NC and the Bus Party, the *Dearest Scotland* letter writing project (DS) invited participation and debate on the referendum and Scotland's future. The project, conceived by Sarah Drummond, Lauren Currie, and Cat Cochrane in 2011 and launched in 2014, asked members of the public to address a fictionalised nation, the dearest Scotland, with their hopes for the future. The project, which received more than 450 handwritten and digital letters as well as drawings from members of the public aged 5 to 88 over 16 months, was, according to the organisers, "[b]orn out of frustration at the lack of sincere coverage given by Scottish mainstream media or embraced by politicians." As a direct reaction to shortcomings of deliberation in the media and public sphere, the project was thus designed as an "initiative where open democracy and citizen participation could be harnessed away from the recognised bubble of empty political buzzwords."⁶⁴⁸ In its emphasis on popular rather than elite politics, the project is shaped by discourses on participation and democracy, which framed the referendum campaign from its beginning and grew in significance in the mainstream media. In its aim to collect wishes and dreams by the public, DC bears similarities with NC's Wish Trees and the Bus Party's Scrolls of Thought.

As mentioned above, NC's Wish Trees, formed of wishes, hopes, and dreams written on luggage tags by members of the public, have frequently been criticised for their naiveté and idealism. They even became "an object of ridicule; a feeble, idealistic thing which encapsulated the naivety and utopian dreaming of the cultural campaign for independence." However, according to Barr, they worked well in attracting voters "to stop, talk and participate."⁶⁴⁹ This latter function as a space for public reflection is an important contribution of both projects: they stand out in their encouragement of diverse, low-level participation.⁶⁵⁰

The strategic "empowerment" of the public by creative organisers promotes a specific form of popular participation, which grants them political voice. However, it is notably performative: by encouraging the public to use their political voice through directly addressing an imagined nation, rather than a national government through consultations and voting, this practice emphasises the discursive role of voice. Where it does not align with political agency, it limits popular participation to a symbolic performance of democracy and change. These creative interventions then create alternative micro-publics which dialectically constitute and

⁶⁴⁸ Sarah Drummond, Lauren Currie, and Cat Cochrane, *Dearest Scotland* (Glasgow: Ringwood Publishing, 2015), III.

⁶⁴⁹ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 48.

⁶⁵⁰ DS also facilitated more inclusive participation through an option for online submission.

run the risk of undermining the formation of public political opinion within the wider public sphere. At the same time, they have the opposite effect and reach those that do not respond to established forms of political debate and, consequently, facilitate political deliberation, awareness, and opinion formation.

In the referendum context in which loud and colourful activism on the Yes side contrasted with the often inaudible voices of the wider public, creative engagement represented a crucial form of voicing private thoughts as public opinion. DS facilitated this practice through the duality of the letter format itself, which is both deeply personal and, in its intended address to the nation, always explicitly public. In contrast to letters written to private confidantes, these contributions correspond to what Sheila Fitzpatrick terms the “incomplete publicness” of letters. This incomplete publicness derives from the tension between a public recipient and the expression of personal experiences and wishes.⁶⁵¹ Indeed, the DS letters talk about home and nationality, the love for a country, its land, culture, art, and food and provide a prism of individual experiences and beliefs. Thus, for one of the contributors, Juliet, Scotland constitutes a “home” marked by “men in kilts, Hogmanay, Rabbie Burns and haggis.”⁶⁵² Other contributions directly added to public debate on national governance and democracy through reflections on what it means to be a proud, caring, and socially just nation. Anne, for example, envisioned “a country run locally by fully accountable people [...] – a happy, prosperous, hard-working, friendly country, that is tolerant of all other human beings.”⁶⁵³ More explicit concerns about the state of politics were raised by Bruce, who criticised “the slow decay of our democracy [...] with many believing that their voice didn’t matter.”⁶⁵⁴ Accordingly, many contributors demanded a better use of financial, environmental, and educational resources, and social provisions – individual demands that echo political and media debates at the time.

By actively engaging with key concerns of the public debate, the significance of the letters’ interventions is strengthened through the intentionality of their publicness and their address to the (bio-) political body of the nation. Indeed, submissions were in part driven by the organisers’ declared aim to publish the letters in an edited collection and made some letters

⁶⁵¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, “Suplicants and Citizens: Public Letter-Writing in Soviet Russia in the 1930s,” *Slavic Review* 55, no. 1 (Spring, 1996): 79-80, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/2500979>. Note how this in-betweenness challenges the traditionally gendered element of letter writing based on distinctions between private and public political voice. Cf. Mary Favret, *Romantic Correspondence: Women, Politics and the Fiction of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004). The gendered dimension of public voice also influenced public media interventions during the referendum in traditional media and on social media. Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 465-66; Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 199.

⁶⁵² Juliet, “Letter 42,” Drummond, Currie, and Cochrane, *Dearest Scotland*, 28-29.

⁶⁵³ Anne, “Letter 47,” Drummond, Currie, and Cochrane, *Dearest Scotland*, 31.

⁶⁵⁴ Bruce, “Letter 51,” Drummond, Currie, and Cochrane, *Dearest Scotland*, 33-34.

available online. Where the preferred aim of political letter writing is “official intervention,” this alters the letters’ expression of personal and political voice.⁶⁵⁵ These written interventions address an absent but communally imagined public or nation, rather than a private recipient or an imagined future self. This practice is necessarily performative: it evokes a shared nation which is both addressed and created through discursive practice. Thus, the letters contribute to discourses on national politics and belonging and provide a space for active contributions to the imagination of the nation. However, they also represent a wish for individual visibility. Next to the sense of contributing to something bigger, a wish for public visibility may also trigger political participation, echoing practices of “performative activism” mentioned above. Its inherent tokenism manifests in some of the shortcomings of the DS project, as exemplified by the necessarily curatorial selection of the contributions for the crowdfunded publication *Dearest Scotland: Nation – Vision – Voice. Letters Written to the Future of a Nation* (2015). In aiming to maintain balance, the editors nonetheless prioritised “colourful”, “emotional”, and “stand-out” letters.⁶⁵⁶ Consequently, DS unites participatory and performative practices: the constitutive discourse of future-focused and participatory imaginings of the nation through the written physicality of popular political voice overlap with tokenistic performances in its discursive construction and imagination of an alternative future. Although the letters are public by design and address a public body, the format fails to achieve one significant element of letter writing: reciprocity. Indeed, this one-way communication “presumably has little significance in the general picture of state/society relations.”⁶⁵⁷ While participants cannot reasonably expect a response from Scotland the nation, the collection of the letters attracted political attention.

Despite having been designed as apolitical, organiser Drummond acknowledged a pro-independence bias among the organisers and the responses DS received.⁶⁵⁸ Unsurprisingly, this Yes bias translated into attention from the SNP government and politicians: it was endorsed by Culture Secretary Fiona Hyslop (SNP), among others, and turned into an exhibition in the Scottish Parliament. Blurring the boundaries between political neutrality and partisan endorsement, the project was thus moved into the institutional realm of politics. Intriguingly,

⁶⁵⁵ Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens,” 94.

⁶⁵⁶ Sarah Drummond (co-initiator of DS and co-founder of design studio Snook), in conversation with the author December 2020.

⁶⁵⁷ Fitzpatrick, “Supplicants and Citizens,” 101.

⁶⁵⁸ Drummond, conversation. According to Drummond, the project “felt more Yes” – due to the blue and white logo designed ahead of the publication of the iconic, official campaigning materials; its alignment with the future-positive element of the Yes campaign; and its emphasis on social progressiveness (in contrast to the “risk focus” of the No side, cf. Bort, “The Annals of the Parish,” 4).

this meant that popular political voices entered the Parliament through creative, rather than political representation, demonstrating the performative openness of post-devolution Scottish politics and the Parliament building. While this move symbolically emphasises the political representation of popular voices, it also reinforces the Scottish narrative around creative representation as a substitute for denied political representation (see [chapter 4](#) and [6](#)) and links to the institutionalisation of alternative and popular voices discussed above. The performative nature of such representations suggests that speech acts are limited by the alternative political realities they constitute, obstructing more meaningful political activism and change for strategic, if temporary, concessions.⁶⁵⁹

Furthermore, DS promoted personal reflection and directly engaged members of the public in imagining their own futures. Importantly, letter writing also constitutes a key practice of participation in the press – primarily through letters to the editor.⁶⁶⁰ The address to the nation and the nation’s iterative co-creation through practices of writing and media circulation echo text-based nationalism⁶⁶¹ and routine performances of the nation through text.⁶⁶² This constitutive role is heightened through the DS project’s explicit allusion to Scottish literary tradition and romanticism.⁶⁶³ By establishing an intimate relationship with an approachable nation, the letter writing project actively co-created national belonging and identity. Merging active and imaginative qualities, it revived a mythical element of national belonging while discursively and performatively participating in the co-construction of a more progressive and democratic nation.

DS’s performative and mythological co-creation of a different Scotland resembles media interpretations of NC’s campaigning practice. Importantly, the successful articulation of a Yes vote through self-proclaimed cultural expression and political and social progressiveness came to shape media reflections by commentators such as Hassan, who argued that the activism of these “young, educated, insecure portfolio workers” defies “boxes of institutional life” by being “self-organising, self-determining, suspicious of the SNP.” Hassan portrays involvement by

⁶⁵⁹ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 43.

⁶⁶⁰ Karin Wahl-Jorgensen, “Letters to the Editor in Local and Regional Newspapers: Giving Voice to the Readers,” in *Local Journalism and Local Media: Making the Local News*, ed. Bob Franklin (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006). Political letter-writing to local politicians and MSPs/MPs is arguably less public but presupposes an institutional response and aligns with conventional political contact participation.

⁶⁶¹ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 25-36.

⁶⁶² Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, e.g., 6; 109.

⁶⁶³ Drummond, interview. The project took inspiration from popular Robert Burns poems such as “To a Mouse” and “Address to a Haggis”.

alternative leaders as instrumental in turning Scotland into “another country.”⁶⁶⁴ However, such representations echo a populist rhetoric where these alternative “elites” “occup[y] a place in the very elite system they pretend to strike against.”⁶⁶⁵

Additionally, limitations in activism, artistic production, and society-wide engagement indicate the performative nature of these claims to societal change and indicate the self-referential role in contributing to a myth of political participation. These limitations are crucially acute where implicit claims to representativeness of Scottish society rupture. Accordingly, Torrance indicates a gap between the “self-styled creatives and most voters” which limited this artistic activism to one social stratum. Interpreting the “hipster politics National Collective-style” as representative of “‘authentic’ Scottish culture” is, according to Torrance, a “self-delusion.”⁶⁶⁶ However, limited societal reach was also criticised by pro-independence supporters who argued that a more inclusive vision of Scotland and political activism beyond the “self-creative and self-actualising” middle-class was needed.⁶⁶⁷ NC’s negligence in exploring these concerns further points to the limitations of the progressive politics of the alternative campaigning organisations and promotes political participation as “dominated by the already well-resourced”⁶⁶⁸ – even if a failure to book more “working-class voices”⁶⁶⁹ is also indicative of large-scale social and structural issues concerning voluntary campaigning and the arts sector. Replicating larger trends in political mobilisation, those who are targeted are often those already politically active.⁶⁷⁰ Other campaigning organisations tried to explicitly mobilise wider audiences,⁶⁷¹ i.e., those traditionally underrepresented in politics and among the voting public: citizens of lower socio-economic status, education, as well as ethnic minorities and women.⁶⁷²

⁶⁶⁴ Gerry Hassan, “The Third Scotland: Self-Organising, Self-Determining, Suspicious of the SNP,” *The Guardian*, April 24, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/apr/24/third-scotland-self-determining-suspicious-of-snp>.

⁶⁶⁵ Michael Higgins, “Governmentality, Populism and Empowerment. David Cameron’s Rhetoric of the Big Society,” Scullion et al. *The Media*, 59.

⁶⁶⁶ David Torrance, “Curious Case of Creative Who Support Independence,” *The Herald*, July 28, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/opinion/13172112.curious-case-creatives-support-independence/>. Torrance criticises NC’s use of “authentic” Scottishness here, while reproducing similar notions of cultural essentialism.

⁶⁶⁷ Kane, interview; Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁶⁸ Cf. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 109.

⁶⁶⁹ Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁷⁰ Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf,’” 271.

⁶⁷¹ Lindsay, interview.

⁶⁷² Cf. Pattie, Seyd and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 95; Barrett and Ian Brunton-Smith, “Political and Civic Engagement,” 9; Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 34.

3. Alternative voices? The *Radical Independence Campaign* and *Women for Independence*

Throughout the campaign, it became clear that despite messaging around openness, equality, and inclusivity as part of the pro-independence mobilisation, various segments of society were less likely to be reached or represented by political campaigning and debate.⁶⁷³ This was a potential problem for both sides of the campaign. However, it disproportionately affected the Yes campaign, which needed to mobilise members of the public into action while being bound by its own narrative of equality, participation, and a more democratic future. Thus, alternative campaigning groups were hugely beneficial for the Yes side. Whereas RIC addressed the underexplored class argument of political representation, WFI promoted women's involvement in the debate and politics.

3.1 The *Radical Independence Campaign* (RIC) and the “class argument”

Under the notion of progressiveness and democratic renewal, the referendum campaign was strategically used to promote the empowerment of “fragmented, apathetic and non-politically involved sectors of society,”⁶⁷⁴ even though research suggests that traditional non-voters were neither uninterested nor disengaged from the referendum.⁶⁷⁵ The most publicly visible player in this mobilisation was RIC. RIC was instigated by the first “Radical Independence Convention” in November 2012, a large left-wing meeting held in Glasgow which served “as a joint vehicle for those who held a more transformative vision of independence than the main Yes Scotland campaign and the SNP.”⁶⁷⁶ At its formation, RIC drew together two key strands of the socialist left in Scotland: veteran members of the Socialist Workers Party (SWP) who had recently split from the International Socialist Group (Scotland)⁶⁷⁷ and a younger network of radicals drawn from the Scottish student movement and anti-austerity activism (notably the Glasgow-based Coalition of Resistance).⁶⁷⁸ These younger radicals injected new energy into a

⁶⁷³ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 55.

⁶⁷⁴ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 78.

⁶⁷⁵ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 19.

⁶⁷⁶ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 80. Cf. Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 89; Suki Sangha and David Jamieson, “Independence Referendum is Transforming Scotland's Political Landscape,” *RS21*, no. 2 (2014), <https://www.rs21.org.uk/2014/09/11/independence-referendum-is-transforming-scotlands-political-landscape/>.

⁶⁷⁷ This split coincided with a protracted crisis over the handling of rape allegations against an SWP leader, a scandal which resulted in hundreds of resignations from the party. Jerome Taylor, “Ranks of the Socialist Workers Party Are Split over Handling of Rape Allegation,” *Independent*, January 11, 2013, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/ranks-of-the-socialist-workers-party-are-split-over-handling-of-rape-allegation-8448429.html>.

⁶⁷⁸ Cf. Sangha and Jamieson, “Independence Referendum.”

pro-independence Scottish political left, which had spent decades building bridges across factional and ideological divides on the “national question”. Thus, RIC became home to many figures and debates familiar from the Scottish Socialist Party,⁶⁷⁹ but also included members from the SNP and the Greens that, together with the SSP, formally constituted the cross-party Yes Campaign beginning in 2012.⁶⁸⁰ The group’s openness to Scottish independence departed from socialist ideas as captured in a 1977 central-committee statement on “The National Question” by the SWP which argued that “the question of nationalism threatens to poison relations between English, Scottish and Welsh workers.”⁶⁸¹ In line with this view, much of the far-left in the UK accused RIC of serving as “a showcase for Scotland’s various pseudo-left groups to offer their services as recruiting sergeants for the Scottish National Party (SNP)”⁶⁸² – even though RIC initially successfully self-positioned outside the orbit of the official *Yes Scotland* campaign and was ran as a loose network of just under 30 local groups that operated more or less autonomously. Their aim was to raise pro-independence support in deprived urban areas and mobilise these by actively registering new voters.⁶⁸³ Broadly conceived, the national organisation, which was disbanded in January 2021 while some local branches continue to campaign under the same name, was a “campaigning organisation working for democracy, social justice, environmental sustainability and peace.”⁶⁸⁴

During the referendum campaign RIC mobilised for mass canvassing of deprived neighbourhoods in Glasgow, Edinburgh, and Dundee to achieve large-scale voter registration

⁶⁷⁹ Formed in 1998 to contest the first Scottish Parliamentary election, the SSP had enjoyed early election successes in a devolved Scotland. However, it faced various challenges ahead of the referendum, including declining electoral support and a high-profile sex-scandal perjury trial involving leader Tommy Sheridan. Severin Carrell, “Tommy Sheridan Sentenced to Three Years in Prison,” *The Guardian*, January 26, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2011/jan/26/tommy-sheridan-sentenced-three-years>.

⁶⁸⁰ Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 89; Neil Davidson, “‘Yes:’ A Non-nationalist Argument for Scottish Independence,” *Radical Philosophy* 185 (2014): 4, <https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/commentary/yes>. Key figures in the RIC circle (and later RISE electoral project) include Chris Bambery, Cat Boyd, Neil Davidson, James Foley, David Jamieson, Pete Ramand, Suki Sangha, Jonathon Shafi, and Ben Wray.

⁶⁸¹ Central Committee of the SWP, “The National Question,” *International Socialism* 101 (September 1977), <https://www.marxists.org/history/etol/newspape/isj/1977/no101/swp.htm>. These debates constituted a condensed replay of arguments conducted in post-war Scotland, during which an electorally viable left-nationalism was constructed (especially in the 1970s-80s). Cf. Ben Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020); Stephen Maxwell, *The Case for Left Wing Nationalism*, with a foreword by Tom Nairn, ed. Jamie Maxwell (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2013).

⁶⁸² Chris Marsden, “Radical Independence Campaign Does Dirty Work for Scottish National Party,” *World Socialist Web Site*, December 4, 2014, <https://www.wsws.org/en/articles/2014/12/04/radi-d04.html>.

⁶⁸³ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 81; Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 8. Cf. also former Scottish Socialist Party leader Tommy Sheridan’s “Hope over Fear” tour.

⁶⁸⁴ RIC, “Constitution,” <https://radical.scot/ric-constitution>. Their activities were motivated by principles of “a social alternative to austerity and privatisation;” environmental sustainability; “real democracy;” “equality and opposition to discrimination;” and “opposition to war, NATO and Trident.” RIC, “Constitution.”

– in line with its agenda of democratic and socially just politics.⁶⁸⁵ One of multiple mass canvassing events was organised in June 2014 and mobilised about “1,000 activists in 40 localities,” resulting in interaction with around 10,000 potential voters.⁶⁸⁶ Although it is difficult to determine the impact of these canvassing drives⁶⁸⁷ in addressing the so-called “missing Scotland” of those 400,000-500,000 previously unregistered members of the public as well as the (not quite) “missing million” who have never or no longer participate in democratic politics through voting,⁶⁸⁸ it brought attention to the class element within the Scottish political context.⁶⁸⁹ Accordingly, RIC explicitly framed the referendum in terms of a class conflict⁶⁹⁰ and aimed to mobilise those “who don’t talk to pollsters and hate politicians” for independence.⁶⁹¹ As they were likely to vote in the referendum, the “Missing Scotland” became a “vital target group.”⁶⁹² The articulation of political voice and political empowerment through the campaign thus contrasted the referendums’ strategic “emphasis on *votes*.”⁶⁹³

Socialist activists’ campaigning both challenged and reaffirmed the narrative of progressiveness, democratic revival, and equality in the referendum debate. Undoubtedly, it made campaigners themselves feel “empowered” and gave the illusion that “[f]or that one day on the 18th September in 2014, Scotland was independent.”⁶⁹⁴ Together with campaigning by political parties and other large grassroots organisations, RIC contributed to the image that the referendum “politicised more people in Scotland than ever” and “brought a lot of people into political awareness.”⁶⁹⁵ As mentioned above, however, many of the traditionally electorally “disengaged” were eager to vote in the referendum. This puts into context the transformative power of mass canvassing which was further limited by RIC’s urban focus and its own socialist pro-independence agenda. The latter is closely related to the pro-independence narrative of progressiveness, but also ties in with *populist* mobilisation for a different politics. While more

⁶⁸⁵ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 9; Sangha and Jamison, “Independence Referendum.” Note that other campaign organisations also participated in voter registration drives in working-class communities. Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 89-90.

⁶⁸⁶ Sangha and Jamieson, “Independence Referendum.”

⁶⁸⁷ Libby Brooks, “Scottish Independence Campaign: Mass Canvassing in Glasgow’s Gorbals,” *The Guardian*, June 22, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/scottish-independence-blog/2014/jun/22/scottish-independence-campaign-radical-independence-campaign-gorbals>.

⁶⁸⁸ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 12-13. Note that, according to numbers cited by Sullivan here, a total of about 10% of unregistered voters is low to average compared to similar states in Western Europe.

⁶⁸⁹ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 82-83.

⁶⁹⁰ Tom Gordon, “Independence is a Class Issue...The Rich Are Voting No,” *The Sunday Herald*, November 24, 2013, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13133226.independence-class-issue-rich-voting-no/>.

⁶⁹¹ Sangha and Jamieson, “Independence Referendum.”

⁶⁹² Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 13; 59; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 90.

⁶⁹³ LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” 140.

⁶⁹⁴ Bissett, interview.

⁶⁹⁵ Lindsay, interview.

commonly associated with right-wing politics, activism here echoes the “beguiling” populist rhetoric of “empower[ing] those over whom power is normally exercised.”⁶⁹⁶ Indeed, the strategic empowerment of politically disengaged groups of society was rhetorically framed through the anti-establishment socialist ideology of the political left.

Although the increasing concentration of political participation among the wealthiest citizens is a problem for contemporary Western democracy,⁶⁹⁷ the risk of failing to represent large segments of society also extends to alternative organisations and pressure groups such as RIC. As a result, “they either become vehicles for narrow special interests or alternatively professional advocacy groups which speak *about*, rather than *on behalf of*, various social groups.”⁶⁹⁸ This promotes inherent claims to empowerment *from above*: by speaking about “politically left behind citizens” to promote a vote for independence RIC, too, failed to represent and engage them more fully in Scottish politics. Felicitas Macgilchrist’s notion of the “language of empowerment” is insightful here. It draws on Jacques Rancière’s concept of the “emancipated spectator” and describes a language that “potentially disempowers those individuals who it is supposed should be empowered.” This practice of empowerment is visible in RIC’s activism (and the “progressive” politics of the Yes campaign) insofar as it “actively (re)produced an inequality of power in (mediated) social relations.”⁶⁹⁹ The discursively suggested empowerment and enfranchisement of deprived parts of society by a radical elite substituted performative participation for unattainable equality. The rhetorically established assumption that large parts of society are outside power is thus mythicised.

The egalitarian shortcomings of what was framed as a politically and socially radical campaign – e.g., concerning gender inequalities – also affected the campaigning organisations themselves.⁷⁰⁰ Jenny Lindsay thus emphasises the precarious position of women in NC who were “treated very differently” and were “undervalued” members of a “non-hierarchical” collective. While some of the female members willingly “ma[de] the sandwiches,” Lindsay stressed that men taking credit for women’s work was a big problem.⁷⁰¹ Similarly, writer Denise Mina suggested that a positive atmosphere distracted from the fact that “the women [are] doing all the fucking work and the men are doing the talking.”⁷⁰² The perception that men

⁶⁹⁶ Higgins, “Governmentality, Populism and Empowerment,” 63.

⁶⁹⁷ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 32.

⁶⁹⁸ Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 276 (emphasis original).

⁶⁹⁹ Felicitas Macgilchrist, “Is ‘Empowerment’ Still a Useful Concept? Rethinking Media Practice with Rancière and the ‘Emancipated Spectator,’” Scullion et al. *The Media*, 91.

⁷⁰⁰ Jenny Morrison, “Little Feminism, but Lots of Feminists: Feminist Resistance and the Scottish Independence Movement,” *Journal of Resistance Studies* 2, no. 1 (2016): 98-99.

⁷⁰¹ Lindsay, interview.

⁷⁰² Denise Mina (crime writer and playwright), interviewed by the author, July 2021.

were “more likely to vote Yes” further complicated the gender politics of the campaign: it meant NC had “a policy of pretty much always shoving women out as spokespeople” in an attempt to grow support.⁷⁰³ These hidden, heteronormative gender politics display strategic campaign politics but equally undermine some of the progressive ideas of these alternative campaign organisations and point to problematic gender representations throughout the debate (and in politics more generally). They indicate that gender equality remained largely underexplored in the referendum campaign and activism. One of the rare exceptions is WFI discussed below.

3.2 *Women for Independence (WFI) and the “female vote”*

Women for Independence, Independence for Women (WFI), officially launched in September 2012 and still active in 2023,⁷⁰⁴ was the main organisation promoting women’s interests during the referendum campaign. Its activism was unmatched by the organisation *Women Together*, which emerged to “provide some sort of counteracting effect to the activities of WFI” and to promote a No vote to women.⁷⁰⁵ Whereas *Women Together* was created as part of *Better Together* to target female pro-Unionist voters more directly,⁷⁰⁶ WFI grew through online activity and events run by locally emerging sub-groups,⁷⁰⁷ with the aim “to counter the disproportionately ‘masculine’ nature of Scottish politics” and male-dominated political debate on the referendum.⁷⁰⁸ Although the structural underrepresentation of women in politics could have easily aligned with notions of a more democratic and egalitarian future Scotland,⁷⁰⁹ the referendum was rarely framed as a feminist opportunity. While Scottish Labour’s (No supporting) Red Paper *Together We Can* (2014) explicitly addressed women’s political

⁷⁰³ Lindsay, interview. For gendered voting expectations and larger trends in gender specific pro-independence support, cf. Gerry Hassan, “Mind the Gap: Gender and the Debate over Scotland’s Future,” *Open Democracy* (2013), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/opendemocracyuk/mind-gap-gender-and-debate-over-scotlands-future/>; Gilles Leydier “Un Enjeu Genre? Les Femmes Écossaises et L’Indépendance,” in *Women and Scotland: Literature, Culture, Politics*, ed. Marie-Odile Pittin-Hédon (Besançon: Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 2020); Meryl Kenny, “Engendering the Independence Debate,” *Scottish Affairs* 23, no. 3 (2014), <https://doi.org/10.3366/scot.2014.0031>.

⁷⁰⁴ From a loose network of local groups, WFI has grown into a more formal organisation. Cf. McAngus and Rummery, “Campaigning for the Female Vote,” 156. Founded by about 100 members, WFI grew substantially and “morphed into an organisation that hosted a conference with 1,000 participants and had over 50 local groups active in political campaigning” after the referendum. Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 9.

⁷⁰⁵ McAngus and Rummery, “Campaigning for the Female Vote,” 147-151.

⁷⁰⁶ McAngus and Rummery, “Campaigning for the Female Vote,” 151-53; 165.

⁷⁰⁷ Kathleen Caskie, “Women Seeking a State of Independence,” *Scottish Left Review* (2014) <https://www.scottishleftreview.scot/women-seeking-a-state-of-independence/>. Cf. Women for Independence, *Our Constitution*, <https://www.wfi.scot/our-constitution/>.

⁷⁰⁸ McAngus and Rummery, “Campaigning for the Female Vote,” 151-53; 165.

⁷⁰⁹ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 86.

underrepresentation as an issue of gender equality, it did not mainstream this issue.⁷¹⁰ Shortcomings in terms of a feminist perspective are even more blatant in the Scottish Government's *White Paper*, where gender inequality remained largely restricted to issues around childcare.⁷¹¹ The enormous voting potential of roughly half the population notwithstanding, galvanising the "female vote" was not a priority in institutional politics at the time. Indeed, provisions made in these strategic documents, rather than in practice, resemble tokenism and forms of "performative activism" discussed above. Importantly, the relative absence of women's voices and discussions on gender equality and justice in 2014 starkly contrast with their prominent role in the debate on the 1997 devolution referendum and the newly devolved Scottish Parliament.⁷¹²

Shortcomings in succeeding to galvanise the "female vote" for independence were discussed as early as 2012, when opinion polls suggested that women were less likely to support a Yes vote.⁷¹³ This apparent inability to win the support of a significant and frequently underrepresented part of society was problematic for the Yes campaign's emphasis on progressiveness, equality, and democracy. Despite the relatively high number of female politicians in Scotland and within the SNP, the party has "less developed links with women's organisations and community groups" (than the Labour party, for example) and initially the constitutional debate was largely shaped by male voices across civic society, politics, and the media.⁷¹⁴ The formation of WFI was highly instrumental in framing the referendum vote more clearly in feminist terms, given its rationale of independence as the "best method for undermining and changing patriarchal power structures in political institutions, the economy

⁷¹⁰ Kenny, "Engendering the Independence Debate," 329; Engender, "A Gender Edit of Scottish Labour's 'Red Paper'" (2014), <https://www.engender.org.uk/news/blog/gender-and-scottish-labours-red-paper/>.

⁷¹¹ McAngus and Rummery, "Campaigning for the Female Vote," 147; Kenny, "Engendering the Independence Debate," 325; Engender, "A Gender Edit."

⁷¹² Bell and Mackay, "Women and Constitutional Debates," 197; Kenny, "Engendering the Independence Debate," 323-24; 327.

⁷¹³ Bell and Mackay, "Women and Constitutional Debates," 198-99. Despite suggestions by e.g., Curtice who links the lower pro-independence support among women to a gendered relationship with politics, there is not sufficient evidence to support this position. John Curtice, "Closing the Gap: Why Women's Voices Could Be a Deciding Factor in the Independence Referendum," *Holyrood Magazine*, November 5, 2012. Cf. Bell and Mackay, "Women and Constitutional Debates," 202. Cf. also Leydier "Un Enjeu Genre?"; Kenny, "Engendering the Independence Debate."

⁷¹⁴ Bell and Mackay, "Women and Constitutional Debates," 200. During later phases of the campaign the SNP made more efforts to rally female voters behind a Yes vote through events such as the all-women Cabinet chaired by Nicola Sturgeon in June 2014. Cf. Annie Thiec, "'Yes Scotland': More than a Party Political Campaign, a National Movement Fostering a New Active Citizenship," *Revue Française de Civilisation Britannique* XX, no. 2 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.4000/rfcb.401>. For analyses of the referendum's gendered media debate, cf. Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, "Whose Voices;" Patrick, "Who Writes the News?"

and wider society.”⁷¹⁵ Indeed, the loose network of “autonomous,” local groups has been campaigning based on the premise that “independence is not only inevitable but essential” to “create a gender-just, inclusive society.”⁷¹⁶ WFI’s decentralised activism meant that a variety of campaigning approaches and events emerged at the time, including creative methods. One such notable example is the Knitting a Nation Project by Aimee Chalmers.

Motivated by a lack of inclusivity among pro-independence campaigning organisations which “saw women mainly as providers of tablet and home baking for fundraising events,” Chalmers decided to organise alternative small-scale campaigning events. Various WFI branches had put significant emphasis on “Listening Groups” to promote exchange and debate between women. Hoping to combine the small-scale political debate of this format with creative engagement, Chalmers initiated the knitting project alongside other small-scale creative projects. The project was successful in involving 36 Yes and No voting women from across Scotland and allowed cross-generational bonds to form between activists, e.g., through cooperation with NC.⁷¹⁷ The news media and the Yes campaign were, however, hesitant to engage with this project or the knitted map of Scotland that emerged from it.⁷¹⁸

Chalmers’ project was inspired by earlier career experiences and aimed to motivate women “who didn’t see themselves as ‘political’ at all” to get involved in the political process.⁷¹⁹ She, like many of the founding and key members of WFI, had ample experience in the political field and institutional politics. Jeane Freeman, political advisor to former First Minister Jack McConnell and prominent SNP MSP, was involved in the founding of WFI. Sturgeon, SNP depute leader at the time, openly backed the campaign, stating that she thought it was “vital that women’s voices are heard loudly and clearly in the independence debate.”⁷²⁰ Additional support came from former SSP MSPs Rosie Kane and Carolyn Leckie, with the latter being a prominent founding member of the group.⁷²¹ Despite attempts at distancing themselves from *Yes Scotland* and the SNP, WFI was not only working closely alongside *Yes*

⁷¹⁵ McAngus and Rummery, “Campaigning for the Female Vote,” 160-61. According to their Manifesto, published in 2021, WFI’s campaigning is structured around the five key areas of human rights, health and wellbeing, the economy, food and the environment, and immigration, and prioritises specific provisions for women. Women for Independence, *Manifesto* (2021), <https://www.wfi.scot/womanifesto/>.

⁷¹⁶ Women for Independence, *Manifesto*; Women for Independence, *Our Constitution*.

⁷¹⁷ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 74.

⁷¹⁸ Aimee Chalmers, submission to the project, June 2014. The map was exhibited in various town halls and local venues and was covered in the film *Social Fabric* by journalist Jo Gill and François Lamy. Both were shown at the Scottish Parliament in 2015. Chalmers, submission. Cf. Jessie McLaughlin, “Indy Knitting,” *Bella Caledonia*, October 21, 2014, <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2014/10/21/indy-knitting/>.

⁷¹⁹ Chalmers, submission.

⁷²⁰ Nicola Sturgeon qtd. in BBC News, “Scottish Independence: Women Encouraged to Vote Yes,” September 30, 2012, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-19769633>.

⁷²¹ BBC News, “Scottish Independence.”

Scotland, but has included various SNP members, has had close ties to SNP party politics,⁷²² and has replicated features of astroturf campaigning. How closely linked WFI activism and institutional politics of, most notably, the SNP are, has become evident since the referendum.⁷²³ As with NC, there has been ample cross-pollination between WFI and SNP party political positions, with current and former campaigners joining the party ranks.

Similar to the Bus Party, WFI aimed to facilitate discussion and exchange through their “Listening Group” format, even if in the context of an outspoken pro-independence agenda. Although this resulted in “spirited, often heart-felt, but always respectful” debates, WFI also struggled to facilitate cross-party deliberative debate between Yes and No supporters. Like NC, the Bus Party, and many Yes supporters, WFI were mainly talking to themselves.⁷²⁴ The creation of an alternative, highly gendered space for political debate aside, WFI, too, demonstrates significant limitations in terms of “authenticity,” representativeness, and reach. For example, WFI also struggled to address “women of immigrant backgrounds”⁷²⁵ and working-class women.⁷²⁶ The limited capacity for involvement from women – especially women from minority backgrounds – was further constraint by the political context of the independence option. As Bell and Mackay argue, the fact the practicalities (and realities) of independence will only be determined after the referendum “contributed to a dis-empowerment of civic participation”⁷²⁷ which disproportionately disadvantages women due to their “relative exclusion from the spheres of party politics and legal debate.”⁷²⁸ Thus, the political debate both side-lined women and feminist positions in political debate – outside of vote winning tactics.

3.3 Limitations of alternative campaigning organisations

Where “professionally run, centrally managed elite organisations [...] are less suited to mobilise grassroots activists from less advantaged, less educated backgrounds or representing their interests,”⁷²⁹ the alternative campaigning organisations NC, WFI, and especially RIC

⁷²² Jenny Morrison, “Little Feminism,” 93.

⁷²³ Cf. the embezzlement scandal around former SNP MP Natalie McGarry: reported by Jeane Freeman over discrepancies in WFI accounts, McGarry was found guilty in 2022 for embezzling funds from WFI and the SNP. BBC News, “Former SNP MP Natalie McGarry Jailed for Embezzling £25,000,” June 30, 2022, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-61994020>.

⁷²⁴ Chalmers, submission.

⁷²⁵ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 86.

⁷²⁶ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 87; Jenny Morrison, “Little Feminism,” 88; 92-93.

⁷²⁷ Bell and Mackay, “Women and Constitutional Debates,” 202.

⁷²⁸ Bell and Mackay, “Women and Constitutional Debates,” 202.

⁷²⁹ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 36.

offered different ways of engaging with these parts of society.⁷³⁰ Despite the shortcomings discussed above, this activism made the campaign more “colourful” and added energy and diversity to the political debate.⁷³¹ Related critical artistic practices provided “alternatives to the current post-political order” and “ma[de] visible what the dominant consensus tends to obscure and obliterate, in giving voice to all those who are silenced within the framework of the existing hegemony.”⁷³² This potential of art to counter silencing hegemonic politics on the one hand, was in constant tension with the SNP’s dominance in providing most of the funding and door-knocking campaigners on the other.⁷³³ Whereas the independence campaign may have “helped re-engage the radical left with mainstream politics,” this “autonomous agency” has been largely absorbed by the SNP.⁷³⁴ The consequent blurring “between authentic and inauthentic participation” as well as the strategic employ of “front groups, co-opting social movement organizations, and [...] appearances of public support”⁷³⁵ by “elites” limits the self-attested importance of alternative campaigners within the public sphere as well as their claims to equality and societal representativeness. Catherine Frost makes a similar point, cautioning against the “transformative effects of Scottish participatory democracy” which she sees as “heavily framed by official messaging from two levels of government that aimed to foreclose on political imagination.”⁷³⁶ The limiting effect on popular participation in the referendum through interventions by, specifically, the Scottish Government under SNP-leadership has been shown above. In the context of increasingly concentrated political power,⁷³⁷ these practices reduce more radical political representation – in its double-meaning as speaking on behalf of and being representative of the people – to “a form of [performative] claim-making.”⁷³⁸ While participation was thus limited by elite interpretation, the above analysis has shown, contrary to Frost’s proposition, that elite political interventions actively encouraged alternative forms of “political imagination” and arts-based activism. The subsequent framing of popular participation as audible and visible activism discursively produced the myth of popular political participation – a myth that fails to address the full breath of participation, as the below discussion will argue.

⁷³⁰ Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 88-90; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 91.

⁷³¹ Bissett, interview.

⁷³² Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 93.

⁷³³ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1187.

⁷³⁴ Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 230.

⁷³⁵ E. Walker, “Between Grassroots and ‘Astroturf,’” 273.

⁷³⁶ Frost, “Scotland’s Festival,” 122-23.

⁷³⁷ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 32.

⁷³⁸ David Judge, “‘Word from the Street:’ When Non-electoral Representative Claims Meet Electoral Representation in the United Kingdom,” *British Politics* 8 (2013): 389, <https://doi.org/10.1057/bp.2013.8>.

4. *Referendum Café* – writing experience, performing participation

A key aim of my research into popular participation and the different voices of the referendum was the collection of statements and contributions from members of the public. Where other projects had emphasised a forward-facing vision of positive change and aimed to encourage participants to imagine alternative future(s),⁷³⁹ I wanted participants to actively reflect and contextualise their own positionality and participation in the public debate. These personal forms of memorialization outside institutional and elite discourse add nuance to understandings of the referendum experience, while highlighting the relevance and limitations of dominant referendum narratives. Reflections by members of the public were collected as part of a *Referendum Café*, consisting of a focus group and an individual response format (see Methodology). The compiled statements of participants and contributors are discussed below.

