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Educational outcomes of political participation? Young first-time voters three years after the
Scottish Independence Referendum

Abstract

After the enfranchisement of 16- and 17-year olds in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, research continued to prioritise questions of how education influences young people's political engagement. By contrast, this paper advances an original focus on educational *outcomes* of youth political participation and investigates how political engagement might have educational consequences for young people. Shortly after the referendum, we interviewed a strategic sample of first-time voters aged 16-20, who had voted 'yes' to Scottish independence. We re-interviewed a sub-sample three years on, facilitating longitudinal analysis and novel qualitative data. Our analysis demonstrates how, from the perspective of remarkably engaged participants, their referendum engagement has three educational consequences. Firstly, participants describe learning about politics through referendum participation and subsequent reflection on it. Secondly, participants understood their political engagements as informing their educational decision-making and trajectories. Thirdly, participants discussed learning about themselves, 'growing up' and developing what they described as mature political attitudes, via their political engagement during and since 2014. The article contributes significant new insights into the educational 'outcomes' of youth political engagement, by showing how young people understand their referendum participation as influencing their formal educational pathways and informal learning, about politics and about themselves.

Key words: elections, referendum, political participation, youth engagement, education, Scottish independence

Introduction

In 2014 the Scottish electorate turned out in unprecedented numbers to vote on whether Scotland should become an independent country or remain within the United Kingdom. Newspapers claimed 97 per cent voter registration one week before the Scottish Independence Referendum¹ (Brooks 2014). While the Electoral Commission (EC) urge caution on this figure, they note that:

The number of registered electors eligible to vote on 18 September 2014 at the referendum can be said with certainty to be the largest ever electorate for a Scotland-wide poll. (EC 2014: 63)

Turnout was, at 84.6 per cent, ‘the highest recorded at any Scotland-wide poll since the advent of universal suffrage’ (EC 2014: 4). Ahead of the referendum, the pro-independence Scottish National Party (SNP), Scottish Greens and the Scottish Socialist Party (SSP) formed the ‘Yes Scotland’ campaign, while the pro-union Conservatives, Labour and Liberal Democrats campaigned as ‘Better Together’ for a ‘No’ vote. The referendum was the first ever occasion in Scotland where 16-17-year olds were eligible to vote. Registered voters included 109,593 16-17-year olds, and 75% of 16-17 year olds surveyed claimed to have voted (EC 2014: 1, 63). In contrast to some expectations, and bucking trends of low youth turnout at general elections, 16-17-year olds cast their votes ‘in greater numbers than 18–24 year olds and at levels close to the overall population’ (Eichhorn et al. 2015: 1).

The enfranchisement of 16-17-year olds in 2014, with exceptional voter turnout, combined with some of the significant differences between referendums and general elections, makes Scotland’s IndyRef a unique case for investigating young people’s engagement experiences, including but not limited to voting for the first time. The referendum, as a vote on a contentious single issue, combined elements of both formal and informal politics, encompassing party politics, traditional political institutions, and grassroots activism to galvanizing effect (Breeze et al. 2015). Unprecedented levels of registration and turnout chime with findings suggesting that politically disaffected groups are ‘more supportive of referendums’ (Schuck and de Vreeze 2011: 181). After IndyRef, 16-17-year olds were variably dis/enfranchised in subsequent UK elections. In 2015 the franchise in Scotland was permanently extended to 16-17-year olds, with The Scottish Election (Reduction of Voting Age) Bill passing on the same day that Westminster MPs rejected an amendment which *would* have enabled 16-17- year olds to vote in the EU

¹ Hereafter ‘IndyRef’ or ‘the referendum’ for brevity.

Referendum (Brexit) (Bolton 2015). The afterlife of IndyRef is fractured by turbulent UK electoral politics, including Brexit and the 2017 and 2019 UK General Elections. In this context, the consequences of extending the vote to 16-17- year olds in Scotland are debated publicly and across academic disciplines (Breeze et al. 2017; Eichhorn 2018b; Sanghera et al. 2018).

