

Politics and football fandom in post-‘indyref’ Scotland: nationalism, unionism and stereotypes of the ‘Old Firm’

Authors

Stuart Whigham, John Kelly, Alan Bairner

Abstract

Electoral politics is strongly influenced by unfolding events, some of them leading to major shifts in alignment. There has been renewed interest in the ‘floating voter’ in contemporary Europe, not least because of increased electoral support for right-wing political parties. In Scotland, however, the clearest example of realignment is to be found not so much in support for specific political parties, although that should not be ignored, but rather in a shift of sections of the population from UK unionism towards support for Scottish independence, despite the result of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. We explore past contentions from certain authors that the ethno-religious, socioeconomic and political stratification of supporters of the two largest football clubs in Scotland, Celtic and Rangers, may be linked to their personal voting dispositions with regards to the issue of Scottish independence. These past findings are discussed in light of our interviews with fans of Scottish football teams which explore their perceptions of the interconnection between football club support, nationalism, unionism, and political voting in contemporary Scotland. Our interviewees suggest that the shifting dynamics of contemporary Scottish politics in an era of constitutional evolution has been reflected in shifting political and social affiliations of Scottish football clubs: although the traditional political allegiances of Celtic and Rangers were argued to persist to a degree, consensus emerged that these traditional allegiances have been destabilised by broader political, socioeconomic and ideological developments.

Key words: Scottish football, politics, sociology, Scottish independence, nationalism

Introduction

Electoral politics is strongly influenced by unfolding events. While the study of electoral realignments was an influential enterprise undertaken by American political scientists in the 1960s and 1970s (Mayhew, 2000), there has been renewed interest in the ‘floating voter’ in contemporary Europe, not least because of increased electoral support for right-wing populist political parties (Hanley and Sikk, 2016). In Scotland, however, the clearest example of realignment is to be found not so much in support for specific political parties, although that should not be ignored, but rather in a shift of certain sections of the population from UK unionism towards support for Scottish independence (McAnulla and Crines, 2018), the possibility of which remains a salient issue in Scottish and British politics, despite the result of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum in which 55.3% of the electorate voted ‘No’ to Scottish independence as opposed to 44.7% voting ‘Yes’. Indeed, further succour for advocates of Scottish independence has been provided by the outcome of the UK-wide referendum on European Union (EU) membership which resulted in a victory for the anti-EU ‘Leave’ campaign which supported the UK’s withdrawal from the EU, despite strong electoral support in Scotland to ‘Remain’ within the EU (McEwen, 2018).

Therefore, given the increasing calls for a second Scottish independence referendum in light of this development, this article begins by critically discussing current academic literature on the interconnection between Scottish nationalism and football support. In particular, we endeavour to illustrate the continued political importance of football and football-related identities as a key facet of contemporary Scottish society, whilst simultaneously exploring the extent to which the traditional political affiliations attributed to supporters of specific football clubs persist within contemporary Scottish politics. To this end, we explore the contentions of certain authors that the ethno-religious, socioeconomic and political stratification of supporters of the

two largest football clubs in Scotland, Celtic and Rangers, may be linked to their personal voting dispositions with regards to the prospect of Scottish independence (Armstrong, 2014; Bissett and McKillop, 2014; Bradley, 2013; Giulianotti, 2007; Kelly, 2007a, 2013; Walker, 2014, 2016). Echoing the arguments of Grix (2010), we therefore contend that sport remains a salient issue within the domain of British politics, and particularly in this aspect of the ongoing constitutional debates in Scotland.

Although sport was a comparatively marginal issue within the 2014 Scottish independence referendum debate (Jarvie, 2017; Whigham and May, 2017), this did not completely negate discussion of the potential interconnections between sporting issues, Scottish football and the constitutional question. Indeed, given that certain pro-union Scottish politicians actively campaigned for the omission of sporting issues from the debate on Scottish independence, such interventions in themselves illustrate that sport was viewed as a potentially significant socio-political issue within the referendum campaigns. This paper seeks to further explore such interconnections in the context of the shifting nature of political identities among supporters of football clubs in Scotland. Consequently, past academic analyses of this topic are discussed in light of our interviews with fans of football teams in Scotland which explore their perceptions of the interconnection between football club support and political voting.

Scottish Football and Politics

Scottish Football and Nationalist Politics

Given the centrality of the constitutional debate within Scottish politics and society in recent years, discussion of past and recent academic studies on the interconnection between Scottish football and the politics of nationalism and unionism is a pertinent starting point for the current

analysis. Sport has often been argued to possess a strong degree of symbolic potential with regards to Scottish nationalism and national identity, given that Scotland has a number of independent representative teams within the international sporting system (Bairner, 1994, 1996, 2001; Blain, Boyle and O'Donnell, 1993; Boyle, 2000; Duke and Crolley, 1996; Jarvie and Walker, 1994; Kelly, 2007a; Whigham, 2014). Alongside the 'holy trinity' of independent Scottish civil institutions identified by McCrone (1992), namely, the Scottish legal, education and church systems, sport has thus been argued to foster a distinctive sense of Scottish nationhood within the unitary but multi-national state of the United Kingdom (Bairner, 1996, 2001; Jarvie and Walker, 1994; Whigham, 2014). As the most popular sport in terms of participation, spectatorship and media coverage, football has a particularly strong claim to the title of the 'national sport' of Scotland (Bairner, 2000, 2009), and is thus central to understanding the extent to which sport is related to nationalist politics.