Although the constitutional question and referendum were frequently perceived as contested and divisive,⁷⁴⁰ a predominantly calm and respectful discussion emerged in response to the prepared prompts. The only tense moment emerged when one of the participants assumed that all attendees would have naturally voted “Yes” in 2014. By trying to establish a “tribal” identification with the Yes vote, the participant implied that attendance at an event reflecting on and creatively engaging with the referendum would logically coincide with pro-independence support. Although this statement was met with some approving murmurs and nods, not everyone agreed. While one of the participants suggested that Yes supporters would be more likely to continue the debate on independence (in contrast to No voters’ experience of a shared “trauma” or lack of investment in the issue), this was critically challenged by another participant. As I had made it clear that voting preferences as well as party political alignments were not an issue of discussion during the focus group, we quickly moved on to other themes. Nonetheless, this shows that explorations of the referendum – especially through creative means – have come to be discursively aligned with a pro-independence bias and a different level of emotional investment. In fact, the pro-independence bias of creative campaign activism and the DS project (including most of its contributors and editors) was also present with the participants in the *Referendum Café* and my oral history interviews with artists, writers, activists, and commentators. Few supporters of the No side were happy to speak out or self-identify as such. This imbalance in public voice reflects a wider trend across a variety of

⁷³⁹ These include the Bus Party’s Scroll of Hope, the DS project, and NC’s Wish Trees mentioned above.

⁷⁴⁰ Contributor 1, submission to the project, June 2021; Contributor 2, submission to the project, June 2021; Participant 2, submission to the project, November 2022. Cf. Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Re-tweeted,” 70; Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 92-93.

publications which collected statements on the referendum by writers, artists, and public intellectuals. They predominantly lean towards pro-independence support and share in imaginings of the nation through performative elements of constructing a different future – by attempting to collectively “dream” or write it into existence.⁷⁴¹

Furthermore, democratic politics has come to be equated with “the politics of voice.”⁷⁴² Indeed, democratic politics and political agency are – on the private as well as national level – frequently expressed by using one’s voice. This is evident in the conceptual base of the public sphere as structured around speech-acts and reasoned argument. The emphasis on voice was also echoed in the efforts to mobilise the people of Scotland during the referendum to an extent that the referendum became associated with a feeling of being “informed and invigorated” by “[m]y country having a voice and full identity.”⁷⁴³ The referendum thus manifested as an “[e]xciting time, a time of debate and opportunity for a new future” as the participant remembers further; personal excitement and empowerment intersect with an empowered and self-confident nation with its own voice. Indeed, most participants and contributors experienced the referendum as an “exciting” historic moment – even if they did not support independence.⁷⁴⁴ This aligns with the idea of democratic revival and popular sovereignty discussed above as well as the referendum’s structural pre-disposition towards democratic self-determination. Various participants echoed in their contributions the idea that the referendum was an “opportunity for a better future, optimism, [and] agency” which found expression in one participant’s realisation that “I can make a difference in my country and its place in the world.”⁷⁴⁵ This participant was “shocked” to discover their own political voice and that people were listening to them as if “I was some authority on the matter!”⁷⁴⁶ In this way, the sense of making a difference towards a better future manifests in many participants’ experience of political empowerment and having a public, a political voice that mattered.⁷⁴⁷ This dual empowerment of the nation and its citizens is also evident in an excerpt from a poem written by one of the contributors reflecting on their memories of the referendum. Here, they describe

⁷⁴¹ E.g., Scott Hames, ed., *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (Edinburgh: Word Power Books, 2012); Val McDermid and Jo Sharp, eds. *Imagine A Country: Ideas for a Better Future* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2020).

⁷⁴² Mónica Brito Vieira, “Silence in Political Theory and Practice,” *Critical Review of International Social and Political Philosophy* 24, no. 3 (2021): 289, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13698230.2020.1796328>.

⁷⁴³ Participant 2, submission.

⁷⁴⁴ Contributor 1, submission; Contributor 2, submission; Contributor 3, submission to the project, July 2021; Contributor 4, submission to the project, June 2021; Contributor 7, submission, July 2021; Participant 2, submission; Participant 3, submission to the project, November 2022.

⁷⁴⁵ Participant 3, submission.

⁷⁴⁶ Participant 3, submission.

⁷⁴⁷ Contributors 3 and 4, submission; Participants 2 and 3, submission.

that “It [the referendum] gave the nation a voice/ A wee, tricky choice/ Some felt their own power/ First time, in this very hour.”⁷⁴⁸ Again, emphasis is placed on the finding of a voice, on a national and an individual, political level as “tricky” but uniquely empowering.

Arguably, campaigning for the status quo did not require the same vocal, public communication as a reimagining of the nation – at least until “the Vow” was made by leading British politicians shortly before the vote. Where the public debate was dominated by loud, colourful pro-independence campaigning, many supporters of the status quo sought alternative forms of political participation in the debate through strategic silences. Both the joyous and often presumptuous engagement on one side of the debate and the silences and hesitations on the other revived what one participant remembered as the “level of emotional conflict within communities across Scotland”⁷⁴⁹ in the small-scale discussion of the *Referendum Café*. This perception also points to the limitations of the public sphere, which does not account for politicised silences.⁷⁵⁰ As a result of “heated” communication between the “camps” – or the fear thereof –, many chose to keep quiet.⁷⁵¹ The experiences of “spirited, often heart-felt, but always respectful” debate on the one hand,⁷⁵² is contrasted with division and deceit, polarised opinion, alienation, and the loss of friendships.⁷⁵³

The fact that one of the participants came to speak to me after the event to share that they had voted No but did not feel confident to speak out in this relatively intimate and safe setting demonstrates the silencing effects that many members of the public may have experienced during the referendum campaign. Whether being fed up with a “useless” political debate or fearing public or private backlash or isolation, many people felt that publicly expressing support for the Union did not align with the seemingly “progressive” public opinion. This impression aligns with what Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann has described as the “spiral of silence,” i.e., citizens’ unwillingness to voice their political opinion and preferences when faced with deviating public opinion.⁷⁵⁴ A hesitancy to “self-identify” with the Unionist side of the debate also links to the personal experience of Mina, who recounted in her interview that she and “a lot of people felt silenced by joy” during the referendum: “people were very joyous and it was very attractive and it was exciting and it felt young and it felt vibrant and it felt positive” to an

⁷⁴⁸ Contributor 5, poetry submission “Long Live Scotland” to the project, June 2021.

⁷⁴⁹ Participant 1, submission to the project, November 2022.

⁷⁵⁰ Kennan Ferguson, “Silence: A Politics,” *Contemporary Political Theory* 2 (2003): 52; 54.

⁷⁵¹ Contributors 1, 2 and 3, submission; Participant 4, submission to the project, November 2022.

⁷⁵² Contributor 4, submission.

⁷⁵³ Contributors 1 and 2, submission.

⁷⁵⁴ Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, *The Spiral of Silence: Public Opinion, Our Social Skin* (London: Chicago University Press, 1984).

extent that even those opposed to independence and fearful of its associated nationalism sometimes did not want to spoil everyone else's fun.⁷⁵⁵ This observation echoes Asher and French's evaluation of the pro-independence side's "consensualism, and forced positivity from progressives."⁷⁵⁶ Frost also highlights this exclusionary consensus of positivity and states: "[w]hile the idea of the referendum as a festival of democracy is appealing, the problem with enthusiasm is that it creates a danger of missing or misreading the silences of those who don't participate."⁷⁵⁷ As a result, the tensions and nuances of the participation were silenced by a progressive consensus on the Yes side, which shaped the referendum discourse more widely. The silencing of popular political voice challenges underlying assumptions of progressiveness and democratisation.

Although in the minority, one of the contributors described the referendum as "[a] waste of time, money and resources."⁷⁵⁸ Based on their perception of the referendum as "a divisive and unhelpful distraction from the tough work needed done at Holyrood like tackling our drinking culture and sectarianism," this contributor had no desire to get involved. Instead, the referendum experience "put [them] off politics."⁷⁵⁹ Where others felt inspired by the political excitement, they saw "nothing special" in a debate shaped by lies and an ignorance towards risk. For them, voting was nothing but their "civic duty" because "in a referendum every single vote counts."⁷⁶⁰ This notion of civic duty as a mobilising element for political participation aligns with the empowerment experienced by citizens based on the referendum format,⁷⁶¹ rather than the campaign experience discussed above. The emphasis on individual contributions within the majoritarian framework of the referendum highlights the referendum's perceived importance rather than its political logic.⁷⁶²

Simultaneously, contributor 1 also emphasised the silencing effect of the campaign: instead of getting actively involved in so much as personal debates, they felt it "was easier to nod along to their [the Yes voters'] nonsense than get bogged down in a conversation with no winners."⁷⁶³ The frustrations of this contributor are indicative of the debate's rhetorical and

⁷⁵⁵ Mina, interview.

⁷⁵⁶ Asher and French, "Crises Capitalism," 7.

⁷⁵⁷ Frost, "Scotland's Festival," 123.

⁷⁵⁸ Contributor 1, submission.

⁷⁵⁹ Contributor 1, submission.

⁷⁶⁰ Contributor 1, submission.

⁷⁶¹ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 24.

⁷⁶² The first-past-the-post electoral system in General Elections also operates with a majoritarian logic but rarely mobilises voters in the same way. Instead, it has raised concerns about its representativeness. John Curtice, "So What Went Wrong with the Electoral System? The 2010 Election Result and the Debate About Electoral Reform," *Parliamentary Reform* 63, no. 4 (2010): 624-25, <https://doi.org/10.1093/pa/gsq018>.

⁷⁶³ Contributor 1, submission.

practical limitations and manifest in the retreat from public political debate. Their silent retreat from these debates constitutes a form of resistance towards related practices of identity formation and a rejection of these cultural practices of power.⁷⁶⁴ Although, according to Mónica Brito Vieira, “the encouragement of vocal citizenship is meant to produce inclusion, it can, in fact, produce many important exclusions: from the citizens who are non-speakers, and the many citizens whose everyday experience of politics is silent, to those who use silence actively, as a form of political engagement.”⁷⁶⁵

Silence not only denotes and encompasses political activity but also indicates the limitations thereof. In the context of a democracy that is based on active voice, the decision to withhold one’s public political voice becomes a form of political participation itself – and challenges definitions of political participation introduced above. It further challenges the categories of voice and exit proposed by Hirschman through the boycott of vocal participation as constitutive of the politics of the public sphere. According to Hirschman, voice as the “political action par excellence” can manifest through anything from “faint grumbling to violent protest”⁷⁶⁶ but is marked by its “audible” public-ness. As boycott, exit is “undertaken for a specific and explicit purpose of achieving a change of policy” and articulated through voice on the premise of re-entry.⁷⁶⁷ Where the “silent majority” may have extricated itself from the political debate, it forcefully “re-entered” through the vote, i.e. “remainers [...] just shut up and used their vote.”⁷⁶⁸ Much like an audience participating in a ritualised cultural performance,⁷⁶⁹ the “silent majority” formed a community of silent onlookers on the spectacle of street carnivals and public performances of national identity while constituting their own. As the distinction between exit and voice suggests, however, the discourse remained largely limited by its inherent duality. Within this context, boundaries became increasingly fixed, conversations were repetitive and performative. Indeed, contributor 2 remembers the debate as “polarized and focuse[d] on repeat phrases” familiar from “populism politics.”⁷⁷⁰ In a debate which could ostensibly have no winners, claims to an imagined future are both discursively constituted and limited by their own rhetoric.

⁷⁶⁴ Ferguson, “Silence: A Politics,” 54.

⁷⁶⁵ Brito Vieira, “Silence in Political Theory,” 290.

⁷⁶⁶ Albert Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty: Responses to Decline in Firms, Organizations, and States* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 16.

⁷⁶⁷ Hirschman, *Exit, Voice, and Loyalty*, 86.

⁷⁶⁸ Contributor 2, submission.

⁷⁶⁹ Cf. Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 28-82, especially 81; 45.

⁷⁷⁰ Contributor 2, submission.

Indeed, the performative quality of the debate indicates a lack of true exchange, deliberation, and political debate,⁷⁷¹ resulting in an unresolvable political argument. Its performative elements are realised in the *illusio*, in the discursive game of the referendum. According to Bourdieu, participation and “investment in the game by the informed player, who, possessing a sense of the game because made by the game, plays the game, [...] thereby makes it exist.”⁷⁷² The game of the referendum discourse thus not only constituted its informed players and their “moves” within the game,⁷⁷³ but was created and limited through strategic performative utterances, which determined what was sayable (and actionable). Hames conceptualises this as the “pre-ordained rhetorical limits” of “the grid” of the referendum, as contrasted by the “spontaneous social connections” of the referendum as “the festival.”⁷⁷⁴ Whereas the festival character of the referendum implies empowering debate and participation, the *illusio* creates a game which is highly exclusionary and silencing to those who refuse to play it. Some of the contributors thus preferred to keep their opinions on where they stood to themselves⁷⁷⁵ and retreated from the self-constituting, strategic game of fixed patterns.⁷⁷⁶

Even where contributors were “immediately enthused” by the campaigning opportunity, they frequently experienced the limitations of the “open debate.” Thus, contributor 4 writes that during their first time delivering campaigning materials, they were “pursued by a No voter who thrust the leaflet back at me, harangued me and tried to intimidate me. She had no interest in seeing another point of view.”⁷⁷⁷

While many participants experienced the benefits of the debate and enjoyed talking and listening to others,⁷⁷⁸ some were weary of the available information and debate.⁷⁷⁹ They regretted the missed opportunity for a radical re-evaluation of Scotland’s future.⁷⁸⁰ Indeed, this echoes the missed opportunity of open dialogue identified by Asher and French, who suggest that the referendum “function[ed] as a process of closure, where independence is posited as *ipso facto* ‘progressive’.”⁷⁸¹ The shortcomings of an allegedly open debate also impacted how

⁷⁷¹ Contributors 1, 2, 3, and 4, submission; Participant 5, submission to the project, November 2022.

⁷⁷² Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 290.

⁷⁷³ Cf. Hames’s conceptualisation of indyref as a “game of chess.” Hames, “Democracy in the Indyref Novel,” 85-86.

⁷⁷⁴ Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” 86.

⁷⁷⁵ Contributor 3, submission. Cf. also Contributor 2, submission; Participant 4, submission.

⁷⁷⁶ Contributor 2, submission.

⁷⁷⁷ Contributor 4, submission.

⁷⁷⁸ Contributor 3 and 4, submission; Contributor 6, submission to the project, July 2021; Contributor 7, submission; Participants 3 and 4, submission.

⁷⁷⁹ Contributors 1, 2, 3, and 6, submission; Participant 5, submission.

⁷⁸⁰ Contributors 2, 3, and 4, submission.

⁷⁸¹ Asher and French, “Crises Capitalism,” 1.

receptive people were to alternative perspectives: contributor 3 and 6 emphasised the difficulties in persuading anyone to shift support when canvassing.⁷⁸² The need for tribal identification visible in these conversations is indicative of the lasting discursive performances and limitations of the “game” of the referendum, which I continue to experience when I speak about this topic and my research. Generally, the first question is: which side did you vote for?

Seen as divisive by some, partisan support and political participation came naturally to others. Participant 3 stated: “I had to campaign. I didn’t think about why I felt that at the time. Now I know it was because belonging, my country, our country, matters. It matters who we are, who governs us and how.”⁷⁸³ Their motivation to campaign finds direct expression in a sense of belonging, home, and national self-identification. Although the renewal of democracy – beyond the choice of government – was not a key concern for them, they, as many others, felt enthused by the opportunity to make a real difference.⁷⁸⁴ Accordingly, contributor 7 was “very encouraged by the number of different organisations in Scotland who supported independence” and the collegial working together.⁷⁸⁵ Activism, both positive and negative,⁷⁸⁶ was perceived as playing a critical part “in getting the message out there and also attracting people to a cause greater than themselves.”⁷⁸⁷ Nonetheless, the lack of representativeness among campaigners remained an issue.⁷⁸⁸ The sense of empowerment through vocal, colourful and public participation on the pro-independence side simultaneously promoted an exclusionary narrative of what constituted political participation during the referendum. In failing to account for the alternative forms of participation and particularly silences and hesitations, this framing of the referendum in public discourse had contributed to the emerging myth of popular participation.

Indeed, many eventual Yes voters were not swept away by street activism but made their choice slowly and through private conversations. For example, one of the participants, who described themselves “a late and gradual ‘No to Yes!’,” realised that their “journey [was] a result of answering questions from loads of folk – family, friends, colleagues (PCC!⁷⁸⁹).” While

⁷⁸² Contributors 3 and 6, submission.

⁷⁸³ Participant 3, submission.

⁷⁸⁴ Contributors 3, 4, 6, and 7; submission; Participant 3, submission; Participant 6, submission to the project, November 2022.

⁷⁸⁵ Contributor 7, submission.

⁷⁸⁶ Contributor 2, submission.

⁷⁸⁷ Contributor 3, submission.

⁷⁸⁸ Contributor 2, submission.

⁷⁸⁹ PCC stands for Press Complaints Commission here.

constrained by their job and circumstances at the time, they “regret not doing more.”⁷⁹⁰ Another participant explained that their “journey to Yes” began on Leith Gala Day 2013:

there was a stall, a Yes stall. It was part of a push to get one million people to sign to say they would vote yes. As I walked past someone asked me if I wanted to sign and I surprised myself by saying “Not yet.” Until then, I was sure I would vote no.⁷⁹¹

In this way, the referendum did become a political journey for many who got “involved in politics.”⁷⁹² This was also the case with the newly enfranchised youth, who benefitted from the lowering of the voting age to sixteen. Generational differences in voting intersect with cross-generational bonding among activists politicised since the 1960s and the newly vocal campaigners as well as between parents and their children. One of the participants described their son’s unexpected political interest as follows:

“When I think of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum I think of...” Stephen on a Friday evening having his friends round for “pres” – pre-drinks before going out clubbing. I’d given him a copy of the summary White Paper and found it lying crumpled on his bedroom floor amongst the detritus of his typical 19 year old room. When I asked if he’d read it he looked shocked – “of course I have,” he replied. “If you’re finished with it, can I take it for someone else?” To my surprise, he said “absolutely not! You might think we’re sitting in my room drinking but we’re talking about independence – and I’ve converted some of my pals from No to Yes.”⁷⁹³

As this example shows, young voters actively engaged and discussed the referendum and data suggests that support for independence was strongest among those aged 25-39 with 55% – in contrast, older generations were more hesitant to embrace the potential risks associated with independence.⁷⁹⁴ Nonetheless, there was also much hesitancy among young voters and the referendum did not see Scotland wake “to car horns and ceilidhs in the street but” to “dull normality” with the “silent majority who voted No remain[ing] silent.”⁷⁹⁵ While the referendum results did not deliver on the “progressive” politics of the “colourful” and “noisy” pro-independence arts-based activism, Barr’s equation of political voice with public voice reiterates the limitations of progressive pro-independence activism. It disregards the political power of the “silent majority,” who may have remained publicly silent – and refused to engage in the same vocal activism as many Yes campaigners – but also politically decisive.

⁷⁹⁰ Participant 6, submission.

⁷⁹¹ Participant 4, submission.

⁷⁹² Participant 5, submission.

⁷⁹³ Participant 6, submission.

⁷⁹⁴ YouGov, “YouGov Survey Results,” September 2014, http://d25d2506sfb94s.cloudfront.net/cumulus_uploads/document/rj4q1bcwo6/Final_Prediction_140918_Final_Website_Rebasing_W.pdf.

⁷⁹⁵ Barr, *Summer of Independence*, 103.

5. Conclusion: a nation in debate and participating in the streets?

During the final weeks of the campaign “many people became politically active for the first time” and “Yes had tens of thousands of activists involved on the ground on a weekly basis, learning political campaigning techniques and becoming familiar with the political terrain in their communities.”⁷⁹⁶ The movement activism of these campaigners played an important role in promoting independence “as a means to achieve a more egalitarian and inclusive society.”⁷⁹⁷ Political activism created alternative spaces for public debate and deliberation, which contributed to “the awakening of the Scottish civil society, with long-lasting effects, having challenged, as many observed, the boundary of Scotland’s political imagination.”⁷⁹⁸ However, the idea that the referendum mobilised a whole nation and reached otherwise politically apathetic groups has its limitations. While the data cited above indicates a high level of traditional political engagement through the vote itself, the reach of pro-independence campaigning largely followed traditional patterns and reproduced similar practices of political exclusion. This is true both for engagement with the referendum and the Yes side specifically – which had been explicitly framed as an open and inclusive movement, realising the progressive essence of a new Scotland. Indeed, the aftermath of the referendum quickly re-established the decision-making dominance of a political elite and absorbed “alternative agency” on the (progressive) left.⁷⁹⁹ Notwithstanding the “extraordinary vigour of the street protests, the intellectual momentum has been with independence from above,”⁸⁰⁰ as campaigning efforts of NC, RIC, and WFI discussed in this chapter demonstrate.

Quoting data from the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey collected in mid-summer 2014 (at a point when support for Yes was at around 40%), Paterson states that support for the Yes side “was not straightforwardly about social class but was rather about an interaction of political ideology and class,” which suggests “that the Yes movement was led by left-leaning, middle-class people.”⁸⁰¹ Paterson adds that the referendum campaign represents a “familiar case of a movement led by male, left-wing, middle-class activists, speaking certainly to male, left-wing, working-class people, but less convincingly to the working class or women in general.”⁸⁰² Despite a focus on inclusivity during the referendum campaign and in the

⁷⁹⁶ Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 4.

⁷⁹⁷ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 100.

⁷⁹⁸ Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 162-63.

⁷⁹⁹ Davidson and Foley with Wray, *Scotland After Britain*, 230.

⁸⁰⁰ Davidson and Foley with Wray, *Scotland After Britain*, 211.

⁸⁰¹ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 41.

⁸⁰² Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 41. Paterson cites data from the 2014 Scottish Social Attitude Survey to indicate that 42% of working-class and 32% of middle-class voters supported Yes, with support being more

promotion of the Yes vote specifically, this data suggests that participation was constrained by ideology, gender and class. Consequently, political campaigning during the referendum “was not straightforwardly a radical assertion of working-class socialism against elites. It was a rebellion by a minority of people on the left in both middle-class and working-class social groups.”⁸⁰³ Thus, its intrinsic narrative claim to egalitarianism and working-class heritage is largely performative and rooted in the routine articulation of national identity.

Even though devolution and, again, independence could provide an opportunity to counteract growing political exclusion, the reality is a different one: the Scottish political class is increasingly well-educated and middle-class⁸⁰⁴ and has coincided with a “decline of working class people representing themselves.”⁸⁰⁵ This trend was not halted by the referendum campaign, which reaffirmed that politicians barely target those who are already disengaged from institutional politics, unless they are deemed strategically relevant: due to the expected high turnout in the referendum and the relative power of each vote, it became clear that many “routine” non-voters would vote this time – this put the “missing million” back on the political map.⁸⁰⁶ In addition, the high turnout demonstrates “that when you give people something to vote for, or against, then democracy will work.”⁸⁰⁷ Consequently, the referendum politics are symptomatic of larger issues around deliberative democracy, rooted in the absence of widespread citizen participation necessary to balance elite political power.⁸⁰⁸

In the context of the referendum, the idea of empowerment provided an intriguing outlet for notions of progressiveness and change advocated by the SNP government, the Yes campaign, and its spin-off organisations. In contrast to the devolution referendum of 1997, which was seemingly marked by a quiet consensus,⁸⁰⁹ the independence referendum was framed as a democratic opportunity which indirectly defined participation as colourful, audible, and visible in the streets. The quiet consensus that may have “won” devolution, was now seen to obstruct the possibility of independence – by ironically putting emphasis on the most visible members of society.

prevalent among its left-leaning members (51% and 47% respectively). While 48% of working-class men supported Yes, according to the survey only 37% of middle-class men, 35% of working-class women, and 27% of middle-class women said the same. The results are based on a sample of voters who said they had definite views on the referendum question (with a total of 915 responses). Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 42. Thus, Paterson suggests that “the Yes vote was a left-wing male vote.” Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 41.

⁸⁰³ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 43.

⁸⁰⁴ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 32-22.

⁸⁰⁵ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 36.

⁸⁰⁶ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 59-60.

⁸⁰⁷ Sullivan, *The Missing Scotland*, 99. Cf. LeDuc, “Referendums and Deliberative Democracy,” 145.

⁸⁰⁸ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 33.

⁸⁰⁹ Mitchell, “The Referendum Campaign,” 88; Kay, interview.

Indeed, the engaging and egalitarian narrative of political change and progressiveness rooted in a “[m]yth around Scottish exceptionalism”⁸¹⁰ has been discursively and performatively shaped by leftist commentators and public intellectuals. In its application to the referendum discourse, it promoted political participation as colourful and publicly visible popular activism. This form of political participation was beneficial for both sides of the campaign: while it incorporated the progressive, engaging, and visible political messaging needed by the Yes campaign, it could easily be dismissed as the naïve, amateurish, fact-deprived pastime the No campaign needed it to be. Largely scripted through elite political and media discourse, the hegemonic articulation⁸¹¹ of political participation defined which forms of public participation were desired, often ignoring modes of popular participation that evaded the leftist rhetoric of empowerment.

In contrast, the selective representation of wide-reaching political participation through visible activism confirms a bias within the media – which has been significantly shaped by left-leaning, middle class, public intellectuals – as well as the emergence of a myth around democracy, equality, and progressiveness. This myth contrasts Scotland with a specific version of England. Accordingly, the campaign rhetoric on the Yes side “drew on the creation of a popular national narrative of a distinct Scottish identity” and “cast austerity and neoliberalism along national lines as an English phenomenon, alien to Scotland’s purported social-democratic values.”⁸¹² As I argue in chapter 6, tendencies to frame Scottish society in this way draw on long-standing narratives of national identity and tie in with specific media practices during the referendum campaign (see chapter 2). On a practical level, however, this meant that the Yes side routinely performed an “expression of pragmatic nationalist discontent,” rooted in long-standing fluctuations of protest and compromise between sectarian nationalism and unionism.⁸¹³ As such, the 2014 referendum constitutes, according to Paterson, only the latest “revolt of the utopian left against what is perceived as the insufferable caution and conservatism of Scottish civil society.”⁸¹⁴ The persuasiveness of an underlying narrative of participation, progressive politics, and democratic revival articulated in this political dynamic constitutes a specific version of the nation which was constituted and routinely performed in the discursive politics of participation. More so than translating into activism, being part of “a movement” generated “a sense of momentum” and communicated belonging to an “imagined

⁸¹⁰ Harvey, “A Dominant SNP in a Unionist Scotland?” 56.

⁸¹¹ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 92-93; Mouffe and Laclau, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy*, 86-87.

⁸¹² Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 117.

⁸¹³ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 43.

⁸¹⁴ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 33.

community.”⁸¹⁵ Thus, the referendum – and the campaigns – operated within a specifically nationalist framework. How these tensions between political mobilisation, progressive politics, and national(ist) belonging were addressed in poetic provocations and fiction on the referendum – between performances of participation and representation – will be addressed in the following chapter.

⁸¹⁵ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1195.

Chapter 4

Fiction(s) of popular participation: political verse and indyref literature

*Let me tell you something: the referendum was good for us. [...] People were engaged.*⁸¹⁶

The small number of literary responses to the referendum published to date is remarkable. As the previous chapters have indicated, Scotland's self-fashioned creative elite was expected to obtain a central role within the referendum debate. This expectation can be seen to draw on the long-standing narrative of cultural devolution which suggests that writers as well as the art they produce have been an "active vehicle for political identity formation" in Scotland.⁸¹⁷ Indeed, pro-independence support in "the arts" was prevalent in the referendum.⁸¹⁸ However, neither arts-based activism (see [chapter 3](#)) nor the presumed national and cultural functions of writers (see [chapter 6](#)) produced the artistic flourishing such a culture-political alignment might suggest. Instead, the campaign was largely marked by a "lack of actual art."⁸¹⁹

Against this backdrop, this chapter analyses how participation was portrayed and enacted in creative practice, namely political verse, poetry, and fiction. The present chapter further examines how these literary representations performed a myth of popular participation and what political functions this myth played. On this basis, I demonstrate that claims to popular participation, deliberation, and democratisation articulated through a politics of progressiveness in public and media debate were rarely covered in literature and poetry. Instead, political verse, poetry, and indyref fiction mobilised notions of national cultural distinction and symbolism, which challenge an image of the referendum perpetuated through the myth of popular participation. These restrictive portrayals of the referendum contrasts with the political vanguard position of writers in the Scottish movement for self-determination.

Firstly, I address how popular participation was represented, negotiated, and performed in political verse and poetry published during and shortly after the referendum. These publications more explicitly fulfilled a double function as a campaigning tool. On a content level, popular participation was framed through national(ist) iconography or a national political awakening. Poems dealing with the referendum through the latter theme engage more fully than the indyref novels published to date with notions of political change and the progressive

⁸¹⁶ James Robertson, *To Be Continued...* (2016; London: Penguin Books, 2017), 67.

⁸¹⁷ Thomson, "From 'Renaissance' to Referendum?" 63.

⁸¹⁸ Thomson, "From 'Renaissance' to Referendum?" 63.

⁸¹⁹ Massie, "Where's the Art, National Collective?"

politics of participation that shaped the public referendum debate. As such, they create (rare) spaces for political deliberation and expressions of popular participation and voice. This difference in function is also influenced by genre, mode, and date of publication.

Secondly, I suggest that indyref novels, predominantly published after the vote, were less successful in opening spaces for political deliberation. Instead, many publications engage with the referendum by representing the debate as it happened: regurgitating arguments from media and public debate while representing the nation through shortbread tin symbolism. I analyse the defiance of “progressive” politics in indyref fiction in a return to nationalist symbolism and stereotype in the second part of this chapter.

1. Poetry as activism?

Poetry addressing the referendum emerged in two ways during and directly after the referendum campaign: firstly, in its traditional lyrical form published by established Scottish poets in newspapers and poetry collections;⁸²⁰ secondly, in the more free-flowing format of topical political verse⁸²¹ and spoken-word performances. The latter was a key element in political meetings and online communication, as poets used their “stagecraft” to “get the message across to people.”⁸²² Performance poetry and political verse thus added emotion to the political message and helped unite and mobilise “the physical mass of people” in a “positive energy”⁸²³ for change. This chapter addresses these interventions as participatory campaigning tools in the referendum debate. It prioritises poetry and verse publicly performed and published in the press and pamphlets during and shortly after the campaign. Within these works, two key, sometimes overlapping themes are evident: firstly, (ironic) play with national stereotype that elicits an emotional response.⁸²⁴ Secondly, the promotion of a political awakening, agency, and voice. This second theme echoes the civic nationalism of, predominantly, the Yes side.

⁸²⁰ E.g., Robert Crawford, *Testament* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2014); Kathleen Jamie, *The Bonniest Companie* (London: Picador, 2015); Ailes and Paterson, eds., *Aiblins*.

⁸²¹ As proposed by John Barr, political verse is not necessarily “unsophisticated or poorly written poetry,” but “poetry written in pursuit of limited objectives,” specifically, political verse is a “tool of affirmation” rather than of exploration. John Barr, “Is It Poetry or Is It Verse?” *The Poetry Foundation*, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/68681/is-it-poetry-or-is-it-verse>.

⁸²² Bissett, interview.

⁸²³ Bissett, interview.

⁸²⁴ Theatrical performances shown during the referendum campaign fall into similar categories. E.g., Tim Barrow’s nostalgic, romanticising play *Union* (2014) evokes the long-standing Union between England and Scotland, while Bissett’s satirical show *The Pure, the Dead and the Brilliant* (2014) enlists the support of the mythical creatures of Scotland in the referendum debate. Engagement with the referendum vote aside, it deals heavily in cultural memory and tradition. Notable other contributions with a direct campaigning stance in the referendum consist of Chris Dolan’s monodrama *The Pitiless Storm* (2014) as well as *The Great Yes, No, Don’t*

1.1 Stagecraft and participation through the voice of nation

Performances of political verse were the most direct form of participation through poetry in the referendum. As shown in [chapter 3](#), these performances formed essential elements in arts-based activism of *National Collective*, the Bus Party, and local campaigning events. They were performed on the stages of the Edinburgh festivals and shared on social media platforms, directly responding to the debate as it evolved.⁸²⁵ This brought political verse into the public sphere where, ready for immediate consumption, it showed that “poetry is commanding enough to gather crowds in a city square.”⁸²⁶ Direct, short, and topical, these forms of popular verse have long been included in leaflets and speeches and are, more recently, used “to demand attention on social media.”⁸²⁷ Furthermore, poetry has been closely linked to Scottish politics ever since the Scottish Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s.⁸²⁸ Influenced by the party’s traditional self-image as a party of intellectuals and writers (see [chapter 6](#)), SNP politicians including former First Minister Alex Salmond have repeatedly used Scottish verse to mobilise politically and evoke national sentiment. During the referendum campaign, Salmond used references to national poet Robert Burns “to inspire his core vote with ready-made, recognisable passion” without appearing overtly nationalist.⁸²⁹

Nationalist emotion was also evoked by Alan Bissett’s satirical poem “Vote Britain,”⁸³⁰ which attracted significant public and media attention early in the referendum campaign. Bissett’s performance of the poem became a YouTube sensation in 2012 and subsequently influenced the author’s position as an increasingly vocal commentator – and organic intellectual – in the referendum debate. Aided by its use of “extreme scorn and satire and ferocious comedy” the poem reached, according to Alan Riach, more than 50,000 people online in its first year of publication.⁸³¹ In 2013, Bissett performed it to great public effect at the pro-independence rally on Calton Hill in Edinburgh, where it evoked “a really powerful emotion”

Know, Five Minute Theatre Show (2014) by David Greig and David MacLennan. They aimed to provide relevant information and arguments pertaining to the vote.

⁸²⁵ Performance art and plays are not discussed in detail here – although there is some overlap with performance poetry. For a detailed analysis of indyref performances and theatre, cf. Güvenç, “‘Yae, Nae, or Dinnae Ken.’”

⁸²⁶ The Poetry Foundation, “Poems of Protest, Resistance, and Empowerment. Why Poetry Is Necessary and Sought After During Crises,” <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/collections/101581/poems-of-protest-resistance-and-empowerment>.

⁸²⁷ The Poetry Foundation, “Poems of Protest.”

⁸²⁸ Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 149.

⁸²⁹ Gerard Carruthers, “Robert Burns and the Yes Campaign,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/why-robert-burns-yes-campaign-alex-salmond>.

⁸³⁰ Alan Bissett, “Vote Britain,” *Bella Caledonia*, January 15, 2012, <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2012/01/15/vote-britain/>.

⁸³¹ Alan Riach, “A Flying Philosophy Distilled from Scottish Literature,” *The National*, November 25, 2016, <https://www.thenational.scot/news/14927143.alan-riach-a-flying-philosophy-distilled-from-scottish-literature/>.

among the large crowd.⁸³² This performance turned into a rallying cry for change expressed in the – sincere – appeal to “Vote with your heart” at the beginning and end of the poem.⁸³³

The appeal to the “People of Scotland”⁸³⁴ in this satirical, often scornful political verse, asks them to consider British, i.e., essentially English, dominance when casting their vote in the referendum. The text is structured around the repetitive, imperative anaphor that asks the reader/listener to “vote” for past and present injustices from Highland Clearances to a democratic deficit vis-à-vis England. The imperative voice of Union, that Bissett employs ironically here, highlights the Scottish “cringe”⁸³⁵ experience through a devaluation of Scottish dialect, “parochial” culture, art, and “legal tender”.⁸³⁶

Bissett directs long-standing ideas about a formerly uncivilised, now largely deprived, part of Great Britain through a highly patronising voice of English superiority, or, as the text states: “Vote for very, very, very rich people patronising you.”⁸³⁷ By commanding who to vote for and how to conduct the referendum, these patronising interventions have political consequences. A subsequent sense of political disenfranchisement, of a democratic deficit, is represented in the silencing and infantilising of Scottish political voice: “Hush. There there.”⁸³⁸ The text thus establishes a political context in which the Scottish people are marked as lacking a mature political voice and need to be reminded to “talk properly” with their “porridge mooth.”⁸³⁹ The absence of a confident Scottish voice resonates with an absent political voice, seemingly denied by a patronising Britain.

Through this politically patronising intervention the poem describes perceived power hierarchies between Scotland and Britain/England as prevalent in institutions essentially alien to Scotland (e.g., a (broadcast) media dominated by English voices). The stereotypes employed here are mostly rooted in mythologised history and culture. For example, the imperialistic exploitation or colonisation⁸⁴⁰ of Scotland for resources (providing both men and votes) is

⁸³² Bissett, interview.

⁸³³ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” lines 1; 74.

⁸³⁴ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” line 1.

⁸³⁵ The Scottish (cultural) cringe is a sentiment of cultural inadequacy and inferiority felt by the Scottish public vis-à-vis English dominance, which has arguably prevented social and political change. Beveridge and Turnbull describe it as “the Scottish intelligentsia’s readiness to embrace damning conceptions of national culture – in other words as an expression of inferiorism.” Craig Beveridge and Ronald Turnbull, *The Eclipse of Scottish Culture: Inferiorism and the Intellectuals* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), 14. According to Craig, the Scottish cringe is informed by “the Scots’ tendency to criticise Scotland and denigrate the indigenous culture.” Carol Craig, *The Scots’ Crisis of Confidence* (2003; rev. ed.; Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 2011), 15. Cf. Nairn, *After Britain*, 101.

⁸³⁶ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” lines 24; 11.

⁸³⁷ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” line 48.

⁸³⁸ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” line 26.

⁸³⁹ Bissett, “Vote Britain,” lines 9; 54.

⁸⁴⁰ Cf. Alasdair Gray, “Settlers and Colonists,” in Hames, *Unstated*, 100-110.

wielded to emotionally communicate Scottish difference from England but leaves little space for deliberation. Even where ironically subverted, many of these stereotypes convey perceived injustices through Scottish narratives of identity and cultural myth rather than through the “historical fact” they seemingly claim.

This powerful statement against the status quo prescribes pro-independence support and echoes a modern rallying cry to undo English dominance and past and present injustices. The poem’s imperative voice for change positions a vote for Britain as a vote for the continued ills of Union, exploitation, and insignificance. The mobilising power of what Alan Riach called “one of the most ferocious polemical poems written this century”⁸⁴¹ lies in the emotion it conveys, its self-irony, anger, and prevalent sense of political injustice. As such, the poem’s emotionally charged cultural imagery perpetuates the stereotypes it satirises and explicitly risks causing offence. Here, the poem undermines the progressive vision of the pro-independence argument, even if aligning with the Yes campaign’s focus on change. Political participation is reduced to an emotional vote of retaliation. Thus, empowerment and voice are used to enable forms of participation that reproduce the same framework the text challenges rather than to achieve the political independence and change it hopes to promote.