Much research on youth engagement investigates pathways *into* activism and participation (Flanagan et al. 2012; Hensby 2014; Manning & Edwards 2014). Scholarship on lowering the voting age in Scotland follows this pattern and tends to focus on formal education as a site of political socialisation (Eichhorn 2018a: 1095; Hill et al. 2017, Shepard et al. 2014). Public debate repeats the common-sense idea that ‘teaching young people about our democratic system in a school setting could drastically improve voter engagement and increase turnout’ (Smith 2018 np). UK policy on political and citizenship education orientates towards remediating a perceived, contested ‘democratic deficit... among young people’ (Henn & Foard 2014: 360). Together, these debates position formal education as a prerequisite to young people’s informed participation. A deficit model emerges whereby young people are characterised as disengaged and *in need of* (formal) education in order to activate and facilitate their political engagement. By contrast, we shift and invert this predominant paradigm by advancing an original analysis of the educational *consequences* of young people’s participation in IndyRef.

We investigate participants’ accounts of how their IndyRef participation and ongoing political engagements² *inform* their formal educational pathways and informal learning. This approach significantly expands upon prevailing unidirectional analyses of the relation between education and youth political participation. Our longitudinal qualitative interview methods allow us to generate original insights on biographical ‘outcomes’ of political engagement, with an empirical focus on a ‘once in a generation’ (BBC 2014) political event. To be clear, we are not analysing how education impacts political engagement, but *vice versa*. We illuminate how youth political participation can itself be understood as an educational experience, informing subsequent educational decision-making and trajectories, and inspiring autodidactic informal learning and reflection about politics and reflexive political engagements.

² This included: voting in elections and the Brexit referendum; political party membership, canvassing and campaigning; a range of informal political interests and activities such as discussing political issues online and with family/friends.

In 2015 we interviewed a strategic sample of ten first-time voters aged 16-20, who had voted ‘yes’ to Scottish independence (T1). In late 2017 and early 2018 we re-interviewed a sub-sample of original participants about their political attitudes and engagements almost three years after our initial interviews (T2). During T2 interviews we were struck by participants’ lively, spontaneous accounts of how IndyRef engagement influenced their formal education pathways and informal political learning. Educational outcomes of participation were not an explicit focus when we designed the study: their emergence during data collection inspired this article.

In this article we review literature on trends and tensions in youth political dis/engagement, education as informing participation, and the biographical ‘outcomes’ of political activism. We then discuss our qualitative interview methods and sample. We present our findings thematically and discuss how, for participants, political engagements have three kinds of educational consequences, identified via inductive analysis and defined as:

1. Informal learning about political institutions and issues *via* IndyRef participation and subsequent reflection.
2. Drawing on ongoing political participation experiences to inform decision-making about formal education and educational trajectories.
3. Accounts of ‘growing up’, developing mature political attitudes, and considering ambitions for political work as a consequence of political engagement.

We conclude with a discussion of our key finding that political participation can itself be understood as an educational experience, as having educational outcomes and consequences. The conclusion establishes the broader contributions of our analysis, which finesses dichotomous tendencies in youth engagement debates. Our findings challenge simplistic characterisation of young people as entirely dis/engaged, and show how participation can combine both dutiful and self-actualising forms of engagement.

Political education beyond dis/engagement

Young people are regularly characterised as politically disengaged and uninformed (Henn and Foard 2014; Furlong and Cartmel 2012; Manning and Edwards 2014). This chimes with assumptions that 16-17- year old voters would passively ‘copy ideas they are given in schools’ and general scepticism towards lowering the voting age in Scotland (Eichhorn et al. 2014: 1). Here we see both presumptions of a disengaged youth demographic *and* of the one-directional flow of influence, in which education precedes and influences participation. There *is* evidence

of youth distrust in *formal* politics, but research demonstrates that young people can be alienated from traditional political institutions yet enthusiastically engage with broader political issues and activism (Bang 2009; Brooks 2009a, Kisby & Sloam 2009; Marsh et al 2007). As Soler-i-Martí (2015: 396) summarises, ‘young people vote less and protest more’. Alongside such disaffection and detraditionalization, it is clear that ‘a great deal of power’ and importance continues to reside in electoral politics (Manning 2013: 29).