Despite the fact that football has acted as a key component in expressions of Scottish national identity, most academic analyses have concluded that sporting nationalism in Scottish sportⁱ does not necessarily correlate with political nationalism and, specifically, support for the re-establishment of an independent Scottish state (Bairner 1994, 1996, 2001, 2015; Jarvie 1993, 2017; Jarvie and Walker 1994; Kelly 2007a). This disjuncture between sportive and political nationalism was encapsulated in the dismissive remarks about Scots being '90-minute patriots' by outgoing SNP MP for Govan Jim Sillars following his defeat in the 1992 UK General Election (Bairner, 1996; Kowalski, 2004). For Jarvie and Walker (1994), the 'substitute thesis' adopted by Sillars which views sporting nationalism as a direct replacement for political nationalism is 'at once too static and too one-dimensional to help us explain the way sport has reflected Scottish life in its different political, social and cultural manifestations' (1994, p. 2). It is therefore important to note that a simple conflation between support for Scottishⁱⁱ sporting

teams and support for Scottish political nationalist causes is problematic at the very least. However, the relative lack of synergy between these two domains does not mean that football is rendered an apolitical sphere.

For example, during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, personalities from the world of football were often pursued for endorsements of a 'Yes' or a 'No' vote by campaigners from both sides of the political debate (Harris and Skillen 2016; Jarvie 2017; Whigham and May, 2017). For example, the pro-independence 'Yes Scotland' and pro-union 'Better Together' campaign groups attempted to garner support from retired footballers for their respective campaign, with the 'Better Together' campaign being particularly successful in terms of coordinating support from high-profile personalities from Scottish football (Crichton, 2014), including ex-Scotland manager Alex McLeish, ex-Scotland and Rangers manager Walter Smith, ex-Celtic manager Billy McNeill, as well as a raft of ex-players including David Moyes, Alan Hansen, Ally McCoist and Denis Law. However, it can be argued that the pro-union sentiments of the aforementioned ex-footballers can at least be partly explained by the fact that many of them have lived and worked in England in the past, thus reaping the benefits of political and economic union – furthermore, many still reside in England and would not have been eligible to vote in the independence referendum. Indeed, the wording of the press release in which these endorsements were announced aptly illustrated the dualistic and contradictory symbolism of representing Scotland vis-à-vis the constitutional question:

We are proud Scots who have been proud to represent our country around the world. When Scotland calls, we answer. We are proud that Scotland has always stood on its own two feet but we also believe that Scotland stands taller because we are part of the United Kingdom. The United Kingdom is a country Scotland helped to build.

We urge every patriotic Scot to help maintain Scotland's place in the United Kingdom which has served Scotland so well. (https://twitter.com/UK_Together; 6th September 2014)

Given that the 'Yes Scotland' campaign group used similar tactics, albeit attracting lower-profile football personalities, it is apparent that footballers (past and present) and football were perceived by political campaign strategists to possess a degree of political influence on the general public, despite the arguments from some political actors that sport should remain apolitical within the context of the Scottish independence referendum campaigns. However, in light of the aforementioned fallacies regarding the impact of sport in past analyses of similar events in Scottish politics, such as the unsuccessful 1979 referendum on Scottish devolution which followed Scotland's failure at the 1978 FIFA World Cup (Bairner, 1994; Boyle and Haynes, 2009; Jarvie, 1993; Jarvie and Walker, 1994), and the successful 1999 devolution referendum which former SNP leader Alex Salmond argued was influenced by Scotland's qualification for the 1998 FIFA World Cup Finals (Kowalski, 2004), it is unclear to what extent these interventions from football personalities impacted on the outcome of the 2014 independence referendum. What is unequivocal, however, is that football was and continues to be sufficiently perceived to be politically fertile ground for helping to sow the seeds of political ideologies and their associated material realities.

Scottish Football and Political Associations: The 'Old Firm'

The ethno-religious stratification of Scottish society has undoubtedly framed much of the discussion on the politics of Scottish football and, in particular, the controversies around the expression of 'sectarian' political identities. The historic polarisation of the religious, political

and ethnic attachments of Celtic and Rangers, the so-called ‘Old Firm’, means that sectarianism has been argued to remain a divisive issue in Scottish society and sporting culture (Bairner, 2001; Bradley, 2013; Flint and Kelly, 2013; Kelly, 2011). This polarisation has also been discussed within official national censuses such as the Scottish Social Attitudes Survey, with the 2014 survey conducted at the time of the referendum acknowledging this at length:

Given the perceived associations between sectarianism and football allegiance, the survey looked at the level of support for different Scottish football teams... The most widely supported by far are Celtic and Rangers, each supported by 12% of the Scottish population. While just over half of each of these clubs’ support comes from people of the religion they have been historically associated with, they also gain support from people of other religions or none. However, relatively few Catholics support Rangers or Protestants Celtic... Football is the most commonly mentioned factor people believe contributes to sectarianism in Scotland (88% mentioned it, and 55% thought it was the main factor). (Hinchcliffe et al., 2015, pp. i-ii)

Indeed, evidence of ongoing controversies linked to sectarianism in Scottish football continues to be presented in recent months, with the recent 2019/20 survey of Scottish football supporters by Supporters Direct Scotland in partnership with the Scottish Football Association and the Scottish Professional Football League finding that “89% of supporters revealed they had witnessed ‘sectarianism’ compared with ‘racism’ (63%), physical abuse (57%) and homophobia (51%), sexism (50%) and disability discrimination (19%)” (Supporters Direct Scotland, 2020)ⁱⁱⁱ. Furthermore, concerns have been expressed regarding the enforcement of UEFA’s policies for punishing crowd misbehaviour through enforced partial or full stadium closures, with Rangers punished with partial stadium closures during their 2019/20 Europa

League campaign (McFarlane, 2019) and Celtic opting for a self-imposed closure of a stadium section housing the ‘Green Brigade ultras’ fan group (Duncan, 2019)^{iv}.