David MacLennan’s “If Scotland”⁸⁴² can be read in continuation of Bissett’s “Vote Britain”. Whereas Bissett views present ills through a shared past, MacLennan projects forward to a dystopian future of “ifs” and “wills”. Published in *The Herald* in 2014, “If Scotland” is one of few No-leaning poems directly engaging with the referendum. It, too, uses nationalist symbolism and stereotype to negotiate the political voice of the nation – this time to discuss how Scottish independence would fail to change Scotland.

The ten thematic sections of the poem pose rhetorical questions concerned with Scotland’s future; however, none of these are, as the lack of question marks suggest, truly up for debate. By asking what would change “If Scotland votes for Independence,”⁸⁴³ MacLennan uses stereotypical markers of Scottishness to suggest that lived reality would remain largely as is under independence. Indeed, he emphasises that Scottish culture, language, and traditional food (“Will Scots porridge oats be much more porridgey”⁸⁴⁴) have all been kept alive in the

⁸⁴¹ Riach, “A Flying Philosophy.”

⁸⁴² David MacLennan, “Exclusive: David MacLennan’s Poem - If Scotland,” *The Herald*, February 12, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13145362.exclusive-david-maclennans-poem---scotland/>.

⁸⁴³ MacLennan, “If Scotland,” line 1.

⁸⁴⁴ MacLennan, “If Scotland,” line 2.

Union. A defeating “I hae ma doots” answers the poems hypotheticals as well as the final question of whether an independent Scotland would be “more Scottish.”⁸⁴⁵

Similar to Bissett, MacLennan frames Scottishness and national identity as essential arguments in the independence debate. Importantly, however, MacLennan makes an argument for the status quo – by emphasising how little was likely to change through independence. As such, this poem gives voice to the Unionist absences within the debate and to the discursively claimed “silent majority” of No voters. Indeed, the poem portrays participation in its absence, as unnecessary for a political change that is undesirable due to its inability to affect cultural life and identity.

Both texts surveyed above narrate a story of (unfulfilled) change and empowerment through stereotypes and nationalist imagery rather than participation. They deal with political agency through explorations of Scottishness and use cultural identification as the basis of political mobilisation. In doing so, the poets focus on adding “stagecraft” and emotion to political mobilisation, as desired in the manifesto of NC and strategically planned by the Yes campaign (see [chapter 3](#)). In fact, NC’s manifesto roots the emotive, mobilising power of art in the “cultural distinctions”⁸⁴⁶ explicitly performed here. However, there is little evidence that, in contrast to the politician, “the artist asks his people to be empowered.”⁸⁴⁷ Instead neither NC campaigner Bissett nor No supporter MacLennan promoted political deliberation as the basis for popular participation – even if Bissett marks the absence of national political voice as one of the ills of Union.

Reading political participation through the representative framework of the nation (whether imagined as independent or not) suggests that particularly the art of the pro-independence supporting political vanguard of writers and poets lagged behind their own progressive credentials in the discourse. Instead, familiar tropes around nationhood and cultural difference were mobilised in indyref literature, contributing to what Homi Bhabha describes as “the problematic closure of textuality” of the nation – as written through myth and narrative.⁸⁴⁸ Accordingly, textual emphasis on nation and nationalist trope limits artistic creativity and spaces for meaningful political deliberation.

Notions of what it means to be “*Very Scottish*” are also discussed in NC member Jenny Lindsay’s “A ‘Very Scottish’ Spoken Word Provocation” performed for the Edinburgh

⁸⁴⁵ MacLennan, “If Scotland,” lines 57-58.

⁸⁴⁶ National Collective, “Manifesto.”

⁸⁴⁷ National Collective, “Manifesto.”

⁸⁴⁸ Bhabha, “Introduction: Narrating the Nation,” 3.

International Book Festival in August 2014.⁸⁴⁹ In a direct address to “(Dear) Scotland,”⁸⁵⁰ Lindsay playfully negotiates key tropes and myths of national identity: a version of Scottishness that incorporates the “tartan kitsch shit”⁸⁵¹ for tourists is displayed as being advocated by a political and cultural elite. Within this context, Lindsay uses the text to reflect on her own national role as an artist and the temptation to “play the bagpipes in full tartan” to fulfil the expectations of what it means to be Scottish.⁸⁵² With scathing irony, Lindsay considers the public and cultural role of artists and their failure to create a story or “song” for Scotland that normalises national sovereignty.⁸⁵³ The mythical base of Scottishness as grounded in equality as well as an internalised cringe experience is repeated through (fragments of) “the soft refrain of: *Dinnae get above yerself, hen, we’re all equal here. Don’t get ideas above yer station. Not individually. Not collectively. Not as a country.*”⁸⁵⁴

Conceptualised as an external (or internalised) voice, Scotland’s perceived cultural insufficiency is addressed in tension with dominant Unionism. In direct reference to pro-independence campaigning organisations (RIC, NC), the poem demands critical reflection on Scotland’s “claimed leftie-solid homage tae yer elders” which is “barely hiding yer streaky, quiet, inherent conservatism.”⁸⁵⁵ In the context of unfulfilled progressiveness and equality, the referendum is framed as an empowering opportunity for Scotland and a chance for it to use its “goddam voice.”⁸⁵⁶ Where the political becomes personal, personal and political empowerment through active voice project forward a new vision of popular participation. As introduced in chapter 3, democratic politics is largely equated with a “politics of voice.”⁸⁵⁷ The submerged “voice” of political insufficiency (ironically) portrayed through the Union in Bissett’s text above, is powerfully countered in the active finding of personal and communal political voice through the pro-independence mobilisation and debate captured in Lindsay’s spoken word provocation. At the heart of a changed future lies the political empowerment and participation of individual voice which grounds the myth of popular participation in lived experience.

Reflecting on how participation and campaigning for Yes will be viewed retrospectively, Bissett’s performance poem “Vote Scotland” considers the emergence of a communal voice in

⁸⁴⁹ Jenny Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish’ Spoken Word Provocation,” *Salt & Ire*, Jenny Lindsay (Stewed Rhubarb, 2015), 1, title; line 2.

⁸⁵⁰ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 2, line 1; 4, lines 15-16.

⁸⁵¹ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 1, line 13.

⁸⁵² Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 2, lines 8-9; 5, lines 10-11.

⁸⁵³ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 1, line 14. Note the allusion to the song “Scotland Yet,” 4, lines 9-12.

⁸⁵⁴ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 2, lines 4-5; 3, lines 17-18; 4, line 4; 20-21.

⁸⁵⁵ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 4, line 16; 19.

⁸⁵⁶ Lindsay, “A ‘Very Scottish,’” 5, line 1.

⁸⁵⁷ Brito Vieira, “Silence in Political Theory,” 289.

the referendum mobilisation. In contrast to the controversial “Vote Britain” discussed above, Bissett introduced “Vote Scotland” as written for “us” at a Yes in the Park event in Strathclyde Park on 7 June 2014.⁸⁵⁸ In this performance poem, Bissett mythologises the growing movement as follows: “they’ll say things began quietly/ a tad, a sigh, rolling of the eye/ until slowly, scattered, we came together/ to do a simple work that mattered.”⁸⁵⁹ The growing momentum described by Bissett positions the pro-independence mobilisation as “work that mattered” and, what is more, a cause “we were born for.”⁸⁶⁰ Independence – or campaigning for it – is naturalised as the ultimate goal and destiny of the people of Scotland. In this flagging of a national “we”, Bissett replicates the emotive rallying cry of “Vote Britain” and communicates a sense of being part of something bigger. The flagging of the national community echoes Billig’s theorisation of banal nationalism, namely that the “nation is indicated, or ‘flagged’, in the lives of its citizenry”⁸⁶¹ daily. It reproduces national belonging and agency, while implicating participatory action in imagining and creating a different future. In fact, the political agitation for independence is linked to a return of “something elemental. Us.”⁸⁶² In this way, the growing momentum and the activism that led to literal flags being “unfurled” gave Scotland back a sense of unity, community, and national belonging. Fuelled by an unstoppable realisation of a self-confident national “voice” and “true belief”, Scotland “stood up as a people and said Yes!”⁸⁶³

Bissett links highly metaphorical evocations of a reunited nation to a political awakening and mobilisation in the streets (and the pro-independence rally on Calton Hill, including the performance of “Vote Britain”). This awakening echoes Lindsay’s emphasis on political participation through voice. It is framed through the “old-fashioned” words of “dignity, democracy and liberty”⁸⁶⁴ as key arguments of the pro-independence mobilisation and, most notably, the progressive politics articulated by the Yes side. These civic political qualities are contrasted with “the need to be the best global leaders/ world beaters” – allusions which implicitly denote England, its imperial past, and pursuit for political “greatness” – and

⁸⁵⁸ Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” June 7, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yIv_kyS3T9E. Sections cited are based on my own transcription.

⁸⁵⁹ Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶⁰ Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶¹ Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

⁸⁶² Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶³ Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶⁴ Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

rhetorically rejected for a vision of the “greater good. A common weal.”⁸⁶⁵ The people of Scotland, this phrasing implies, do not aim for greatness but want to be “just better.”⁸⁶⁶

In this assertion of Scottish civic nationalist values and politics, notions of distinction and difference remain key and replicate the myth of Scottish egalitarianism as the basis for a myth of popular participation that sees the national community united in a rhetorically naturalised movement for political sovereignty. While leaving little space for deliberation, the performance poem reflects on the political awakening of Scottish political voice and promotes a participatory effort for political change – even if through nationalist trope, imagery, and historical conflict. However, it was seemingly less successful in mobilising an emotional, political response – both at the campaigning event it was performed at and in popular debate more widely. Ironically, “Vote Scotland,” although written for (the pro-independence segment of) Scotland and its people, and directly aligned with key messaging of the Yes campaign, lacked the controversy and emotion that had contributed to the reach and significance of “Vote Britain.”

Crucially, in this respect, Lindsay highlights that there was little space for critical self-reflection within the arts-based pro-independence mobilisation. Lindsay’s show and publication *Ire & Salt* (2015), which according to herself, may have been released “five years too early because people weren’t ready” for a critical reflection on arts-based referendum activism, was published when “the lessons of indyref are still just coming in.”⁸⁶⁷ The critical contemplation of campaign activism sets “Hogmanay 2014,”⁸⁶⁸ discussed below, apart from the other poems in the collection.

Playing with the notion of wish trees and a communal “we” that was “a wish, yes,”⁸⁶⁹ Lindsay infers that a wish for Yes coincided with a wish for a (pro-independence) community, a “national we.” This sentiment finds further expression in the line “we can. national”⁸⁷⁰ which both references the ability of being a nation and activism by *National Collective*. In its personification, the wish for change both implies its realisation and NC’s mobilisation for it. The poem also criticises NC, who became infamous for their wish trees (see [chapter 3](#)) and challenges the movement politics, power structures, and disagreements within this “yes branch.”⁸⁷¹

⁸⁶⁵ Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶⁶ Alan Bissett, “Vote Scotland,” no lines, transcription my own.

⁸⁶⁷ Lindsay, interview.

⁸⁶⁸ Jenny Lindsay, “Hogmanay 2014,” Lindsay, *Ire & Salt* (Stewed Rhubarb: Edinburgh, 2015): 22.

⁸⁶⁹ Lindsay, “Hogmanay 2014,” line 4.

⁸⁷⁰ Lindsay, “Hogmanay 2014,” line 5.

⁸⁷¹ Lindsay, “Hogmanay 2014,” line 3.

The cynical, self-reflective poem further uses the duality of ire and salt, as an inversion of the Scottish Saltire, to describe the complex relationship of enthusiastic campaigners with the Scottish nation. Ire and salt stand for disappointment and tears shed over the outcome of the vote and convey a personal, “authentic” experience of hurt and hope within the context of national politics. Nationalist thought is expressed through reflection on grassroots campaigning, power, (disappointed) hope, and political agency while turning towards a new beginning. In its unique, poetic reflection on what arts-based campaigning for independence meant, Lindsay frames participation as a difficult exercise in political agency. It is negotiated between authentic personal experience and its “obligatory” performance on social media⁸⁷² – indyref experience and political agency here become performative and subject to external valuation and validation. The poem’s emphasis on the importance of people’s voice for popular participation and a national political awakening is also prevalent in the following poems, which articulate participation with plurality of voice and communal political empowerment.

1.2 Political participation in a progressive Scotland

An explicit attempt at integrating the different voices of the political debate is used by Alec Finlay in his pamphlet poem *a better tale to tell: submissions to The Smith Commission* (2015).⁸⁷³ Finlay curates contributions by others into a poetry reflection based on public submissions to the Smith Commission instated after the referendum. As discussed in [chapter 3](#), the Smith Commission, which negotiated further political powers for Scotland after the vote, already symbolised a “return” to elite politics. Thus, the workings of the Commission undermined the popular politics it formally encouraged through the public submission format. “Self-nominated” historian Finlay used the archive of submissions to reconcile the different positions on the referendum and its outcome through artistic mediation.⁸⁷⁴ Published as a pamphlet poem after the vote, this piece provides space for reflection largely missing from political verse published during the referendum. Indeed, earlier publications generally focused on mobilising the public, while the referendum outcome could still be influenced. Considering “how power works when it’s losing power,”⁸⁷⁵ the poem opens spaces for critical reflection on the referendum and its experience; it voices the many questions of the Scottish public.

⁸⁷² Lindsay, “Hogmanay 2014,” line 21.

⁸⁷³ Alec Finlay, *a better tale to tell: submissions to the Smith Commission* (Glasgow: Centre for Contemporary Art, 2015).

⁸⁷⁴ Alec Finlay (artist and poet), interviewed by the author, June 2021.

⁸⁷⁵ Finlay, interview.

The different referendum experiences captured in the statements represented in Finlay's "found" poem constitute a generally hopeful "appetite/ for change"⁸⁷⁶ and a sense of popular empowerment, i.e., of being "more able to be involved."⁸⁷⁷ Although ironically absorbed into an institutionalised process with little political impact, these statements mirror the plurality of popular political participation as well as their performative and political limitations, which shaped the public debate. Limited by a political process that renders these interventions performative, the poem crucially emphasises these limitations of participation within an exclusionary, political process in which power remained with the elite. By rearranging key arguments and self-mythologising statements from the referendum debate, the pamphlet poem critically performs the well-rehearsed arguments of the debate – both within its rhetorical limitations and through the ruptures within it. By reordering and recontextualising these routine phrases, it opens new spaces for reflection. As written down hopes and dreams, these statements of "incomplete publicness"⁸⁷⁸ reproduce the participation of wish trees and the DS project discussed in [chapter 3](#), while being indicative of an exclusionary Scottish politics that has struggled to deliver the participatory politics and change it has promised. Thus, the public voice of the poem critically demands "further/ information" on "how the/ general public/ can make their/ voice heard/ in such a way/ that it will/ actually/ count?"⁸⁷⁹ While productive political conflict within an institutional framework that performs, rather than enables, political participation is seemingly pre-empted by the process of the Smith Commission, the contrasting statements, arguments, and opinions on the page set the context and blank spaces necessary for political deliberation.

Through this recontextualization of the debate, Finlay mobilises the poet's potential to "offer a depth of understanding, and a language adequate to the visions they summon" without "offer[ing] solutions."⁸⁸⁰ The reader is presented with argument and opinion in tension but left to make these meaningful through their own political voice at a historical point when the myth of political participation and empowerment started to crumble. Finlay's poem was ideally placed in the post-referendum period to reflect on the role and limitations of popular participation and the reassertion of political power, while creating spaces for popular voices and to facilitate deliberation. Other poems published at earlier stages of the campaign incorporated similar practices and spaces for reflection, even if on a smaller scale.

⁸⁷⁶ Finlay, *a better tale*, 18, lines 2-3, cf. also page 19.

⁸⁷⁷ Finlay, *a better tale*, 12, line 2.

⁸⁷⁸ Fitzpatrick, "Suplicants and Citizens," 79-80.

⁸⁷⁹ Finlay, *a better tale*, 62, lines 2-3; 5-12.

⁸⁸⁰ Jay Parini, *Why Poetry Matters* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 116.

Kathleen Jamie's poem "Aye!"⁸⁸¹ published in *The Guardian* in 2014 is one of these poems. In contrast to activist performances and poetry pamphlets discussed above, Jamie's poem entered public debate through newspaper circulation (like MacLennan's discussed above). The poem, the preface explains, is compiled of statements by some of Jamie's Yes-supporting friends and incorporates a plurality of voices. Thus, it follows a similar approach to Finlay's, albeit on a smaller scale. It, too, represents the different voices of – at least a pro-independence segment of – society. Similar to Finlay's poem, the text presupposes an empowered public – and nation – capable of using its own voice. As such, the poem presumes an already empowered national community, which negotiates the political potential and limitations of the referendum decision through opposing arguments regarding what "it's about."⁸⁸² The dis-/agreements captured on the page add to the deliberative potential of a passionate political debate (resonant with Mouffe's agonistic approach discussed in chapter 1) and open spaces for reflection on the page.

In Jamie's poem, claims to represent pro-independence voices on a stylistic level contain political agency in the pluralist finding of "our voice"⁸⁸³ on the content level. An implicit need for empowerment is further enacted in the finding of a participatory voice in the debate. This finding of a new voice also applies to a newly self-confident pro-independence movement, nation, and, possibly, diverse language community. These tensions between individual and communal political voice capture the peculiarities of the referendum vote: framed as an empowering opportunity of individual participation, the vote is portrayed to rest on the communal vote of the majority.

The Scots word for Yes in the title of this poem clearly positions it on the pro-independence side of the constitutional question and in the Scottish linguistic context. The progressive, Yes supporting community – a new communal, national "we" evoked here – needs to challenge the status quo to, as the poem claims, truly "resist [...] imitation" from the British establishment.⁸⁸⁴ Then, it can offer inspiring "new songs"⁸⁸⁵ for the future by exploring "a different way of organising a country."⁸⁸⁶ The sense of opportunity, renewal, and change captured here describes a moment of national empowerment which makes it, the poem

⁸⁸¹ Kathleen Jamie, "Aye!" in *Scottish Writers on the Referendum - Independence Day? The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote.

⁸⁸² Jamie, "Aye!" line 5; 6; 8. Cf. also line 7 ("It isn't").

⁸⁸³ Jamie, "Aye!" line 2.

⁸⁸⁴ Jamie, "Aye!" line 14.

⁸⁸⁵ Jamie, "Aye!" line 17.

⁸⁸⁶ Jamie, "Aye!" line 10.

proclaims, a “great time to be alive in Scotland!”⁸⁸⁷ National identity and self-awareness are framed through progressiveness and are explicitly linked to democratic renewal, based on critical deliberation and scrutiny. The poem actively reproduces ideas of progressive politics and empowerment that shaped the myth of participation, but grounds these in a plurality of voice and the political reorganisation of Scottish society. The pro-independence community outlined here carries a vision of a more inclusive, caring, and self-confident nation which has already changed the nation – and its politics. This hopeful reading of the referendum debate and vote differs from Finlay’s post-referendum reflection.

The democratic process of the referendum – and popular participation in it – is even more explicitly addressed in Calum Rodger’s “A Voter’s Reflection in Rhyme.”⁸⁸⁸ “*Written on the morning of 18 September 2014*” (as the preface clarifies),⁸⁸⁹ the poem uses the referendum question as printed on the ballot paper as an opening⁸⁹⁰ and comments on the binary nature of the decision and debate and the creative impoverishment that came with it: “‘yes’ or ‘no’ don’t lend themselves to metaphor.”⁸⁹¹

The excitement of the referendum is expressed in the practical exercise of one’s “voice” – and being heard⁸⁹² – through the pencil that “was etching my political will.”⁸⁹³ Hearing not only one’s own voice but that of “all who listened,”⁸⁹⁴ the communal political agency resonates with Jamie’s poem discussed above but considers the “4.289 million” registered voters who “[c]hange everything with two bisecting lines.”⁸⁹⁵ The poem focuses on political excitement, change, and future possibility and makes explicit the democratic, political power of voice in the referendum, despite its more sentimental and disparaging postscript. In fact, the poem expresses political change through voice, democratic agency, and participation. The poem contextualises popular participation and democratic decision making by linking individual political voice to the communal voice of the electorate rather than to the mythologised movement politics of perceived, largely rhetorical, empowerment. While it does not mobilise for participation in the referendum, the personalised deliberation and crucial political participation of a self-confident political will expressed in the act of voting, captures some of the important political realities of the referendum which were often ignored in public debate.

⁸⁸⁷ Jamie, “Aye!” line 18.

⁸⁸⁸ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflections in Rhyme,” 81-82.

⁸⁸⁹ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, preface (emphasis original).

⁸⁹⁰ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, line 1; 82, line 1.

⁸⁹¹ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, line 4.

⁸⁹² Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, lines 19-20.

⁸⁹³ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, line 16.

⁸⁹⁴ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 81, line 19.

⁸⁹⁵ Rodger, “A Voter’s Reflection,” 82, line 2; 4.

1.3 The poetic limits of popular participation

As the sample above demonstrates, most indyref poetry is narrative and avoids the complex language and lyricism of traditional poetry. Although demonstrating pro-independence bias, poetry and political verse discussed above are not united in the progressive politics and myth of popular participation advocated by the Yes side in the referendum debate. Instead, political participation, mobilisation, and change are frequently framed through the national/ist iconography of “a very particular type of Scottishness,”⁸⁹⁶ which consists of more emotive imagery and language than the civic nationalism of the public referendum debate. A move beyond this rhetoric is more prominent in poems published towards the end or after the referendum campaign; it is thus an issue of format *and* timing. This shift in representations of the referendum is indicative of a shift in the political function of the poetry and verse which slowly opened more spaces for reflection, but rarely for crucial political deliberation. While its function as a mobilising tool within the campaign was unaltered prior to the vote, the emotive rhetoric of earlier verse (e.g., “Vote Britain”) made space for an increasingly “civic” politics of progressiveness advocated through the Yes campaign. Despite representing the self-proclaimed progressive politics of a different Scotland and a shared wish for change and empowered political voice, few poems made use of their potential to foster critical political deliberation and participation. Poetry and verse achieved this most convincingly by engaging with the open-endedness of the decision, with its literary and figurative blank spaces, and by moving beyond the specificity of political argument. Such critical reflections on the referendum and its movement politics are rare, however. Even more self-critical reflections portray visions of hope which largely perpetuate a simplistic myth of a politically open nation, without critically engaging with the limitations of rhetorically proclaimed political voice and participation.

2. Where is the indyref novel?

In contrast to the visibility of political poetry and verse in arts-based campaigning and newspapers during the referendum, “indyref” fiction has remained rare and elusive – despite the central role ascribed to Scottish writers in the referendum discourse based on long-standing myths surrounding cultural devolution.⁸⁹⁷ One contributing factor is the ongoing constitutional

⁸⁹⁶ Mina, interview.

⁸⁹⁷ As it stands, the representation of the political in contemporary Scottish writing seems to find expression in two diametrical developments: one being the move away from political representation towards a focus on

debate, which has made literary reflection on the referendum difficult since, according to Bissett, “the novel is not an appropriate medium to look at current events with.”⁸⁹⁸ Indeed, novels relating to the referendum have remained limited in number, scope, and appeal.

For the purpose of this chapter, I understand indyref fiction as thematically defined by its engagement with the referendum.⁸⁹⁹ As stated in the *Methodology* section, the corpus of texts I discuss here includes Allan Cameron’s *Cinico: Travels with a Good Professor at the Time of the Scottish Referendum* (2017); Kirstin Innes’s *Scabby Queen* (2020); Mary McCabe’s *Two Closes and a Referendum* (2017); James Robertson’s *To Be Continued...* (2016); and Craig A. Smith’s *The Mile* (2013). I briefly introduce all five novels below.

In *Cinico*, the protagonist is a London-based Italian journalist for *Il Messaggio del Popolo* travelling to Scotland to cover the referendum. Openly framed as a modern take on Voltaire’s satirical fable *Candide*, the protagonist Cinico de Oblivii seemingly follows a comparable journey, leaving his old life behind. The examination of the political scene and encounters with different characters along the way aim to “[p]resent conflicting views on nation, nationalism, power, class and the Scottish referendum.”⁹⁰⁰ Mirroring themes of the classic *Bildungsroman*, these encounters help the protagonist to find his way in a changing world – here, however, through an exercise in contemporary self-realisation rather than through personal development nurtured by challenging encounters. Various levels of mediation and voice (e.g., editorial voice, translation) create an unreliable narrator and narrative.⁹⁰¹ This unreliability links to journalistic practice which, according to Cinico, “deal[s] in lies and subterfuge at the bidding of our masters,” using information “to decorate a preconceived truth.”⁹⁰² Whereas the political media debate is portrayed as shredded in lies and dominated by self-interest, the real, authentic indyref experience is located in the encounters and exchange with others. This referendum experience chimes with that of many grassroots campaigners and activists and mirrors the popular image of a country enthralled in debate. Like many campaigners, Cinico becomes increasingly invested in the debate,⁹⁰³ and begins his own

diversity, ecology, and environmentalism, the other being a strong emphasis on nationalist symbolism and nationalist political cut-outs. I discuss both forms of representations in later sections of this chapter.

⁸⁹⁸ Bissett, interview.

⁸⁹⁹ Note Hames’s distinction between “Indyref novels” and Fictions of Indyref. While he sees the former to be immersed in the campaign and its passions (e.g., *The Mile*, *Two Closes and a Referendum*), the later arguably maintain a more ironic distance to the events and treat the referendum as marked by narrative, propaganda and self-performance (e.g., *Cinico*, *Scabby Queen*).

⁹⁰⁰ Allan Cameron, *Cinico: Travels with a Good Professor at the Time of the Scottish Referendum* (Glasgow: Vagabond Voices, 2017), n.p.

⁹⁰¹ Cameron, *Cinico*, 4.

⁹⁰² Cameron, *Cinico*, 23.

⁹⁰³ Cameron, *Cinico*, 135

journey towards pro-independence support which culminates in a Yes supporting article that challenges his employers' referendum position.⁹⁰⁴ However, the shallowness of this experience is exposed in Cinico's self-serving independence support, rooted largely in his romantic pursuits.⁹⁰⁵

To Be Continued...(TBC) is also structured around explorations into the role of journalism and mediation on the referendum, set just over a month after the referendum on 18 September 2014. In a (self-proclaimed) Kafkaesque style, the novel follows Douglas Findhorn Elder and his travel companion the toad Mungo Forth Mungo. The toad – clever companion or figment of the protagonist's imagination – helps him deal with confusing coincidences and a loss of agency. After having been made redundant as a journalist, Douglas takes his chance when his former editor at the *Spear*, John Liffield, commissions him to cover “[t]his historic year for the nation. *Our* nation. Decision time. Destiny. We have a responsibility.”⁹⁰⁶ Like Cinico, Douglas searches for the “big story” – and personal gain.⁹⁰⁷ Both Cinico and Douglas negotiate a similar Northward journey of self-realisation and romantic entanglement, marked by self-irony and alienation in a “post-truth” world of corrupt journalism and absurdist encounters which, in *TBC*, are more explicitly expressed through hopelessness, remoteness, and decay. As in *Cinico*, the protagonist's personal journey hinges on the encounter with a seductive yet elusive female character – in response to which the protagonist “goes native” in an entanglement of Scottish imagery and stereotype. The romantic plot as well as a contemplation of the state of the nation against the backdrop of the referendum are resolved in the lovers' agreement to “take things as they come” because at least “[t]hat way we won't regret anything that doesn't happen” – or “that does.”⁹⁰⁸

In contrast to these individual journeys through the “referendum-scape,” McCabe's social novel *Two Closes and a Referendum* focuses on different characters living in the microcosm of two tenement closes in East-Glasgow (in Denniston and Barmulloch respectively) and works like a prism of lived experience, personal beliefs, and voice. The

⁹⁰⁴ Cameron, *Cinico*, 115.

⁹⁰⁵ Cameron, *Cinico*, 126.

⁹⁰⁶ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 66 (emphasis original).

⁹⁰⁷ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 67.

⁹⁰⁸ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 323. The “marriage” or “relationship” trope, although somewhat underexplored here, has become prominent in media coverage and fictional responses to the independence referendum (cf. Bissett, interview). It is frequently used to either portray the two nations Scotland and England in a marriage that has either run its course or is worth saving, or to represent the two sides of the referendum, i.e., the Yes and No side. Cf. also Craig A. Smith, *The Mile* (Edinburgh: Pilrig Press, 2013); McCabe, *Two Closes*; Effie Dean, *An Indyref Romance: Harmony and Dissonance* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2015).

multiple narrative perspectives democratise how voice in the debate and popular participation are fictionalised. Portraying a sense of disagreement and community, the novel follows families, couples, and lovers in their struggles with the referendum decision and with negotiating personal disagreements, poverty, isolation, and violence through the months of 2014. The plurality of voices, although stereotyped at times, and the tangible experiences of the protagonists counter “[h]istory as written by the victors” that the book identifies in the media response to the George Square “riots”.⁹⁰⁹

In *Scabby Queen*, the story is told not by the victors but by the survivors. That is, those who survive the failing one-hit popstar, political activist, and protagonist in absentia Clio Campbell. Clio’s voice only ever works through mediation – from (recounted) voice recordings, to emails, and social media posts. The socio-political novel fictionalises Scottish-British politics, culture, and history from the 1980s to 2018. A benchmark of Scottish history, political argument, and nationhood, Clio is depicted as an emblem of explicit Scottishness (a red-haired folk singer of Burns-inspired music with a soft Scottish accent). Although Clio is publicly political and came to fame through her protest song “Rise Up” which responded to the anti-poll tax protests in 1980s Scotland, her political commitment frequently appears accidental. The epistolary form through which her life is largely narrated provides both close insight and a mediated remove from the thoughts and motives of a publicly political character, while contributing to a multi-layered perspective on political activism and leadership. In the context of larger political and personal shifts, this text – which might easily escape the label of indyref novel altogether – frames the referendum as but one political event and critically reflects on the role of cultural political activism in the Scottish independence movement.

The Mile focuses on referendum discussions and argument, which it explores through a near-focus group setting. Three old friends come together to discuss life and the referendum: the pro-independence minded Ian, the undecided, France-based Stuart, and the No-inclined Euan. As the protagonists move from one pub to the next along Edinburgh’s Royal Mile, they encounter the ninety-five-year-old Jock – an emblematic caricature of Scottish stereotype. As the characters move between centres of (former) political power and tourist attractions, they, ironically, negotiate a dystopian Scotland marked by disagreement, personal woes, alcoholism, and sectarianism rather than by tourist imagery and appeal. By stylising debates that were undoubtedly had in pubs up and down the country prior to the referendum, the novel portrays a caricatured, yet familiar indyref experience. Interestingly, *The Mile* is the only novel in this

⁹⁰⁹ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 333.

corpus that was published prior to the referendum in 2013. It gives discussions on #indyref Twitter as one of its “sources”⁹¹⁰ and thus situates its narrative in live debate, chronicles the online debate through fiction, and distils voice and argument into a pro-independence statement. Through its engagement with live discussion, this novel is directly entrenched in the referendum debate. Its mobilising for “Scotland’s rebirth”⁹¹¹ resonates with the political verse discussed above.

2.1 Participation and the festival of democracy

In the opening paragraphs of *Two Closes*, 2014 is described as a time that “transfigured the Scottish perspective forever” – a time during which “[o]rdinary people [...] woke up, asked new questions, considered new options.”⁹¹² The result of this newfound interest in politics is logically linked to the turnout of 84.5% percent of the electorate, that “reversed the rise of apathy, smashed all UK records and was one of the highest in the democratic world.”⁹¹³ *Two Closes* represents the growing support for Yes through the incorporation of opinion polls (at the beginning of every chapter and for every month of 2014). On a narrative level, this is portrayed in the political awakening of characters such as 16-year-old, newly enfranchised Malky who tells his love interest Kirsty that he “only got intae it [politics] last year [...] Didnae even know there wis a Parliament in Edinburgh. Ah knew aboot evolution an revolution, but Ah’d never heard of devolution.”⁹¹⁴ The newfound political interest expressed here reiterates the political awakening conveyed in the political verse analysed above and points to “self-education”⁹¹⁵ encourage by the referendum debate. This phrasing tells a story of individualised empowerment of deprived segments of society through the framework of the myth of popular participation, illustrated through a surprising lack of national political knowledge (particularly in contrast with knowledge about “revolution”). New tangible political agency is framed through a changed public political climate of a historic political event. Whereas political excitement and enthusiasm were part of the political attractiveness of the Yes side,⁹¹⁶ *Two Closes* importantly also acknowledges political participation among No supporters: the typified

⁹¹⁰ C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, 7.

⁹¹¹ C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, 157.

⁹¹² McCabe, *Two Closes*, 2.

⁹¹³ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 325.

⁹¹⁴ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 123-24.

⁹¹⁵ Frost, “Scotland’s Festival,” 232.

⁹¹⁶ Cf. Kirstin Innes, *Scabby Queen* (2020; repr. in paperback, London: 4th Estate, 2021), 351; 380.

Orange Order character Wilma, for example, “registered tae vote noo” although she “never even voted afore” because “[t]his referendum is important.”⁹¹⁷

The different motivations and realities of engaging with the referendum represented here are indicative of the significant voter interest in the political opportunity of the referendum, independent of the campaigns and the voter drive (see [chapter 3](#)). *Two Closes* explicitly mobilises the myth of popular participation in its retelling of these referendum experiences, in as much as it portrays a changed nation of political openness, participation, and empowerment. However, it crucially indicates the limits of this myth, where it emphasises that popular participation was neither reserved to the Yes side’s grassroots mobilisation nor tethered to activism alone. *Two Closes*, even more so than other “realistic” indyref fiction,⁹¹⁸ aims to convey and find authenticity through a reliance on “factual” media texts, well-established arguments, and interpersonal encounters. Against this backdrop, I demonstrate that popular participation in indyref literature to date has been portrayed in two essential ways: either as engagement and debate (replaying stock arguments from popular and media debate) or as grassroots activism and mobilisation on the ground.

2.1.1 Participation and the limits of performative debate

The role of alternative online debate is described in *Two Closes*. The daily struggle and difficulty of keeping up with the “real” indyref story via alternative media is shown through the character of pro-independence supporter Ewan, who “dip[s] in and out of the websites – NewsnetScotland, Bella Caledonia and the rest – which cover the supressed stories.” He like “most YES activists boycott[s]”⁹¹⁹ print newspapers and seeks alternative pro-independence coverage online. Similarly, high school student Emma is heavily involved in the online debate on websites like “Wings Over Scotland, Bella Caledonia, National Collective. Tweeting and Facebooking and blogging about it all over the place.”⁹²⁰ The easy access to online debates facilitated participation in the referendum debate (see [chapter 5](#)) but often came closer to “political engagement,” namely an interest in and having feelings about the referendum, rather than participation through active involvement and physical presence.⁹²¹ The personal

⁹¹⁷ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 70-71.

⁹¹⁸ “Realistic” indyref fiction contrasts with speculative indyref fiction, including dooms-day scenarios and crime and sci-fi novels as identified by Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” 103 (note 1). Cf. also Jim Hewitson, *Down in the Glen Something Stirs* (OTCEditions, 2014).

⁹¹⁹ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 15.

⁹²⁰ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 145.

⁹²¹ Barrett and Bruton-Smith, “Political and Civic Engagement,” 6.

investment in the campaign gave people the impression of being “really informed [...] because they were reading a lot” even if, as writer Denise Mina suggests, many people were “quite misinformed.”⁹²²

On a narrative level, however, alternative media is the characters’ gateway to Yes support and activism: the emerging digital micro-publics provide them with a sense of community and purpose. While both Ewan and Emma are faced with a lack of understanding from those around them, this is largely framed through a misunderstood position of Yes support.⁹²³ This perspective perpetuates the assumption expressed in *TBC* that “pro-indy people are *really engaged*.”⁹²⁴ The enthusiasm and naivety of pro-independence supporters emphasises their idealism and casts related participation as performative. Discursively performed independence support outweighs other forms of activism and demonstrates the limits of its own design.

A key element of this discursive, and highly emotional engagement with the referendum – in the streets and in literature – was the performative picking of sites which fulfilled a specific function of tribal nationalism and identification (see also [chapter 3](#)). In *TBC*, editor Liffield is determined to find out how Mrs. Munloch – as a representative figure of the nation – voted.⁹²⁵ When picking a side is primarily about “public perception,” it becomes a strategic move with calculatable outcomes rather than an expression of “true” conviction and activism. Liffield expresses this as follows:

How will Roselind Munloch want people to *think* she voted? Suppose she votes Yes. That makes her a gallant loser, a proud Scot dignified in defeat. Then again, suppose she voted No. She’s on the winning side. [...] On the other hand, it’s a bit shameful, isn’t it, voting against your own country’s freedom. [...] Even if she did vote No, she’ll tell you she voted Yes. That way she gets the right pragmatic result but can still bask in the glory of her own romantic sunset. The only scenario I can’t envisage is if she voted Yes but lies to you that she voted No. Nothing to be gained there, as far as I can see.⁹²⁶

The strategizing evident here is driven by self-interest and by an investment in what can be conceptualised as the discursive game of indyref. Where participatory activism is fuelled by self-interest, it becomes performative in its double sense, explicitly in its tokenistic function within the rhetoric game of the *illusio* (see [chapter 3](#)). As for the representative Yes supporter Ian in *The Mile*, participation in the public debate became “a mission” for many – as such, it echoes quasi-missionary activism and forms of mobilisation discussed in the previous [chapter](#).

⁹²² Mina, interview.

⁹²³ In both cases, there is also an explicitly generational conflict at play that is translated into one between pro-independence and pro-Union support. While Ewan feels mis-understood by his older partner, Emma’s parents struggle to understand her political activity online – even if some of her beliefs resonate with her Glasgow-based grandmother.

⁹²⁴ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 68 (emphasis original).

⁹²⁵ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 126.

⁹²⁶ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 126-27.