Here Scotland’s Indyref offers an instructive case. It was a formal political event, involving traditional forms of political action (canvassing, voting, party membership) as well as grassroots mobilisation. IndyRef thus combined ‘old’ and ‘new’ forms of participation, stretching beyond institutional party politics (Breeze et al. 2017). While referendums can engage disaffected voters (Schuck and de Vreeze 2011), Indyref can be positioned, in response to Soler-i-Martí’s (2015), as *both* a vote *and* a protest. This contextualises how IndyRef interrupts established trends in youth turnout (Henn & Foard 2014; Kimberlee 2002) and challenges descriptions of ‘the average young person’ as not participating in conventional politics (Sloam 2007: 562)³. These factors combine to make young, first time voters’ IndyRef experiences, and their subsequent political dis/engagements, a unique opportunity for re-thinking relationships between participation and education.

Importantly for our study, research suggests that first voting experiences inform subsequent electoral participation (Russell et al. 2002: 7). Henn and Foard (2014: 373) found that young first-time voters in the 2010 UK General Election were left ‘feeling somewhat disheartened and frustrated’ and averse to electoral politics. Unlike participants in Henn and Foard’s study, some of our respondents’ first voting opportunity arrived significantly earlier, aged 16 or 17, and took place in relation to the participatory social movement characteristics of some elements of IndyRef. While our ‘yes’ voting participants were disappointed with the referendum result, they channelled their frustration into ongoing political engagements (Breeze et al. 2017). Accordingly, our work contributes to the broader project of understanding how ‘micro-ethico-political practices intersect with institutionalised politics’ (Manning 2013: 30) as well as bridging the ‘dichotomy between youth political action that is either linked to – or delinked from – state institutions’ (Coe et al 2016: 1321).

³ The 2015 UK General Election saw 43 per cent of 18-24-year-olds turn out to vote, compared with 78% of those aged 65 or over (BBC 2017). However in the 2017 General Election turnout among 18-19 year olds rose to 57 per cent (YouGov 2017).

Political engagement and education research overwhelmingly investigates mobilisation *into* political participation. Crossley (2003) argues that children learn about the political world through the experiences and attitudes of their parents and family. Braungart & Braungart (1990) noted how activist leaders of the 1960s were heavily influenced by early exposure to family activism. Likewise, research tends to approach education as a facilitator of political participation (Eichhorn 2018a; Kisby & Sloam 2009), asking how civics or citizenship education might encourage political participation (Lopes et al. 2009). Indeed, when citizenship education was made statutory in England in 2002, it aimed explicitly to address a ‘democratic deficit [...] among young people’ (Henn & Foard 2014: 360). In Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence, citizenship education is intended to ‘permeate the whole curriculum’ (Biesta 2008: 38), and the ‘development of “responsible citizens” is a central goal’ (Maitles 2009: 53). Lopes et al (2009: 15) argue that citizenship education is significant in ‘influencing young people’s intentions to participate’ in electoral politics. Henn & Foard (2014: 360) find that ‘whether or not respondents have remained in full-time education, as well as level and type of educational qualifications’ (ibid 274) are influential factors in increasing young people’s engagement with formal politics.

Understandings of education as facilitator of engagement extend beyond compulsory schooling. Brooks (2009b: 307) shows how participation in ‘socially focussed’ extra-curricular activities fosters engagement with social and political issues. Eichhorn et al. (2015) likewise suggest that school-based social networks are important sites of political learning. Post-school, there is general support for the idea that higher education encourages political engagement. Crossley and Ibrahim (2012) note that a ‘critical mass’ of similarly situated university peers increases opportunities for activism and Abrahams & Brooks’ (2019) respondents described increasing political awareness after starting university. However, the prevailing focus on young people’s mobilisation into political participation says little about the outcomes youth participation generates and can unintentionally imply a deficit-model of disengaged young people. We do not question that education is important in facilitating youth political engagement, but seek to expand the analytical frame to include the educational *consequences* of first-time voters’ experiences and explore how participation can inform education.