Sectarianism has been a common topic in academic reflections on Scottish sport and society, with Kowalski stating that “[f]ootball, the so-called ‘national game’, still provides an important focus for the perpetuation of the sectarian divisions that have marred Scotland since the second half of the nineteenth century” (ibid: 73). Bairner (1994) highlights the significant influence of sectarianism on patterns of support for Scottish club teams, with this phenomenon explaining the hegemonic position of the ‘Old Firm’ due to their association with Protestantism and Catholicism, respectively. Bairner argues that the ethno-religious and political connotations attached to each club has allowed them to harness support from outside the Glasgow and West-Central Scotland, thereby having a detrimental effect on the fan-base of other Scottish football clubs.

Historically, Rangers, and their supporters, have frequently been associated with overt expressions of Protestantism, Orangeism, Conservatism, and unionism (in relation to both Scotland and Northern Ireland) (Bairner, 1994; Bissett and McKillop, 2014; Bradley, 2013; Flint and Kelly, 2013; Holt, 1989; Kowalski, 2004). Bradley argues that Rangers became “a symbol of a number of dominant, privileged and institutional features of Scottish-British life, particularly in terms of allegiances and affinities with royalty, empire, unionist politics, freemasonry and Protestantism, prov[ing] highly attractive to Ulster-Scots in Scotland’s central belt” (2013: 67). Given the polarisation between the oppositional religious, political and ethnic attachments of Rangers and their rivals Celtic, it has been argued that these clubs’ symbolism has a significant influence on the politics of Scottish society more broadly (Bairner, 2001; Bradley, 2013; Flint and Kelly, 2013; Walker, 2014), although some remain sceptical about

the pervasiveness and perniciousness of ‘sectarianism’ in 21st century Scotland (Devine, 2018; Bruce and Glendinning, 2017; Bruce et al., 2004).

Indeed, on the question of whether all of these historical associations persist for Rangers supporters in the current political context, recent analyses have further questioned the validity of historical stereotypes of Rangers fans. For example, in the introduction to their edited collection ‘Born Under the Union Flag: Rangers, Britain and Scottish Independence’, Bissett and McKillop (2014) argue that:

It is often taken for granted, by combatants on both sides of the independence debate, that a Rangers fan will or should be a dyed-in-the-wool Unionist, whose No vote is a foregone conclusion. No doubt there are many such Rangers fans. But there are also many who intend to vote Yes, just as there are supporters of Celtic, Aberdeen, Hibs, Dundee United and Hearts who intend to vote No. While no one would wish to portray Rangers supporters as paragons of virtue, lazy stereotypes can also surround the club. (p.19)

Similar arguments to those of Bissett and McKillop are made elsewhere in the collection by fellow contributors, with Richardson (2014) arguing that while “the Rangers fan base taken as a whole may lean more towards Better Together than Yes Scotland, I know many fans who are strongly committed to independence... the idea of the right-wing, Unionist Rangers fan is simply not borne out by the political landscape of Scotland over the last 20 to 30 years” (p.25), whilst Duff (2014) argues that:

Odd as it may seem, I know of many independence-supporting Rangers fans who see no contradiction in associating themselves with the British flag at games whilst simultaneously supporting the breakup of the United Kingdom. They consider the Union Jack to be part of their identity as a Rangers fan, not part of their national identity. For most football fans, the culture that surrounds the match day experience can be packed away at the end of the 90 minutes and kept locked up in the understairs cupboard until the next match. (p.110)

Therefore, whilst the historical attachments of Rangers to Protestantism, Orangeism, Conservatism, and unionism are still deemed to be present in the contemporary era, the shifting political climate in Scottish politics more broadly is argued to have impacted upon Rangers' fan base, thereby undermining the 'lazy stereotypes' of the club.

Turning our attention to the case of Celtic, Bradley (1995) suggests that the long-standing popularity of the club has been due to its position as a symbol and emblem for Irish Catholic immigrants in Scotland, a section of Scottish society with numerous members who perceive themselves to be victims of racism, prejudice and sectarianism. For Bradley, the establishment of Celtic allowed the integration of the Irish Catholic community into the football culture of Scotland, an important step given the importance of the game in the country, especially amongst males. Other authors have outlined the association of Celtic with elements of ethnic and religious identity associated with Irishness, Catholicism and republicanism, while not necessarily denying evidence of discrimination against this section of the Scottish population both within Scottish football and in Scottish society more widely (Dimeo and Finn, 2001; Finn, 1991a, 1991b; Horne, 1995; Kelly, 2011; Flint and Kelly, 2013).

However, as in the case of Rangers, the historic political associations of Celtic have been argued to have softened across time which is equally relevant for the contemporary analysis. In previous academic analyses, Celtic supporters, in contrast with supporters of other Scottish clubs, have often been linked with the left of the political spectrum and found to have a relatively strong affinity with the Labour Party (Bradley, 1998; McDougall, 2013; Walker, 2016). Such affinity has extended into Celtic's boardroom, with Walker (2014: 38) highlighting some of Celtic's board members who have also been high-profile Labour Party politicians:

Leading Celtic figures, such as past Chairmen John Reid and Michael Kelly, and current director Brian Wilson, are amongst the most prominent anti-independence commentators and this reflects enduring cynicism to Scottish Nationalism within the Labour Party that has traditionally drawn such strong support from the Catholic (of Irish descent) community in Scotland.

This therefore suggests that the constitutional debate in Scotland has resulted in an ideological dilemma for many Celtic supporters, given the clash between the (pro-British) unionist position of the Scottish Labour Party and the (Irish) republican sympathies which have often been argued to play a central role in their group identity. Indeed, as Walker argues elsewhere (2016: 65) "Irish Nationalist and Republican sympathies had of course long been a characteristic of parts of the Catholic community in Scotland. However, such sympathies had not prevented the emergence of the strong Catholic-Labour alliance... within the political context of the UK", thus illustrating the inherent contradictions in voting for a Labour Party whose support for a united Ireland was limited to a position of 'by consent' at the time of the 2014 independence referendum. Echoing the decline of the Labour Party in Scotland more broadly in recent years,

the rise of the SNP to power and the growth of political nationalism have therefore been argued to have led to a number of Celtic fans switching their political allegiances to the nationalist party and the cause of Scottish independence (Tomkins, 2014; Walker, 2014). Nonetheless, given the lack of empirical data offered in the aforementioned analyses, the extent to which these claims ring true merits further investigation.