Convinced of his own idealism and investment in “change,”⁹²⁷ Ian is unaware that he himself becomes invested in the game as “the informed player, who, possessing a sense of the game because made by the game, plays the game, and thereby makes it exist.”⁹²⁸ His increasing investment in “arguing in pubs, and at work with anyone who’d trotted out the usual reasons for maintaining the status quo”⁹²⁹ constitutes Ian’s own investment in the debate: he conforms to the very practice he criticises on the No side by “trott[ing] out the usual reasons” for independence throughout the pub crawl, thus illustrating the rhetorical and performative limitations of the game.⁹³⁰

What rhetorically sets activism on the Yes side apart is its supporters’ idealism: “their sense of responsibility [...] and concern for a just and fairer world”⁹³¹ as well as the related sense of political progressiveness, participation, and democratic change. This idealism contrasts with the repetitive arguments on the No side, although bound by the same rhetorical limitations of the discursive game. How much of a game these regular debates, where “You say wan thing, they say the ither,”⁹³² had become is pointedly summarised by pro-independence campaigner Ewan in *Two Closes*. Ewan declares that

[b]y this stage of the game I have a leaflet for every major question which has arisen at the door. If YES doesn’t supply them (who designs the YES leaflets anyway? Does s/he ever actually darken a doorstep?) and none of the myriad leaflets produced by the myriad wee groups fit the bill (Davids for YES?) then I write my own.⁹³³

Ewan’s experience within this discursive framework of predestined exchanges is one of disconnect between on the ground activism and the professional Yes campaigning machine. It highlights the search for a “real”, “authentic” referendum experience that is rooted in organic grassroots mobilisation and participation – rather than elite political strategizing and interventions (see [chapter 3](#)). Ironically, however, this participation in the debate is restricted by the rhetorical limitations of the discourse and the “moves” within it. As Hames argues, indyref debate – as depicted in these indyref fictions – was shaped by rhetorical “talking points” in which, like in a “game of chess,” “the stock arguments [...] determined what moves were possible in a given situation.”⁹³⁴ Even though some of the novels are self-critically aware of

⁹²⁷ C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, 11.

⁹²⁸ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 290.

⁹²⁹ C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, 11.

⁹³⁰ E.g., C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, 26; 93-94; 125-26. Cf. mentions of arguments pertaining to oil, pension cuts, economy, EU membership, the NHS and the SNP are mentioned in *Cinico* (78-80); *Two Closes* (e.g., 58; 60; 104; 232; 282); *The Mile* (e.g., 26-27; 99); *Scabby Queen* (347).

⁹³¹ Cameron, *Cinico*, 120.

⁹³² McCabe, *Two Closes*, 58.

⁹³³ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 63.

⁹³⁴ Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” 85.

these limitations and their role within the discursive game,⁹³⁵ neither the narrative structures nor their characters are able to move beyond them. Thus, indyref fiction closely represents the discursive politics of participation in the referendum debate as well as, largely involuntarily, “authentic” indyref experience. The search for this authenticity reverberates with the referendum’s discursively constructed historicity, which was publicly performed *while* the campaign unfolded. It points to a wider contemporary “obsession with authenticity” and “the real” and “genuine”, determined by an “increasingly unreal, staged, and manipulated”⁹³⁶ media environment, in which it can no longer be assumed that “the ‘real’ is more important, significant, or even ‘true’ than the representation.”⁹³⁷

In its pursuit of capturing the “authentic” indyref experience, indyref fiction demonstrates what Hames describes as a tendency towards “citing and re-playing stock arguments”⁹³⁸ that shaped the media debate at the time, rather than engaging in meaningful dialogue “which strengthens the democratic culture in which it is conducted and embedded.”⁹³⁹ This narrative performance ruptures where the deliberative potential of the referendum is directly addressed in *Two Closes* and rooted in individual experiences. The text explicitly depicts how characters struggle with political opinion on the referendum and change their minds through debate – even more so than in *The Mile*.⁹⁴⁰ The votes these characters cast have personal (and political) consequences and are understood as such.⁹⁴¹ On this basis, the political becomes personal and tangible – similar to its articulation in some of the political verse discussed above.

This depiction of political participation as rooted in lived experience contrasts with a preoccupation with argument and participation in a discursive game, which is resolved neither in public debate nor in fiction. This discursive game of rehearsed argument nonetheless has the potential to actualise a changed political reality and to revive the public sphere, even where characters (and citizens) talk past one another and forgo deliberative debate. As suggested by Mouffe, debate between adversaries is the foundation of well-functioning democracy if it is grounded in a shared “allegiance to the democratic principles of ‘liberty and equality for all,’” as evident in the referendum debate and the progressive politics it evoked.⁹⁴² United in a belief

⁹³⁵ Cf. Cameron, *Cinico*, 3.

⁹³⁶ Gunn Enli, “‘Trust Me, I Am Authentic!’ Authenticity Illusions in Social Media Politics,” in Bruns et al. *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 122.

⁹³⁷ Fiske, *Media Matters*, 2.

⁹³⁸ Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” 83.

⁹³⁹ Hames, “Democracy and the Indyref Novel,” 86.

⁹⁴⁰ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 169; 309.

⁹⁴¹ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 318.

⁹⁴² Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

in public political empowerment and agency, the novels' characters participate in various levels of debate – even if limited by the rhetorical boundaries of the game. From an agonistic perspective, this disagreement based on reasoned exchange counters “apathy and [...] disaffection with political participation.”⁹⁴³ Indeed, in reproducing the limitations of public discourse, indyref novels enact the rhetorical boundaries of the game and with them the passionate debate of unresolvable argument; within these confines, characters in *The Mile*, *Two Closes*, *Scabby Queen*, and even *Cinico*, are, much like in real-life, mobilised into sometimes passionate participation in the referendum debate and politics.

Indyref literature may have added little deliberative reflection and largely viewed and represented political participation through replicating media talking points and a myth of popular participation. However, by demonstrating personal investment and participation in this “democratic” game of argument and counterargument, it also affirms democratic ideals and political reality – through the representation of performative debate and interaction. This is crucially evident in Clio’s appearance on *Question Time*, which leads to a heated debate with former lover and MP Gordon Duke. Clio’s criticism of the “practiced lines” of debate becomes itself an argument in the fictionalised referendum discourse and motivates former classmate Adele’s newfound political enthusiasm and participation. In fiction, as in public debate, the unresolvable, constitutional argument seemingly revived political discourse and the political as “the enactment of collective ideas.”⁹⁴⁴ The rhetorical limitations of the discursive game outlined above restrained ways of representing – and doing – participatory activism within the context of the referendum.

2.1.2 Writing participation as activism

Activist campaigning in the referendum is detailed in *Cinico*, *Two Closes*, and *Scabby Queen*. This activism, like debate grounded in human interaction, is portrayed as the real and “authentic” indyref experience. When Donald confesses to his much younger and idealistic, Yes-supporting partner that he joined *Better Together* “as an activist,” Ewan critically asks “what does being an activist involve? Better Together don’t have enough volunteers to go door-knocking.”⁹⁴⁵ This exchange indicates both larger questions of what participatory action entails

⁹⁴³ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

⁹⁴⁴ Jacques Rancière, “The Politics of Literature,” *SubStance* 33, no. 1 (2004): 10, <https://doi.org/10.2307/3685460>.

⁹⁴⁵ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 16.

and differences in campaigning: whereas Yes supporters took to leafletting and door-knocking, *Better Together* often focused on traditional media and telephone canvassing. The visibility and public presence of the Yes campaign – its “festival” aspect – and its contrast to the mass media-led No campaign are also addressed in *Cinico*.⁹⁴⁶ The referendum as a grassroots “festival of participation” is further represented in these texts through a revival of debate “up and down the country;”⁹⁴⁷ “the glimpse of something better [...] democracy at last”;⁹⁴⁸ “festivals of hope” by the Yes movement and *National Collective*;⁹⁴⁹ and activism by *Women for Independence*.⁹⁵⁰ These one-dimensional notions of what constituted popular participation during the referendum also shaped the media debate of the campaigns, as I have demonstrated in chapter 2.

Scabby Queen addresses the lead role of artists and writers in (culture-based) activism for independence – notably from a perspective of critical, often cynical, distance. Clio’s seemingly sincere, albeit idealist exaggeration of “com[ing] home” to “discover a really inspiring fight” is ridiculed in the fictionalised media coverage,⁹⁵¹ but is shown to trigger political participation and interest in those around her.⁹⁵² Clio’s “journey” insightfully details the excitement in growing activist circles, her personal politicisation, and enthusiasm as well as some of the struggles of Yes campaigners on the ground in reaching and convincing others (cf. chapter 3).⁹⁵³ Whereas Adele struggles to recognise herself in the politically outspoken activist the referendum has turned her into, Clio’s political activism and enthusiasm give her new purpose – even if making her “increasingly hysterical” and desperate, as her participation in online debates suggests.⁹⁵⁴ Unsurprisingly, then, Clio’s suicide is framed as a public political statement. While it allows Clio to reclaim a sense of personal agency in choosing her death, she does so by forfeiting political agency: by choosing an individual statement over collective

⁹⁴⁶ Cameron, *Cinico*, 26.

⁹⁴⁷ Cameron, *Cinico*, 139.

⁹⁴⁸ Cameron, *Cinico*, 161-62.

⁹⁴⁹ Cf. McCabe, *Two Closes*, 21.

⁹⁵⁰ Cf. Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 349-51.

⁹⁵¹ Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 319.

⁹⁵² Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 349. Clio’s participation in public debate has explicitly gendered effects: whereas male politicians and reporters describe Clio as increasingly hysterical (70; 320), her political activism and criticism of male political elitism encourages political activism in women (347-51) and fits her narrative of empowerment (her only successful song “Rise UP” celebrates a comeback on indyref stages). The limited sample consulted for this chapter suggests that male authors have dealt differently with how participation during the referendum and political activism have been represented. Whereas both McCabe and Innes give voice to multiple narrators and explicitly address different lived experiences and levels of public political agency, Cameron, Robertson, and (less prominently) C. A. Smith focus on male protagonists’ engagement with the political through levels of romantic resolve.

⁹⁵³ Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 352.

⁹⁵⁴ Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 341.

participation, she expresses her disappointment with both the political establishment and grassroots activism, even if retrospectively. Clio's choice undermines the majoritarian logic of the referendum.

The representations of empowerment and arts-based mobilisation by cultural representatives and emerging intellectuals co-construct and circulate the myth of popular participation in text. In contrast, *Two Closes* importantly recognise some of the day-to-day realities that lie somewhere in-between. When Belgian journalist Agnetha joins Ewan to cover some of the campaigning activism, she is disappointed by the turnout, having “understood the people of Scotland were enthusiastic about this referendum.”⁹⁵⁵ Away from big marches and large festival crowds as essential symbols of participation, *Two Closes* captures a different day-to-day reality – one where people had other obligations and chose football matches over political campaigning. This crucially puts the referendum – and its myth – as a “festival” of popular participation into perspective. It challenges alternative (narrative) realities which paint an image of a nation submerged in political debate (*The Mile*) or run by activists and self-proclaimed experts (*Cinico*).

Despite these attempts at situating the political in the context of the personal and live debate, indyref fiction to date largely regurgitates arguments and imagery dominant in the public and media debate at the time, co-constructing a myth of participation which is firmly tied to power hierarchies (between the media, activist celebrities, and the wider “citizenry”). As such, it follows an urge to make tangible and meaningful a complex debate which both mobilised and limited participation. In search of authenticity, popular participation was limited by repetitive performances of stale arguments. While crucially reproducing performative and passionate political debate, these indyref novels add little to media versions of political debate and popular participation (see [chapter 2](#)). Instead, participation is largely framed through familiar media tropes of inclusive (if adversary) debate, positive activism, personal “journeys,” and festivals on the ground. It is the popular “mass movement,” the coming together of people in the streets, in which authentic experiences of participation enact the dominant framework of the nation. Or, as suggested in *Cinico*: “The nation works at the level of the crowd, the mass, and usually the instinct to conform in the absence of genuine dialogue.”⁹⁵⁶ Conversely, one distinction in

⁹⁵⁵ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 149.

⁹⁵⁶ Cameron, *Cinico*, 119.

framing active participation and debate is the emphasis on national iconography and symbolism in indyref literature – and political verse as discussed above – that was unmatched in media coverage and public debate.

2.2 Speaking for the people, representing the nation

The shared “critical commonplace that Scotland’s artists had been its unacknowledged legislators”⁹⁵⁷ discursively ascribes artists and writers, as well as pre-devolution literature, a representative political function in Scotland.⁹⁵⁸ However, the Scottish Parliament as a new, national frame of reference (see [chapter 1](#)) contributed to a more self-confident and depoliticised Scottish literature which more explicitly engaged with global issues of gender, class, ecology, and “marginalised” voices.⁹⁵⁹ I suggest that indyref literature constitutes a return to national iconography and political representation, in contrast to Pittin-Hédon who, in line with a “depoliticization” of Scottish literature, sees contemporary Scottish writing – including (post-)referendum literature – moving away from a paradigm of representation and voice, while maintaining the representative (political) function of writers.⁹⁶⁰

In continuation of pre-referendum literature, indyref fiction employs “voice as a representative token” through the limiting terms of a “laudably-inclusive vocal imagery [that] still operates on the logic of *displaying* pre-given ‘identities,’”⁹⁶¹ rather than through political enfranchisement. Despite being shaped by the idea of political participation, the independence referendum has nonetheless triggered a fictional move away from this sense of political agency, ironically dealing in display identities and stencils of national identification. As such, indyref fictions have largely fallen short of the mobilising potential of representation.⁹⁶² In a return to a “difference-fetishising appetite for signs, motif and languages encrusted with historical conflict”⁹⁶³ the “confidence” or “complacency” of a self-assured Scottish literature⁹⁶⁴ reiterates the “containment and deferral of nationalist *agency*.”⁹⁶⁵ Rather than challenging or contributing

⁹⁵⁷ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 64.

⁹⁵⁸ Cf. the notion of “cultural devolution” discussed in [chapter 6](#).

⁹⁵⁹ Robert Crawford, *Scotland’s Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 657.

⁹⁶⁰ Pittin-Hédon, “Reconstructing the Future,” 3.

⁹⁶¹ Scott Hames, “On Vernacular Scottishness and Its Limits: Devolution and the Spectacle of ‘Voice,’” *Studies in Scottish Literature* 39, no. 1 (2013): 209.

⁹⁶² Cf. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 252. For more details, see [Introduction](#).

⁹⁶³ Hames, “On Vernacular Scottishness,” 215-16.

⁹⁶⁴ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 81.

⁹⁶⁵ Hames, “On Vernacular Scottishness,” 223.

to a critical paradigm of national representation through democratic participation and agency, the majority of indyref novels represent the referendum as a spectacle of argument and voice through traditional tools of language, sign, and motif.

Thus, the register of voice and the vernacular, although explored in all five indyref novels, rarely portrays a sense of political voice and empowerment. Whereas in the Glasgow setting of *Two Closes* the different registers, although typified, appear as an extension of character, the use of the vernacular adopts a largely social function in *The Mile* and *TBC* as the language of (alcohol-induced) banter and debate. In *Cinico* and *Scabby Queen* dialect and the vernacular are employed predominantly as markers of othering. While use of dialect (in translation) raises suspicion in *Cinico*, it is a continuous marker of difference in *Scabby Queen*, as exemplified in Clio's "demonstrably, Scottish" accent.⁹⁶⁶ Although all five novels set their characters in a context of national belonging through the vernacular, voice is used as a marker of difference that lacks the political quality of empowerment and agency it implies. Instead, authentic political voice is substituted for portrayals of place and class.

Individual political voice is further subsumed under the nation's reliance on the representative role associated with specific signs and emblematic characters: the nearly 100-year-old poet and former politician Rosalind Munloch is portrayed as the "Mother of the Nation."⁹⁶⁷ Like artist Clio Campbell in *Scabby Queen* and Jock in *The Mile*, she is a caricatured symbol and representative of Scottish culture and the nation. The novels perpetuate to different degrees a vision of nationalist symbolism through (anti-)heroic experiences of decay and insignificance expressed in Scottish art of the 1990s. Whereas Jock represents the tourist version of Scottishness on sale on Edinburgh's Royal Mile (with a pinch of drunken modern Scottish disillusionment à la *Trainspotting*),⁹⁶⁸ Munloch and Campbell fit the image of artists and writers cast as the political vanguard and popular leaders established in the myth of cultural devolution. While both Jock and Campbell die the literal and figurative death as representatives of the nation, Munloch has already disappeared into obscurity like the "old Scotland" and, arguably, the dream of independence they all represent. Neither these characters nor the allegorical representation of pro-independence campaigner Maryanne as a freedom

⁹⁶⁶ Innes, *Scabby Queen*, 1.

⁹⁶⁷ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 73.

⁹⁶⁸ Jock is an emblem of Scottishness by name, appearance, behaviour, and beliefs – from tartan trousers, whisky consumption to national pride and military sacrifice. C. A. Smith, *The Mile*, e.g., 78; 108. Historic connections can also be drawn between two of the other characters and literary precedent, i.e., English-born Rosie and traditionalist Euan who show similarities with the main characters in Walter Scott's *Waverley*, Rose Bradwardine and Edward Waverley. Hames, "Democracy and the Indyref Novel," 96.

fighter “leap[ing] to the barricade”⁹⁶⁹ work within the civic narrative of progressive, pro-independence politics. However, these artificial symbols of the nation demonstrate the limitations of political agency of cultural representatives. While Clio inspires some political participation through a transfer of political power (much like an “elected representative”), representative politics is only democratised into larger political agency and participation in *Two Closes* through the non-hierarchical, fictionalised multiplicity of democratic, vernacular voice – even if tied to nationalist symbolism and a spectacle of debate.

Rather than contributing to the radically different “new politics for the nation” that Pittin-Hédon attests to contemporary Scottish literature,⁹⁷⁰ indyref literature and criticism are seemingly undoing the Scottish “post-national turn” of the 2000s.⁹⁷¹ While Introna suggests that the renewed “primacy of the national focus of analysis” is rooted in the strong public pro-independence support of the arts,⁹⁷² the analysis of indyref fiction (and poetry) underlines its explicit rootedness in text. The politics of nation – whether new or shaped by longstanding cultural myths of Scottish identity – is negotiated in indyref literature (more so than in poetry and verse) predominantly through superficial argument and national stereotype, rather than politics of participation and voice. The submerged notion of popular participation and democratic politics inherent in this debate and mythicization of indyref activism rarely breaks the surface to imagine and discursively create the “new nationhood” feverishly evoked in indyref discourse.

Instead, indyref novels negotiate political participation through tensions between ironic self-critical awareness and a silently complacent failure to move beyond national stereotype. In *TBC*, Douglas’s initial aversion to the “prolonged bout of national navel-gazing”⁹⁷³ of writing about the nation is easily overcome for financial gain and visibility. The “Idea of Scotland”⁹⁷⁴ he is asked to portray through “a tartan lens”⁹⁷⁵ presents to the reader a country that is remote, run down, shaped by bad weather, alcohol abuse, and whisky smuggling and is

⁹⁶⁹ Cameron, *Cinico*, 66. This can be read as a direct reference to Eugène Delacroix’s painting “Liberty Leading the People” (1830). Also note the rhetoric play with “cynical” and “forgotten/forgetting” evident in *Cinico* de Oblivii’s name.

⁹⁷⁰ Pittin-Hédon, “Reconstructing the Future,” 8.

⁹⁷¹ Arianna Introna, “Nationed Silences, Interventions and (Dis)Engagements: Brexit and the Politics of Contextualism in Post-Indyref Scottish Literature,” *Open Library of Humanities* 6, no. 1.12 (2020): 7, <https://doi.org/10.16995/olh.459>.

⁹⁷² Introna, “Nationed Silences,” 7.

⁹⁷³ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 71.

⁹⁷⁴ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 69.

⁹⁷⁵ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 70.

barely redeemed through its picturesque landscape.⁹⁷⁶ As such, the text buys into an iconography of national stereotype and relies on an elite media dictum. This focus on national stereotype and tartanry – even if self-ironic – limits the political and deliberative potential of these novels. These texts ask little to no new question about the referendum and the role of participation – or its mythicization – within it, despite attempts to capture the “authentic” referendum experience. Instead, the iconography and symbolism that situate the referendum in the Scottish context do not match the campaign’s progressive agenda. Progressiveness is viewed in tension with nationalist representations in which a woman transitioning into a man is more acceptable than being an “Englishman in the Highlands.”⁹⁷⁷

Rebuttals of open nationalism on a fictional, self-reflective level constitute mere nods towards a routine differentiation from more traditional forms of national identification. As such, the nation as a paradigm of representation crowds out participation in indyref fiction and, arguably, affirms a specifically nationalist function. Nationalist literatures, according to Paul Gilbert, “express the political aspirations of a nation”⁹⁷⁸ as the indyref novels surveyed above do. As Thomson emphasises, “the new rhetorical of aesthetics in political debate attests to the rising tide of identity thinking” which challenges the “liberal nationalism espoused by the SNP” and the pro-independence movement in 2014.⁹⁷⁹

3. Conclusion: writing indyref myths between participation, voice, and nation

As the selection above indicates, political verse, poetry, and indyref literature in support of independence are more numerous and publicly visible than pro-Unionist publications. This is telling in two ways: firstly, it reaffirms the idea that most writers and poets supported a Yes vote and that, secondly, the political movement for self-determination is seen to be historically driven by Scottish poets and writers.

The works produced to date share several key features, namely a concern with capturing the “real” referendum experience as well as a reproduction of well-rehearsed arguments and debate on the one hand, and an evocation of nationalist tropes on the other. The national is evoked in two primary forms: firstly, through stereotypical markers of nationalist identity expressed through flags and food, through national symbols, territory, language, and culture

⁹⁷⁶ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 200; 287. Cf. the direct reference to Compton Mackenzie’s *Whisky Galore* (1947).

⁹⁷⁷ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 238.

⁹⁷⁸ Gilbert, “The Idea of a National Literature,” 199.

⁹⁷⁹ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 86.

(prominent in indyref fiction and, slightly less so, poetry and verse). Secondly, through a “civic” version of national identity and difference, rooted in notions of equality, democracy, and fairness which advocated change and political voice (more prevalent in Yes-leaning poetry). Against the backdrop of a “changed country,” indyref literature covers – rather than critically represents – participatory action and political deliberation either through the description of popular activism on the ground (the festival and myth of popular participation) or the unresolved, adversary debate of indyref argument (encouraging some reflection and political activity). However, despite a noticeable emphasis on political change and empowerment in pro-independence indyref poetry and fiction, this is rarely expressed through participation. Instead, indyref fiction in particular is found to prioritise stereotypical portrayals of the nation that all too often substitute voice and political agency for nationalist trope. This links to the idea, as expressed by Lindsay, that Scottish independence is

a hard subject to be creative about [...] without being a wee bit twee almost, because we’ve got a lot of poetry of the past that was kind of talking of Scotland and the thistles [...]. There’s plenty of propaganda still produced [...] but actually good thoughtful, beautiful, joyful art is very hard to do about an issue like that.⁹⁸⁰

The inherent creative impoverishment that comes with the referendum is more explicitly visible in indyref fiction which, more so than verse and poetry, often falls short of communicating the progressiveness and participation advocated in the public debate. Indyref poetry, in contrast, has provided more abstract reflections on political deliberation, agency, and activism and has attained a more directly political (and mobilising) function within the debate.

In indyref fiction, descriptions of political argument and its limitations – both as a trope and as lengthy fictionalised content – replace the sincere political deliberation that fiction as political text can provide. Instead, these novels largely fail to co-create a sense of agency and democratic voice through fictional reflection and different layers of discourse; they do not “leave the common stage of the conflict of wills in order to investigate in the underground of society and read the symptoms of history.”⁹⁸¹ In this often shallow coverage of the indyref debate, however, they succeed – at least on the narrative level – to capture the indyref experience of many and reproduce the adversary conflict which, according to Mouffe, is essential for democratic politics and an informed public. This productive political conflict influences (if not changes) representations and performances of political participation across the novels; they are rooted in the personal interactions of characters – depicted as the “authentic” indyref experience that gives meaning to their lives.

⁹⁸⁰ Lindsay, interview.

⁹⁸¹ Rancière, “The Politics of Literature, 19.

Many indyref texts rely on performative notions of political voice and participation. The myth of political participation is frequently reproduced and discursively performed in these portrayals as an enticing image and legacy of the referendum, while critical “re-presentation” of it remains limited. Instead, it is often silenced by the regurgitation of slogans and arguments as well as nationalist identity markers and ideas. Where some fictional texts and poetry in particular move towards more democratic and open portrayals of national politics and scrutinise notions of political excitement and participation, the rhetorical and structural scaffolding remains largely rooted in the context of established national(ist) patterns. In many ways, then, indyref literature to date is “bleating what everyone is already saying or at least secretly wants to hear.”⁹⁸² The related pre-occupation with national stereotype rather than with negotiations of voice and political agency in indyref fiction is a symptom of the ongoing political discourse on the constitutional question – despite attempts at (re)claiming political voice and agency. Literary texts focus on “popular political engagement in literature, and its contemporary media manifestations” which are symptomatic of “times of nationalist struggle.”⁹⁸³ In line with this, the ideas of “right”⁹⁸⁴ forms of Scottishness and, importantly, of acceptable forms of popular participation persist; they are subject to a discursive hegemony of interpretation.⁹⁸⁵ The press’s hegemony of interpretation in determining and performing the discursive limits of participation has already been addressed in its historical context (chapter 3) and in newspaper representations and performances of the referendum (chapter 4). Whether social media platforms provided a medium for more inclusive popular participation and agency in media debate will be addressed in the following chapter, while the role of public intellectuals and elite mythmaking in the referendum will be discussed in detail in chapter 6.

⁹⁸² Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor with an afterword by Fredric Jameson, trans. Francis McDonagh (1977; London: Verso, 1998), 193.

⁹⁸³ Gilbert, “The Idea of a National Literature,” 215.

⁹⁸⁴ Mina, interview.

⁹⁸⁵ Cf. Adorno, “Commitment,” 177-78.

Chapter 5

Digital publics: political participation and networks of communication on Twitter

*Discussion as a form of sociability gave way to the fetishism of community involvement.*⁹⁸⁶

The analysis so far has shown different ways in which elite media and literary representations have shaped the role and perceptions of popular participation in the referendum. This elite dominance alongside alleged media bias and popular dissatisfaction with the traditional media (see [chapter 1](#)) not only highlights the potential of creative and literary activism for political agency and participation (as discussed in the previous two chapters) but also meant that many people turned to alternative media platforms and, crucially, to social media to engage with the referendum debate. Social media platforms seemed uniquely suitable to foster political participation and deliberation outside elite media dominance during the referendum campaign. Indeed, since their emergence, social media platforms have been routinely linked to inclusive political participation and a democratisation of politics.⁹⁸⁷

In this chapter, I address the participatory and deliberative potential of the social media networking site Twitter in the referendum. This focus aligns with the second way of political participation discussed in [chapter 3](#), i.e., contact participation via activity on participatory media platforms.⁹⁸⁸ It adds to the discussion of popular participation in the referendum by positioning it in the context of mediated political debate ([chapter 1](#)), while further exploring the limitations of elite media influence in determining popular participation identified in [chapter 2](#). Specifically, this chapter focuses on how parts of the public participated and interacted with discussions of the referendum on Twitter and analyses the networks of communication which emerged as a result. To map these communication networks and their prominent members on Twitter, I employ network analysis of tweet activity. This approach is uniquely suited to specify interactions and the positionality of agents online. It helps determine the “distribution of relational power” in the public sphere⁹⁸⁹ and indicates “the public’s

⁹⁸⁶ Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, 158.

⁹⁸⁷ Todd Graham, Marcel Broersma, and Karin Hazelhoff, “Closing the Gap? Twitter as an Instrument for Connected Representation,” Scullion et al., *The Media*, 71-74; Mick Temple, “Civic and Audience Empowerment: The Role of Citizen Journalism,” Scullion et al., *The Media*, 235; Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere,” 10-11; 15; 18; Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 730.

⁹⁸⁸ Pattie, Seyd, and Whiteley, *Citizenship in Britain*, 78-79; 265.

⁹⁸⁹ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 2.

increasingly mediated interaction with politics [...] inside (social) networks.”⁹⁹⁰ On this basis, I examine the practical and democratic limitations of widespread participation, debate, and democratic deliberation by highlighting the continued dominance of a close-knit network of (elite) communicators online. Twitter activity during the referendum challenges the idea of widespread and inclusive political deliberation on social media. It confirms what I have argued so far about the performative limits of participation: the large amounts of data, information, and activity on Twitter did not coincide with large-scale popular participation alone but were significantly shaped by elite actors. The very idea of open political participation on social media platforms is rendered performative in as much as these claims to participation are neither enacted nor sustained by reality. While this is not a uniquely Scottish phenomenon, claims to open and inclusive popular political participation during the campaign have relevance within the context of the referendum and, specifically, for the myth of popular participation.

In this chapter, I will, firstly, discuss the role of the public sphere for digital communication and expectations towards participation and activity online. I address limitations and potentials for online communication and interaction, and link these to analyses of online debate and deliberation pertaining to the referendum. On this basis, I, secondly, analyse data collected on Twitter around #indyref. By identifying different modes of interaction on Twitter in September 2014, this section examines who participated in the online debate at the time and analyses networks of communication and their central actors – between elite dominance and public participation. In doing so, it identifies limitations of the idea of openness and large-scale public participation and debate online. Thirdly, I examine in more detail the levels of activity, interaction, and reach of alternative campaigners, notably *National Collective*, on Twitter. The combination of these strands of analysis will allow me to examine and challenge expectations of wide-reaching, successful political mobilisation and debate online.

1. The digital public sphere

Participation online impacts the potential of the public sphere as a framework for what Habermas describes as the formation of “political opinions and convictions,” both of which become “effective through general elections” as a tool of “‘controlling’ the government.”⁹⁹¹ While a common practice in routine elections, the negotiation of political opinion by members

⁹⁹⁰ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 2.

⁹⁹¹ Habermas, “The Public Sphere,” 49.

of the public is even more critical where constitutional change is concerned as constitutional referendums are often less reliant on established party affiliations and may address singular issues of significant consequence (see [chapter 3](#)). Indeed, “it is the deliberative opinion- and will-formation of citizens, grounded in principles of popular sovereignty, that forms the ultimate medium for a form of abstract, legally constructed solidarity that reproduces itself through political participation.”⁹⁹² This crucial, if idealised, function of the public sphere in fostering political participation proposes deliberative democracy should be realised through “extensive discussion, knowledge exchange, due consideration to all options, and an openness to changing one’s mind.”⁹⁹³ As the referendum debate has demonstrated, this rhetoric of political legitimacy is both inclusionary and exclusionary where it presumes equal access to debate and knowledge.

In addition to this underlying elitism and ingroup-identification, the popular referendum debate frequently evoked the sense of informed discussion without meeting the ideal notions of debate. Newspapers and broadcasting as the traditional arena of the public sphere increasingly lost credibility during the referendum debate due to a perceived political bias and lack of balanced reporting, which was seen to restrict public political deliberation – particularly from a pro-independence standpoint (see [chapter 1](#)). Some of the limitations of the traditional media in maintaining public political debate and a public sphere evident in the referendum context were already anticipated by Habermas as more general challenges for contemporary societies. Considering the demise of the media in the context of increasing commercialisation (since the 19th-century), Habermas identified a “refeudalization” of the public sphere which has cast audiences as “spectators rather than participants.”⁹⁹⁴ As such, the internal tensions of the media as the mouthpiece and framework of the public sphere are far from new. However, the rise of social media has added to these tensions and pressures and their consequences for popular participation. In fact, opportunities for political participation and debate online have grown and given private individuals “a voice in the public domain.”⁹⁹⁵ Arguably, the national public sphere has “transformed to a multi-layered sphere of online and social networks which are increasingly important in engaging and mobilizing citizenship and in shaping the discourse within which rational discussion takes place.”⁹⁹⁶ Despite the “democratic and mobilising

⁹⁹² Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*. Translated, edited, and with an Introduction by Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 76.

⁹⁹³ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 192-93.

⁹⁹⁴ Fairclough, *Media Discourse*, 44. Cf. Habermas, *The Structural Transformation*, e.g., 142; 232.

⁹⁹⁵ Buchanan, “‘Liked’, ‘Shared’, Re-tweeted,” 80; cf. 70.

⁹⁹⁶ Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 619. Cf. Matthew Hindman, *The Myth of Digital Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009), 7.

power” of online platforms and the “twittersphere”⁹⁹⁷ to transcend boundaries and offer practically free and easy access,⁹⁹⁸ there are limitations to political deliberation online.⁹⁹⁹ Marked by uncivil behaviour, “flaming”,¹⁰⁰⁰ insults, and a regurgitation of fixed beliefs in self-affirming bubbles and on partisan forums, social media activity frequently contributes to echo chambers and polarisation rather than deliberation.¹⁰⁰¹ These echo chambers are formed “when people with the same interests or views interact primarily within their group,”¹⁰⁰² meaning that people inside these groups will “only encounter things they already agree with.”¹⁰⁰³ As a result, echo chambers add to issues with inclusiveness and censorship, partisanship, and corporate interests. These factors negatively impact dialogue, critical discussion, and, ultimately, deliberation online.¹⁰⁰⁴ Here, the referendum debate was no exception.

A study by Quinlan et al. confirms the limited deliberative qualities of online discussion during the referendum.¹⁰⁰⁵ In their analysis of the BBC’s Have Your Say discussion forum during the referendum, they found “discussion dominance, with a small number of contributors accounting for more than half of the conversation.”¹⁰⁰⁶ Related practices of practical exclusion from the political discourse directly undermine the political legitimacy of political debate and the premise of a functional public sphere. Further limitations of the political debate are determined by the fact that the “overwhelming majority of interjectors are men (91%).”¹⁰⁰⁷ The dominance of male voices on a mediated and closely monitored, non-partisan online forum clearly indicates that women participated less in political discussion, even in a relatively safe online space. The visible gender imbalances confirm that nominally equal access does not translate into equal levels of participation.¹⁰⁰⁸ Some of these limitations are predetermined by

⁹⁹⁷ Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 623.

⁹⁹⁸ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 193.

⁹⁹⁹ Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff, “Closing the Gap?” 82; Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 72-73.

¹⁰⁰⁰ Richard Davis, *Politics Online: Blogs, Chatrooms, and Discussion Groups in American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2005). Cf. Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 732; Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere,” 10.

¹⁰⁰¹ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 193; 195.

¹⁰⁰² Dubois and Blank, “The Echo Chamber,” 731.

¹⁰⁰³ Dubois and Blank, “The Echo Chamber,” 729.

¹⁰⁰⁴ Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 620.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Cf. Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 72-73.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 193.

¹⁰⁰⁷ Quinlan, Shepard, Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 199. Given the required registration to the forum statistical accuracy is more likely than on unmonitored platforms.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Misrepresentation can be assumed in terms of class, ethnicity, and locality/regional. Cf. McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 3; Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 624.

structural and conceptual underpinnings of the public sphere proposed by Habermas, which in its conceptualisation remains marked by gendered ideology.¹⁰⁰⁹

These ideological limitations as well as gendered barriers to political participation in particular were complemented by structural barriers in Scotland at the time of the referendum. The notion of “digital disconnection” describes this unequal access to the internet based on lower income, older age, and rural location.¹⁰¹⁰ Although this has changed over recent years with increasing mobile phone access to the internet, these limitations impacted media communication and access during the referendum campaign, which subjected various segments of society to another level of structural exclusion from political debate.

On the other hand, Scottish households were those most prominently using the internet for social networking in the United Kingdom in 2012, with nearly half of Scotland’s population (48.2%) using these platforms regularly.¹⁰¹¹ The impact of social media platforms on people’s political information has also been significant. Research by polling organisation YouGov suggests that in 2014 54% of people received general political information from social media and 39% said that information from social media and the web had influenced their decision in the referendum.¹⁰¹² As these statistics suggest, social media played a significant role in spreading information about the referendum and eventually became a news item in the traditional media as well, discussing hashtags, likes, and shares.¹⁰¹³

However, nominal access to information does not necessarily translate into participation online. Indeed, Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson observe little interaction, and thus little deliberation, online – even among those who actively signed up to public discussion forums. Instead, the referendum “debate” on the Have Your Say forum was largely comment-driven, dominated by few individuals, and thus lacked political dialogue.¹⁰¹⁴ Personal experiences of

¹⁰⁰⁹ Whereas the open and dialogic character of public debate as well as the “emancipatory power of reason” retain the semblance of inclusivity for public political debate, these ideas themselves follow a highly gendered ideology as do underlying conceptualisations of public and domestic life. Pauline Johnson, “Distorted Communications: Feminism’s Dispute with Habermas,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 27, no. 1 (2001): 42-43.

¹⁰¹⁰ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 85. Referencing an Ofcom study from 2011, Hassan states that at that time only 30% of those on lower incomes in Scotland had broadband internet access compared to 55% across the UK. Although this has changed over recent years with mobile internet access, these inequalities in access were highly relevant in 2014.

¹⁰¹¹ Tickell, “Regulating #indyref,” 406.

¹⁰¹² Shepard and Quinlan reference a summary of YouGov data by Haggerty here. Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 490. Cf. Angela Haggerty, “Social Media More Influential Information Source Than Newspapers in Scottish Independence Referendum, YouGov finds,” *The Drum*, October 17, 2014, <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2014/10/17/social-media-more-influential-information-source-newspapers-scottish-independence>.

¹⁰¹³ Gillett, “10 million Scottish Independence Facebook Reactions”; Lauren Davidson, “Social Media Suggests Separatists in the Lead,” *The Daily Telegraph*, September 17, 2014; Williams, “The Power of Social Media.” Cf. also Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Re-tweeted.”

¹⁰¹⁴ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion,” 202.

the referendum debate further illustrate this lack of critical dialogue. For example, novelist Denise Mina argues that growing echo chambers “lead to people being quite misinformed, but it made people feel that they were really informed, because they were reading a lot.”¹⁰¹⁵ By mistaking availability and access to information and intensity of engagement for understanding and deliberation, online arguments actively contributed to misinformation and, potentially, a false sense of political confidence. This was a widespread phenomenon in 2014 but can be assumed to find wider application to political debate off-and online.

The comfort and sense of empowerment stemming from political echo chambers,¹⁰¹⁶ as they were common in the referendum debate, often meant that fixed, contrasting opinions and beliefs, claims and counterclaims, manifested as unresolvable, routine performances within the discursive game at play. The performativity of these conflicts thus contributed to the divisiveness of the referendum debate online and offline, despite its potential for productive confrontation and a revival of political debate and passions.¹⁰¹⁷ The tension of rhetoric patterns and revived political passion manifests in renewed political enthusiasm on the one hand, and a lack of political debate and deliberation on the other. The acute political limitations of the digital public sphere in fostering meaningful deliberation (e.g., on Twitter) both contribute to and partially contradict the mythologisation of the referendum through notions of participation. The lack of representativeness shown above demonstrates that the digital public sphere’s participatory potential was not born out during the referendum,¹⁰¹⁸ despite the nominal openness of Twitter (and the Have Your Say forum). Network analysis of the online debate on Twitter during September 2014 demonstrates these limitations. It develops observations about echo chambers and micro-publics made in chapter 3 and considers these in the context of *ad hoc* issue publics that form online around specific themes captured by hashtags.¹⁰¹⁹

2. Growing networks – networked communities?

In the following, I use network analysis to examine data returned via the Twitter API search for #indyref. As discussed in the Methodology section, the analysis focuses on the legacy social media platform Twitter for three main reasons, namely: the suggestion that it provides a space

¹⁰¹⁵ Mina, interview.