Research on the biographical outcomes of activism suggest that social movement participation can have lasting influences on employment over the life-course. For instance, ‘Freedom Summer’ volunteers’ ‘work and marital histories appear to have been shaped, to a remarkable degree, by their politics’ (McAdam 1989: 758). Sherkat and Blocker’s (1997) analysis of panel

data found that anti-war demonstrators differed markedly from their peers in the short and long term across a number of factors: politics; status attainment; religion; and family. Studies of New-Left activists' careers show they clustered in the 'helping' or teaching professions (Fendrich 1974; McAdam 1989). As Giugni (2004: 494) notes in his review of the field, 'activism has a strong effect both on the political and personal lives of the subjects'. Our methods allow us to explore how young first time voters understand the influence of their IndyRef participation on their political and personal lives.

The educational consequences of young people's participation, and first voting experience in particular, remain under-researched compared to involvement in 'high risk activism' (e.g. McAdam 1989). Hensby's (2014: 97) work on 'high cost' UK student protests notes that some respondents chose to go to universities that would enable them to pursue their political interests, suggesting that political participation might inform educational trajectories. However, the social movement outcomes literature does not in general investigate educational consequences. Vestergren et al (2016: 203) systematically review social and biographical outcomes research and argue that outcomes take '19 main forms'. 'Work-life/career' (ibid) is mentioned but education is absent from this otherwise exhaustive list. We address this omission via analysis of empirical data grounded in young people's own accounts of how their IndyRef participation informed their political learning and educational pathways.

Methods

Our qualitative interview methods make a valuable contribution to youth participation research literatures, which overwhelmingly comprises quantitative analysis (Readshaw 2017). Our re-interviews allow us not only to analyse participants' experiential accounts, but to attend to participants' narratives reflecting on their IndyRef experiences over time. The first round of data collection (T1) took place roughly six months after Indyref, in March and April 2015, and comprised ten in-depth, qualitative, semi-structured interviews with participants aged between 16 and 20 (Table 1). All participants voted 'yes', in favour of Scottish independence, and nine participants were first-time voters; one had voted once previously, in the 2014 European elections. We selected three Scottish cities to recruit from based on Indyref results. In Dundee 'Yes' secured a 57 per cent majority, and in Glasgow 53 per cent (ScotParl 2014). In Edinburgh most voters came out against independence, with 38.8 per cent voting 'yes' (ScotParl 2014 and see EC 2014: 152). We circulated a call for participants via youth work organisations and youth

political associations⁴ and on social media (Twitter and Facebook). Our approach combined convenience sampling with the purposive and strategic selection of first time ‘yes’ voters. Interviews lasted between 60 and 90 minutes, nine were face-to-face and one was via video call. All names given are pseudonyms.

Table 1: T1 Participants (from Breeze et al. 2017)

Pseudonyms	Age at time of interview	Parliamentary constituency
Russell	16	Dundee West
Sandra	16	Dundee West
Anne	17	Edinburgh North & Leith
Tom	17	Edinburgh South West
Gregg	18	Edinburgh West
Mike	18	East Renfrewshire
Pamela	18	Edinburgh West
Brian	19	Edinburgh North & Leith
Fiona	19	Dundee East
James	20	Glasgow North

The second round of data collection (T2) took place in December 2017 and January 2018. We re-contacted initial participants via email with an invitation to be re-interviewed for the study. This yielded five participants willing to take part in a second interview (Table 2). Both rounds of interviews were digitally audio recorded, transcribed and manually coded iteratively by the research team for inductive thematic analysis. Transcripts were returned to interviewees for checking and validation, facilitating the opportunity for participants to make clarifications or elaborations, and we shared an initial research report with participants, inviting their feedback. In practice, while two participants replied to tell us they had read their transcripts and the research report, no changes to transcripts were made as a result of this process.

⁴ Which we do not name here to preserve participant anonymity.

Table 2: T2 Participants

Pseudonyms	Age at time of interview	Parliamentary constituency
Russell	19	Glasgow North
Anne	20	(not known) Aberdeen
Gregg	21	Edinburgh West
Brian	21	Edinburgh North & Leith
James	23	Glasgow North

All T2 participants reported voting in the 2015 UK General Election, 2016 Scottish Parliament Election, 2016 ‘Brexit’ Referendum, and 2017 UK General Election. Three participants (Anne, James, and Russell) reported voting ‘at every opportunity’ (Anne T2) including the 2017 Scottish Local Council Election, and four continued to be members of political parties (Anne, SNP; Gregg, SNP; James, Scottish Greens before switching to SNP; Russell, Scottish Greens). Participants’ consistent engagement with electoral and party politics is remarkable considering scholarship that identifies young people’s alienation from and disaffection with political institutions. Such levels of engagement are indicative of the non-representative character of our sample.