Scottish Football and Political Voting: The 'Old Firm' in the 'Indyref' Campaign

Given the relative lack of empirical data on the interconnection between football support and political voting in the Scottish context, of interest amidst the plethora of opinion polls conducted on the topic of Scottish independence in the months before the referendum in September 2014 was a Panelbase opinion poll commissioned by the Wings Over Scotland website in May 2014 which simultaneously collected data about which football clubs respondents supported (Wings Over Scotland, 2014a, 2014b). Although the data represented only a small sample of football fans of clubs in Scotland, the results displayed in Table 1 illustrate interesting insights which challenged some of the traditional stereotypes of supporters of football clubs in Scotland:

INSERT TABLE 1

Whilst the only major deviation from the average voting trend (46.3% 'Yes' and 53.7% 'No') was the significant difference of the voting intentions of Aberdeen fans (25.8% 'Yes' and 74.2% 'No', deviation from the assumptions of past academic analysis of the politics of football in Scotland arguably lies in the voting intentions of Rangers and Celtic fans. For example, given that Rangers fans have frequently been associated with overt expressions of Britishness,

Conservatism and unionism whereas their rivals Celtic have often been linked with the political 'left', an affinity with the Labour Party, as well with (Irish) republican ideas (Bradley, 1998; McDougall, 2013; Walker, 2014), the fact that the two Glasgow clubs represented the only 'Yes' supporting clubs in this opinion poll challenges these traditional political stereotypes. However, given that Glasgow and Dundee were the only Scottish cities in which there was a majority for 'Yes' (53.49% and 57.35% respectively) in the independence referendum (see Table 2), and the aforementioned existence of a significant number of Celtic and Rangers fans outside of the Glasgow area, it can equally be argued that the findings of this opinion poll were more reflective of regional voting patterns rather than football-related affiliations.

INSERT TABLE 2

Given the obvious limitations of generalising on the basis of a single opinion poll, the remainder of this article seeks to further explore the reasons behind any possible interconnection between support for the 'Old Firm' clubs and voting preferences in contemporary Scottish politics, thus endeavouring to reveal the empirical realities of contemporary political identities among supporters of football clubs in Scotland. To this end, the findings of this opinion poll and the past academic analyses outlined above will be discussed in light of new research conducted with fans of Scottish football teams which critically examines the validity of the traditional stereotypes of Celtic and Rangers fans within an evolving political climate in Scotland, by considering the extent to which electoral realignment has taken place and/or is perceived to have taken place.

Methodology

In order to examine the perceptions of football supporters in Scotland on the relationship between Scottish football and political voting preferences, we adopted a qualitative

methodological approach focusing upon extended telephone interviews with supporters of various Scottish football clubs. In order to recruit potential participants, a short online survey was created to collect information on potential interviewees, such as demographic information (e.g. age, gender, geographic location, socio-economic status, religion), football support (e.g. club supported, frequency of attendance, frequency of media consumption relating to their club) and political preferences (e.g. recall of vote in 2014 Scottish independence referendum, expression of current and future support for Scottish independence, recall of past electoral voting decision by party, expression of current and future political party voting intention, recall of vote in 2016 referendum on EU membership). Following formal institutional ethical approval of the data collection process, participants were sourced via online recruitment strategies for survey respondents in April-May 2017. This included using social media formats such as Twitter and Facebook, online fan forums and personal contacts. Survey respondents were asked to volunteer a contact email address if they were willing to take part in a follow-up telephone interview which would explore their responses to the initial survey in more detail.

For the telephone interview data collection process, a semi-structured interview schedule was devised to seek detailed, qualitative explanations of the reasons behind their political voting preferences. The interviews particularly focused on the possible interconnection between football club support and political voting preferences, as well as their perceptions of more general associations between Scottish football and political causes and/or parties. From the total of 134 survey respondents, a total of 18 interviews were conducted between June and November 2017 with respondents who had agreed to the follow-up interview process. The interviews ranged from 9 to 29 minutes in length, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Participants were selected in such a way as to ensure a cross-section of

supporters in terms of football clubs supported, political dispositions, ages and genders (see Table 3 for information on interviewees).

INSERT TABLE 3

Although the sample only incorporates supporters from 8 out of the 42 clubs in the Scottish Professional Football League due to the small group of respondents who agreed to take part in the follow-up interview process, and can therefore make no claims for full representation of all clubs in this regard, the opportunity to explore the relationship between Scottish football and politics from a range of different perspectives allowed for a wide-ranging reflection on the individual perceptions of fans of different clubs. Furthermore, claims to generalisability of the findings to the wider population were not deemed to be necessary nor appropriate for an ideographic study of this nature. Therefore, notwithstanding the aforementioned limitations and caveats, the emergent findings from the interviews possess a great deal of analytical utility for the current discussion; attention now turns to the main findings from the interview process.

Discussion

Analysis of the interviews with this sample of Scottish football supporters identified a number of pertinent emergent themes related to the interconnection between supporters of clubs in Scotland and stated political voting preferences. The discussion focuses on the most prevalent and interesting of these, with attention given first to the interviewees' perceptions of the relationship between football support in Scotland and voting patterns in the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. The extent to which the historic stereotypes of the 'Old Firm' clubs resonate with the reality of contemporary Scottish constitutional politics is discussed initially by drawing upon reflections from fans of these two clubs, prior to an analysis of the perceived

political leanings from supporters of clubs in Scottish football outside of the ‘Old Firm’. Attention then turns to other political associations for Scottish football clubs beyond the constitutional debate, offering a consideration of the nuanced political and social attachments associated with fan identities. Finally, discussion turns to the extent to which football support has any significant impact on an individual’s political voting in comparison to broader political, social and economic factors which influence political preferences.