¹⁰¹⁶ Kane, interview.

¹⁰¹⁷ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 91.

¹⁰¹⁸ Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 72-73.

¹⁰¹⁹ Axel Bruns and Jean Burgess, “The Use of Twitter Hashtags in the Formation of Ad Hoc Publics,” *Proceedings of the 6th European Consortium for Political Research (ECPR) General Conference 2011* (2011): 7, <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/46515/>; Burns and Burgess, “Researching News Discussions,” 804.

for political participation and deliberation; its structural openness and relative inclusivity; and its bias towards political content, agents, and organisations. Twitter data collected for 1-30 September 2014 returned a total of 1,048,575 tweets tagged with the hashtag “#indyref”. The referendum constituted “one of the most featured topics on Twitter”¹⁰²⁰ in 2014. Twitter thus provided a crucial outlet for public political opinion and, alongside other social media platforms, suggests a “broadening of public debate.”¹⁰²¹ Nonetheless, these numbers say little about who contributed on social media and how. In short, it raises the question whether nominal access translated into larger levels of participation and larger networks of interaction and communication online.

An initial survey of the collected data suggests limited interaction with contributions by others. Only 6043 out of 1048575 tweets (0.58%) received 15 or more likes, with only 10 tweets receiving over 1000 likes. The highest like (15303) – and retweet (7625) – count in this sample occurred in response to a poll by Media Scotland’s *Scotland Now* which asked for an “indyref” vote through retweets (Yes) and likes (No) on 15 September. The other four highest like counts in this sample can be attributed to two private individuals (2207 and 1676 respectively)¹⁰²² and two public figures: a pro-independence tweet by actor Simon Pegg (2120) and a pro-Union tweet by writer J. K. Rowling (1399). While *Scotland Now*’s post as well as the same tweets by the two private individuals mentioned above dominated the retweet counts on single tweets, a tweet by Nicola Sturgeon (2280 retweets) as well as two tweets by *Sky News* (2777 and 2778 retweets) stand out here. Both *Sky News* tweets (on 02/09 and 14/09) referred to TV debates: they both asked the public to retweet this post if they thought Alex Salmond had won the debate – again using the affordances of Twitter to survey public opinion. Sturgeon’s tweet stated a refusal by the No side, namely former leader of the Labour Party Ed Miliband, to join her in a TV debate for *Scotland Tonight*, which was clearly intended to call out the opposition and demonstrate the pro-independence sides’ willingness to engage in public debate and foster political deliberation.

These statistics indicate two key trends: firstly, traditional media players remained dominant distributors of information on social media. Even where the public has increasingly turned to accessing political news via social media platforms, the content accessed there

¹⁰²⁰ Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 70. In an article for *The Herald*, Williams states that 2.3 million tweets used #indyref in the 30 days prior to the referendum (note the slightly different timeframe), making it the most popular hashtag associated with the referendum. Williams, “The Power of Social Media.”

¹⁰²¹ Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 741.

¹⁰²² In line with ethical guidance (see also *Methodology* section), only public personas and organisations with an explicitly public-facing Twitter profile are named in this analysis.

frequently originates from the same sources. Twitter thus worked as a source for news rather than as a platform of deliberation and debate, with information production centring on key actors. This changing practice thus constitutes a shift in information distribution rather than production.¹⁰²³ These observations resonate with findings by Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez who identified a male-dominated political elite as key news producers of political debate in television coverage of the referendum.¹⁰²⁴

However, relevant political information is not simply spread via a different medium. Instead, the data suggests that established media outlets and social media “elites” – including traditional players such as journalists, politicians, as well as celebrities and “influencers” – create a larger variety of content online. Thus, critical or humorous tweets that reflect the sentiment of the time can “go viral,”¹⁰²⁵ as the like and tweet count of single interventions by private individuals mentioned above suggests. This limited “broadening” of public debate does not imply its radical democratisation, however. Instead, the fashioning of “social media posts and metrics into public opinion” remains largely with the elites.¹⁰²⁶ It demonstrates that social media, and particularly Twitter, have become essential to journalistic practice, where they are employed as a “newsgathering tool.”¹⁰²⁷ As Shannon McGregor and Rachel Mourão suggest, these metrics are frequently used by journalists “in the same way they report public opinion polls.” Although this allows the public to “use social media to partake in the real-time creation of public opinion,”¹⁰²⁸ it largely mimics routine polling of surveys rather than more empowering and deliberative qualities of a digital public sphere. Indeed, with just 11% of Scots claiming to have participated in discussions of the referendum online, political debate on social media was limited to a small percentage of the overall population. However, this number of people surpassed “those who said they attended a public meeting during the campaign.”¹⁰²⁹ Where the public might be more hesitant to engage in political debate on the ground, this threshold for participation in political debate was lower online during the referendum.

¹⁰²³ Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 490.

¹⁰²⁴ Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 468.

¹⁰²⁵ This was visible for example in reactions to the *Better Together*’s campaign video “The Women that Made Up Her Mind” (an appeal to women voters that was largely perceived as patronising). Law, “Mediating the Scottish Independence Debate,” 4; 7. For a discussion on virality online, cf. Ulrike Klinger and Jakob Svensson, “Network Media Logic: Some Conceptual Considerations,” in Bruns et al., *The Routledge Companion to Social Media and Politics*, 31.

¹⁰²⁶ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 11. Cf. Bruns and Burgess, “Researching News Discussion,” 802.

¹⁰²⁷ Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 453.

¹⁰²⁸ McGregor and Mourão, “Talking Politics on Twitter,” 11.

¹⁰²⁹ Shepard and Quinlan reference data by TNS Global here. Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 491.

Secondly, social media provides an alternative arena for political debate while maintaining a close connection to traditional media. Discussions on social media often revolve around events mediated through traditional media (e.g., TV debates).¹⁰³⁰ Analysis of audience responses to three televised referendum debates in September 2014 by Pedersen et al. suggests that viewers co-created a wide variety of content online while watching these debates, with a tendency to focus on “moments of political theatre” online.¹⁰³¹ The connection between televised content and tweet activity anticipated by Pedersen et al. on a content level is also prominent in my analysis of the longitudinal distribution of tweets throughout September. A steady increase in tweets till referendum day or rather the days after the referendum aside, smaller increases in tweet activity occurred around mediated TV debates. These events thus became items of online discussion and, as my analysis suggests, focused tweet activity. For example, a townhall debate between the Yes and No campaign on 2 September 2014 is visible in a relative increase in tweet activity between 2-3 September (50,742 tweets compared to 37,012 and 37,152 in the 24 hours before and after). Tweet activity slightly dropped again under the 50,000-mark in the days that followed. A steady increase from 6-7 September raises to another relative peak on 11-12 September (116,963 tweets), as the below figure shows.

The steady increase in tweet activity from 6 September coincides with the media announcement of a Yes lead in opinion polls for the first time.¹⁰³² The *Scotland Decides: The Big, Big Debate* that was broadcast by BBC One on 11 September 2014 explains the relative increase for 11-12 September. Despite a considerable increase on the day of the vote, tweet activity was highest on the days after the referendum, i.e., between 18-19 and 19-20 September (361,326 and 419,797 tweets within 24 hours respectively), when results were announced and discussed.

¹⁰³⁰ Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 741.

¹⁰³¹ Pedersen et al., “Backchannel Chat,” 2.

¹⁰³² Will Dahlgreen, “‘Yes’ Campaign Lead at 2 in Scottish Referendum,” *YouGov*, September 6, 2014, <https://yougov.co.uk/topics/politics/articles-reports/2014/09/06/latest-scottish-referendum-poll-yes-lead>; Ben Quinn, “Scottish Independence: Poll Shows Yes Side in the Lead,” *The Guardian*, September 7, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/scottish-independence-blog/live/2014/sep/07/scottish-independence-poll-shows-yes-side-in-the-lead-live>.

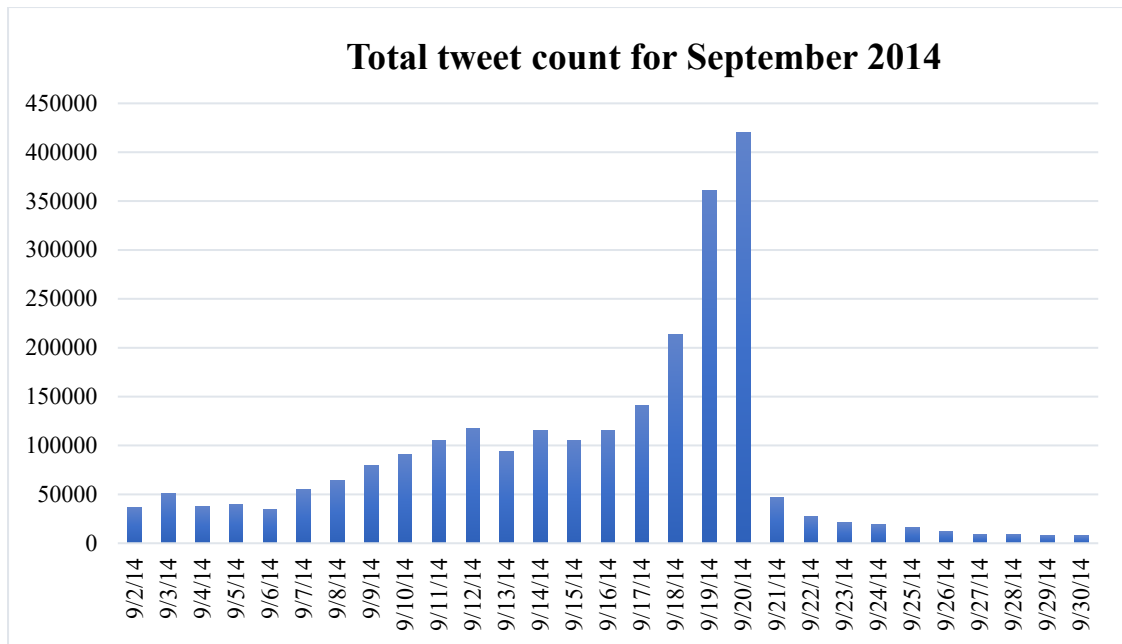


Figure 1: Longitudinal distribution of tweet activity for September 2014 (beginning on 1 September; dates mark the endpoint of data collected over 24 hours)

Confirming trends suggested by the like and retweet count on single posts discussed above, the table below provides an overview over the collected data according to tweet types. This provides further insight into the level of participation and interaction visible online. Whereas retweets indicate an intention to spread other users' messages, @replies/mentions "indicate discursive intent."¹⁰³³ Quoted tweets also make use of "mentions" but can fulfil a slightly different function. Often, they combine retweets with an added message which neither expresses comprehensive discursive intent nor does it simply help spread another message. As the below table (table 1) indicates, only a very small number of tweet activity demonstrated interaction through the @mentions/replies feature online.

¹⁰³³ Karen Boyle and Chamil Rathnayake, "#HimToo and the Networking of Misogyny in the Age of #MeToo," *Feminist Media Studies* 20, no. 8 (2020): 1262, <https://doi.org/10.1080/14680777.2019.1661868>.

Overview of tweet activity for September 2014

Tweet type	Number	Per cent
Retweets	783246	74.69%
Replies/mentions	52068	4.97%
Quoted	749	0.07%
Singletons/none of above	212512	20.27%
Total	1048575	100.00%

Table 1: Overview over tweet activity divided by tweet type

Replies to and mentions of other users, which are essential for active debate and “indicate discursive intent,”¹⁰³⁴ only constitute around 5% of all tweet activity. Quoted tweets, which fulfil a similar function, are rarely used. However, it is crucial to note here that the method for data collection via the Twitter API search for tweets tagged with #indyref limits not only the overall sample for collection but specifically that of @replies/mentions and quoted tweets. Consequently, only replies (and quoted tweets) that are also tagged with #indyref are collected as part of the sample. Crucially, few users tag their responses to tweets in this way – where they do, they emphasise their discursive intent and contribution to the debate.

Margot Buchanan suggests in her analysis of social media use during the referendum that “the number of written responses to tweets in general was fairly low.”¹⁰³⁵ The data collected for tweet activity throughout September 2014 confirms Buchanan’s assumption, despite the limitations detailed above. Indeed, qualitative checks of like and retweet counts of the most prominent tweets identified above confirm that replies to these “viral tweets” were largely absent or minimal and rarely elicited debate beyond single comments.

The collected data further demonstrates that singular, undirected tweets as well as retweets of content by others make up 94.96% of all tweet activity. Single tweets demonstrate interaction with the hashtag #indyref and thus most directly communicate identification with the referendum debate. They usually express opinion, beliefs, or observations. As such, single tweets were most likely to cover information that was personal and bore little relevance for the overall referendum debate and, where published by private individuals, rarely attracted

¹⁰³⁴ Boyle and Rathnayake, “#HimToo,” 1262.

¹⁰³⁵ Buchanan, “‘Liked,’ ‘Shared,’ Retweeted,” 74.

significant attention. This practice mimics the liminality of private publicness of interventions in the form of letters discussed in [chapter 3](#). In contrast, retweets more frequently drew attention to notable content and information on the referendum. They helped spread information by others and indicate an understanding of Twitter's network structure,¹⁰³⁶ while showing a low level of interaction. These findings add to the analysis by Shephard et al. mentioned above, that found little interaction and deliberation on the BBC Have Your Say forum. My analysis of tweet activity identifies a similar trend on the platform Twitter and suggests that political debate and deliberation related to the referendum were sparse. Affirmation of preconceived beliefs meant that tweet activity was largely monological and expressive – rather than dialogical – and thus rendered participation on the platform largely performative in September 2014. Tweet activity further shows that interaction at the time was dominated by a symbolic participation in the debate based on the sharing of external content without having to interact with political arguments or actively participating in debate. Instead, participation in these debates also worked as a performance of belonging and (tribal) national identity. Arguably, most arguments for and against independence had been made at this point in the debate and campaigners primarily aimed to reiterate established information through retweets. These findings nonetheless indicate a lack of deliberative debate online and highlight the performative character of political participation on Twitter.

So far, little has been said about the role of those creating, sharing, and interacting with information online. Even if there is little evidence for (meaningful) interaction and debate, did Twitter provide a framework for large-scale public participation and aid “a broadening of public debate?” Or did “it merely serve as yet another arena for already established societal actors?”¹⁰³⁷ These questions, which were raised by Larsson and Moe in their analysis of the 2010 Swedish election, are highly relevant for my analysis of the 2014 referendum debate. I use network analysis of tweet activity from September 2014 to similarly determine which members of society were most active in political debate online and which networks of communication emerged as a result. Specifically, I analyse below whether the exceptional level of tweet activity during the final month of the referendum translated into wide and open networks of political debate and interaction online which facilitated the inclusive participation associated with the referendum in the myth of popular participation.

¹⁰³⁶ Burns and Burgess propose that retweets indicate users' understanding of Twitter's network structure in as much as they know that “original messages will reach only a limited number of users” and thus rely on amplification of visibility through retweet activity. Burns and Burgess, “Researching News Discussion,” 803.

¹⁰³⁷ Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 736.

Based on the collected data, three different data sets were mapped through separate network visualisations. The network consists of Twitter users (nodes) and their different connections (edges). Edges represent retweet and quote relationships as well as @reply/mention interactions.¹⁰³⁸ They explain the level of interaction between different users. Based on these interactions, key actors in the different networks were systematically identified through weighted degree and in-degree. The size of the nodes is shown proportional to their degree (degree centrality in the network) and coloured according to the number of incoming edges (weighted in-degree; lighter colours showing important receivers of attention, i.e., influential actors). Figure 2 below provides an example of a network visualisation.

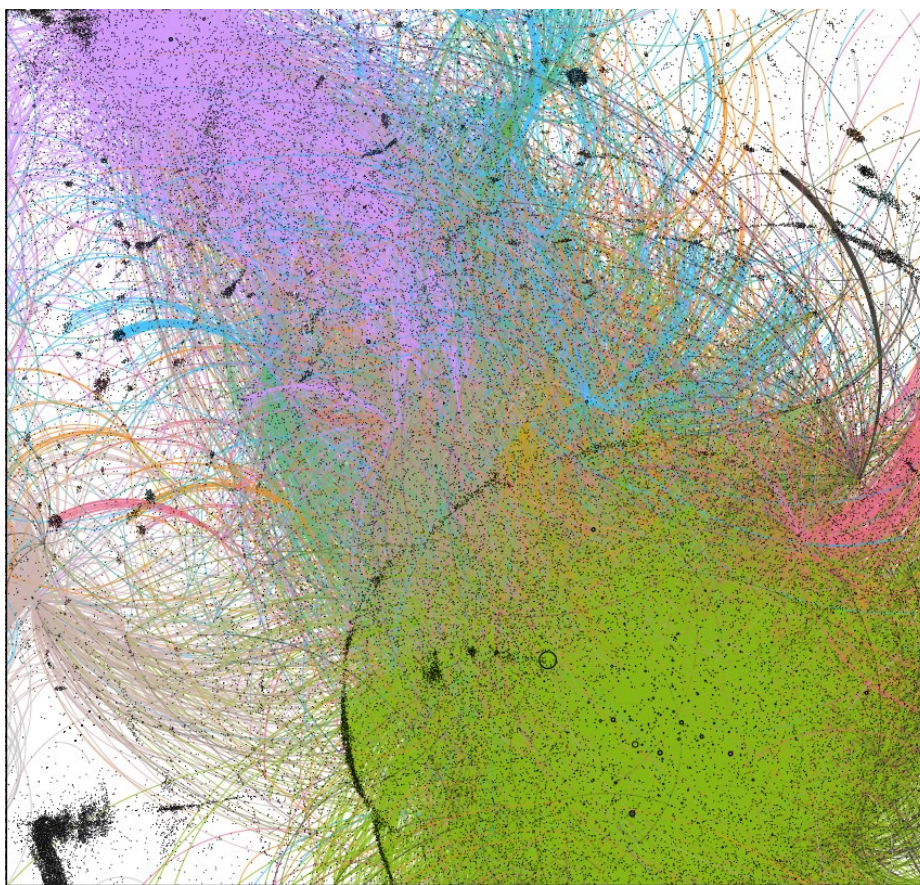


Figure 2: Retweet network showing degree (size of nodes proportional to their degree), weighted in-degree (highly connected nodes are lighter in colour) and modularity (different colours indicate different communities within the network). The visualisation is based on Open Ord and Force Atlas2 layout in Gephi.

Visualisations use degree, in- and out-degree as well as modularity to determine the number of connections a node has and distinguish between different community clusters within the network. Indegree (incoming degree) indicates how frequently a message was retweeted or

¹⁰³⁸ Boyle and Rathnayake, “#HimToo,” 1262.

quoted, and how frequently a user is replied to or mentioned in @reply/mention and quoted networks.¹⁰³⁹ It thus demonstrates the user's influence and prestige within the network.¹⁰⁴⁰ Specifically, "[a]nalysis of indegree within networks helps understand prominent actors and how clusters form around them."¹⁰⁴¹ Indeed, Ausserhofer and Maireder suggest influence and authority on Twitter is determined through involvement, namely how frequently an account is mentioned, addressed, or retweeted, rather than by following and tweet activity alone.¹⁰⁴² The latter factors would potentially prioritise users who have been more active before and/or after the referendum, distracting from those who most actively engaged with the referendum debate. Therefore, following and tweet activity were not taken into account in this instance.

Outdegree indicates the number of retweets and @messages a user sent; it thus helps identify the most active senders within a network. Degree combines indegree and outdegree and is thus indicative of the number of connections a node has within the network – it shows a user's centrality within the communication network. Modularity describes the extent to which a network consists of distinct subgraphs (commonly known as communities and identified through their interaction online). These are represented through the different colours in the figure above (figure 2). Accordingly, network analysis facilitates the systematic identification of high prestige and influential actors within each network. It provides meaningful indication of who was speaking to whom as part of the referendum debate online and demonstrates dominant patterns of information sharing within these networks based on the interaction between users.

As indicated above, the largest and most active network emerged through retweet activity. The network consists of 892244 nodes and 556431 edges. This activity is suggestive of a large but poorly connected network.¹⁰⁴³ Indeed, the fact that the number of edges is smaller than the number of nodes shows that the network consists of a lot of isolated retweet activity, such as isolated research pairs. In combination with a low modularity value of 0.360, this is indicative of a weak community structure (with values ranging between 0-1). A total number of 784587 communities was identified. Indegree measures of these retweets indicate which tweets were shared most frequently during the 30-day period in September 2014.

¹⁰³⁹ Boyle and Rathnayake, "#HimToo," 1263.

¹⁰⁴⁰ Boyle and Rathnayake, "#HimToo," 1262. Cf. Albert-László Barabási, *Network Science* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016). Importantly, prestige does not refer to a user's popularity here but to their prominence and centrality within the network.

¹⁰⁴¹ Boyle and Rathnayake, "#HimToo," 1263.

¹⁰⁴² Ausserhofer and Maireder, "National Politics on Twitter," 293.

¹⁰⁴³ Particularly in retweet networks, retweet bots are likely to impact network structures. To what extent these were involved in sharing content in the present network was not captured as part of the present analysis.

User influence in the retweet network

Node/User	Indegree	Degree
Yes Scotland	14091	14134
Scotland Now	4920	4920
National Collective		4666
Nicola Sturgeon	4546	4582
National Collective	4380	
UK Together	4303	4331
Jim Sillars	3555	3590
Private individual (politically active)	3363	3410
Newsnet Scotland	3178	3216
Private individual (politically active)	2985	3020
Michael Stewart	2974	3018

Table 2: Indegree and degree factors for the retweets occurring in September 2014

As the above numbers indicate, this network was shaped by institutional players. The ten most influential actors in this network reached an indegree of above 2900, with pro-independence campaign organisation *Yes Scotland* (@YesScotland, indegree 14091). While *Better Together/UK Together* (@UK_Together, indegree 4303) is also a dominant player in this network, *Yes Scotland*'s level of engagement online was more than three times that, confirming that "Yes made extensive use of the media and particularly social media."¹⁰⁴⁴ Thus, the same actors dominate the indegree and degree ranking in this network, indicating that no single user reached a level of tweet activity comparable with the number of retweets by these dominant actors. Retweet activity by these dominant actors themselves was comparably small. The ten dominant users consist mainly of campaign organisations, media outlets and key politicians, except for three individuals. While two of them are private individuals, who identify as politically active with clear pro-independence and anti-Tory sympathies expressed in their bios, the third individual is former Scottish football personality Michael Stewart.¹⁰⁴⁵

In contrast, the most active actors in the outdegree network, i.e., those who frequently retweet tweets by others, pre-dominantly consist of private individuals. Where "Twitter bios" are available for the top ten actors, they all self-identify as politically opinionated and/or politically active citizens. They frequently self-identify as Scottish and as SNP supporters with

¹⁰⁴⁴ Lynch, "Bottom-up," 3. Cf. Shepard and Quinlan, "Social Media," 498.

¹⁰⁴⁵ As detailed in the [Methodology](#) section, only public figures and organisations with an expressed interest in engaging with a public audience are named in the present analysis.

anti-Tory sympathies. In addition to campaign slogans, many still clearly position as Yes supporters/voters – even at the time of analysis more than eight years after the referendum –, with some making explicit reference to nationalist imagery and symbolism.

Consequently, prestige and influence within the retweet network largely remained with established, “elite” political and media actors. However, activity rested pre-dominantly with politically active citizens, who were greatly involved in distributing information online through their high level of retweet activity. The momentum of the content shared in this way was with pro-independence supporters and campaigners, at least where #indyref was used.

In terms of the deliberative potential, however, the role of @reply and mentions networks is more substantial than the spreading of information through retweet networks. This network is significantly smaller than the retweet network and includes 91603 nodes and 53206 edges. Similar to the retweet network analysed above, the @reply network is dominated by established players from politics and media.

User influence in the @replies/mention network

Node/User	Indegree
Yes Scotland	601
UK Together	466
Nicola Sturgeon	396
BBC News	395
Alex Salmond	311
BBC Scotland	302
Scottish Labour	269

Table 3: Indegree factors for the @replies/mention network occurring in September 2014

While replies to campaigning organisations *Yes Scotland* (indegree 601) and *UK Together/Better Together* (466) dominate the network, tweets by Nicola Sturgeon (396) and, this time also, Alex Salmond (311) as well as Scottish Labour (269) elicited frequent replies. In contrast to the retweet network, BBC News (395) and BBC Scotland (302) are positioned much more centrally in this network. This centrality indicates that people engaged more with these accounts and the information provided here: rather than simply sharing relevant information pertaining to the referendum debate (through retweets), the information provided here elicited more engagement and commentary which potentially indicates its controversial or emotive nature. Likely due to its relevance for the debate or users’ dis-/agreement with the information provided, users explicitly positioned their responses to these tweets in the

“#indyref” discourse by tagging them. Indeed, private individuals posted the most (tagged) replies to these tweets. Those with available Twitter bios again clearly position as politically active. The users who most prominently used the reply function (in combination with #indyref) self-identify as supporters of freedom, of “free thinking,” voice pro-independence and anti-Tory sympathies and position as politically progressive, except for one user who self-declares as a No voter. Similar tendencies are also visible where quoted tweets are concerned. While those most frequently quoted were actors from the field of politics and media as well as, notably, campaign analyst and strategists, those engaging with their tweets were predominantly partisan supporters of independence.¹⁰⁴⁶ However, the @replies/mention network was used more openly to communicate criticism and outrage – by activists and, to a lesser degree, journalists.¹⁰⁴⁷

These interactions online, or rather the lack thereof, indicate a replication of pre-existing power dynamics in the online environment. While the high activity by private individuals might suggest that Twitter allowed politically active and interested members of the public to converse with campaigning organisations, politicians, and news outlets online,¹⁰⁴⁸ the comparison between indegree and degree numbers does not support such a positive outlook. Indeed, indegree and degree for the key actors in the network is either identical or up by one, indicating that (tagged) replies to tweets by others were rare. Consequently, little interaction (and conversation) between these key actors and the wider public was found online. Elite actors act as informants, while the public is left to analyse and, rarely, discuss the available information and consequences among themselves. Indeed, Ulrike Klinger and Jakob Svensson emphasise that political actors and organisations largely use social media platforms “as one-way information channels” to “broadcast” their ideas.¹⁰⁴⁹ Echoing this observation, analysis of #indyref shows that the potential openness of political debate on social media was rarely used by elite actors to facilitate active debate and interaction with supporters and a politically interested and engaged public.

¹⁰⁴⁶ The number of interactions mapped here only includes replies which have been tagged with #indyref. However, users frequently do not tag replies to pre-existing (tagged) tweets. Where they do, they add additional emphasis to their contributions and demonstrate discursive intent as well as an attempt at actively contributing to a specific discourse. Where users employ hashtags in their responses, they, according to Bruns and Burgess, “deliberately choose to make their response visible to the wider hashtag community.” Bruns and Burgess, “Researching News Discussion,” 807.

¹⁰⁴⁷ The analysis of this network is primarily comparative, given the small scale of this network (1482 nodes, 650 edges) and its relative numerical insignificance.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Cf. Dekavalla and Jelen-Sanchez, “Whose Voices,” 453.

¹⁰⁴⁹ Klinger and Svensson, “Network Media Logic,” 24; Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff, “Closing the Gap?” 85.

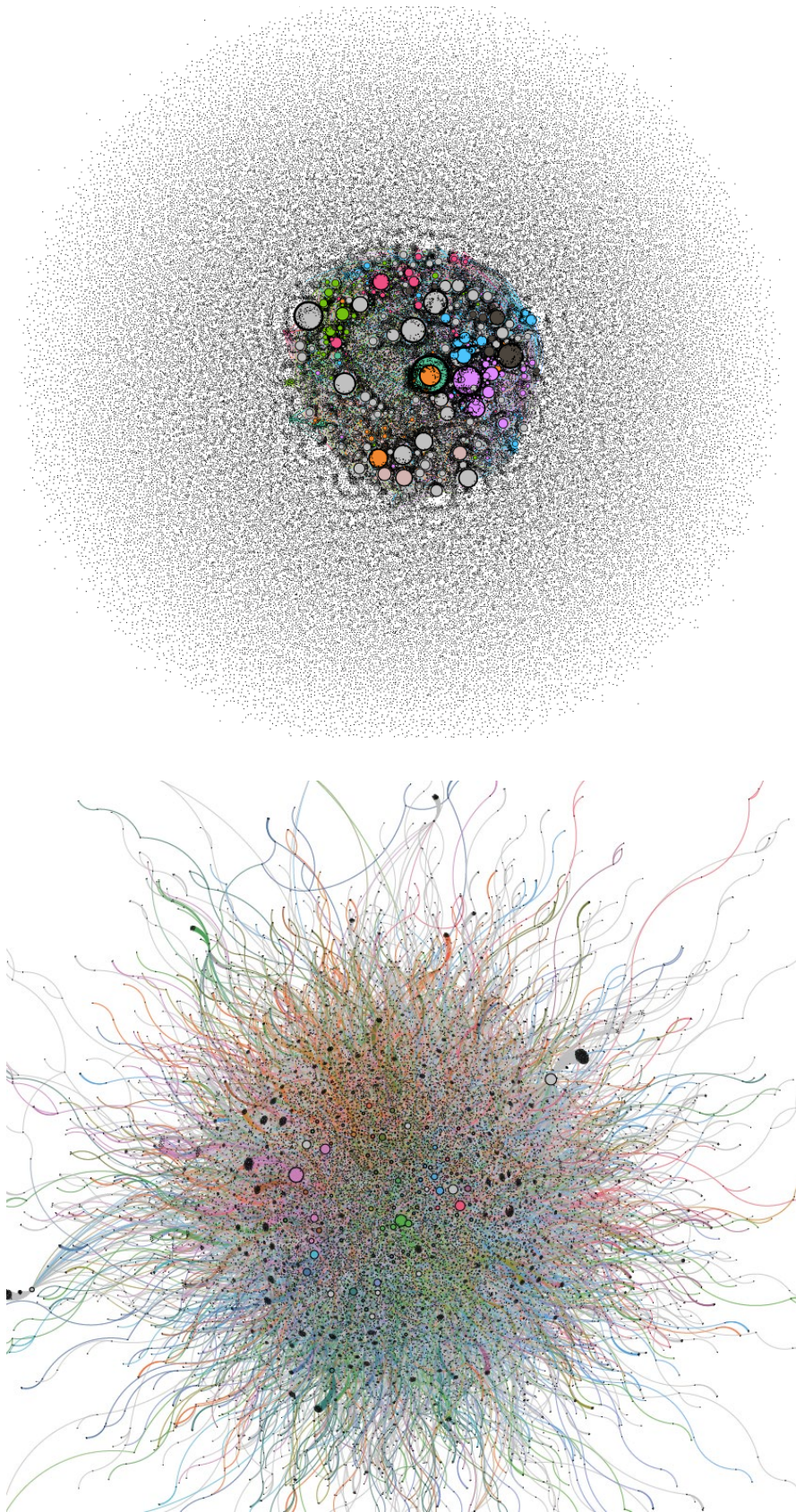


Figure 3 and 4: #indyref @reply network, showing weighted degree and in-degree, and modularity. The visualisation uses Open Ord and Force Atlas2 layout in Gephi. The size of nodes shows weighted degree, with larger nodes indicating higher levels of interaction. Lighter colours identify a larger number of incoming edges (weighted in-degree), different colours indicate communities. Curved edges show the direction of the interaction (clockwise). The visualisations differ in modularity and scaling parameters.

As anticipated in the analysis by Shepard and Quinlan cited above, political deliberation online was highly limited. By demonstrating similar limitations of interaction and conversation on Twitter, my findings add to their analysis of levels of deliberation on the BBC Have Your Say forum.¹⁰⁵⁰ They demonstrate that similar tendencies shaped activity on the much larger and nominally open social media network Twitter. While Shepard and Quinlan's analysis establishes a lack of deliberation on a small-scale monitored discussion forum, results from my analysis indicate that demonstrable levels of debate were even less extensive on the open platform Twitter. Instead, here, too, dominance by few actors could be ascertained – not in terms of interaction but regarding the production and circulation of content.

Echoing previous research into public election debates on Twitter, the data analysed above confirms that a broadening of access on the one hand did not significantly counter the dominance of established voices.¹⁰⁵¹ It clearly indicates that the majority of information that was circulated came from established actors within the political and media fields, including campaigning organisations, political parties, politicians, and news media outlets. Larsson and Moe's network analysis of the Swedish election in 2010 found that "Twitter indeed serves as a new outlet for speakers already belonging to an elite, or at least affiliated with prominent positions in mainstream media or political life in general."¹⁰⁵² Building on these findings, my research has shown that these trends also applied to the Scottish referendum debate on Twitter four years later. My findings thus indicate little change within this timeframe and, importantly, demonstrate that the myth of participation did not significantly challenge established realities of elite information dominance on Twitter. Similarly, it adds to Ausserhofer and Maireder's analysis of the Austrian political twittersphere: it echoes their findings that few elite (or professional) actors "branch out to connect with citizens."¹⁰⁵³

However, the above findings show that those who most actively retweeted and replied to the tweets of these elite actors were predominantly private individuals. While most of them were politically active and outspoken and frequently worked within the media context, this activity contributed to a broadening of influence online. Nonetheless, this form of digital power remained within a small group of vocal, political "influencers".¹⁰⁵⁴ The same holds true for

¹⁰⁵⁰ Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, "Online Discussion," 202-203.

¹⁰⁵¹ Larsson and Moe, "Studying Political Microblogging," 741.

¹⁰⁵² Larsson and Moe, "Studying Political Microblogging," 741.

¹⁰⁵³ Ausserhofer and Maireder, "National Politics on Twitter," 309.

¹⁰⁵⁴ As Ausserhofer and Maireder suggest, these elite networks extend, in rare instances, to non-professionals. If promoted by receptive members of the elite or where they establish themselves as niche authorities and experts, they can obtain a prominent, if temporary, role within these networks of communication. Ausserhofer and Maireder, "National Politics on Twitter," 309.

those few individuals who obtained key positions within the retweet network. Whereas D’heer and Verdegem point out that the symbolic capital fuelled by the number of mentions and replies on Twitter may differ in relation to a user’s standing as a “politician, media or citizen agent,”¹⁰⁵⁵ the referendum and social media developments more widely have established alternative practices for generating said capital.¹⁰⁵⁶ However, political engagement and active use of Twitter through retweets and replies does not necessarily constitute influence within the digital public sphere, nor does it contribute to more discussion and deliberation. Instead, the above findings indicate that Twitter was predominantly used to disseminate information rather than to foster dialogue and debate – these findings align with findings by previous studies on political debate online.¹⁰⁵⁷

3. Alternative campaigners – open networks?

The level of online engagement is also relevant regarding online interaction with specific social media pages of campaigning organisations. Instead of focussing on the changing social media performance of campaign organisations *Yes Scotland* and *Better Together*,¹⁰⁵⁸ I have analysed the level of interaction of campaigners NC, RIC, and WFI on Twitter. In contrast to Shepard and Quinlan’s analysis, which monitored the number of likes on the official campaigners’ Facebook pages and counted the number of followers and tweets of these accounts to establish their reach,¹⁰⁵⁹ network-based analysis provides further insights into how different users interact online and how power dynamics shape social media interaction and communication networks of alternative players.

The analysis of these campaign organisations and their interaction online is based on the same Twitter dataset from 1 to 30 September 2014. As briefly noted above, this period includes the final push for participation ahead of the referendum – as well as the days of contemplation after the vote. Although marked by various TV debates and increasing levels of political activism and campaigning, the focus slowly shifted away from attempts at creating the

¹⁰⁵⁵ D’heer and Verdegem, “Conversations About the Elections,” 731.

¹⁰⁵⁶ As discussed previously, using network analysis based on a hashtag search often means that less experienced users who do not tag their posts are not included in the dataset. This approach, as well as a focus on the most active users within the network, prioritises elite participation.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Larsson and Moe, “Studying Political Microblogging,” 741.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Cf. Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 489.

¹⁰⁵⁹ Shepard and Quinlan, “Social Media,” 491. As Klinger and Svensson point out, “[t]he number of followers on Twitter or friends on Facebook are only weak predictors of visibility, because they indicate to how many people the post will be broadcast, but not if and how it will travel from there via re-tweets and other means of sharing. Klinger and Svensson, “Network Media Logic,” 35.

conditions for debate and deliberation towards traditional “Get out to vote” messaging in a final push for participation to secure the anticipated high turnout in the vote. Thus, the prominent type of communication by these campaign organisations may have shifted in the last weeks prior to the referendum while, undoubtedly, capturing their most fervent attempts at mobilising the public into participation.

While NC tweeted an impressive 308 times during this 30-day period (in addition to 492 retweets), interaction with these tweets was small. Except for one original tweet which solicited 958 retweets and 395 likes, retweets averaged at 39.84 and likes at 20.71. The tweet activity of RIC (with 32 tweets and 50 retweets) and WFI (8 tweets and 68 retweets) was significantly lower, and so was engagement with their content (for WFI retweets averaged at 25.25 and likes at 17.13; for RIC at 38.38 and 15.31).

Singular tweets of media sites and established political and cultural commentators as well as “viral” tweets by private individuals (e.g., on the “royal baby” and indyref) generated larger levels of interaction as detailed above. These observations are also reflected in network analysis of the campaigning organisations’ tweet activity. It shows that NC’s content received substantial attention online through retweets, quotes, and replies. This high level of impact in public debate (indegree 4452) establishes their role as “elite”, that is key activists online. However, they also interacted considerably with others through retweets and replies (outdegree 297) and thus acted as advocates for others. As such, they carved out for themselves a central position within the “#indyref” network of communication online. In contrast, activity by WFI and RIC saw low engagement from other users with their tweets.