Our methods support our aim of attending to the specificities of first-time pro-independence 16-20-year-old voters, whose self-selection implies unusually enthusiastic political engagement. The issues with self-selection are compounded at T2, when participants were sufficiently interested to take part in an academic study about political participation not once, but twice. Our findings demonstrate the value of using ‘qualitative methods to understand how young people understand and practice politics’ (Manning 2013: 22) and contribute new understandings of youth participation by prioritising young people’s own perspectives (Bang 2009: 128-9, Marsh et al. 2007). Gregg (T2) commented that ‘you have to vote... you have to take responsibility’ and James (T2) described organising envelopes for an SNP mail-out, ‘I love all that. It's that buzz of activity, that feeling of just everyone pulling together for some greater goal. It is absolutely beautiful and you can't replace it’. Such views are not generalizable to all young people in Scotland, but they do provide vivid illustrations of how some, remarkably

engaged, young ‘yes’ voters articulate their understandings of and participation in electoral politics.

Findings and discussion

We were struck by participants’ unexpected accounts of how Indyref engagement and ongoing political participation informed both their informal political learning and formal education trajectories. As such findings are organised thematically and discuss how, from participants’ perspectives, Indyref participation had three kinds of educational consequences. Firstly, participants described *learning about politics* via Indyref participation and subsequent reflection. Secondly, participants drew on participation experiences to explain their *pathways through further and higher education*. Thirdly, participants gave accounts of ‘*growing up*’ and developing ‘mature’ political attitudes during and since Indyref, and in some cases aspire to political work. Significantly, all participants reflected upon how their learning about politics, negotiations of post-compulsory education, and approaches to political participation had been shaped by Indyref and their ongoing political engagements.

First, though, we should note how participants *did* describe formal education in schools, colleges, and universities as important for their learning about politics, in accordance with much of the literature discussed above. In Anne’s words she learnt, during Modern Studies classes, about the ‘nitty gritty’ (T2) of electoral systems including the principles of ‘first past the post’ and the meaning of ‘safe seats’. Russell described gaining useful knowledge while studying Economics at university:

[economics] is phenomenally useful for like whenever there's chat about taxes and budgets and things, I kind of know what's going on more than I used to. (Russell T2)

In these examples, participants saw their studies as enabling them to be more informed about political issues and processes. Anne, who at T1 named school as a key for learning about Indyref, at T2 described how further education led to re-evaluating her position on Scottish independence.

[At college] I started studying politics and then I learned more about it and I was like: ‘I think I made the wrong decision at that point [...] I should have voted “No”’, but I never [chuckling] [...] Having to write essays, I was having to look into it more myself and actually do the work for myself. (Anne T2)

This shows the potential for continued formal education to encourage politically passionate young people to develop, refine, and revise their attitudes. While this aligns with the dominant paradigm that positions education as a facilitator of political awareness and participation, primarily our analysis broadens youth dis/engagement debates to include three key educational *consequences* of political participation: learning about politics, educational pathways, and ‘growing up’ – that structure our discussion below.

Learning about politics

Participants’ accounts of learning about politics range beyond formal education to encompass: informal spaces in schools and universities, conversations within social networks, and most significantly for this article, their IndyRef engagement as an important site of political learning. Participants described the referendum catalysing ongoing political discussions among peer groups:

I remember before the independence referendum came around, you just didn't talk to people in school about politics and it just changed that. [...] then obviously when I came to university, I go to [find] all the people who care about politics. (Russell T2)