‘Old Firm’ Supporters and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum

Given the prevalence of past academic discussion of the political affiliations of the ‘Old Firm’ clubs (Bairner, 1994; Bissett and McKillop, 2014; Bradley, 2013; Flint and Kelly, 2013; Holt, 1989; Kowalski, 2004; McDougall, 2013; Walker, 2016), the perceptions the interviewees have regarding the validity of these claims in the contemporary Scottish political context is considered at this juncture. For all of the interviewees, whether ‘Old Firm’ fans or fans of other Scottish clubs, there was a broad acceptance of the generalisation that Celtic fans continue to have a stronger association with pro-independence political sentiments and that Rangers fans are more likely to express pro-union views. Statements to this effect were common throughout the vast majority of the interviews:

...if they could get all of the supporters who voted ‘No’ and ‘Yes’ who are season-ticket holders at Rangers and Celtic, I would be shocked if there wasn’t more in the ‘No’ that go to Rangers games. (Rangers fan, male, 36-45)

There were surveys after the referendum... and Celtic fans were definitely more [Scottish] nationalist than Rangers fans, that’s obvious... it wasn’t striking, they were just sort of the extremes. (Celtic fan, male, 46-55)

Well I think from speaking to a lot of Rangers fans who I’m friends with and also just Rangers fans who I know, there is a lean towards unionism... and very much with Celtic, it’s the polar opposite. The Celtic fans that I know... at least, they like to think of

themselves as more left-wing, more left-leaning, pro-independence, pro-Europe as well. (Morton fan, male, 26-35)

With regards to the prevalence of support for Scottish independence within the fan-base of Celtic, a number of explanations were offered by interviewees. In particular, it was argued that the left-leaning political preferences of the Celtic fan-base, the socioeconomic background of Celtic fans, and the club's traditional associations within republican ideals were all important contributory factors, given that the rhetoric of the pro-independence 'Yes' campaign was argued to resonate with a number of these factors:

Yes I think our fan base is nationalistic in its broadest sense... I think there's a long thread of radical republicanism associated with Ireland that you can find extensively throughout the Celtic support, and that's manifest itself in many different ways. For me, that would be a natural place for that kind of population to then buy in to the proposals for an independent Scotland. But, again, I think we're going back to gross generalisations here, that Celtic equals republican... equals y'know an independent Scotland, and that's a bit of a stretch. (Celtic fan, male, 46-55)

When I was growing up, if you were to stereotype Celtic fans it would be predominantly Irish, IRA-supporting... and that would be the political side of it. But in the last 10-15 years, it's shifted to being left-leaning, liberal and potentially of a nationalist leaning, which is obviously the other complexity layer over Scottish politics that now it's overwhelmingly constitutional rather than over political ideology. (Rangers fan, male, 26-35)

Similarly, a number of contrasting but related explanations were offered to support the beliefs of the interviewees regarding the perceived pro-union political position of Rangers supporters. Historical allegiances to more right-of-centre political views, Protestant religious affiliations and a pro-monarchy constitutional position were all used to explain Rangers fans' leanings towards a 'No' vote in the 2014 independence referendum, even where some interviewees cautioned on such generalisations:

Well, I think the stereotypical one you always get is that we're the home of kind of right-wing, Conservatism and unionism in Scotland. My personal experience is kind of varied though within that. (Rangers fan, male, 26-35)

...certainly growing up as a Rangers supporter through the 80s and 90s, it was very much the culture that being a Rangers fan it was British... y'know, the songs they would sing in the stands, y'know, 'Rule Britannia', all the rest of it. That was certainly something certainly growing up, and I think that just kind of stuck. And when it comes to the 'No' vote, I think my automatic thought if I'm just thinking with my gut would be I don't really want to leave Britain. (Rangers fan, male, 36-45)

...people who are kind of hard-core 'Yes', wearing Saltires on Twitter, ranting about bias in the BBC, they would say that Rangers fans are conniving with the Tories in Scotland. And it's not as clear-cut as that... I think it's far more nuanced than that. (Rangers fan, female, 26-35)

The polarised constitutional positions associated with Celtic and Rangers were more likely to be held by supporters of clubs outside the 'Old Firm', who regularly claimed that the only clear political associations for Scottish football clubs were evident in fans of the Old Firm clubs. However, given that supporters of other Scottish football clubs admitted to having little personal knowledge of the specific political associations of Celtic and Rangers fans per se, it is difficult to surmise whether these claims had any evidential basis or whether they were simply derived from the historical stereotypes of the Old Firm which are widely accepted within the popular folklore of Scottish football:

I dunno if Celtic fans would just go the opposite way... you know, that's their natural reaction to just go opposite to whatever the Rangers fans do! But I think that some of the Celtic fans would be more pro-independence because of the whole thing with the UK, and what they did. (Raith Rovers fan, female, 56-65)

...y'know, Rangers are a unionist club as everyone knows them, but I do think that kind of complicates unionism because their unionism was about Irish politics, as opposed to 1707 [The 1707 Act of Union]... but, aye, they obviously have that kind of connection, and a lot of my views on them are that they seem to be very vocally pro-union in the 'indyref'... there was a lot of Celtic supporters, and very public ones with a high public

profile, who were 'Yes' voters, and kind of tied that to their identity as Celtic supporters... a lot of the arguments that were given by certainly the Celtic supporters I know were kind of rooted in their Irishness as well. (Hibs fan, male, 26-35)