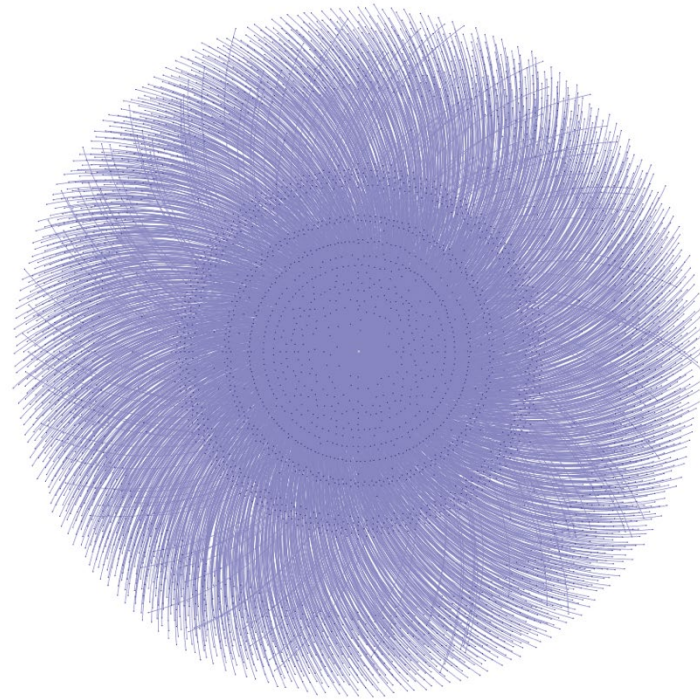


Figure 5: Ego-centric network of *National Collective* (@WeAreNational), showing the account's Twitter interactions (retweets, quoted tweets, and replies tagged with #indyref). The figure shows NC as the central, highly connected player through the lighter colour at the centre (weighted in-degree). The visualisation uses Open Ord and Force Atlas2 layout in Gephi. Edges show the direction of the interaction (clockwise).

As stated above, NC's tweet activity was also significant within the retweet network, where they became a key actor. As figure 5 shows, content created and shared by NC attracted a significant level of interaction (in-ward directed edges). However, NC also actively interacted with a variety of actors (via tagged retweets, @reply/mentions, and quoted tweets) as the outward directed edges show. As the numbers stated above as well as this analysis confirm, interaction on the respective tweets was comparably small. The high tweet activity of NC, however, contributed to its relative impact. While this is indicative of a continuously high level of interaction with a tight-knit community cluster of supporters, it nonetheless confirms Lynch's claim that pro-independence organisations used social media to run "some very effective campaigns across the referendum" – even if these online activities primarily reached a relatively contained community online.¹⁰⁶⁰

¹⁰⁶⁰ Lynch, "Bottom-up," 4.

4. Conclusion: digital publics and continued elite dominance

The limitations of the idea that the referendum mobilised a whole nation and reached otherwise politically apathetic groups have been analysed in previous chapters. Although the growing prominence of online information and platforms provided an alternative arena for more popular political participation – much like the referendum itself – the above data demonstrates the practical limitations of this potential. As established in [chapter 1](#), digital media outlets as well as social media platforms were seen as crucial alternative spaces for political discussion to a traditional media arguably shaped by pro-Union bias and elitism. However, the Twitter analysis discussed in this chapter has demonstrated that the political debate online provided few spaces for more inclusive public interaction and deliberation, even if it showed a prominence of (institutional) pro-independence campaigners and supporters popularly deemed absent in traditional media. While information shared online was more easily accessible to large parts of society and users had access to a wider range of information online, the above analysis confirms dominance by a cultural, political, and media elite online. Thus, political debate and interaction online largely followed traditional forms of hierarchical communication and reproduced similar patterns of exclusion. The “highly controlled” elite political discourse routinely excluded the public; this practice of ignoring “unofficial interventions” aligns with issues around participatory politics more widely.¹⁰⁶¹ Discursive empowerment and nominal openness of social media platforms thus did not automatically translate into wider networks of political debate, interaction, and deliberation online. Instead, online debate “allow[s] the public merely to feel involved rather than to advance actual participation in civic life.”¹⁰⁶² Consequently, the idea of a more open and inclusive political debate is, despite its merits, restrictive in two intersecting ways: firstly, it frequently reproduces patterns of political exclusion and limits access to political debate (beyond echo chambers). Secondly, and more crucially so, it promotes the idea of open and inclusive access to political debate and deliberation that distracts and conceals the limitations and barriers to political participation and deliberation online.

These levels of exclusion were also predetermined by structural barriers to political debate online – which were frequently not acknowledged in the image and myth of a nation shaped by popular participation and political debate. Indeed, access to online political debate was negatively affected by the “digital divide” during the referendum campaign, which has structurally excluded members of the public from participating. As Silver suggests, the lack of

¹⁰⁶¹ Lilleker, “Empowering the Citizens?” 36.

¹⁰⁶² Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 627.

internet access – and literacy – remained an issue which cut off members of the public from the online debate. Journalistic networks, too, struggled to “engag[e] with low-income voices” – not least due to economic pressures.¹⁰⁶³ In fact, online platforms often “reinforced existing political inequalities rather than mobilising those citizens who are absent from political engagement and participation.”¹⁰⁶⁴ In as much, online platforms reproduced exclusionary tendencies under the cover of progressive notions of wide-reaching debate and nominal openness. These limitations to participatory media engagement echo substantial research into the deliberative and political potential of social media.¹⁰⁶⁵ Despite these limitations, social media was crucial to mobilising efforts¹⁰⁶⁶ and the maintenance of alternative micro-publics during the referendum.¹⁰⁶⁷ Indeed, alternative campaigners and grassroots organisations such as NC were able to generate momentum and directly engage with interested segments of society online, allowing for more direct communication with diverse segments of society.

Nonetheless, political culture’s “inherent battle for power during elections,” or referendums, is reproduced on these platforms and prevents, according to Darren Lilleker, these occasions of direct democracy from being “empowering”¹⁰⁶⁸ – whether contingent on offline or online political activity and participation. Instead, the nominal openness and inclusivity as well as the high level of activity and information available online create the illusion of popular participation – both for members of the public, who felt empowered in their ability to voice their thoughts and beliefs online, and in terms of the “potential” for political participation online. The illusion of participation and its routine performance were thus more compelling than the realities of political debate and influence online.

The participatory potential online has been shown to be largely preconditioned by the structural positionality of its agents: social media interactions and contributions to the (digital) public sphere have remained dominated by symbolic capital rooted within the political – and as I suggest in [chapter 6](#), cultural – field.¹⁰⁶⁹ The following chapter thus focuses on the role of elite actors in constructing and performing the myth of popular participation during the

¹⁰⁶³ Silver, *Demanding Democracy*, 31. Silver cites a BBC News article here that claims that one fifth of Scottish households had no internet access in February 2015.

¹⁰⁶⁴ Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*, 53-54.

¹⁰⁶⁵ Lilleker, “Empowering the Citizens?”; Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff, “Closing the Gap?”; Temple, “Civic and Audience Empowerment”; Papacharissi, “The Virtual Sphere”; Quinlan, Shepard, and Paterson, “Online Discussion”; Iosifidis, “The Public Sphere,” 623-24; Vromen, *Digital Citizenship*.

¹⁰⁶⁶ Bissett, interview; Graham, Broersma, and Hazelhoff, “Closing the Gap?” 82-83.

¹⁰⁶⁷ The impact of these micro-publics on social media may have seemed substantial to those involved but their reach was often limited as data analysis of Tweet activity of NC, RIC, and WFI in September 2014 suggests.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Lilleker, “Empowering the Citizens?” 36.

¹⁰⁶⁹ Cf. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 215.

referendum. By indicating persuasive narratives and myths of Scottish national self-identification, this chapter examines how cultural vanguardism, egalitarianism, and political progressiveness have fed into the myth of popular participation. It identifies the key role of a Scottish cultural elite in maintaining and performing these narratives while demonstrating the discursive constraints on their agency within the referendum discourse.

Chapter 6

Creative elites and public intellectuals: representing the people, writing the nation?

*Creativity and imagination were unobjectionable – safely depoliticised – and yet traditionally associated with resistance to capitalism.*¹⁰⁷⁰

As the discussion so far has shown, popular participation – whether as activism, social media activity, or in literary and media representations – was largely defined and limited by elite actors and articulated with political progressiveness, arts-based expression, and colourful street festivals. This elitism shaped alternative campaign organisations and interaction online as well as representations in the press that prioritised commentary by cultural and intellectual elites over popular voices (as shown in [chapter 2](#)). As early as 2011, the press turned to the Scottish intellectual elite and their thoughts on the possibility of an independence referendum. Writing for *The Guardian* shortly after the SNP’s landslide win in the 2011 Scottish Election, commentator and activist Pat Kane predicted that the envisioned independence referendum would “see a Scotterati recruitment drive” to find “exemplars and articulators” to advocate its cause. With support from celebrities and the “literateurs [...] at the mountaintop (novelist Alasdair Gray or national poets Edwin Morgan and Liz Lochhead) [...] it is difficult to see many who would dissent from that position.”¹⁰⁷¹ The discussion in the press discursively ascribed Scottish artists and writers a central function in the referendum debate as well as a pro-independence bias¹⁰⁷² months before a referendum was even confirmed. These assumptions were repeatedly performed in press coverage throughout the debate and shaped the cultural basis of the myth of participation while reasserting elite dominance. Their performance reiterates (Scottish) nationalist practices of casting a cultural and intellectual elite as active political leaders and representatives, but also assimilated them as ostensibly voiceless symbols for independence – from Bissett and Lochhead, Morgan and Gray to Stevenson, Scott, and Burns.

As demonstrated in previous chapters, a central element in mobilising and defining popular participation has, paradoxically, been constituted in elite cultural and political

¹⁰⁷⁰ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 84-85.

¹⁰⁷¹ Pat Kane, “Scotland’s Independence Referendum Will See a Scotterati Recruitment Drive,” *The Guardian*, May 20, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2011/may/20/scotland-independence-referendum-pat-kane>.

¹⁰⁷² Cf. Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 63.

discourses. Public intellectuals in the Scottish public sphere significantly contributed to the mythologisation of popular participation and political debate in the referendum, while discursively reiterating their own position within it. Where generalisations in the press coverage established an image of overwhelming involvement in the debate and pro-independence support by artists and writers,¹⁰⁷³ alternative perspectives and silences were rarely acknowledged – or quickly dismissed as isolated instances (cf. chapter 3).¹⁰⁷⁴ Involvement by artists and writers in the debate was organised along the fault lines of traditional and organic intellectuals (see Introduction); constitutional support; and questions around “authentic” art and propaganda, especially once artists and activists joined the payroll of the SNP and various governing bodies shortly after the referendum.¹⁰⁷⁵

To understand more fully the political involvement of artists and writers, I scrutinise below their discursive positionality within the debate based on self-perception, representation, civic “responsibilities,” and performance of public role. This chapter argues that engagement by Scottish writers and artists fulfilled three different functions in the public sphere: from adding personal thought and creativity to politics (artistic professionals) to criticising power structures and politics and mobilising politically (public intellectuals and representatives) to performing national identity (national symbols). The different functions of Scottish artists and writers within the public sphere will be analysed below based on press commentary and representations, as well as interviews with artists and writers. On this basis, this chapter discusses how artists and writers as members of a national, public elite co-created and circulated the myth of popular participation in the referendum debate.

Firstly, I discuss the expectation that artists and writers would get involved and support independence in the referendum debate in relation to myths of cultural devolution and Scottish egalitarianism. Secondly, I examine how artists and writers participated in the referendum as campaigners – to add vision and creativity to the debate. Thirdly, I address how artists and

¹⁰⁷³ The terms “artist” and “writer” are applied loosely to mirror practices in media and public debate at the time. The particular focus is on those who established themselves discursively as participants in the constitutional debate, even where this results in the exclusion of prominent Scottish artists and writers, who are otherwise influential in the public sphere.

¹⁰⁷⁴ A key example is J.K. Rowling’s pro-Union support, as well as interventions by Denise Mina and James MacMillan, whose lack of pro-independence support were treated as rare exceptions in the press coverage. Libby Brooks, “‘Exploration of Identity Should Not Be Limited to the National’ – Scottish Artists Wrestle with Independence Issue,” *The Guardian*, August 4, 2014, www.theguardian.com/culture/2014/aug/04/scottish-artists-wrestle-independence-issue; Kidd, “Scottish Independence.” Cf. J.K. Rowling, “JK Rowling’s Anti Scottish Independence Statement in Full,” *The Telegraph*, June 11, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/10891509/JK-Rowlings-anti-Scottish-independence-statement-in-full.html>. When Rowling changed her support to Yes after the EU referendum in 2016, this decision was covered in *The Independent*, *The Herald*, *The Scotsman* and *The National*.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Bissett, interview; Lindsay, interview.

writers as public intellectuals claimed a discursively created function as critics and national representatives within the debate and how they have actively interpreted nationalist politics and participated in creating and performing (a myth of) popular participation. Fourthly, I analyse the limitations of writers' and artists' agency within the referendum debate and the myth of popular participation where they were discursively cast as national symbols.

1. Campaigning for independence as a national responsibility?

In media and critical discourse, a strong expectation that Scottish artists and, particularly, writers would firstly get involved in the referendum debate and, secondly, would support independence existed, as the article in *The Guardian* referenced above highlights. This expectation continued to shape newspaper accounts and public debate over the following years.

The title of the nominally non-partisan publication *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (2012), edited by Hames, reiterates this structural alignment with the pro-independence side – although many of the contributors¹⁰⁷⁶ address more general claims towards democracy, freedom, and a changed future. Where writers and artists might have been reticent to voice their support for the referendum campaigns early on, the expectation that they would do so was widespread amongst commentators and critics.¹⁰⁷⁷ Hames's publication responds to this assumption, namely to his observation that "few prominent writers are [...] aligning themselves overtly with the official campaigns."¹⁰⁷⁸ By providing a space for writers to share their thoughts and opinions, Hames provides a platform for their involvement, which aids the discursive realisation of this expectation rooted in a narrative of "cultural devolution" as I will discuss below.

By 2013, involvement in the debate by writers and artists had become increasingly visible. Well-known Scottish poet and writer Kathleen Jamie illustrates this in the *New Statesman*, when claiming that one year ahead of the referendum, "the country's artists have already launched their own fight for freedom."¹⁰⁷⁹ This statement (self-)proclaims and naturalises writers' commitment to the debate and casts it as a "fight for freedom." It thus

¹⁰⁷⁶ The broad definition of "writers" as "novelists, poets, playwrights, editors and translators" highlights a recurring issue in the constitutional debate: it points to the difficulty in defining the "cultural elite" and those who have a say in public discourse in Scotland (as suggested in the *Introduction*). Hames, "Introduction," in Hames, *Unstated*, 12.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Thomson, "From 'Renaissance' to Referendum?" 63.

¹⁰⁷⁸ Hames, "Introduction," 3.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Kathleen Jamie, "The Spirit of Bannockburn," *New Statesman*, February 7, 2013, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/politics/2013/02/spirit-bannockburn>.

rhetorically raised the stakes in the referendum above party-politics and constitutional alignment; it suggests a preoccupation with liberal core values of freedom (and democracy) and, notably, the progressive politics of the myth of popular participation. The context of this statement is of further interest here. Made in an article entitled “The Spirit of Bannockburn,” the fight for freedom elicits a historical continuity with this earlier Scottish freedom fight and related nationalist sentiment. Jamie’s statement thus displays pro-independence partisanship through a lens of historical continuity and national identification while alluding to the civic arguments of the official Yes campaign. This merging of nationalist sentiment, cultural identification, and civic values of progressive politics is a recurring theme of artistic contributions – as discussed in [chapters 3 and 4](#) – and the referendum discourse at large and constitutes the foundation for the myth of popular participation.

The expectation that writers and artists would actively support and contribute to the referendum debate became increasingly central to discussions in the press. To this effect, Rosemary Goring, writing for *The Herald*, highlighted that “the Scottish literary establishment seems generally inclined towards a yay vote”¹⁰⁸⁰ and Mike Small identified a “disproportionate support for Yes” among artists and writers.¹⁰⁸¹ Similarly, Colin Kidd claimed in *The Guardian* that Scottish writers “have come out en masse for a yes vote”¹⁰⁸² – an impression which was shared by Macwhirter, who suggested that “almost the entire Scottish literary community seemed to turn to independence” during the campaigning period.¹⁰⁸³ Macwhirter further attributed the eventual momentum of the Yes campaign to the commitment by writers, which enabled the campaign to engage with “vision and emotion – the stuff of literature and theatre.”¹⁰⁸⁴

These statements naturalise an *expected* involvement by artists and writers in the referendum and create an image of unified pro-independence support. This expectation, in combination with the vision and emotion conveyed in arts-based activism ([chapter 3](#)) and literary text ([chapter 4](#)), contributed to a stimulating and highly transformative indyref experience for some – as well as one of alienation and isolation for others. Echoing the silencing effect of the referendum debate discussed for members of the public (see [chapter 3](#)),

¹⁰⁸⁰ Rosemary Goring, “It’s Good that Writers Speak Up for Scotland,” *The Herald*, March 8 2014, www.heraldsotland.com/arts_ents/13149460.It_s_good_that_writers_speak_up_for_Scotland/.

¹⁰⁸¹ Mike Small, “Artists for Independence?” *Bella Caledonia*, July 30, 2013, <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2013/07/30/artists-for-independence/>.

¹⁰⁸² Colin Kidd, “Scottish Independence: Literature and Nationalism,” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-independence-literature-nationalism.

¹⁰⁸³ Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 57.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 27. Cf. Pat Kane, “Imagining a New Nation”, *BBC Arts*, January 6, 2015, www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/2DkWccNfsbrhJt06zY15H8q/imagining-a-new-nation.

Mina remembers that “the experience of being involved in this debate was the experience of not being understood.”¹⁰⁸⁵

These experiences of indyref resonate with, and partially contradict, what Noelle-Neuman describes as the “spiral of silence.”¹⁰⁸⁶ The concept suggests that those who see themselves supporting an unpopular opinion are less likely to voice this opinion publicly. However, support for a No vote was the consensus among the Scottish public (as evidenced by most opinion polls and the referendum results), even if an unpopular position among artists and writers. The silencing effect of the public discourse experienced by No-supporting artists and writers is thus indicative of expectations in public and critical debate, rather than based on a unique position among the public – even if it resonates with the trope of the silent – or silenced? – majority.

Deviations from this presumed consensus of “overwhelming Yes support” had surprisingly vicious consequences. Mina thus recounts that “people were spitting in my coffee in coffeeshops” and “our house was egged [...] It was quite real.” In addition to personal attacks, support for the No side was also feared to have economic consequences. To this end, Mina mentions a statement on Facebook saying that when you are a recognised No voter “you will never be invited to another arts festival in Scotland.” Mina comments further: “people still write to me and say ‘I’m boycotting your books, because of your position’ and [...] I really did feel like there is an expectation that you’ll either shut up or comply.”¹⁰⁸⁷ These experiences indicate the national articulation of writers with radical, pro-devolution and pro-independence ideas and the deeply internalised belief that had Scottish independence “been left to writers, it would have been achieved long ago.”¹⁰⁸⁸ I discuss the related idea of “cultural devolution,” namely the “critical commonplace that Scotland’s artists had been its unacknowledged legislators: a self-appointed elite who knew the country better than the people themselves,”¹⁰⁸⁹ in the following section. This function resonates and overlaps with the representative and identarian function of media (elites) discussed in chapter 1.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Mina, interview.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Noelle-Naumann, *The Spiral of Silence*.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Mina, interview.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 11.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 64.

1.1 The Scottish Renaissance and “cultural devolution”

The articulation of Scottish nationalism through literature or, more importantly, national writers, revolves around two key moments in Scottish history: the Scottish Renaissance of the 1920s and 1930s, which gave rise to modern Scottish cultural nationalism; and the idea of “cultural devolution,” which became prominent in the aftermath of the first referendum on devolution in 1979. In both instances, critical debate has fused together Scottish nationalist politics with Scottish writers. This practice manifests in prominent claims that Scottish nationalist “struggles were waged, strikingly effectively, through acts of literary imagination”¹⁰⁹⁰ before they succeeded on a political level and that “a parliament of novels”¹⁰⁹¹ predated the *political* Scottish Parliament. As a powerful narrative in Scottish cultural memory, this discursively established political influence of Scottish writers continued into the independence debate in 2014. It rhetorically grounded and legitimised the expectation of pro-independence support from Scottish artists and, particularly, writers and legitimised and added importance to arts-based campaigners (e.g., NC) and activism.

The politicisation of writers and the “revolutionary movement” of the Scottish Renaissance aimed to create and revive a critical and creative Scottish “art for the future.”¹⁰⁹² The retrospective narrativization of an artistic revival in the 1980s as “belatedly fulfilling the hopes of the 1920s and 1930s Renaissance movement,” however, risks, according to Thomson, equating the artistic and political agenda of both nationalist projects.¹⁰⁹³ This misconception, he emphasises, manifests in the growing reluctance of artists and writers “to see themselves as possessing a privileged point of view” during the second literary revival.¹⁰⁹⁴ Conflations of an assumption of unique artistic vision and cultural representativeness with discursive claims as “of the people” indicate the complex position artists and writers have carved out for themselves in the public political discourse since the 1980s. In line with this populist rhetoric, they have performed a public role as national representatives with political clout.¹⁰⁹⁵

Specifically in the aftermath of the unsuccessful devolution referendum in 1979, the public positionality of writers was afforded a new valuation in critical debate – and was eagerly reaffirmed by writers themselves. It contributed to “a story of cultural vanguardism in which writers and artists play the starring role in the recuperation of national identity, cultural

¹⁰⁹⁰ Crawford, *Bannockburns*, 134.

¹⁰⁹¹ Duncan McLean, quoted in John Burnside et al., “Poet’s Parliament,” *Edinburgh Review* 100 (1999): 74.

¹⁰⁹² Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 66-67; cf. Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 107.

¹⁰⁹³ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 64.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 72.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Cf. Higgins, “Mediatization and Political Language,” 390.

confidence and democratic agency.”¹⁰⁹⁶ Commenting in 2014 writer Jamie thus suggests that “[i]n 20 years a whole generation of Scottish novelists ‘wrote themselves out of despair’” and reasserts the “cherished half-truth” that the “1997 devolution bill was achieved partly by the work of writers and visual artists.”¹⁰⁹⁷ As Jamie’s public statement suggests, however, “[t]he established narrative of *literary and critical vanguardism* – in which writers, thinkers and artists established and secured the space for renewing Scottish democracy” is, according to Hames, less of a “neutral historical description [...] than a mobilising narrative constructed *within* the diffuse, campaign-like process and milieu it describes.”¹⁰⁹⁸ According to Hames, the mobilising culture-political discourse relied not only on the politically radical, left-nationalist intelligentsia which formed micro-publics around culture-political magazines such as *Cencrastus*, *Chapman*, *Edinburgh Review*, *Scottish Affairs* and *Radical Scotland* which sustained it,¹⁰⁹⁹ but coincided with growing investment “in a story of Scottish *identitarian empowerment*” by the “centralised state authority.”¹¹⁰⁰ In the inter-referendum years, writers and artists united with a broad spectrum of Scottish civil society in a “progressive” political culture, against the externalised political threat of Thatcherism, giving rise to a larger culture-political movement.¹¹⁰¹ This internal unification of civic, media, and cultural elites was institutionally rewarded in the pre-devolution process that helped determine the framework for the Scottish Parliament (see [chapter 1](#)).

The subsequent “pervasive strength of ‘cultural devolution’ as an internalised folk belief”¹¹⁰² has shaped the way in which writers are popularly portrayed as much as how they have chosen to cast their own role: it has established them as political commentators and national representatives. As a key element in Scottish culture-political mythology, the narrative of cultural devolution, and writers’ central position within it, are essential to how the Scottish national community is “imagined” and routinely “flagged” and performed (see [chapter 1](#)).¹¹⁰³ The persuasiveness of this narrative was reiterated in an expectation towards pro-independence support and involvement by artists and writers in the 2014 referendum debate and their willing

¹⁰⁹⁶ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, xii. Hames contrasts this political cultural vanguardism with “the Grind” of the political history of devolution as “a shrewd and sometimes grubby saga of electoral expediency, characterised less by stirring visions of democratic rebirth than ploys of cynical circumspection.” Hames, *The Literary Politics*, xii.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Jamie, “The Spirit of Bannockburn.”

¹⁰⁹⁸ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, x (emphasis original).

¹⁰⁹⁹ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 79-81; Scott Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 132-33; Harvie, *Scotland and Nationalism*, 222.

¹¹⁰⁰ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 3 (emphasis original).

¹¹⁰¹ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 63.

¹¹⁰² Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 2.

¹¹⁰³ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6; Billig, *Banal Nationalism*, 6.

self-positioning within it, as discussed above. Here, it has articulated artistic vanguardism through political progressiveness and, crucially, intersects with the myth of Scottish egalitarianism. This articulation infers a performative rebuttal of a privileged position in political discourse by artists and writers – as suggested by Thomson – while maintaining their elite function as political commentators and “representative figure[s] that matter.”¹¹⁰⁴

1.2 Scottish egalitarianism and Enlightenment values

As discussed in chapter 1, Scottish self-perception has been marked by a myth of egalitarianism¹¹⁰⁵ that has been informed by an Enlightenment paradigm of intellectual distinction, polite social interaction, and social freedoms of civil society.¹¹⁰⁶ This myth speaks to how the Scottish national community is “imagined”¹¹⁰⁷ and discursively negotiated. Indeed, an essentially Scottish civil society has contributed to the separation of state and civil society in Scotland,¹¹⁰⁸ while facilitating (rather than incorporating) national expression.¹¹⁰⁹ Enlightenment culture has, as a powerful trope and maker of national difference, been retrospectively appropriated and performed to fit a Scottish self-perception of political and social progressiveness. Paradoxically, these claims, sit uneasily with the historical period of the Enlightenment marked by a strong Unionism and liberal market ideology.¹¹¹⁰ However, as a marker of difference, egalitarianism, and left-leaning political progressiveness, they have been effectively employed in public discourse since the Thatcher years. The resulting self-perception also contributed to what Hassan frames as the romanticising exploitation of anti-Thatcherism:

the constructed dominant version of the 1980s includes a sense of collective amnesia and interpretations of the past [...] includ[ing] the imposition of Thatcherism and Mrs Thatcher’s rule on an unwilling Scotland, the closing down of traditional industry, the totems of the poll tax, the Scots as “guinea pigs” and the closing of the Ravenscraig steel works (even though this actually occurred under John Major’s government).¹¹¹¹

¹¹⁰⁴ Cf. Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 12.

¹¹⁰⁵ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 17; Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 139-140. Cf. Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming*, 32.

¹¹⁰⁶ C. Smith, “The Scottish Enlightenment,” 338-341.

¹¹⁰⁷ Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

¹¹⁰⁸ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 101.

¹¹⁰⁹ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 45.

¹¹¹⁰ C. Smith, “Scottish Enlightenment,” 341.

¹¹¹¹ Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 98.

The “addiction to difference” evident here was strengthened, according to Hassan, through a growing divergence in voting patterns in England and Scotland since the 1970s.¹¹¹² The experience of an ostensibly powerless Scottish vote vis-à-vis the dominant English voting power has added to an interpretation of Scotland as a politically progressive nation which has been both ignored and exploited by an overbearing neighbour. The related notions of political difference as well as the more democratic, progressive, and socially just politics that have, as the narrative goes, been denied to the people of Scotland on a UK-level, have been (re-)constructed and performed by the Scottish intelligentsia since these political shifts in the 1980s. According to Paterson, the most striking reaction to the (rhetorically externalised) intervention of Thatcherism in Scotland became, ironically, socially powerful because it challenged the power of the Scottish middle-class:

for all the electoral importance of Scottish working-class alienation from the Conservative government, the most striking protests often came from vested interests. This could happen because Scotland does possess a sort of state and therefore has ruling elites who resent the erosion of their power.¹¹¹³

By merging rhetorical claims about political and socio-economic circumstances with a belief in civic values rooted in a distinct intellectual tradition, ideas of egalitarianism and of political progressiveness have been mobilised as powerful arguments in post-devolution Scotland and in the civic nationalism promoted by the SNP in the referendum. By adopting an interpretation of national culture that is civic, egalitarian, more socially just, and democratic than England’s – in short, more progressive – Scotland has been marked as *politically* different in public debate, while avoiding more traditional culturalist expressions of nationalism.

According to Hearn, “[t]he Scottish [nationalist] movement has provided a forum over the years through which these values and policy preferences have been articulated and rendered uniquely Scottish in the popular imagination” and “have become closely associated with national identity and support for constitutional change.”¹¹¹⁴ This idea that the nationalist goal of constitutional change “could be reconciled with social democratic values” grew discursively powerful in the 1980s and 1990s.¹¹¹⁵ Indeed, “cultural activity gave to the political resentment [of anti-Thatcherism and anti-Conservatism] a framework that was firmly Scottish” and was largely promoted among the middle-classes that already had access to institutional power.¹¹¹⁶

¹¹¹² According to Hassan, the Labour lead over the Conservatives in Scotland (compared to England) grew from 10.4% in 1974 to 35.1% in 1987, Hassan, *Independence of the Scottish Mind*, 105.

¹¹¹³ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 169.

¹¹¹⁴ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 3.

¹¹¹⁵ Miller, Rodger, and Dudley Edwards, *Tartan Pimps*, 23.

¹¹¹⁶ Paterson, *The Autonomy*, 173.

The significant popular political and creative energy of the poll tax demonstrations and peace strikes bolstered the devolution story of arts-based activism. The merging of radical political activism, civic values, and political progressiveness with a (largely self-proclaimed) cultural vanguard of artists and writers constitutes the framework of the political culture that carved out a space for campaigners such as NC and arts-based activism during the 2014 referendum campaign. The idea of this arts-based politics of progressiveness discursively performs, i.e., it discursively creates and limits, ideas about Scotland as a country – even if it does so by mobilising largely universal values within a nationally defined context.¹¹¹⁷ These mythologisations within Scottish self-perception have sustained the myth of popular participation and a pro-independence argument in the 2014 referendum discourse, while asserting an elite position of artists and writers within what was performed as a civic movement for popular empowerment and sovereignty. Within this context, artists and writers were tasked with – and carved out for themselves – three public functions: firstly, to add vision and emotion to the political decision; secondly, to represent and advocate for the people and the nation as public intellectuals; and, thirdly, as symbols of pro-independence support (by association). In the sections below, I address these three public functions of writers and artists in the referendum debate.

2. Imagining Scotland: writers as campaigners and commentators

As discussed in chapters 3 and 4, artists and writers made few artistic contributions to the referendum itself. Artistic works, and even arts-based activism, were rarely at the centre of pro-independence, or pro-devolution, mobilisation despite the compelling narrative of cultural devolution stated above.¹¹¹⁸ Instead, artists' and writers' mobilising and representative political potential has revolved around themselves; their public political function has arguably shaped notions of national difference as the cornerstone of political change. The function of artists and writers as artistic professionals and campaigners in the referendum has been largely covered in chapters 3 and 4. Tasked to add vision and creativity to a “dull” political campaign, artists and writers who joined organisations such as NC aimed, according to Bissett, to “make [the

¹¹¹⁷ Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 6.

¹¹¹⁸ Two instances that were more explicitly marked by arts-based activism in the 1990s are the A Day For Scotland event in 1990 and the Bus Party campaign of 1997, discussed in chapter 3. Cf. Maïke Dinger, “A Day For Scotland and Arts-based Campaigning for Self-government,” April 26, 2021, <https://stirlingcentre.scottishstudies.wordpress.com>; Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 185-87. Hames singles out James Robertson's *And the Land Lay Still* (2010) as a unique literary example which transfers “cultural devolution” onto the page. Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 201-32.

referendum message] more palpable for people and more interesting and more colourful.”¹¹¹⁹ The willingness to do so contributed to the discursive naturalisation of their presumed alignment with the Yes vote and impact of their support. Accordingly, Colin Kidd proposed in *The Guardian* that the “flat and uninspired” No campaign seemed to lack “anti-nationalist” literary matter to draw on¹¹²⁰ and Fraser Nelson, writing for *The Telegraph*, suggested that “Unionists can win in Scotland if they stop patronising and find some poetry.”¹¹²¹

Drawing on and reinforcing the abovementioned expectations for involvement in the public debate, writers contributed to said debate through personal statements and commentary – rather than art and literature – as early as 2011. A segment entitled “Scotland and England: What Future for the Union?” was published by *The Guardian* in August 2011. It showcased the thoughts and opinions on Scottish independence by well-known writers AL Kennedy, Janice Galloway, Iain Banks, David Greg, and Shena Mackay.¹¹²² Although seemingly united in their pro-independence support, the reasons they gave for this support are far from unison: apart from Mackay, who contemplates romanticising childhood memories of an expatriate and the longing for a “truly Scottish” Scotland, all writers connected Scottish independence to a hope for political and social renewal. An independent Scotland, they suggested, might lay the groundwork for a more just and self-confident society: on the grounds of, what Banks described as having “our destiny [...] back in our own hands” and what Galloway termed the people’s need for “a measure of governance over the territory they stand upon.” In contrast to this emphasis on popular sovereignty, Kennedy criticised inadequate media representations as well as failures in political leadership, poverty and deprivation and suggested that “[t]he more Westminster disappoints [in dealing with these issues], then the more attractive and untraumatic independence may seem.”¹¹²³

In their reflections on the future of Scotland, these writers navigate their own identity between experiences of Scottish life, dreams, and disillusionment on the one hand, thus expressing concerns resonant with those of members of the public discussed in chapter 3. On the other hand, they communicated their hope for a better future within an independent Scotland on the basis of what Greig described as a Scottish “state of mind” that is “cautious,

¹¹¹⁹ Bissett, interview.

¹¹²⁰ Kidd, “Scottish Independence.”

¹¹²¹ Fraser Nelson, “Scottish Independence: You Can’t Reduce a 300-Year-Old Union to a Mushy Peas Analogy,” *The Telegraph*, June 6, 2014, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/scottish-independence/10879569/Scottish-independence-You-cant-reduce-a-300-year-old-union-to-a-mushy-peas-analogy.html>.

¹¹²² AL Kennedy and Janice Galloway, eds., “Scotland and England: What Future for the Union?” *The Guardian*, August 28, 2011, www.theguardian.com/culture/2011/aug/28/scottish-independence-snp-iain-banks.

¹¹²³ Kennedy and Galloway, eds., “Scotland and England.”

communitarian, disliking of bullying or boasting, broadly egalitarian, valuing of education, internationalist in outlook, working class in character, conservative with a small c.”¹¹²⁴ This framing lends nuance to the notions of progressiveness mobilised in the referendum debate and highlights their limitations. The critical self-awareness expressed here nonetheless reproduces key elements of “the egalitarian myth”¹¹²⁵ stated above and establishes these Scottish writers within its context. Tentatively voiced pro-independence support is thus communicated through civic nationalist identification which merges egalitarianism and political progressiveness with ideas around cultural vanguardism. Here, writers as commentators and leaders of political mobilisation assert elite dominance and their own discursive political position, while performing myths of egalitarianism and of Scotland as more democratic, socially just, and participatory.

By proclaiming their political opinion at this early stage of the campaign, “some of Scotland’s best known writers”¹¹²⁶ demonstrated their interest in maintaining their public political role. Over the course of the referendum debate, a growing number of writers participated via personal blogs and social media accounts or contributions to newspaper and news platforms such as *The Guardian*, *New Statesman*, *National Collective*, *Bella Caledonia* to name but the most prominent ones. From *ImagiNation: Stories of Scotland’s Future* (2011), edited by Bryan Beattie and Gerry Hassan, and *Unstated* (2012), mentioned above, to *Imagine A Country* (2020), edited by Val McDermid and Jo Sharp, various book publications have also underlined and reinforced the presumed importance of artists’ and writers’ contributions to the political debate. These practices then resonate with what Bauman terms the “combined effect of mobilization and self-recruitment,”¹¹²⁷ which sees writers and artists inhabiting spaces for public contribution co-produced and sustained by cultural and intellectual elites and informed by long-standing narratives of cultural identification, i.e., the idea of “cultural devolution” and artistic vanguardism. In their contributions artists and, more frequently, writers shared their personal political beliefs, commented on, and tried to imagine a different future for Scotland, while fulfilling a representative public function.

¹¹²⁴ Kennedy and Galloway, eds., “Scotland and England.”

¹¹²⁵ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 92.

¹¹²⁶ Kennedy and Galloway, “Scotland and England.”

¹¹²⁷ Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 2.

3. Claiming politics: artists and writers as public intellectuals and critics

By participating in public political debate artists and writers transcend the context of their own professional expertise and assume a political and representative function in and for the public. This function extends, according to Bauman, to key public actors “who felt in their moral responsibility, and their collective right, to intervene directly in the political process through influencing the minds of the nation and moulding the actions of its political leaders.”¹¹²⁸ As largely self-proclaimed public representatives, artists and writers have taken it upon themselves to keep alive the story of Scottish cultural and political distinction and have claimed a public political position as commentators and critics. Indeed, they do not intervene in the political debate simply as private individuals or professionals with an opinion but inhabit a public representative function as commentators and critics who speak on behalf of the public. Where they use their voice to intervene in politics, they transcend their own field of reference and adopt a specific function as intellectuals in and for the public. In the referendum debate this meant, as suggested by commentary from writers cited above, that they used private opinion and thought to express larger truths about Scotland the nation, its politics, and the possibility of independence.

While Lindsay explained that artists and writers like herself lacked the professional expertise to comment on fiscal and economic questions, she, like many others, was not afraid to share her opinion on independence and the referendum: “It was about having power closer to home, it was about the democratic deficit in terms of Scottish votes at Westminster, it was about the differences between our parliaments and their ethos.”¹¹²⁹ The public valuation and legitimising grounds for these public political interventions align with Bourdieu’s conceptualisation of the “intellectual field.” Its relative autonomy from the political field of power “makes possible the inaugural act of a writer who, in the name of norms belonging to the literary field, intervenes in the political field, thus constituting himself as an intellectual.”¹¹³⁰ As such, writers (and artists) have claimed legitimacy for their intervention in the political discourse as public intellectuals based on their artistic credentials and related public esteem. The positionality and valuation of writers in the field of literary production that legitimises their access to the political field casts them as intellectuals with a specific societal, that is political and representative, function. Routinely employed in the narrative of cultural devolution, artists’ and writers’ role as quasi-political representatives thus preconditioned and

¹¹²⁸ Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 1.

¹¹²⁹ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹³⁰ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 129.

legitimised their public interventions in the political referendum debate. As Bissett emphasises, writers were able to provide crucial deliberative spaces by “show[ing] people the same debate from a different angle” and allowing them to “recontextualize things.”¹¹³¹ This public role discursively establishes writers as political advisors and quasi-politicians who mobilise alternative politics, public deliberation, and popular participation. As such, this practice resonates with conceptualisations of the identity politics of the press (see chapter 1) and of the “public intellectual”.

