



# Polish migrants in Scotland: voting behaviours and engagement in the Scottish independence referendum

Polish migrants are the largest non-UK born population in Scotland (56,000 in 2012). As EU citizens who are resident in Scotland, they are eligible to vote in the 18 September 2014 referendum on Scottish independence. Using a survey of 245 Polish migrants in Scotland we investigate their level of engagement with the Scottish referendum asking; do Polish migrants vote and where (Poland and/or UK)? Will they take part in the referendum? Will the outcome of the referendum have an impact on their migration or settlement plans in Scotland?

## Key Points

- Despite Poles having the right to participate and vote in both sub-national elections in the UK and national elections in Poland, most of those asked vote in one or the other, not both;
- 84% of those surveyed stated that they would participate in the 18 September 2014 referendum;
- The uncertainty of Scotland and the UK's future membership of the EU and Polish migrants' residence rights in a potentially independent Scotland were significant issues for all participants;
- The majority of survey participants indicated that the outcome of the referendum will not have an impact on their settlement plans.

## Introduction

The large increase in arrivals to Scotland from Poland following the EU accession marks a significant shift in the Scotland's migration profile. The recent population census shows that the Polish community appears to be one of the fastest growing migrant populations in Scotland, growing from 2,505 in 2001 to 55,231 in 2011

and reaching an estimated 56,000 in 2012. As a consequence of the electoral and free movement rights in the EU, Poles are eligible to vote in the Scotland Independence Referendum and other sub-national elections including local and European parliament elections. However, despite Polish migrants being the largest non-UK born

population in Scotland, little is known about the extent to which they participate in political processes. In this briefing paper we will explore the level of engagement of Polish migrants in these political processes by examining their participation in previous local elections as well as their engagement and attitudes with regards to voting in the Scottish independence referendum to be held in September 2014.

**The study**

The findings of this paper are drawn from 245 responses to an online survey with Polish migrant residents in Scotland. The survey questionnaire was distributed through diverse channels including Polish community organisations, Polish businesses and Polish online networks across Scotland. Participants of the online survey were young (54.4% were age 35 or below) and well educated (60.3% had a Bachelor’s degree or above). The vast majority of survey participants were employed (84%), were living in Scotland for at least 7 years (60.7%) and were planning to stay and live in Scotland (61%).

**Political participation of Polish migrants in Scotland**

Polish migrants, like other EU migrants, have relevant stakes in more than one polity. Poles have Polish citizenship with expatriate voting rights in national and presidential elections in Poland and, as EU citizens, they have sub-national (local and European Parliament) election voting rights in Scotland. In general, the majority (64.9%) of participants in our survey did participate in political elections (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Voting behaviours

Passive voting behaviour (not voting in Poland and Scotland)	Exclusive voting behaviour (votes either in Polish or Scottish election)	Overlapping voting behaviour (votes in Polish and Scottish elections)
86 (35.10%)	121 (49.40%)	38 (15.50%)

Source: Authors’ analysis of survey data, 2014

The dominant form of voting behaviour among survey participants was to participate and vote exclusively in

Scottish sub-national or Polish presidential elections (49.4%). Despite having multiple voting rights, only a minority of survey participants (15.5%) were active citizens in more than one polity.

We found a correlation between the length of residence and Polish migrants’ exclusive participation in Scottish sub-national elections; 95% of the survey participants who voted only in Scottish elections had lived in Scotland for at least 5 years.

The majority (75.1%) of survey participants indicated that they have an interest in what is going on in Scottish politics and 84.4% of participants said that they were registered with the Scottish Registration Office at their current address. The turnout of survey participants in Scottish sub-national election was 41% and they mainly voted for SNP (40.9%) or Labour Party (30.7%).

**Attitudes and engagement in the Scottish referendum**

Almost all survey participants (98.7%) were aware of the Scottish independence referendum and had discussed it with their friends (32.5%), work colleagues (28.5%) and family (27.1%). As well as high awareness, 85% of survey participants declared that it is likely or very likely that they will vote in the referendum.

The findings show that one of the main factors influencing participants’ Yes or No vote will be whether they felt confident about the future of an independent Scotland (see Table 2). The majority of survey participants (95.3%) who indicated that they had concerns about Scotland’s future would vote ‘No’, comparing to those participants who were very confident about an independent Scotland’s future (92.3%) and would vote ‘Yes’.

Table 2 – Voting intentions by confidence in an independent Scotland

	Very confident	Quite confident	Quite worried	Very worried
Yes	24 (92.3%)	28 (73.7%)	5 (6.2%)	2 (4.7%)
No	2 (7.7%)	10 (26.3%)	76 (93.8%)	41 (95.3%)
Total (100%)	26	38	81	43

Source: Authors’ analysis of survey data, 2014

As EU membership guarantees Poles, as EU citizens, their political and free movement rights, the disruption of Scotland’s and the UK’s continuing EU membership (and thus Poles’ rights to residence in Scotland) was particularly important for survey participants. The need for clarification and certainty in light of the uncertainty of the outcome of the referendum were therefore the main concerns for the vast majority of survey participants. Other concerns related to uncertainty with regard to the Scottish economy, in particular the future currency, prices of properties or stability of the labour market.

**Political changes and Polish migrants settlement practices**

The majority of survey participants (78.7%) were long-term residents and were living in Scotland for at least 5 years.

Table 3 – Length of residence of survey participants

Length of residence	% of survey participants
1-2 years	10.40%
3-4 years	10.90%
5-6 years	18%
6-7 years	38.50%
9-10 years	22.20%

Source: Authors’ analysis of survey data, 2014

Despite being concerned about Scotland’s future, the majority of survey participants (68%) who indicated that they were concerned (very worried or worried) about Scotland’s future also pointed out that the outcome of referendum will not have an impact on their migration or settlement plans. The reasons they cite are that they have achieved a better quality of life and standard of living in Scotland. Instead, survey participants indicated that their migration or settlement plans were more linked to their employment prospects and family life in Scotland.

**Summary and policy implications:**

The study indicates that the Scottish independence referendum is a very salient issue among survey participants. While less than half of the survey participants took part in other sub-national elections (that is, local and European Parliament elections) in Scotland, the vast majority of participants indicated that they would vote in the Scottish independence referendum. Survey participants’ intentions to vote in the referendum were linked to the inclusive political opportunity structure in Scotland with regard to both policies and public attitudes towards migration.

The Scottish independence referendum is an unprecedented event amongst established EU member states. The referendum may lead to the break up of the UK and creation of new states that could in turn, necessitate the designation of the residence rights to EU migrants living in Scotland. The majority of Polish migrants who participated in the survey declared that they planned to stay and live in Scotland regardless of their concerns about the outcome of referendum. This suggests that Polish migrants in Scotland are, and will become a long-term settled population in Scotland.

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