Others generated informal political conversations within formal educational settings, such as Anne’s political debates with university peers ‘on nights out’ (T2). Russell (T2) described learning about social justice, including intersectional feminism and trans rights, via his university debating society. Participants’ political learning also took place within social relationships. Gregg’s (T2) friends suggested useful articles to read, and explained aspects of the UK political system. Brian (T2) reported learning about Middle East politics through a friend from Iraq. Such informal learning, less didactic than much classroom teaching, whereby participants reportedly learnt with and from their peers, included sharing their own knowledge. Gregg (T2) was asked by friends to explain social policies and SNP politics. As we’ve suggested previously (Breeze et al 2017), this complicates suggestions that young people will simply copy what they’re told about politics by school and/or parents. Young people are active agents in their own – and others’ – political education, including as prompted by their first voting experience and referendum engagement. Brian (T2) described doing an online ‘political compass test’ with his mum:

...instead of trying to persuade her to my point of view, which is what I would do before, I would give her both points of view, or all points of view, to consider, so... I would say, ‘right, some people say this, some people say that. What do you think?’

This echoes participants' accounts of how their Indyref involvement inspired them to seek out a wider range of political views, in direct response to their participation experiences. Here we see accounts of participation leading to learning, and participation co-occurring with learning, rather than formal education as a precondition to participation.

I got fed up with certain strains within the 'Yes' movement, and how narrow-minded and disgusting it was, is. If that had not been the case, I don't know if I would have embarked out and looked at different issues that I never previously thought about before. It was that that started me questioning things, questioning everything that I had previously held [...] It started that mode of thinking that led me to other areas of politics and being interested in that. (Brian T2)

[After Indyref] a lot of the independence media just lost - I don't know, once I could get alternative views on it, I was like, 'oh, actually, maybe that's not so great'. So I kept reading, so now I get most of my political stuff from [university] debating [club] Facebook groups which are surprisingly very, very political and then, most of my news then is a combination of the BBC, the *Guardian* and then, weirdly, I've been reading quite a lot of the *Atlantic*. (Russell T2)

Here is a sense of disillusionment with some aspects of pro-independence politics and alternative media, leading Brian and Russell to explore other sources of information. Interestingly, even disappointing experiences stimulated Brian and Russell to further, and broader, political interests, in contrast to Henn & Foard's participants' reported aversion to electoral politics after the 2010 election (2014: 373). Here we can see electoral events as educational moments in themselves, in which participants were not only galvanised to engage, but inspired to 'research things for myself' (Anne T2). Of all our participants, James articulated this most directly:

I feel like both referendums, both the EU one and the independence referendum, raised my political awareness massively... I'd say it was a sense of wanting to get involved. (James T2)

James found himself in a position where he needed to learn more in order to develop his enthusiasm into well-informed participation:

I never realised just how important the EU was until almost the day of Brexit. It was only a couple of weeks before [the vote] that I actually started reading up on it properly and understanding just why I was going to vote to remain. (James T2)

Again, we see an account of a key referendum, a critical moment at the ballot box, as *inspiring young people to learn more about political issues*. Russell too spoke of Indyref as a direct impetus for learning ‘specific facts, for arguments’ (T2), and went on to consider an attitudinal shift, in which he was inspired to sustain his political interest:

But I think what's been more important is the attitude because the referendum really cemented, 'look, this matters, pay attention', and then from there, I think a percentage of everything I've learned about politics from then till now is because I've got more interested in it. I came to university, I then joined debating, all these things are in some way caused by that. (Russell T2)

For Russell, rather than formal education underlining the importance of political engagements (as we might expect given the ‘democratic deficit’ found in much of the literature and education policy (Henn & Foard 2014: 360)) it was an electoral event that inspired him to learn about particular issues *and* to a longer-term commitment to political engagement, still in evidence three years on. Clearly, participants continued to learn about political issues, refining, and in some cases revising, their views within and beyond formal education. Centrally, our data suggests that electoral events - and referendums in particular - have the potential to catalyse not only enthusiastic participation, but to prompt young voters’ informal, self-directed, and ongoing political learning. The crucial experience of voting for the first time can therefore be understood as an educational moment, with educational consequences. In addition, as Russell’s quote suggests, participants’ Indyref engagement is bound up with negotiating post-compulsory education pathways.