In-between the state and the people the intellectual assumes – and is discursively assigned – a role as critic in and for the public. “[A]s exile and marginal, as amateur, and as the author of a language that tries to speak the truth to power,” the intellectual is the author of public political and subversive criticism.¹¹³² This political role of the public intellectual as “critic” was crucial in the referendum discourse. In fact, a notion of speaking truth to power and holding political elites to account are not only routinely associated with journalistic interventions (as suggested by the idea of the Fourth Estate) but were key aims of NC’s early activism.¹¹³³ The expression of criticism, challenges to the status quo, and calls for a changed future were also routinely voiced by artists and writers more generally. For example, John Aberdein criticised how little Scotland has achieved with the devolved powers it already holds¹¹³⁴ and John Burnside emphasised that Scotland would need to become “independent of the charlatans, liars and chancers who have run it for too long.”¹¹³⁵ Similarly, Alan Warner saw the Yes vote as “a vote for increased democracy” and “greater representation” by breaking with “the moribund, corrupt, militaristic lump that is Westminster today.”¹¹³⁶ Allan Armstrong as well as Gordon Asher and Leigh French called for true empowerment for Scotland and its people¹¹³⁷ along similar lines of the “profound and radical” change demanded by Suhayl Saadi.¹¹³⁸ These evaluations were based on a sense that, according to Richard Holloway, “the British political system is broken” and that ultimately, the UK is, in the words of Irvine Welsh, “a failed state” that “has entrenched the entitlement of power and privilege above that of the aspiration to any

¹¹³¹ Bissett, interview.

¹¹³² Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xvi.

¹¹³³ National Collective, “We Will Not Be Bullied,” April 18, 2013, www.nationalcollective.com/2013/04/18/we-will-not-be-bullied/.

¹¹³⁴ John Aberdein, in Hames, *Unstated*, 18-19.

¹¹³⁵ John Burnside, in Val McDermid et al., “Scottish Writers on the Referendum – Independence Day?” *The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/scottish-referendum-independence-uk-how-writers-vote>.

¹¹³⁶ Alan Warner, in Val McDermid et al., “Scottish Writers on the Referendum.”

¹¹³⁷ Allan Armstrong, in Hames, *Unstated*, 31; Leigh French and Gordon Asher, in Hames, *Unstated*, 77.

¹¹³⁸ Suhayl Saadi, in Hames, *Unstated*, 172.

true democracy.”¹¹³⁹ The hope conveyed by the referendum debate “that elections can actually bring about change” could, according to Kennedy, benefit the whole of the British Isles.¹¹⁴⁰ Importantly, French and Asher emphasised the practical limitations of the “idea” – rather than policy – of independence which has provided “a utopian category into which people pour their desires, hopes and aspirations.”¹¹⁴¹

These contributions show that writers and artists sought to comment on general political truths and ambitions. They claimed a public role and ostensibly representative function as public intellectuals and critics in the referendum debate by voicing criticism on behalf of the public.¹¹⁴² Indicating a critical predisposition, Lindsay suggests accordingly that “writers do tend to speak quite distrusting[ly] of authority.”¹¹⁴³ In this role, they advocated for political change alongside political commentators, campaign activists, and politicians. Indeed, they conformed to what Bauman identifies as “engage[ment] with the global issues of truth, judgement and taste.”¹¹⁴⁴ Accordingly Scottish writers and artists politicised their public position through the critique of political power, while maintaining their own public (political) relevance.¹¹⁴⁵ This position of artists and writers indicates their role as critics and representatives for the public, but also demonstrate the practical and rhetorical limits of a debate structured around elite interest and interventions while claiming popular advocacy and, crucially, a position of popular representativeness, of “being of” and speaking for the people.

3.1 Empowerment of artists: organic intellectuals

The role of creatives as grassroots-level commentators “outside” traditional power structures had a particular appeal during the referendum campaign – although it was contingent on underlying power structures, as will be discussed in later sections of this chapter. Said’s definition of the intellectual as outsider and critic with a “specific function”¹¹⁴⁶ in and for public debate mentioned above builds on Gramsci’s definition of the intellectual. Gramsci distinguishes between the “organic intellectual” and the “traditional intellectual.” Whereas the former are specialisations of their (emerging) class and are thus class-bound, the latter are tied

¹¹³⁹ Irvine Welsh, in Val McDermid et al., “Scottish Writers on the Referendum.”

¹¹⁴⁰ AL Kennedy, in Val McDermid et al., “Scottish Writers on the Referendum.”

¹¹⁴¹ French and Asher, in Hames, *Unstated*, 78.

¹¹⁴² Cf. Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” 116.

¹¹⁴³ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁴⁴ Bauman, *Legislators and Interpreters*, 2.

¹¹⁴⁵ Cf. Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 215.

¹¹⁴⁶ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, 4.

to public institutions and help maintain societal structures.¹¹⁴⁷ Both roles were assumed by artists and writers in the referendum debate: artists' and writers' activism has – aided by discursive practices and media representations – contributed to the establishment of new public, that is “organic intellectuals,” while “traditional intellectuals” were routinely employed in press coverage to mobilise citizens into participating politically,¹¹⁴⁸ as shown above.

Whether through newspaper segments, public panel discussions or TV and radio interviews and debates, Scottish writers' willingness to share their thoughts on the referendum and independence¹¹⁴⁹ created ever-more spaces for participation and a growing number of “intellectuals” to fill them during the campaign. As Bissett states “there was a whole new audience that [...] wanted to hear me talk about that issue. And the media wanted me to talk about that issue.”¹¹⁵⁰ Bissett's experience highlights two important points, namely that artists and writers were able to grow their economic and cultural capital through participation in public political discourse and that the media played a crucial role in establishing them as public commentators and intellectuals.¹¹⁵¹ Where the traditional media might have been less likely to provide spaces for commentary by emerging artists and writers, the “new media [...] was giving voice to the artists.”¹¹⁵² It provided alternative spaces for artists and writers to voice their opinions and allowed them to circumvent traditional media and associated gatekeepers “to get a fair hearing” in an arguably biased media environment.¹¹⁵³

In line with the empowerment of new artistic voices in public discourse, many of the artists and writers involved in alternative campaigning efforts emphasised the “generational” shifts and the forward-facing nature of their campaigning. Lindsay points out that with the young people in NC “there wasn't as much looking back [to] the past and what'd work then.”¹¹⁵⁴ Bissett similarly claimed that “We've got nothing to do with the old legacies.”¹¹⁵⁵ These claims to artistic and creative exceptionalism point to the public politicisation of those activists, who were “made” by the movement.¹¹⁵⁶ Resonating with the idea of Gramsci's

¹¹⁴⁷ Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” 114-15.

¹¹⁴⁸ Cf. Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 8.

¹¹⁴⁹ Bissett, interview; Lindsay, interview; Mina, interview.

¹¹⁵⁰ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁵¹ Importantly, the press also benefitted in four ways from including contributions by artists and writers: firstly, the promotion of creative voices gave them the appearance of artistic support and provided a “selling point”; secondly, it was a way to balance a pro-Union editorial line (without having to rely on commentary by politicians and campaigners); thirdly, it allowed for economic content creation by commission; and fourthly, it added more “colourful” takes to an often stagnant political argument that otherwise lacked engaging material.

¹¹⁵² Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁵³ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁵⁴ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁵⁵ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁵⁶ In addition to, arguably, more generally human and artistic desires for exceptionalism.

“organic intellectual,” they position themselves in contrast to those established commentators who were more familiar with “traditional mechanisms” of public contribution to the public debate. Kay, for example, explains that, while he participated in various events, he

felt as if I was being underused in the campaign and I now realise that it was because it was all coming from local Yes groups [...] and it was maybe more up to people like me who felt they had something to contribute to contact them and be more active in contacting them rather than waiting on the call kind of thing.¹¹⁵⁷

Relying on institutional practices of voice, commentary, and power, Kay felt “underused” in the grassroots mobilisation and politicisation that established “organic intellectuals” as representatives of their “class”. For example, the large public attention Bissett received for the performance of his poem “Vote Britain” (see [chapter 4](#)), resulted in efforts by members of the SNP and *Yes Scotland* to win him for the official Yes campaign. This presence contributed to Bissett’s position and visibility¹¹⁵⁸ during the campaign and established Bissett as a media phenomenon within it,¹¹⁵⁹ namely he “became a sort of media face.”¹¹⁶⁰ Crucially, the establishment of these emerging voices was largely contingent on traditional public discourse, primarily in the press, which depicted a certain degree of tokenism: finding a “Yes writer” for commentary on a new development of the debate; inserting a quote from someone who had changed their opinion and “journeyed” (in most instances) to Yes; balancing a panel; sensationalist news stories about the seeming betrayal of a Scottish artist or writer supporting a No vote. These portrayals in the press reiterate the rhetorical limitations of the debate and indicate the performative nature of this support – as a tick box exercise rather than based on political insights, commentary, and reasoning. This practice prioritised gestures of support – be that financial, or through signatures and statements – over creative contributions and critical insight.¹¹⁶¹ Here, the function of artists and writers echoes practices of media branding and symbolism. Thus, the positionality of writers, their self-proclaimed and externally assigned public role, were part of a cycle of public valuation and validation, which ultimately stylised them as symbolic representatives for independence – as discussed later in this chapter.

¹¹⁵⁷ Kay, interview.

¹¹⁵⁸ Many newspaper segments provided a platform for artists and writers to promote their work. They often included notes on upcoming book publications or shows after statements by artists and writers, adding to their economic and cultural capital. E.g., Kennedy and Galloway, eds., “Scotland and England.”

¹¹⁵⁹ Kennedy and Galloway, eds., “Scotland and England.”

¹¹⁶⁰ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁶¹ Kidd, “Scottish Independence”; BBC News, “Scots Poet Edwin Morgan’s SNP Bequest ‘Inspiring’,” June 19, 2011, www.bbc.com/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-13830657; National Collective, “Over 1,300 Artists Sign Letter in Support of Yes Vote,” September 7, 2014, www.nationalcollective.com/2014/09/07/over-1300-artists-sign-letter-in-support-of-yes-vote/; Severin Carrell and Libby Brooks, “JK Rowling Donates £1m to Scotland’s Anti-Independence Campaign,” *The Guardian*, June 11, 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jun/11/jk-rowling-donates-scotland-anti-independence-campaign.

These practices mirror the role of celebrity endorsement in the media. The increasing impact and global reach of new media “has generated new ways of representing, consuming and producing celebrity” and has added to its centrality across different media.¹¹⁶² The practice of including celebrity endorsement in the media was, Lindsay suggests, a way to “normalise the idea that independence is a good thing. So, you had your Alan Cumming, Sean Connery for goodness sake, you know, very big well-known people.”¹¹⁶³ These references to celebrity support in the press,¹¹⁶⁴ like that to artists and writers more specifically, reiterate the long-standing practice to defer pro-independence advocacy to a “cultural elite” in Scottish critical – and political – debate and indicates that independence serves as a cause of performative, often romanticising, support by celebrities and “out-of-touch” expatriates.¹¹⁶⁵ Recounting Bourdieu, the valuation of celebrities builds on a similar cultural practice to that of writers, whereby capital from a different field of reference is employed to contribute to a matter of public political concern. Although lacking the grounding in long-standing narratives of cultural devolution and egalitarianism, their publicly proclaimed support contributed to the performance and assertion of discursively legitimised elite dominance *while* performing notions of egalitarianism and popular participation. The discursive role of a cultural elite in advocating for popular participation and mobilisation in the debate performs popular participation through arts-based political progressiveness and reasserts its advocates as representatives of a specific political system and agenda.

3.2 Maintaining cultural hegemonies and the nation: traditional intellectuals

The representative function of well-known artists and writers in mobilising the public and portraying a specific (self-)image of Scotland was of considerable concern in press representations. This is evident in the collection of commentary and thought by Scotland’s “best known writers” in newspaper articles as shown above. Articles such as “Scottish Writers on the Referendum – Independence Day?” in *The Guardian* featured contributions by well-

¹¹⁶² Graeme Turner, “Approaching Celebrity Studies,” *Celebrity Studies* 1, no. 1 (March 2010): 11, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1939239090351924>.

¹¹⁶³ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁶⁴ For a discussion of celebrity influence on the referendum, cf. Libby Brooks and Severin Carrell, “Will Celebrity Endorsement Sway Yes or No Vote in Scotland?” *The Guardian*, June 11, 2014, www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jun/11/celebrity-endorsement-sway-yes-no-scotland-analysis. Although the piece suggests that celebrity endorsement may have little influence on the referendum, it includes a list of celebrity supporters for both the Yes and No side.

¹¹⁶⁵ Cf. Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 89. Here, Hearn identifies “several pop bands (e.g., Hue and Cry, Runrig, Capercaillie, The Proclaimers) who emphasise Scottish themes and sometimes nationalist politics.”

known Scottish writers Val McDermid, Irvine Welsh, James Meek, Richard Holloway, Allan Massie, Kathleen Jamie, Alan Warner, John Burnside, Janice Galloway, and AL Kennedy.¹¹⁶⁶ However, the routine deferral of voice to a cultural elite in public political discourse evidenced through such articles also demonstrates that pro-independence support has relied on “dense and interconnected social networks” of a cultural and political elite.¹¹⁶⁷ Support from artists and writers was not only expected – as detailed in the first section of this chapter – but unanimous pro-independence support became naturalised in public discourse. Lindsay suggests that

it became just assumed that if you were a writer, you were voting Yes. I’ve got issues with that now, to be honest with you, when I think back on what that must have been like for writers who weren’t going [to] be voting Yes. It must have been so isolating because it became this kind of assumption: “Oh, you’re a poet. Oh yeah, of course you’re voting Yes.” Yes became true.¹¹⁶⁸

As emphasised here, supporting a Yes vote created a rhetorical truth that defined artistic involvement as well as its progressive politics. Here, the performance of political interventions by artists and writers explicitly articulates claims to a progressive, more democratic, and just politics which forms the basis for the myth of popular participation. In fact, Lindsay suggests further that pro-independence support “became associated with being progressive, with being more tolerant, with being inclusive.”¹¹⁶⁹ Such interpretations resonate with what Asher and French have described as the *ipso facto* progressiveness of independence (see [chapter 3](#)) and perform popular participation through the articulation of progressive politics with arts-based activism.

The exclusionary nature of this progressive, seemingly inclusive and radical politics resonates with Introna’s evaluation of the “missing Scotland,” namely that “in the progressive imagination of the indyref, the Missing Scotland was rejected as an inadequate representative of a nation that was being renewed and energised by the radical politics of the independence campaign.”¹¹⁷⁰ Beyond the idea of the “missing Scotland,” the illusion of political progressiveness advances and performs an exclusionary notion of what the referendum – and popular participation within it – could stand for, in as far as it was informed by long-standing cultural narratives of left-leaning, progressive arts-based vanguardism and socio-political egalitarianism which fed into the myth of popular participation in the referendum. The failure to promote the social change written into the progressive politics of this arts-based mobilisation

¹¹⁶⁶ Val McDermid et al., “Scottish Writers on the Referendum.”

¹¹⁶⁷ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 84.

¹¹⁶⁸ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁶⁹ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁷⁰ Introna, “Reveries of a Progressive Past,” 121-22.

indicates the limitations of the cultural and political vanguardism performed in the referendum debate. It reveals how cultural elites and public intellectuals contributed to the maintenance of an established “progressive” political rhetoric and system, which has sustained the myth of participatory politics.

As the aftermath of the referendum has shown, “a lot of the energy of the Yes campaign went straight into party politics” and “all of that grassroots activism ended up being swept up by the establishment.”¹¹⁷¹ These developments highlight the institutionalisation of the alternative campaigning politics while, more crucially, challenging their presumed political difference. As argued in chapter 3, even alternative campaigning organisations were closely linked to planning by the SNP and *Yes Scotland*, with both being instrumental in the creation of NC.¹¹⁷² Accordingly, these organisations largely conformed with establishment politics and myths around discursively performed cultural vanguardism and progressiveness. While both campaigns may have tried “not to appeal to history”¹¹⁷³ and to “downplay the national-identity discourse and shift the focus towards broader political, economic and social issues”¹¹⁷⁴ to avoid appearing “as the reactionary side,”¹¹⁷⁵ they both “presented themselves as defenders of the status quo – only independence or continuing partnership in the Union would allow Scotland to preserve a political culture that reflected its social consensus.”¹¹⁷⁶ Indeed, as argued above, the realisation of Scotland’s progressive essence through independence has been discursively linked to established beliefs around cultural and political distinction which have been institutionalised in the Scottish Parliament (see chapter 1) and the SNP’s pro-independence argument and politics. As powerful cultural narratives, however, they have provided a compelling argument for change and more participatory and inclusive politics, while reproducing established practices of political exclusion and elitism. Within this context, artists and writers fulfilled another important public role – not as critics outside power but as traditional intellectuals. According to Gramsci, “traditional intellectuals” are crucial in fostering and maintaining social and political hegemony.¹¹⁷⁷ As spokespeople in and for the nation, they convey ideas and national sentiment and help create or maintain societal consensus on matters of public (political) relevance – including dominant tropes and narratives of self-identification.

¹¹⁷¹ Lindsay, interview.

¹¹⁷² Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁷³ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 83.

¹¹⁷⁴ Della Porta, et al., *Social Movements*, 101.

¹¹⁷⁵ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 83.

¹¹⁷⁶ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 84.

¹¹⁷⁷ Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” 114.

The performance of this public function through public commentary then constitutes a participatory co-writing of public discourse and, ultimately, the nation. What could thus be observed during the referendum was the constant, ritualistic writing of an imagined (future) country¹¹⁷⁸ through public commentary. A crucial part of this was the re-affirmation and “writing in” of their own positionality and public importance by Scottish writers and the wider intelligentsia. This discursive construction of narratives of national identity, the national public sphere, and, ultimately, the nation reinforces the position of artists and writers as representatives of national significance. As such, the socio-political function of the public intellectual manifests its prevalence in nationalist discourse. Simultaneously, these discursive practices made explicit use of the narrative of cultural devolution and the representative cultural *and* political function it has bestowed upon Scotland’s writers. In fact, Hames points out that “it is precisely in the *absence* of an official literary nationalism that Scottish writers and artists have claimed – and been burdened with – special ‘representative’ clout.”¹¹⁷⁹ As noted by Christopher Whyte, “the task of representing the nation has been repeatedly devolved to its writers” “in the absence of an elected political authority” and representatives on a national, i.e., Scottish, political level.¹¹⁸⁰

However, this elite position and the associated institutionalised notion of political progressiveness and participatory openness represented by a politically radical, while nationalist, cultural elite are discursively performed rather than actualised, as I have argued throughout this thesis. This performative quality also constitutes the practices of self-assertion by public intellectuals who do not want to see themselves as part of a (political) elite and rhetorically claim a position outside of power. Although well-established as political commentators, many artists and writers do not acknowledge their (increasingly) institutionalised position. A denial of the fact that, in many respects, even the “organic intellectual” is now in office in Scotland points to larger processes of assimilating cultural representatives into political goals. Indeed, a tendency of this “elite” to downplay their institutional influence while overstating their cultural significance and political power in the public sphere is, according to Hearn, “a distinctive Scottish a pattern [*sic*],” which means that “many would probably identify themselves as working class, despite having been upwardly mobile, achieving levels of consumption, education, and professional status unknown to their

¹¹⁷⁸ Cf. Bhabha, “DissemiNation,” 292; 297.

¹¹⁷⁹ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, ix.

¹¹⁸⁰ Christopher Whyte, “Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction,” *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 34, no. 3 (July 1998): 284, <https://doi.org/10.1093/fmls/XXXIV.3.274>.

parents.”¹¹⁸¹ The reluctance to acknowledge one’s own influence and standing reiterates the persuasive cultural role of the myth of egalitarianism as a marker of Scottish identity. Indeed, the flipside of routinely proclaimed equality and popular politics is the performative assertion of working-class identity and political progressiveness through middle-class claims to artsy activism and representation. This performative claim to representation demonstrates the very limits of representativeness where these discursively established public intellectuals fail, as elite cultural, media, and political actors, to truly represent the public and enact the popular politics they rhetorically assert. Nonetheless, they constitute powerful symbols of self-identification and national difference, as I discuss below.

4. Writers and artists as national symbols of identity

As analysed in previous chapters, political and media elites were essential in planning and performing popular participation in the referendum campaign – via arts-based activism and its defining trope of colourful street festivals. Given the central political function attributed to artists and writers in Scottish national imagination, a strong interest in making use of this connection in political messaging is unsurprising. Strategic attempts to appropriate artists and writers – not in their own right but as symbols of national identity and distinction – are visible on various levels of the referendum debate. Thus, Colin Kidd argued in *The Guardian* that the SNP and the party leader Alex Salmond hoped to make use of the “cultural connection” based on the “successful courtship of Scotland’s poets and novelists.”¹¹⁸² Similarly, Andrew Eaton-Lewis suggested that the SNP had hoped for an “orgy of culture” to support their independence claim.¹¹⁸³ This hope for support from the cultural elite echoes narratives of cultural devolution but also translated into targeted action as evident in the foundation of NC, orchestrated by *Yes Scotland* and the SNP (see [chapter 3](#)).

The close connection between elite political intervention and arts-based activism gave rise to substantial criticism. While writers’ rootedness in another field of reference – namely the literary one – when contributing to a political discourse could add creativity and emotion to politics (frequently perceived as positive by the public), it arguably politicises writers’ artistic production (more often seen as problematic). Thus, outspoken No supporters such as

¹¹⁸¹ Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 90.

¹¹⁸² Kidd “Scottish Independence.”

¹¹⁸³ Andrew Eaton-Lewis, “Why I’m Backing Independence,” *The Scotsman*, January 6, 2014, www.scotsman.com/lifestyle/andrew-eaton-lewis-why-i-m-backing-independence-1-3257327.

James MacMillan criticised those “artists who suck up to Government politicians, or those who want to huddle in ‘collectives’ like Mussolini’s cheerleaders.”¹¹⁸⁴ Similarly, Bissett recounts criticism of NC “for being an SNP front” and “SNP puppets.”¹¹⁸⁵ While this criticism may unjustly ignore the “politically polyvalent” functionality of political art,¹¹⁸⁶ it is also worth highlighting that few writers and artists conformed to the level of party-political support MacMillan describes. In fact, Scottish artists have often tried to avoid being cast as representatives of a specific party-political goal. Even those writers and artists who were involved in pro-independence campaigning were frequently critical of *Yes Scotland* and the SNP. Bissett emphasised to this effect that he “never did anything because the SNP told me to” but saw his activism as “helping the independence movement.”¹¹⁸⁷ Others were more outspoken about not wanting to be “national cheerleaders.”¹¹⁸⁸ Accordingly, Lindsay explained that

this was actually a bit of a split between me and perhaps some of the other creative people involved in indyref [...] I felt that [...] as writers and artists and whatever it was our place to sort of imagine a better Scotland, but not particularly to be propagandists [...] So, most of the events that I ran would be just a bunch of writers and musicians really, presenting political work, but it wasn't necessarily directly linked to voting Yes [...]. It was just like cultural events and talking about, critiquing Scotland and also critiquing the SNP as well because as the grassroots campaign I always thought it was very, very important for us to be really arm's length from the SNP, or from any particular political party, because writers have to be independent. [...] I was really precious about autonomy and not dancing to Yes Scotland or the SNP's tunes. [...] That became trickier in 2014.¹¹⁸⁹

During later stages of the campaign the fault-lines became increasingly distinct, which made maintaining the distance to official party and campaigning strategies difficult for many artists and writers who tried to avoid openly supporting party politics. Attempts and tendencies to institutionalise their position and employ writers and artists in media and political discourse complicate their role as “outsiders” and critics as advocated by Said. Indeed, Said describes intellectuals as “those figures whose public performance can neither be predicted nor

¹¹⁸⁴ James MacMillan qtd. in Alison Campsie, “James MacMillan Likens Indy Group National Collective to ‘Mussolini’s Cheerleaders’,” *The Herald*, August 26, 2013, www.heraldscotland.com/news/13119861.james-macmillan-likens-indy-group-national-collective-to-mussolinis-cheerleaders/. For a reply to this statement, cf. Alan Bissett, “Reply to James MacMillan’s Essay From 30th April 2014,” *National Collective*, May 1, 2014, www.nationalcollective.com/2014/05/01/reply-james-macmillans-essay-30th-april-2014/.

¹¹⁸⁵ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁸⁶ Adorno, “Commitment,” 178; Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 205.

¹¹⁸⁷ Bissett, interview.

¹¹⁸⁸ Jamie, “The Spirit of Bannockburn”; James Kelman, in Hames, *Unstated*, 121; Lindsay, “I Have to Believe in a Better World,” *National Collective*, January 29, 2013, <http://www.nationalcollective.com/2013/01/29/jenny-lindsay-poet-i-have-to-believe-in-a-better-world/>; Alan Warner qtd. in Laura Barton, “Alan Warner: Booze, Books and Why He’s Backing Scottish Independence,” *The Guardian*, August 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/19/alan-warner-booze-books-why-voting-scottish-independence>.

¹¹⁸⁹ Lindsay, interview.

compelled into some slogan, orthodox party line, or fixed dogma.”¹¹⁹⁰ Instead, they “should be the ones to question patriotic nationalism.”¹¹⁹¹ This sense of critical agency which most writers and artists emphasised and employed in the public debate, made it more difficult to cast them as figureheads and nationalist symbols. Simultaneously, it demonstrates the limitations of the idea of writers and artists as critics and representatives with the potential to mobilise politically.

In contrast, Gramsci’s notion of the traditional intellectual holds that these public figures play an important role in integrating the people into the national project and maintaining social and cultural hegemonies.¹¹⁹² This more institutionalised role of national intellectuals sees them as integrated in established power structures and discourses. Such tendencies can, in the Scottish context, be linked most readily to those writers who have been well-established as, what Kane called, “the literateurs at the mountaintop” through media representations, cultural narratives, and self-affirmation. Their position is no longer one of critical detachment alone – instead, they are also being claimed as “guiding lights and cultural guarantors”¹¹⁹³ by and for the nation. In fact, this institutionalisation echoes what Whyte describes as Scottish writers’ “task of representing the nation” where “an elected political authority” did not exist.¹¹⁹⁴ As representatives of national identity and the nation, writers’ agency as individuals and critics becomes less relevant, their public function increasingly symbolic.

Where living writers frequently emphasised their critical position, public debate more vigorously turned to writers of the past: well-established as national(ist) symbols, these writers were more easily incorporated into political rallying calls. Among increasingly absurd, and arguably unreasonable, attempts to link highly esteemed writers such as Robert Louis Stevenson and Sir Walter Scott to specific sides in the referendum debate,¹¹⁹⁵ a discussion on whether national poet Robert Burns would have been a supporter of independence gained prominence in 2014.¹¹⁹⁶ In fact, various commentators and critics tried to make an argument

¹¹⁹⁰ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xii.

¹¹⁹¹ Said, *Representations of the Intellectual*, xiii.

¹¹⁹² Cf. Gramsci, “The Intellectuals,” 114.

¹¹⁹³ Hames, “Introduction,” 10.

¹¹⁹⁴ Whyte, “Masculinities in Contemporary Scottish Fiction,” 284.

¹¹⁹⁵ Cf. Derek Bateman, “Silly Wee Scotland”, *Bella Caledonia*, January 10, 2014, www.bellacaledonia.org.uk/2014/01/10/silly-wee-scotland/; Alex Salmond qtd. in Alan Bissett, “The Writers Alex Salmond Is Courting Now Will Hold Him to Account,” *The Guardian*, July 14, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/14/writers-alex-salmond-courting-hold-account>.

¹¹⁹⁶ Chris Bambery, “How Would Robert Burns Vote in the Scottish Referendum,” *The Guardian*, July 23, 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jul/23/robert-burns-vote-scottish-referendum-identity; Robert Crawford qtd. in *The Herald*, “Author Claims Burns Would Have Backed Independence”, January 11, 2014, <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/13139972.author-claims-burns-would-have-backed-independence/>; Liz Lochhead, “Of Course Robert Burns Would Vote for Scottish Independence,” *The Guardian*, January 24, 2014, www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/jan/24/robert-burns-vote-scottish-independence.

for the national bard's pro-independence support. Patrick Scott Hogg enlisted "Robert Burns for Independence" and detected "evidence" that Burns "would have been a leading voice of the Yes campaign" in the national poet's patriotism¹¹⁹⁷ and Salmond asserted that "Burns would have been a 'Yes' voter."¹¹⁹⁸ Scots Makar at the time, Liz Lochhead, further explained that "my gut feeling is that (och, just read him!) as a libertarian, a democrat, a lover of freedom and autonomy, a revolutionary and a romantic, of course he'd be voting for independence."¹¹⁹⁹ While Lochhead sees this confirmed by her impression that "just about every contemporary writer or artist, young and old, that I know has declared they'll be saying a big yes" to independence,¹²⁰⁰ then-Labour MSP Richard Baker argued for the wider appeal of Burns.¹²⁰¹ The extensive discussion on this presumed support from Scotland's deceased national writers in the press – no matter how far-fetched some of it appeared – emphasises the importance attributed to this "literary support." The symbolic references to these national writers and poets in the context of a contemporary political debate reiterates the continuous weight that has been attributed to this narrative in Scottish nationalist discourse. At the same time, these tendencies highlight what Eleanor Bell describes as the "paradoxical need to assert culture while understanding its fabricated nature, which Scottish writers have often tended to avoid and yet which Scottish critics have often strictly held on to."¹²⁰² The shared habitus rooted in these practices as well as criticism and performances of national identity and belonging in the media and public debate contribute to the discursive construction of the public function of writers as national representatives and symbols.

In fact, endeavours to borrow some of the creative powers – and "aura" – of artists and writers extended to the proposition to include them in the process of writing the Scottish White Paper, outlining the structure of an independent nation.¹²⁰³ However, the document seemingly lacks the desired "dash of literary magic."¹²⁰⁴ This idea – and media stunt – nonetheless points to wider expectations regarding the presumed political relevance of literary tools and matter.

¹¹⁹⁷ Patrick Scott Hogg, "Robert Burns for Independence," *Bella Caledonia*, January 19, 2014, www.bellacaledonia.org.uk/2014/01/19/robert-burns-for-independence/.

¹¹⁹⁸ Gerard Carruthers, "Robert Burns and the Yes Campaign," *The Guardian*, July 19, 2014, www.theguardian.com/books/2014/jul/19/why-robert-burns-yes-campaign-alex-salmond. Cf. Andrew Whitaker, "Scottish Independence: Burns Would Be Yes – Salmond", *The Scotsman*, June 23, 2013, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/scottish-independence-burns-would-be-yes-salmond-1570353>.

¹¹⁹⁹ Lochhead, "Of Course Robert Burns."

¹²⁰⁰ Lochhead, "Of Course Robert Burns."

¹²⁰¹ Richard Baker qtd. in Whitaker, "Scottish Independence."

¹²⁰² Bell, *Questioning Scotland*, 45.

¹²⁰³ Kevin McKenna, "Alex Salmond Aims for Independence White Paper with a Literary Twist," *The Guardian*, July 13, 2013, www.theguardian.com/politics/2013/jul/13/alex-salmond-white-paper-william-mcilvanney.

¹²⁰⁴ McKenna, "Alex Salmond Aims for Independence White Paper."

Related practices indicate an attempt by “those who hold political power [...] to impose their vision on artists and appropriate for themselves the [writers’] power of consecration and of legitimisation.”¹²⁰⁵ In the Scottish context, this appropriation for politics is evident in the “political leveraging of ‘Scottish literature’ operating beyond its own bookish sphere, and intervening in public affairs with a specific ‘national’ weight and social authority.”¹²⁰⁶ What makes this practice meaningful is the repeated performance of narratives of Scottish national identity, specifically the narrative of cultural devolution, by intellectuals and the political establishment alike.

Attempts to emphasise and strengthen this link between national politics, literature, poetry, and its creators were visible beyond the referendum context. In fact, examples include the opening of the new Scottish Parliament¹²⁰⁷ and the institution of the Scots Makar, whose task it is to contribute poetry and thought to the parliamentary opening ceremonies to represent and, in the words of former First Minister, Sturgeon, address “significant events in our nation.”¹²⁰⁸ An aura of literary support and expertise has also been curated for themselves by Sturgeon and Salmond. While the SNP has long maintained its own “founding myth” as “a party of poets and novelists,”¹²⁰⁹ Sturgeon has increasingly created for herself a public persona with literary credentials and influence during her time in office.¹²¹⁰ From chairing panels at the Edinburgh International Book Festival to sharing her book choices and reading habits on her Twitter account, Sturgeon has constructed an image of literary appreciation on both a personal and a national political level. However, this image does not necessarily translate into specific support for artists and writers. As Lindsay highlights:

lots of my friends in England would say “God, I wish I lived in Scotland because you’ve got a more progressive government and your arts is better. You celebrate the arts more.” I don’t know if that’s actually backed up by funding stats or anything but there’s a perception that Scotland really values the arts and Nicola Sturgeon’s always tweeting her book covers.¹²¹¹

Scottish political representatives have successfully coined and continue to perform an image of Scotland as a country of literary and artistic appreciation and valuation, which continues to translate into writers’ ambassadorial role as national representatives. Meanwhile, the literary

¹²⁰⁵ Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 51.

¹²⁰⁶ Hames, *The Literary Politics*, 4.

¹²⁰⁷ Cf. Carruthers, “Robert Burns and the Yes Campaign”; Kidd “Scottish Independence.”

¹²⁰⁸ Nicola Sturgeon qtd. in Scottish Poetry Library, “Our National Poet: Jackie Kay, Makar 2016-2020,” www.scottishpoetrylibrary.org.uk/poetry/our-national-poet.

¹²⁰⁹ Kidd, “Scottish Independence”; Crawford, *Bannockburns*, 8.

¹²¹⁰ Cf. Scott Hames, “The Politics of Scotland’s Bookishness,” *The New Statesman*, March 12, 2022, <https://www.newstatesman.com/ideas/2022/03/the-politics-of-scotlands-bookishness>.

¹²¹¹ Lindsay, interview.

aura of Scottish politics underlines national identity and discursively connects it to political difference and progressiveness – based on radical, left-leaning politics associated with the Scottish cultural elite.

The referendum campaign once again highlighted this crucial public political, if discursive, function of Scottish artists and writers and the narrative that legitimates it. Complex structures of public discourse and persistent narratives of identity have positioned artists and writers in a context of grassroots campaigning, cultural vanguardism, politicisations of art, cultural propaganda, nationalist cheerleading, and institutionalised politics of power. Unsurprisingly, many artists and writers have been reluctant to align themselves openly with campaigning politics and nationalism. Along these lines, Lindsay emphasised that NC's grassroots activism "wasn't nationalist in tone, and there were people of all different sort of political persuasions in the organising group as well."¹²¹² However, this self-positioning as non-nationalist appears to be more rhetorically powerful than factual, and echoes claims to operate outside traditional – or institutional – power structures discussed above. Indeed, many of the pro-independence arts-based activities had a clear political component which linked to achieving national independence and, by extension, to the goals and activism of the official Yes campaign. As such, this mobilisation was crucially shaped and sustained by the performance of national myths within the Scottish public sphere.

5. Conclusion: elite culture and politics “for the people”

Artists and writers fulfilled various public functions in the referendum debate: creative, critical, representational, and propagandistic. While the referendum campaign contributed to the discursive establishment of new commentators, many of these became established as part of a close-knit network of personal and professional connection. Gatekeeping mechanisms largely remained in place, with cultural, media, and political elites utilising their public influence without acknowledging – or by discursively downplaying – their own position of power. The dominance of elite voices in public and media debate demonstrates a largely self-referential and performative assurance of public intellectuals' own importance. By referencing and performing this function, those involved legitimise and attach value to this practice. Informed by long-standing myths around the political function of the Scottish cultural elite as well as the popular myth of egalitarianism and political progressiveness, writers and artists performed a

¹²¹² Lindsay, interview.

key role during the referendum. However, according to Thomson, “[t]he potent blend of aesthetics and politics in the rhetoric of the Independence movement was itself the real break with the past, attesting not to the critical power of the arts but to their subsumption by contemporary politics.”¹²¹³ Indeed, Thomson here points to the crucial role in the referential practice of legitimising a politics of progressiveness and popular participation through artistic consecration. Importantly, this indicates the continued relevance of key myths of cultural and political difference as routinely performed during the referendum. Within this context, deferrals to culture and cultural representatives played an important role – for the critical discourse on progressive politics in the Scottish public sphere (see [chapter 1](#)) and representations of popular participation in the press coverage (see [chapter 2](#)) as well as for political mobilisation (see [chapters 3 and 4](#)) more specifically. Indeed, Thomson suggests that

[t]he language of aesthetics met the need of the Yes campaign for an unobjectionable and non-specific vocabulary that left itself open to radical construction and would aid in building a political coalition. It also served a valuable second function in helping strike a balance between radical promise (to keep the energetic grassroots democratic movements on board) and emphasising continuity (to appear to minimise the threat of disruptive change). Creativity and imagination were unobjectionable — safely depoliticised — and yet traditionally associated with resistance to capitalism.¹²¹⁴

Associating the referendum project with artistic practice – rather than openly with national culture – allowed the Yes campaign to project forward a seemingly more progressive politics without proposing a radically different vision for the future. In fact, the association of political change with the mythologised function of national artists and writers mobilised a sense of alternative politics, of democratisation, and social justice – even in the absence of policy proposals to sustain these claims. This focus on artists and writers as public intellectuals and exemplars for political change adds to conceptualisations of their role for nationalist politics and with an “exploitation of culture and celebrity to establish extra-political credentials.”¹²¹⁵

This chapter has highlighted the instrumental role of elite interventions, nationalist narratives, and institutionalised power in the creation and performance of the myth of popular participation. Rather than empowering large segments of society, the cultural as well as political practices that established this myth remained largely self-referential. This exclusionary politics manifested in what Lindsay states as follows: “I think we were probably guilty of talking to ourselves quite a lot.”¹²¹⁶ This mobilisation of progressiveness contrasts

¹²¹³ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 65.

¹²¹⁴ Thomson, “From Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 84-85.

¹²¹⁵ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 85. Thomson identifies a similar practice with Tony Blair’s New Labour government.

¹²¹⁶ Lindsay, interview.

with what Torrance identifies as the gap between the “self-styled creatives and most voters.”¹²¹⁷ This gap between the commentating elites and the wider public reasserts the elite’s symbolic function in and for the public discourse. It points to the prevalence of elite narratives and performances within established political power structures. By conflating cultural vanguardism with notions of political progressiveness and egalitarian political ideals, interventions by artists and writers in the public discourse – as artists, public intellectuals and representatives, and symbols of national identification – have aided the construction and circulation of a myth of popular participation. Whereas long-standing narratives of Scottish identity have given rise to the myth of popular participation during the referendum, the continued performance and self-referential assertion of these underlying narratives and myths operate as key tropes within it. They legitimate a reality performatively created by political, cultural, and media elites.

¹²¹⁷ David Torrance, “Curious Case of Creatives.”

Conclusion: a myth of popular participation

*The referendum may be over, but the question it addressed is neither over nor done with.
How could it be? So long as Scotland exists and England exists,
that question will never be over.*¹²¹⁸

In this thesis, I have argued that the referendum was at least partially constructed, enacted, and mythologised as a historic, highly participatory moment. The ensuing myth of popular participation identified in this thesis describes a people-centred participatory, inclusive, and “just” politics, which was articulated through notions of political progressiveness and democratisation in the referendum debate.