There was some people bringing it up, but I think most of that stemmed from dislike for a particular club rather than any empirical reasons for it... I mean obviously the Old Firm, they were always going on about what they want, and unionist tendencies and what not. But I think a lot of that was just 'we hate the Old Firm and any view which I don't like, they must have'... that's the feeling that I get. (Hearts fan, female, 26-35)

Furthermore, whilst there was a degree of acceptance that assumptions regarding the historical political associations of the Celtic and Rangers supporters did still possess some validity within the contemporary debates on Scottish independence, there was also a degree of agreement that the strength of these political sentiments was softening significantly, particularly for younger supporters. Therefore, in line with the arguments of Bissett and McKillop (2014), Tomkins (2014) and Walker (2014), a number of the interviewees argued that over-simplistic generalisations regarding the political preferences of 'Old Firm' supporters were flawed in their assumptions, and other factors such as an individual's socio-economic status or political ideology were much better gauges of their likely stance on the Scottish constitutional question:

When I first started going to the football, all you saw were England flags, and all you saw were Red Hand of Ulster flags, and that was in the mid to late '90s. And since then, the change has been profound. The Rangers fans do not identify with that half as much as strongly as they used to, and there's a huge shift to being viewed as more of a unionist club, and Union Jacks flying and being British. Which of course is why the perception of voters voting 'Yes' to leave the Union is so interesting. (Rangers fan, male, 26-35)

Caution is required when assessing the ideological rationale guiding political allegiance. For example, while there is a perception among Celtic supporters that in recent years many fellow Celtic supporters have shifted party allegiance from Labour to the SNP, this may not represent an ideological shift from a leftist class-based politics towards a nationalist based one. Rather, it may be that in post-Blair Scotland, the political expression of class-based

ideology is perceived to be better represented by supporting the SNP rather than New Labour.

I think for older Celtic fans that they kind of still align with Labour, but I think for younger fans they're definitely moving... have moved towards the SNP. And I think it kind of is because of... y'know, that kind of allegiance to left-wing politics. I suppose this is maybe moving away a bit from football here, but... I think those people who feel that Labour kind of abandoned the working classes and things like that, that's kind of why they've gravitated towards the SNP. (Celtic fan, female, 18-25)

In light of these arguments, it can therefore be suggested that the findings of the aforementioned opinion poll analysis by Wings Over Scotland (2014) in which the Old Firm represented the only 'Yes' supporting clubs illustrates that the shifts in the traditional political allegiances are also part of more complex shifts in regional voting patterns in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, as Labour's influence has waned and support for the SNP has waxed.

Scottish Football and Party Politics – More Than A Game?

Turning from the Scottish constitutional debate towards issues of electoral alignment and realignment in the more conventional sense, when pressed on the possible relationship between football support and broader political issues, such as party preferences and political ideologies ostensibly detached from the debate on Scottish independence, the interviewees continued to attribute some political allegiances to particular clubs. As was the case with the independence debate, political allegiances were argued to be starker for the 'Old Firm' clubs in line with the arguments of Bradley (1998), with interviewees suggesting that Rangers fans may be more likely to vote Conservative and Labour rather than SNP, and a number of interviewees identifying a shift amongst Celtic fans from their afore-mentioned traditional allegiance to the Labour Party to the SNP:

I don't know if it's just my own bias, but I do definitely feel that, and I know that a few of my friends feel, that [Scottish Conservatives leader] Ruth Davidson and the Tory Party

definitely tried to court loyalist votes and people who were kind of sympathetic towards that... I just feel like they would vote left-wing parties like Labour and the SNP, but they would feel much more comfortable than a Celtic supporter would voting Tory. They don't have the hang-ups that maybe people from the Celtic background would (Celtic fan, female, 18-25)

I think the Celtic support have probably moved from Labour to SNP... in general, I think a significant proportion of Celtic fans have gone from voting Labour almost as a matter of course to voting SNP as a matter of course... as for Rangers... again I'm sure that there's many Rangers supporters who are happy to vote Labour... fewer who are happy to vote SNP... it's just a stronger, less porous support for unionism, and a lot of the time it would be for the Tories... I mean, there's a pretty vociferous anti-SNP tendency within the Rangers support. (Hearts fan, male, 56-65)

Overall, these findings illustrate that, although the interviewees continued to perceive that both clubs still possess notable political and social allegiances, these were often argued to be waning in terms of their influence on the identities of their supporters, even where stronger patterns had traditionally been deemed to exist at clubs such as Celtic and Rangers. Furthermore, the potential impact of these allegiances on the political voting preferences of football supporters was also regarded as negligible by most interviewees:

From looking at the situation, people are much more likely to be influenced by what other people are voting for, and the general tone. Now that may also be their football group, because friends and family may be with that group. (Rangers fan, male, 26-35)

I'd like to think that my political beliefs are shaped by things outwith supporting a particular football team... I mean, I went to Catholic school, I'm a practicing Catholic... I think my faith has shaped more my political outlook more than sports issues, I have to say... as a child of Thatcher, that's probably impacted more on my political views than my support of a football team. (Celtic fan, male, 46-55)

There was unanimous agreement amongst the interviewees that their personal football support and identity had no direct impact on their voting behaviour, with all interviewees arguing that their own decisions to vote for a particular constitutional outcome or political party were influenced by economic, social and ideological issues rather than any sense of collective identity with the assumed political allegiances of their football clubs. However, a number of

participants argued that they knew of other fans from within their own club's support base and from that of other clubs who had stated that their political voting preferences had been influenced by their identification with their football club:

I have heard Celtic fans say 'oh I voted that because every other... because couple of Celtic fan mates did', and you're like 'what?!'. These people are nuts, and they really do need they're head looked at. And I know Rangers fans who voted Tory in Scotland purely on the basis of what the Tories stood for, and I'm sitting and I'm looking at them, and I'm going 'right, but you're in a council flat, you're on benefits, the Tories don't support people like you, they want to support rich folk'. (Celtic fan, female, 36-45)