By mobilising these notions of a “progressive politics,” the referendum debate discursively renewed the belief in popular political participation – even if only momentarily. Moving beyond what was seen to be the growing elitism of a nominally participatory Scottish politics since the early 2000s,¹²¹⁹ the public political challenges and disagreements of the referendum debate affirmed the political debate of the public sphere and countered “apathy and [...] disaffection with political participation.”¹²²⁰ The unresolvable, passionate, and conflicting public arguments of the long campaigning period contributed to the political confrontations described by Mouffe as essential elements in a working democracy. This debate – and participation therein – has been presented as a historic moment of political empowerment, which communicated a new valuation of popular voice and contributions to political debate.

This difference in valuation of popular participation as well as the “monumental” decision of the referendum are at the root of the high referendum turnout and the membership surges post-referendum. Indeed, those newly joining political parties were motivated to do so largely by a changed perception of politics and valuation of their political voice, rather than by an aim to affect radical political change through personal political activism.¹²²¹ As such, the mobilisation for the referendum provides valuable insights into the contemporary potentials and limitations of popular plebiscites and participatory politics – as detailed below.

Neither the referendum nor the myth of participation have significantly changed access to politics – despite the sense of empowerment conveyed by them. Instead, they indicate where Scotland’s progressive vision of an inclusive politics falls short of its own claims and contributes to a frequently exclusionary political reality. Here, the myth of popular

¹²¹⁸ Robertson, *To Be Continued...*, 252.

¹²¹⁹ St Denny, “The Scottish Parliament,” 76-77.

¹²²⁰ Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 7.

¹²²¹ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1188; 1195. Cf. Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2.

participation and the vision of political difference it conveys have been more discursively compelling than the political realities and legacy of the referendum. Indeed, this thesis has argued that elite dominance has persisted in the referendum and was instrumental in the co-creation and meaning making via the myth of popular participation – as indicated by the practical shortcomings and performativity of popular participation within the referendum context. It demonstrates that popular participation was largely determined by elite representations, discursively constructed, and routinely performed in the public sphere. This emphasises, rather than challenges, the mobilising power of the myth itself, which has communicated a sense of political empowerment to the public. As this thesis has shown, a sense of empowerment and excitement was repeatedly connected to cultural practices of meaning making in public debate, which echo practices of cultural nationalism while raising larger questions on elite contributions to participatory democratic events, the organisation of participatory politics, and related political exclusions.

1. Popular participation, discourse, and the politics of representation

Chapter 1 has positioned the referendum in its historical and national context, with specific attention to Scottish political realities and the political role of the media. Within this context, the referendum has been established as a complex socio-political and cultural moment and discourse which is, this thesis suggests, best addressed through a transdisciplinary approach to the referendum debate. This thesis positions these complexities and the plurality of the referendum debate within the conceptual framework of the public sphere – rather than through seemingly isolated institutions of politics, civil society, and a diverse yet unified public alone. The public sphere is thus understood as a (metaphorical) space where cultural dynamics, political activism, and societal opinion-formation take place. Largely predating the formal institutionalisation of the Scottish Parliament, civil society, cultural representation, and the media have claimed a crucial role as political representatives in the Scottish public sphere; they have continuously determined the political potential of popular participation in Scotland. I have discussed these dynamics in relation to the historical origins and continued discursive emphasis on a participatory political culture, which this thesis has found to culminate in the myth of popular participation during the referendum. Chapter 1 has thus established the framework for analysis conducted throughout this thesis and has demonstrated how existing narratives of

national identity, namely the “myth of Scottish egalitarianism”¹²²² and the related “myth of Scottish [political] exceptionalism,”¹²²³ operate within the myth of popular participation, which is at the centre of the subsequent analyses and discussion.

The related notions of democratic representation, equality, and political progressiveness indicate how Scotland sees itself and sustains arguments not only of egalitarianism and openness but also of a strong culture of argument and debate nurtured by an independent press. As McCrone highlights, such

attitudes and values have been distilled [...] so that they become “as if” Scottish, even though such attitudes are fairly widespread throughout most Western capitalist societies [...] In other words, there is nothing innately distinctive about them, but they become useful markers of how a society wishes to present itself.¹²²⁴

The performative iteration of these values during the referendum debate through a myth of popular participation has demonstrated its cultural construction without diminishing its social, cultural, and political significance. Chapter 1 has thus established the practical and discursive limitations of popular participation and the public sphere as well as their reliance on performances of cultural mythology in public and media discourse, which have been developed throughout the following chapters.

Building on these paradigms of political, cultural, and media representations, I have analysed the role of the press in representing and, more importantly, performing specific visions of popular participation as part of the referendum debate in chapter 2. Critical discourse analysis of representations of participation in the press, as a key organ of political communication and political debate in the public sphere, has revealed exclusionary interpretations of what participation meant in the referendum debate. Newspaper analysis in chapter 2 has shown a reliance on the publicly persuasive mythology of political difference introduced in chapter 1 and has reiterated the limitations of its “progressive” vision in public and, specifically, media discourse. Influenced by a historically rooted mythology of political and social difference, the press has been shown to prescribe participation and empowerment through tropes of national distinction and through “a revived language of sovereignty and democratisation” – primarily on the Yes side.¹²²⁵ Stage-managed by the political and media elite, the referendum as a media event and spectacle drew on the societal conflict and contested

¹²²² Keating and McEwen, “The Scottish Independence Debate,” 17; Hearn, *Claiming Scotland*, 139-140. Cf. Hassan, *Caledonian Dreaming*, 32.

¹²²³ Harvey, “A Dominant SNP in a Unionist Scotland?” 56.

¹²²⁴ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 174.

¹²²⁵ Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 167.

terrain of the referendum debate,¹²²⁶ thus mobilising a language of contest and competition routinely employed in political and election coverage.

Importantly, however, I have shown that the press also played a key agenda-setting role in defining and promoting a specific form of popular participation in the referendum debate, most notably by promoting an engaging and colourful image of a “celebration of democracy.”¹²²⁷ This elite-sanctioned form of popular participation has been shown to contrast with more organic forms of popular activism: while these were frequently celebrated as expressions of popular opinion on the No side, they were more often condemned as threatening and undemocratic through a lexicon of violence and abuse in representations of the Yes side, (rhetorically) turning peaceful protesters into angry mobs. The circulation and performance of elite-sanctioned forms of popular participation in the press was powerfully reaffirmed by a select group of left-leaning, self-stylised “progressive”, cultural commentators in the aftermath of the referendum. These rhetorical performances thus promoted an exclusionary, normative vision of popular participation – a vision of popular participation enacted by a small, elite segment of society. Elite evaluations and prescriptions of popular participation have been further contextualised in chapter 3, which has discussed the role of and partially reclaimed activism by alternative campaigners as well as the different levels of involvement and exclusion these facilitated for members of the public. As such, findings from these chapters add to more general debates on popular participation and are indicative of the role of elite contributors for participatory political events such as referendums and elections.

Related tensions between individual empowerment, group participation, and the majoritarian logic of the referendum vote are also evident in the competing rhetorical claims to representation voiced through the terms “silent majority” and “missing Scotland”. These competing claims towards representation (or a lack thereof) crucially emphasise the role of voice: when the majority is silent and the deprived minority is disenfranchised or “missing”, the articulation and performance of national politics is rhetorically reaffirmed and discursively performed as an elite project. By critically analysing the underlying power dynamics and the discursive construction of meaning-making in the newspaper debates on the referendum, chapter 2 has shown how such representations of participation were created and performed in elite political discourses in the press. The related performance of exclusionary forms of popular

¹²²⁶ Kellner, “Media Spectacle,” 76-78.

¹²²⁷ Bort, “The Annals of the Parish,” 2.

participation indicates a preoccupation with the politics of voice and an ignorance towards alternative expressions of political participation – as established in [chapter 3](#).

[Chapter 3](#) detailed the conceptual basis of popular political participation and considered its relevance in the context of the referendum in continuation and tension with elite evaluations of popular participation discussed in [chapter 2](#). By indicating the political potential of popular participation in the referendum as well as the practical shortcomings of its realisation, this chapter has problematised the discrepancies between a compelling vision of popular participation and its rhetorical and practical limitations, which have given rise to the myth of popular participation. The analysis of alternative campaigners as the epitome of popular participation has challenged the idea of an inclusive mobilisation and popular “upheaval”¹²²⁸ and specifically calls into question the “progressive” credentials of this mobilisation. It has demonstrated the limited reach, appeal, and representativeness of these campaigners’ activism and the popular political movement they have been discursively credited with. Thus, this chapter has expanded on Paterson’s observation that the referendum’s mobilising effort qualifies as but “a rebellion by a minority of people on the left in both middle-class and working-class social groups”¹²²⁹ and has considered the role of elite agency in terms of popular political mobilisation and grassroots campaigning efforts.

Evidence from interviews with arts-based campaigners and activists forms the basis of my argument and has been used throughout to illustrate the mythologisation of arts-based pro-independence support as well as tensions between popular activism and elite interventions. It has added crucial insight to the analysis of the scope and drawbacks of these mobilising efforts and associated creative projects by *National Collective* and other activists. Particularly, my own public engagement format, *The Referendum Café*, captured unique reflections by members of the public on the role and legacy of popular participation in the referendum context. Building on these practices and reflections, this chapter has considered how activists and members of the public have made use of alternative spaces and have inhabited and reclaimed some of these through different forms of political activism and participation. While perceived by many as an empowering finding of individual and collective political voice, others experienced the referendum as silencing, divisive, exclusionary, and alienating. Statements by participants of *The Referendum Café* emphasised the discrepancies between a progressive, participatory vision articulated through the pro-independence vote and their personal experiences of the

¹²²⁸ Malloch, Munro, and Rogers, “Justice, Civic Engagement,” 8.

¹²²⁹ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 43.

campaigning realities, echoing some of the debates established in the press at the time (cf. [chapter 2](#)). Accordingly, participants' statements also repeatedly highlighted where members of the public subscribed to the compelling vision of what this thesis has described as the myth of popular participation. Indeed, even those who fell outside the colourful vision of progressive politics associated with the pro-independence side in media representations and public debate frequently felt "silenced by joy,"¹²³⁰ as commentary by Denise Mina suggests, rather than excluded from its political realities. It is this tension between vision and reality that discursively sustained and performed popular participation in the referendum and has given rise to the myth of popular participation – as a politically mobilising and powerful vehicle of cultural sense production and national identity.

Reiterating observations from [chapter 2](#), [chapter 3](#) has highlighted how notions of a more progressive, participatory, and democratic politics became associated with the pro-independence argument as well as alternative, predominantly arts-based activism in the referendum context and its political discourse. This discursive framing has attributed a central role in political mobilisation to arts-based activism, which contrasts with criticism that little art and literature were created in response to the referendum as a crucial national event. The underlying assumptions regarding the role of art and literature for political mobilisation and participation were further developed in [chapter 4](#), which has addressed how poets and writers responded to the referendum and its politics. This discussion has indicated the participatory and representational function of literary texts in the referendum context. The analysis of indyref poetry, verse, and fiction has shown where and how these texts have added emotion and passion to the debate and creatively promoted political participation in the referendum – through a pro-independence vision associated with the progressive politics of the myth of popular participation and the performance of nationalist trope. By analysing literary texts, I have shown that this nationalist imagery evoked emotion and added national sentiment to the public debate, even if running the risk of being reductionist and exclusionary on a textual level and in its social-political appeal.

In contrast, attempts at capturing a "real", "authentic" indyref experience covered, but rarely critically "re-presented", participative interventions in the referendum debate and mobilisation. Where indyref literature did, it largely followed the imagery and trope of the referendum as a festival of popular participation. Indyref fiction and, more prominently, indyref poetry struggled to transfer onto the page the unresolved, adversary debate of the

¹²³⁰ Mina, interview.

indyref argument and to create spaces for political reflection, deliberation, and a plurality of political voice. Where the political potential of arts-based activism created such spaces, it powerfully worked as a form of resistance against a dominant “establishment”¹²³¹ and as a campaigning tool.¹²³²

More generally, however, indyref literature has been shown to have largely substituted political voice and agency for nationalist trope and lagged behind the social and political progressiveness performed in the referendum discourse and, particularly, in the rhetoric of the Yes campaign. These artistic representations of the referendum thus indicate that popular participation was rarely “made present” or transferred political deliberation and participation onto the page and instead reproduced performative notions of popular participation that circulated in the referendum debate – indicating the persuasiveness of this idea and performing the myth of popular participation through the rhetoric of nationalist trope.

A focus on the role of alternative spaces for political participation and debate continues into the next chapter. To address discursively promoted participatory politics beyond “elite” media platforms, [chapter 5](#) has expanded on the participatory potential and political agency of the public – this time in the context of participatory opportunities on new media platforms. It has addressed this potential for public political interventions through access to political debate via social media platforms, specifically Twitter (now X). Contrary to its nominal openness and inclusivity, network analysis of Twitter data has demonstrated elite and institutional dominance during the referendum – these findings echo the elite performances of popular participation in the press and have added another layer of complexity to political interactions and debate in the public sphere. Online activity around #indyref have shown little public deliberation and political debate crucial for a public participatory politics. As such, these findings have contributed to growing research on the limitations of political debate, participation, and inclusion online.

At the tightly connected core of the wide communication networks that formed around #indyref remained elite actors, contrasting potential openness with elite-centred activity. As such, these networks demonstrate a deferral of political agency and voice to elite representatives in politics and media. Thus, they replicate in the virtual sphere the deferral of political agency to established players in the field of political activism observed in [chapter 3](#). By highlighting these practices, I have shown that, much like political activism on the ground,

¹²³¹ Kane, interview.

¹²³² Della Porta et al., *Social Movements and Referendums*, 63-64.

online participation during the referendum was largely confined to the performative dimension of a myth of political participation which does not fully realise the reality it seeks to evoke. Participation on Twitter must then be regarded also as performative in its second sense, i.e., as a sign and symbol of support. Participation here largely functioned as an acknowledgement of the game at play within its pre-set limitations and as an expression of belonging to a movement – while withholding active investment in it. Even where the public had easier access to political debate, their participation and involvement fell short of the open and progressive vision of popular political participation discursively attributed to the referendum debate – and presumably facilitated by platforms such as Twitter. Instead, I have shown that online activity, too, reproduced the myth of popular participation prevalent in elite representations in literary and media text through a focus on elite players in digital networks of political debate.

Chapter 6 has further analysed the role of elite interventions in mobilising and performing a myth of popular participation and progressive politics. As Foley, Wray, and Davidson suggest, reflections on the referendum have to reconcile with the fact that despite the “extraordinary vigour of the street protests, the intellectual momentum has been with independence from above.”¹²³³ This explicitly applies to the pro-independence campaign and argument which, according to Thomson, “must contend with the legacy of this powerful identification not of Scotland with its historical past, but of politics as such with the expression of identity” if it is to have “a lasting influence through a more thoroughgoing debate over the democratization of Scotland.”¹²³⁴ Thus, public and political debate must acknowledge the role of culture in expressions of nationalist distinction through political progressiveness and participation. An emphasis on progressiveness, political participation, and civic nationalism needs to be recognised as an expression of national identity rooted in a specific national context and intellectual tradition, reiterating the referendum’s nationalist practices of identity performance – these resonate with cultural arguments of identification more commonly associated with secessionist movements in Spain, Belgium, or Canada.

Within the context of a specific cultural tradition and Scottish national identity (chapter 1), representations of participation have been considered in chapters 2 and, to a lesser extent, 4 and have been contextualised through participatory political interventions and activism in chapters 3, 4, and 5 by members of the public and elite actors – most notably Scottish artists, writers, and intellectuals. In chapter 6, I have shown that Scottish artists and writers were

¹²³³ Foley and Wray with Davidson, *Scotland After Britain*, 211.

¹²³⁴ Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Referendum?” 87.

discursively credited with a crucial function in adding creativity to the referendum debate, in mobilising the public politically, and in performing national identity, thus fulfilling a plurality of public functions: as artistic professionals, public intellectuals and representatives, and as national symbols. These functions directly align with the three theoretical strands of this thesis respectively, namely participation, representation, and performance. Although the political involvement by writers and intellectuals in nationalists movements is a widely acknowledged characteristic in nationalism debates,¹²³⁵ the Scottish political vanguard of its *littérateurs* has been mythologised as a marker of distinction (see chapters 3, 4, and 6). As representatives of progressive politics, Scottish writers have been cast as symbols of national identity and agents of political change.

Using statements from my interviews with artists and writers as well as various publications and newspaper discussions on their public political role during the referendum, chapter 6 has examined this creative elite's national representative and political function and weaves together key themes that have emerged in this thesis. Here, I have argued that the assertions of national myths of Scottish identity have operated as key tropes in the Scottish referendum debate and have sustained and legitimated the political function of the “cultural argument” and the political, cultural, and media elite that have performed it. These practices have been shown to speak to a national understanding of the Scottish imagined community while highlighting routine practices of a political deferral to a cultural, and symbolically charged, elite – as first observed in chapters 3 and 5. They demonstrate how notions of democratic representation, political progressiveness, and cultural identity have operated in a myth of popular participation, as it was (co-)constructed and performed by a cultural, political, and media elite. The association with creativity and the public political role of artists and writers – and the discursive national tradition that sustains it – have allowed the Yes campaign to project forward a seemingly more radical politics without proposing a radically different vision for the future. In fact, I have demonstrated that, aided by interventions from a cultural elite, the vision of popular participation and a progressive political culture has been condensed into a myth of national identity and sense production, which has been routinely performed in the referendum debate.

The discussion of wide-ranging contributions to the political and cultural referendum debate in the public sphere answers the initial question of this thesis: did the referendum debate

¹²³⁵ E.g., Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, with a Preface by Jean-Paul Sartre, trans. Constance Farrington (1961; New York: Grove Press, 1963); Gramsci, “The Intellectuals.”

give rise to a myth of popular participation and how? Interview material and newspaper coverage have demonstrated the crucial role of elite interventions and representations in producing a compelling vision and myth of popular participation. Based on the analysis of literary texts, I have identified how the representation and performance of these visions and their specifically national connotations intersect with the political potential for arts-based mobilisation – regarding their creative, mobilising potential, their national identity function, and their role in opening spaces for deliberation. The contrasts and intersections between these visions and the experiences and spaces for popular interventions have been captured through my public engagement format (*Referendum Café*) and network analysis on Twitter. Informed by these contributions, I have identified discrepancies between elite vision and popular political activity, which highlight the discursive creation and persuasiveness of the myth of popular participation as well as its performative relevance during and beyond the referendum debate. This thesis has thus identified multiple, intersecting levels of representation and discourse which perform a myth of popular participation in the national public sphere.

2. The myth of popular participation

By viewing myth as “a guide to help interpret social reality,”¹²³⁶ this thesis has highlighted the practical and political limitations of popular participation and its representations in the referendum debate and beyond. It has found that the myth of popular participation promoted a narrative of empowerment which established a hegemony of interpretation,¹²³⁷ i.e., a specific reading of the referendum as a participatory opportunity which performed a restrictive and exclusionary form of popular participation. Indeed, notions of national self-perception of Scotland as egalitarian, open, and democratic – in comparison with England – were mobilised into the partisan narrative of political change and progressiveness on the pro-independence side. Or, in the words of Jackson, into an opportunity on the left to further “Scotland’s long-standing egalitarian and democratic traditions.”¹²³⁸ This popular mythologisation of Scottish political difference through national identity and partisan political narratives contributed to the discursive iteration and performance of popular participation in the referendum debate. The importance and role of popular participation in this debate was, as I have shown, created and performed in elite media and political discourse. While partially reclaimed by the public

¹²³⁶ McCrone, *Understanding Scotland*, 91.

¹²³⁷ Cf. Adorno, “Commitment,” 177-78. Cf. Mouffe, *Agonistics*, 92-93; 1-2.

¹²³⁸ Jackson, *The Case for Scottish Independence*, 2.

through political engagement and creative activism, popular participation was celebrated predominantly where it remained within elite visions of a colourful festival of democracy in the streets. The dialectic between elite prescriptions of empowerment and alternative ways of enlivening and claiming political agency by the public contributed to the discursive construction and circulation of a myth of popular participation, which went beyond political activism on the ground.

By conceptualising popular political participation in the referendum through notions of representation and performativity, I have demonstrated how participation was negotiated across textual representations and public debate. I have shown that popular participation and political democratisation were constantly talked about but not fully realised. This practice constitutes a progressive vision of an inclusive politics which falls short of its own claims and instead contributes to a political reality that is more exclusionary than its performative assertions. By highlighting its discursive construction, I have identified practical shortcomings of popular participation in the referendum debate and demonstrated how participation has been performatively enacted as a compelling socio-cultural myth. The limitations to popular participation identified through this national myth hold wider implications for the mobilising power of culture and creative activism in political decision making and for the role of popular political participation. As such, this research has established the conditions for a more nuanced evaluation of the consistent under- and misrepresentation of marginalised groups in Scottish politics. Beyond claims to a “new”, progressive politics in Scotland, the analysis of this thesis has raised wider concerns around the limitations to popular involvement in participatory political events such as referendums and elections. It has crucially highlighted various levels of exclusion in political decision making and has identified hurdles that prevent politics from being participatory and engaging – both in Scotland and in Western deliberative democracies more generally.

3. The participatory legacy of the referendum

As the analysis of this thesis has revealed, the debate in the lead-up to the referendum in 2014 has given rise to a compelling myth of popular participation. This unifying myth has promoted pluralist popular participation while simultaneously abstracting from individual voice and participation. Popular participation in the referendum was more restrictive and less organic than its discursive construction via media and literary representations of an eruption of popular political debate and activism in the streets would suggest. As a result, the increasingly partisan

image of an engaging, inclusive, and politically progressive movement for change on the pro-independence side contributed to a compelling socio-political myth with limited political merit.

Looking back at the referendum now, a quick “return to elite-driven deal-making,”¹²³⁹ to politics as usual, and to party-political and elite dominance have become evident.¹²⁴⁰ The referendum neither brought about the constitutional change associated with an independence vote nor significant political change within the Union, despite a substantial increase in fiscal powers.¹²⁴¹ Importantly, it also failed to settle the constitutional question, as intended by the British government.¹²⁴² Instead, the question of independence has remained a live political issue, even if upstaged by recent political challenges: the project of independence, which has become “synonymous” with the SNP,¹²⁴³ has been threatened by the Scottish Government’s unsuccessful Supreme Court Case to obtain the legal basis for another independence referendum,¹²⁴⁴ the SNP’s political – and image – crises,¹²⁴⁵ and Nicola Sturgeon’s resignation as First Minister¹²⁴⁶. Meanwhile, political challenges on a UK level – from the Brexit Referendum to the political response to the Covid-19 pandemic and the economic and social challenges associated with the Cost-of-Living Crisis have provided new arguments for – and, to a lesser extent, against – independence.¹²⁴⁷

¹²³⁹ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 186; Tierney, “Reclaiming Politics,” 232; Keating and McEwen, “Beyond the Referendum,” 199; Mullen, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 640.

¹²⁴⁰ While alternative campaigners NC and RIC initially stated that they would continue to campaign for independence, both organisations have since dispersed (at least on a national level). In contrast, WFI has grown into more substantiated party structures, closely aligned with SNP party politics and politicians.

¹²⁴¹ The additional powers that have been devolved as part of the 2016 Scotland Act which delivers the Smith Commission Agreement are predominantly fiscal but include changes to employability and social security support as well as additional constitutional powers (pertaining to elections) and limited legislative powers (in infrastructure, economy, health). UK Parliament, “Scotland Act 2016”, <https://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2016/11/contents/enacted/data.htm>. Cf. Keating and McEwen, “Beyond the Referendum,” 198; Mullen, “Introduction,” 9-10.

¹²⁴² Mullen, “Introduction,” 25.

¹²⁴³ Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1186.

¹²⁴⁴ David Torrance, “Supreme Court Judgement on Scottish Independence Referendum,” *House of Commons Library*, November 23, 2022, <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/supreme-court-judgment-on-scottish-independence-referendum/>; Libby Brooks and Ben Quinn, “Supreme Court Rules Against Scottish Parliament Holding New Independence Referendum,” *The Guardian*, November 23, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2022/nov/23/scottish-independence-supreme-court-scottish-parliament-second-referendum-indyref2>.

¹²⁴⁵ Mike Russell, “SNP Facing ‘Biggest Crisis in 50 Years,’” *BBC News*, April 8, 2023, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-65219944>; James Foley, Tom Montgomery, and Ewan Kerr, “The Antinomies of Insurgency: The Case of the Scottish National Party,” *The Political Quarterly* (2023): 1, <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-923X.13314>.

¹²⁴⁶ Adam Forrest, “Nicola Sturgeon’s Tearful Exit Throws Push for Scottish Independence into Doubt,” *Independent*, February 15, 2023, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/politics/nicola-sturgeon-resigns-scotland-first-minister-b2282629.html>; Severin Carrell and Libby Brooks, “Sturgeon Exit May Delay New Scotland Independence Vote by Five Years,” *The Guardian*, February 16, 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2023/feb/16/sturgeon-resignation-might-delay-new-scotland-independence-vote-by-five-years>.

¹²⁴⁷ Suteu, “The Scottish Independence Referendum,” 216; Annie Thiec, “The Impact of Brexit on the SNP’s Narrative of Independence,” *Observatoire de la Société Britannique* 26 (2021), <https://doi.org/10.4000/>

Nonetheless, the visible popular pro-independence support of the 2014 referendum has largely disappeared, despite mobilising efforts by pro-independence pressure groups like *All Under One Banner*.¹²⁴⁸ For the time being, this small-scale activism has not countered a sentiment of disillusionment, stagnation, and a lack of “momentum.”¹²⁴⁹ Whether a period of pragmatic adjustment and compromise¹²⁵⁰ or of continued, albeit less fervent, “political awakening,”¹²⁵¹ the strategic alignment of the Yes side with creative imagination during the referendum has meant that “any future failure could be blamed on their opponents, and stigmatised as treacherous lack of faith in the radical promise” of a changed future.¹²⁵² This “dream” of independence as an attractive panacea for radical change and progressive politics remains alive in a capitalist neo-liberal, post-democratic world. In discursively performing the referendum as an opportunity for political change and participation, the public referendum debate has helped mainstream support for independence,¹²⁵³ not least through the continued relevance and persuasiveness of a myth of popular participation.

osb.5057; The Economist, “How Coronavirus Strengthened Scottish Independence,” August 6, 2020, <https://www.economist.com/britain/2020/08/06/how-coronavirus-strengthened-scottish-independence>; John Curtice, “The COVID-19 Pandemic and Support for Independence,” *What Scotland Thinks*, November 22, 2022, <https://www.whatscotlandthinks.org/2022/11/the-covid-19-pandemic-and-support-for-independence/>; Rebecca McCurdy, “Sturgeon: Cost of Living Crisis Highlights Need for Scottish Independence,” *Independent*, April 8, 2022, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/nicola-sturgeon-first-minister-boris-johnson-scottish-snp-b2054042.html>; Stephen McIlkenny, “Scottish Independence Is Essential for Tackling Cost-of-living Crisis Says Nicola Sturgeon,” *The Scotsman*, June 26, 2022, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/politics/scottish-independence-is-essential-for-tackling-cost-of-living-crisis-says-nicola-sturgeon-3745573>. For a different perspective, cf. Pamela Nash, “SNP’s Scottish Independence Obsession Amid Cost of Living Crisis Shows How out of Touch with Public Opinion They Really Are,” *The Scotsman*, January 12, 2023, <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/snps-scottish-independence-obsession-amid-cost-of-living-crisis-shows-how-out-of-touch-with-public-opinion-they-really-are-pamela-nash-3982301>.

¹²⁴⁸ All Under One Banner (AUOB) have been organising nation-wide rallies and marches with varying success since October 2014.

¹²⁴⁹ Bissett, interview; Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1195. A second referendum on independence was proposed for 19 October 2023 but has been abandoned since. Cf. Nicola Sturgeon, “Nicola Sturgeon’s Full Statement Announcing the 2023 Independence Referendum,” *SNP*, June 28, 2022, <https://www.snp.org/nicola-sturgeons-full-statement-announcing-the-2023-independence-referendum/>; Scottish Government, “Next Steps in Independence Referendum Set Out,” June 28, 2022, [https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-63312363](https://www.gov.scot/news/next-steps-in-independence-referendum-set-out/#:~:text=‘The%20Bill%20includes%20the%20proposed,have%20legal%20clarity%3B%20legal%20fact; Philip Sim, “Are We Really One Year Away from a Scottish Referendum?” <i>BBC News</i>, October 19, 2022, <a href=). Cf. Carrell and Brooks, “Sturgeon Exit May Delay New Scotland Vote.”

¹²⁵⁰ Paterson, “Utopian Pragmatism,” 27-32.

¹²⁵¹ Walker, interview.

¹²⁵² Thomson, “From ‘Renaissance’ to Renaissance?” 85.

¹²⁵³ Bissett, interview. Cf. Lynch, “Bottom-up,” 2; Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns, “Parties, Movements,” 1195.

4. Future direction of research

The main strength of the thesis is its interdisciplinary approach to the referendum allied with the scope of materials and methods it employs. By consulting a wide range of sources, I have analysed the referendum and its experience – both individualised and aggregated in the majoritarian referendum frame – as a complex social, cultural, and political moment. As a result of this focus on the complex interplay of political debate and cultural identity in the public sphere, some elements of the referendum and popular participation could only be addressed selectively, e.g., where the textual nature of the referendum is concerned. This area provides significant scope for further research: specifically, the systematic analysis of leaflets and referendum diaries and their “participatory” stories promises deeper insights into the narrativization and construction of the referendum as a historic – and participatory – moment.

One of the aims of this thesis has been the recording of the different voices of the referendum, the different experiences of the Scottish public. While the engagement with a wide variety of materials has made this possible, this thesis can only attempt to capture this plurality of experience. Indeed, by focusing on and providing a platform to elitist culture-based activism in the referendum, this thesis partially perpetuates and co-creates the myth of participation it criticises. Thus, conducting more detailed and longitudinal analyses on Twitter (including identity markers such as gender, occupation, and location) as well as establishing a larger and more “democratic” corpus of oral history interviews provides a promising basis for future research into public political voice and indyref experiences within the context of the Scottish public sphere. However, the establishment of a more inclusive oral history collection will come with its own challenges. As the approach of this project has demonstrated, capturing experiences and stories of members of the public is not simply a matter of time and resources but also determined by access and bias: many members of the public were hesitant to make their own voices heard and there was a clear pro-independence bias among those who did. Instead, a deferral of political voice to public figures and more “important” representatives was a routine practice among those contacted to partake in the research for this project.

This practice of deferral also raises important concerns about participatory politics. According to Phil Parvin, participatory politics are not as desirable as the progressive vision promoted in contemporary Scotland might suggest. Indeed, political participation and influence are increasingly concentrated among those of “high socio-economic status.”¹²⁵⁴ Those of lesser socio-economic status are thus increasingly excluded from politics in

¹²⁵⁴ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 38; cf. 32.

“contemporary democratic states”¹²⁵⁵ and, consequently, experience politics as “too divorced from their own lives to be meaningful.”¹²⁵⁶ As such, the promotion of a deliberative politics of participation ignores the inherent inequalities of this political approach as well as its limitations – some of which have become acutely evident in the context of the referendum. These limitations of popular political participation need to be considered in relation to participatory political events such as referendums and elections. Specifically, these limitations need to be addressed in the context of a potential second independence referendum and contemporary Scottish politics if popular participation is to realise the empowering and progressive qualities imagined and performed in its mythologisation.

¹²⁵⁵ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 36.

¹²⁵⁶ Parvin, “Democracy Without Participation,” 37.

Appendixes

Appendix 1: Sample questions oral history interviews

1. When you think about the Scottish referendum on independence in 2014, what is the first thing that comes to mind?
2. Could you tell me how you first became involved in the debate on independence and how you participated in it?
3. How did your involvement with the referendum influence/complement your own creative practice/activism/work?
4. How would you describe the role politics and activism play more generally in your own practice?
5. Based on your own experience, can you say something about the role of grassroots movements and cultural activism in the referendum debate? What were the expectations towards writers and creatives like yourself?
6. Do you remember a specific event/instance that exemplifies this for you and why?
7. How would you describe the atmosphere at the time of the referendum campaign?
8. In your opinion, what role did the established media and alternative grassroots platforms play during and after the referendum campaign? Especially in terms of public debate and participation?
9. How do you remember previous referendums on devolution? How do you think the campaigns/movements differed?
10. Has your perception of the referendum debate and popular participation changed over the course of the debate and/or since the referendum?
11. Looking back, what would you say is the referendum's legacy – if any?
12. Has the experience and outcome of the referendum changed how you think about independence?
13. Would you campaign differently in a second independence referendum and how/why?
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?

Appendix 2: *Referendum Café*

Appendix 2.1: Focus group

- Welcome to the *Referendum Café* and Thank Yous (to Beverley Casebow and Heidi Egginton from the National Library of Scotland; Being Human Festival)
- Housekeeping and outline for today's session
- Introduction to and findings from the research project
- Introduction to and exploration of the NLS Referendum Collection
- Coffee BREAK ---
- Introduction to writing options and tools (Creative Writing, Life Writing, Autoethnographic Writing)

1. When I think about the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, I think of...

2. Campaigning for or against Scottish independence

Example: McCabe, *Two Closes and a Referendum*, 7-8;16

- You're not who I thought you were.
- What's up? Do I no get to be an activist? Like you are?
- I've always been an activist. You're not interested in politics.
- How do you know?
- Because when I bang on you change the subject.
- Never dawned that was to keep the peace?
- [...]
- This time it's Donald who breaks the silence.
- Went along today to Better Together and officially joined as an activist."¹²⁵⁷

Questions to think about: Was there a moment during the campaign when you knew you wanted to get involved (with the Yes/No campaign)? Did you also feel that you would be unable to "sit out the big one"? What made the referendum debate and campaign special?

3. Remembering the campaigning period

Example: Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 14.

There was an eruption of political activity in towns and cities across Scotland. [...] It was sometimes naïve, but it was optimistic, humane and above all peaceful. This may be a time of political disengagement, of anti-politics, but in the spring and summer of 2014, something different happened in Scotland.¹²⁵⁸

¹²⁵⁷ McCabe, *Two Closes*, 7-8;16.

¹²⁵⁸ Macwhirter, *Disunited Kingdom*, 14.

Questions to think about: How do you remember the campaigning period? Did you think activism played an important role during the referendum campaign? Did you become (politically) active during the campaign and have you continued to be so? (Through canvassing, party membership, public forums, private debates...?)

- **Thank you.**

Appendix 2.2: Individual response format

Welcome to the Indyref Project

Thank you for your interest in this research project. Every contribution will add to a more varied and vibrant collection of indyref memories.

Below you can find various sections with different texts and images. Please look at the statements and pictures. These materials might bring back memories of the referendum debate. They are there to help you get started. You can engage with the images and texts as much or little as you would like in your responses.

The questions under each section are prompts to get you thinking. You do not need to answer each or any of them. Your responses can be as creative or literal as you would like. There are no right or wrong answers. The experiences you share are personal to you.

Please type or write down your answers on a separate piece of paper (or fill them in on this sheet) and submit a file, scan or picture of your responses using the [contact form](#) on the project webpage.

When I think about the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, I think of...

Campaigning for or against Scottish independence:

“When I got back to the flat, there was a Better Together leaflet lying on the floor in the hall amongst the mail. It set me off. It was the exact moment when I became a Yes campaigner – an unusual moment of radicalization, which sounds childish when I think about it now. But, in any case, the real question was whether I could actually sit out the big one – this wasn’t an election after all, but something far more profound.”¹²⁵⁹

¹²⁵⁹ Peter Lynch, *IndyRef to ScotRef: Campaigning for Yes* (Cardiff: Welsh Academic Press, 2017), 10.

Questions to think about: Was there a moment during the campaign when you knew you wanted to get involved (with the Yes/No campaign)? Did you also feel that you would be unable to “sit out the big one”? What made the referendum debate and campaign special?

Remembering the campaigning period:

Scottish independence: Mass rallies mark referendum climax

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“Compared with millions on the streets of Barcelona, or armed independence movements across the world, the 2014 referendum in Scotland was an understated affair. But behind the subdued façade, there was an undoubted surge in political activity. Doors were chapped, conversations were had, posters were blue-tacked onto windows. [...] Many of those who delivered flyers, manned stalls and tried to convince their friends, neighbours and colleagues to vote for independence say they intend to stay involved in some form of political activity.”¹²⁶¹

Questions to think about: How do you remember the campaigning period? Did you think activism played an important role during the referendum campaign? Did you become (politically) active during the campaign and have you continued to be so? (Through canvassing, party membership, public forums, private debates...?)

¹²⁶⁰ BBC News, “Scottish Independence: Mass Rallies Mark Referendum Climax,” September 17, 2014, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-scotland-politics-29231440>.

¹²⁶¹ Peter Geoghegan, *The People's Referendum* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014), 163.

The referendum debate:



“The campaign had produced two Scotlands, each of whose experiences of the referendum remain incomprehensible to the other.”¹²⁶³

“This was Scotland as I had never seen it before.”¹²⁶⁴

Questions to think about:

Did the referendum encourage debate? How did you experience the conversations at the time? Do you think people with different opinions discussed the referendum openly? Was there communication between different “camps”? What role did the media play?

Referendum day:

“It was a day like any other. She saw the twins off to school, kissed their father on his way out, then rapidly tidied the kitchen before leaving the house herself. [...]”

On the way home she went to the polling place, a church hall. She handed over her card and received the ballot paper.

She had read and listened to all the arguments about the economy, assets, debts, pensions, oil, membership of this or that international organisation, but as she stood in the booth, pencil poised, none of them seemed to matter. What mattered was how she felt.

¹²⁶² Mhari Law, Documenting Yes, September 18, 2014, <https://www.flickr.com/photos/documentingyes/21046844178>.

¹²⁶³ Colin Kidd, “After the Referendum,” *London Review of Books* 38, no. 2 (2016), <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v38/n04/colin-kidd/diary>.

¹²⁶⁴ Peter Geoghegan, *The People’s Referendum: Why Scotland Will Never Be the Same Again* (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2014), 9.

When she reached home she put the radio on for the news. The reader reported simply that voting was brisk. Of course he wasn't permitted to say anything that might influence those still to vote [...].”¹²⁶⁵

Questions to think about: How do you remember the day of the referendum (18 September 2014)? Was it a day like every other or was it special to you? Can you describe how you spent the “referendum day”? Did you feel like your vote could make/made a difference?

¹²⁶⁵ James Robertson, *365 Stories* (London: Penguin Book, 2014), <https://three-six-five.net/Stories-And-Music/>.

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