I got the impression, rightly or wrongly... well I think it is right... that a lot of Rangers fans, the ones who do vote for 'Yes', are a bit quieter about it than the pro-union ones... it's almost like, do they support Rangers because they're pro-union, or are they pro-union because they support Rangers? And I just thought that's daft, you know... Football is really important to lot of people, y'know, but it's just an aside to things that affect people's lives day in and day out... (Raith Rovers fan, female, 56-65)

Furthermore, some interviewees also reflected upon the fact that their own social, political and ideological positions may have been at least in part shaped by the socio-cultural environment in which they were raised, and thus accepted that their experiences within the fan culture of their particular club may have contributed towards their personal political positions. For example, the influence of family and friends during an individual's formative years was often seen as a factor in forming political beliefs, and a number of interviewees accepted that their socialisation into the culture of a particular football club may have implicitly influenced their political beliefs:

I think, whether or not it's accurate or not, there was a perception of pragmatism and maybe doing the right think for the long-term, which I guess you can associated with Conservatism. But, even though I'm not a Conservative voter, I think that's influenced how I view politics and how I analyse politics.... I don't think you can grow up amongst a group that identifies so tribally during those formative years, and not be influenced by it. (Rangers fan, male, 26-35)

We're shaped by family, by society, by the people we engage with. I mean, I think it's a bit of a stretch to say 'I support football team X and then that has then driven things'. I think it's about ultimately the primary influence of things is about parents and family... (Celtic fan, male, 46-55)

Given these nuanced positions on the relative influence of football support on political voting, it appeared that the interviewees differentiated between, on the one hand, a minority of individuals whose voting behaviour was almost entirely shaped by the political allegiances of their football club, and, on the other hand, a much larger group of individuals whose voting behaviour is predominantly shaped by broader political and societal concerns but which can, at least in part, be viewed as reflective of their football club's broader ethos and socio-cultural identity. It is therefore important to acknowledge that, for this second larger group of individuals, the constituent parts of football fandom identity (such as socio-cultural, geographical and ethno-religious attachments, amongst others) are not completely separate entities distinct from the realm of political ideology and behaviour, despite their relatively marginal status in terms of determining an individual's ultimate voting behaviour vis-à-vis broader political, ideological, economic and societal factors.

Finally, a number of interviewees also suggested that Scottish football supporters as a whole may be slightly more likely to vote for independence, given that football support is more strongly associated with the working and lower-middle classes in Scottish society, who were found to be most likely to support a 'Yes' vote compared with those from higher rungs on the socio-economic ladder:

From years of going to Scottish football... it just always seemed to me that the identity amongst Scottish fans has felt more pro-independence than it is amongst the general population. I mean, if you were to do a referendum of all the folk at Scottish football games every week, I think you'd have a majority in favour of independence well over 50%, in my perception. (Ross County fan, male, 26-35)

This suggests that, whilst the club that an individual supports could be argued to have some explanatory value in terms of understanding constitutional preference, this was of marginal importance compared with that individual's socio-economic status, age, occupation, and ideological beliefs. Indeed, as argued by the majority of interviewees, football supporter identities were deemed to have been relegated to the periphery of the decision-making process by the vast majority of the Scottish population. It can therefore be contended that, whilst it would clearly be foolish to use football club support as a proxy for or predictor of an individual's political preferences, it would be equally rash to completely dismiss the possibility that an individual's affiliation and identification with a football club may have a marginal role in their cultural and political socialisation. It is therefore important to acknowledge that the interviewees' responses suggest that football supporter cultures and identities in Scotland continue to possess at least a degree of political and ideological salience, even if these are marginal and declining in terms of their influence.

Conclusions

As the above discussion has illustrated, the shifting dynamics of contemporary Scottish politics in an era of constitutional evolution has been reflected in shifting political and social affiliations of Scottish football clubs. Although the traditional political allegiances of Celtic, and Rangers, identified in past analyses (Bissett and McKillop, 2014; Bradley, 1998, 2013; Giulianotti, 2007; Kelly, 2007a, 2013; Walker, 2014, 2016), were argued to persist to a degree by a number of interviewees, the general consensus was that these traditional allegiances and stereotypes have been destabilised and/or undermined by broader political, socioeconomic and ideological developments which are more influential on an individual's voting preferences. Arguably, this should come as no surprise given the frequent allusion by both interviewees and recent academic analyses to the high degree of political engagement of the Scottish electorate during the Scottish independence referendum debate (Hearn, 2014; Whigham and May, 2017). This has perhaps served to marginalise the impact of political identities linked to football support, and inevitably so given the importance of the constitutional questions faced by Scottish voters in recent years. Indeed, it is important to note that football clubs act as but only one point of fixture for the multifarious and fluid social identities which shape our political and ideological positions; it is therefore important to avoid over-egging the import of football fandom on voting behaviours.

Nevertheless, our findings suggest that social identities associated with football clubs continue to possess at least some degree of influence on shaping the political views of some Scottish football supporters. Given that a number of interviewees from the contrasting clubs stated that they were aware of individuals who had voted 'Yes' or 'No' in the Scottish independence referendum based solely on their allegiance to a football club, this suggests that, for a small minority of the Scottish electorate, football is more than simply a game. Furthermore, the

frequent suggestions that Scottish football supporters might be more willing to support Scottish independence due to their relatively low socio-economic status was another interesting theme to emerge. Although it is clearly important to avoid over-stating the political import of football as an influence on voting, the opinions of the interviewees suggest that it would be equally foolish to completely ignore the impact of socio-political and cultural identities fostered through an identification with a particular football club, and perhaps more importantly, the influence of peers within the fanbase of their respective clubs.

As attention in Scotland now turns to the unfolding political, economic, and constitutional implications of the UK's withdrawal from the European Union (McEwen, 2018), the likely future turmoil which will result will raise further questions concerning Scotland's constitutional future. Given this, and the possibility of a second referendum on Scottish independence in the coming years, the findings of this study suggest that politicians who are interested in understanding the varied and complex factors which may impact an individual's voting behaviour should continue to be cognisant of the influence of a wide range of socio-cultural factors. Although football-based allegiance is but one such minor factor within this complex maelstrom, the opportunity to tap into this field by politicians wishing to capitalise on a populist approach to political communication is unlikely to go unnoticed in future campaigns.

ⁱ We purposely use this phrase rather than "Scottish sporting nationalism" to avoid conflating sporting *nationalism in Scotland* with *Scottish nationalism* in sport. In a country where supporters of the two biggest football clubs continue to perform (and display) support for Irish nationalism and Ulster unionism respectively, this linguistic clarity is essential.

ⁱⁱ We use this label cautiously. We are aware that some would see their (and others') sports clubs in alternative ways. For example, some people view Celtic FC as an Irish club in Scotland.

ⁱⁱⁱ Given the ambiguities and disagreements over the definition of 'sectarian', it remains problematic to assume from such claims that prejudicial or bigoted behaviour have been prevalent in each of these cases given that they are predicated on the opinions and perceptions of supporters.

^{iv} It should be noted that Rangers' closure was for what UEFA deemed to be racist chanting. Celtic's self-imposed closure was unrelated to racist or 'sectarian' behaviour, and related more to the supporters' use of pyrotechnics.

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Club	'Yes' Vote Intention	%	'No' Vote Intention	%
Rangers	63	52.5%	57	47.5%
Celtic	50	54.3%	42	45.7%
Aberdeen	8	25.8%	23	74.2%
Hearts	14	48.3%	15	51.7%
Hibs	8	47.1%	9	52.9%
Dundee United	8	47.1%	9	52.9%
Other	60	50.0%	60	50.0%
No interest	165	42.7%	221	57.3%
TOTAL	376	46.3%	436	53.7%

Table 1 – Scottish independence referendum voting intentions by Scottish football club support (Wings Over Scotland, 2014a, 2014b)

Council Area	No %	Yes %	SPFL Clubs in Council Area
Aberdeen City	58.5	41.3	Aberdeen
Aberdeenshire	60.3	39.6	Peterhead
Angus	56.3	43.6	Arbroath, Brechin City, Forfar Athletic, Montrose
Argyll and Bute	58.5	41.4	-
City of Edinburgh	61.0	38.8	Edinburgh City, Heart of Midlothian, Hibernian
Clackmannanshire	53.8	46.2	Alloa Athletic
Dumfries & Galloway	65.6	34.3	Annan Athletic, Queen of the South, Stranraer
Dundee City	42.6	57.3	Dundee, Dundee United
East Ayrshire	52.7	47.2	Kilmarnock
East Dunbartonshire	61.1	38.8	-
East Lothian	61.7	38.3	-
East Renfrewshire	63.1	36.8	-
Falkirk	53.4	46.5	Falkirk, Stenhousemuir
Fife	55.0	44.9	Cowdenbeath, Dunfermline, East Fife, Raith Rovers
Glasgow City	46.4	53.4	Celtic, Partick Thistle, Queens Park, Rangers
Highland	52.9	47.0	Inverness Caledonian Thistle, Ross County
Inverclyde	50.1	49.9	Morton
Midlothian	56.2	43.7	-
Moray	57.5	42.4	Elgin
Na h-Eileanan Sair	53.4	46.5	-
North Ayrshire	51.0	48.9	-
North Lanarkshire	48.9	51.0	Airdrieonians, Albion Rovers, Clyde, Motherwell
Orkney Islands	67.1	32.8	-
Perth and Kinross	60.1	39.8	St. Johnstone
Renfrewshire	52.8	47.2	St. Mirren
Scottish Borders	66.5	33.4	-
Shetland Islands	63.6	36.3	-
South Ayrshire	57.8	42.1	Ayr United
South Lanarkshire	54.6	45.3	Hamilton Academical
Stirling	59.7	40.2	Stirling Albion
West Dunbartonshire	46.0	53.9	Dumbarton
West Lothian	55.1	44.8	Livingston
OVERALL	55.3	44.7	

Table 2 – Scottish independence referendum results by local council area (Scottish Parliament Information Centre, 2014) with location of Scottish Professional Football League clubs [NB Berwick Rangers FC exempt]

Club	Age	Gender	Independence Referendum Vote (2014)	Political Party Voting (2014-2016)	EU Membership Referendum Vote (2016)
Celtic	18-25	Female	Yes	Labour	Remain
Celtic	36-45	Female	Yes	SNP / Green	Remain
Celtic	46-55	Male	No	Labour	Remain
Celtic	46-55	Male	Yes	Green / SNP	Remain
Celtic	46-55	Male	No	Labour	Remain
Hearts	26-35	Female	Yes	Labour	Remain
Hearts	56-65	Male	No	Green	Remain
Hibernian	26-35	Male	Yes	SNP	Leave
Hibernian	26-35	Male	Yes	Labour	Remain
Hibernian	46-55	Male	Yes	SNP	Remain
Inverness CT	26-35	Male	Yes	Green / SNP	Leave
Inverness CT	36-45	Male	Yes	SNP	Remain
Morton	26-35	Male	Yes	SNP / Green	Remain
Raith Rovers	56-65	Female	Yes	SNP / Green	Remain
Rangers	26-35	Male	No	Labour	Remain
Rangers	26-35	Female	Yes	SNP / Green	Remain
Rangers	36-45	Male	No	Conservatives / Liberal Dem.	Remain
Ross County	26-35	Male	Yes	SNP / Green	Remain

Table 3 – Overview of interviewees’ responses to survey on football support and voting preferences