Education pathways

Participants narrated their post-compulsory educational decision-making and ambitions as related to, and sometimes inspired by, their Indyref participation. There is a caveat here, however. We might expect post-secondary education to sustain or increase participants’ political engagement given popular conceptions of HE students as political actors (Abrahams and Brooks 2019). However, our data demonstrates the importance of not assuming that education necessarily fosters participation. For example, Anne withdrew from the Scottish Youth Parliament after moving to Aberdeen for university: ‘I would still be a part of it if I

wasn't at university, but it's just difficult to do your work, like have a social life and do everything at the same time' (T2). Russell described a timetable clash between local Scottish Greens meetings and his university debating society speaker training. He chose the latter: 'when I came to university, all of the ambition to change the world and all of this kind of stuff [...] ended up getting side-tracked into debating' (T2). James' mum encouraged him to step back from his high levels of SNP involvement and concentrate on his undergraduate study (T2). In some cases, going to university involved participants decreasing their previously high levels of political engagement.

For James, balancing university with his enthusiasm for party politics involved negotiating the academic year and the electoral calendar, which tilted the scales between extensive and minimal participation:

I was more involved in the 2017 election than I had been in 2015 or 2016, in part because it was during the summer holidays, so my exams were over, [...] it meant that I had four or five weeks before the vote where I could just dedicate myself entirely to campaigning [...] because in 2015 and 2016 the elections were in May, and in both elections, I had an exam [...] the morning after the election. It was such bad timing, because it meant I couldn't stay up for the results. (James T2)

There is an incompatibility here between pursuing higher education and sustaining remarkably high levels of participation. This relates to the concept of 'biographical availability'; with engagement more likely in the absence of personal constraints (McAdam 1986), and echoes findings that participation is adversely affected by university students' paid employment (Crossley & Ibrahim 2012, Brooks et al. 2016). Any rendering of the education-engagement relationship simply in terms of education increasing participation does not hold up empirically among our remarkably engaged sample. Putting campaigning on hold, however, does not mean that participants were completely inactive. Like Manning (2013: 23), we found that participants 'understood and practiced politics in ways that politicised their daily lives and decisions', and described their educational pathways as informed by their IndyRef experiences.

Four of our five T2 participants (Anne, Brian, Gregg, and Russell) described motivations for continuing education as partly in consequence of their political experiences. Anne accords Indyref a key role in her educational decision making, including deciding to study Social Sciences at university:

...before the independence referendum I wasn't interested in politics at all, I didn't understand it, and then when I actually started looking into it [...] I think I'm actually finding something I'm good at and I'm actually interested in. I feel like I just want to pursue it, [...] now I've actually found [...] something that I feel I can make a difference in. I think if the independence referendum hadn't have happened, I probably would have not got into politics. (Anne, T2)

Brian described his interest in journalism, at the early stages of exploring whether he could pursue a course at college:

Since the referendum, I also got very interested in political writing [...] reading things like, you know, blog papers and different things like that. I've got very interested in the prospect of doing that one day as well, political journalism [...] I was just thinking about this only a couple of weeks ago. I think, obviously, I'll have to take a course at college, or something like that, a journalism course, [...] to try to get that first step on the way of actually doing it. (Brian, T2)

Russell had begun university studying for a degree in Politics, he then switched to Economics, before settling on Philosophy. Having decided to study politics, due in part to his Indyref engagement and Scottish Greens membership, he explained his passion for the university debating society as involving 'the bits which I found interesting about politics'. Russell changed his degree programme to enable pursuit of his evolving political interests:

The thing which I find interesting is what is *right* rather than how to do policy and the intricacies of all this kind of stuff. So that then influenced what I did for university because I was going to do economics because I was like, well, that's the one that you can make the most difference in because you can, if we get economics right, then you can do lots of other things right, whereas I actually wasn't interested in that. What I was interested in is attacking all the economists for being so right wing. (Russell, T2)

Both Russell's ambition to 'make a difference', forged in his IndyRef experiences, and his emergent interest in questions of morality and political ethics, informed decisions about what to study. Gregg had pursued his political interests by initially embarking on a joint honours degree in Politics and Social Policy, before replacing Politics with Area Studies. Like Russell, he described an iterative process of working out what aspects of 'the political' he was most interested in:

I found Politics [degree programme] very boring. It was all very theoretical, and very International Relations-focused, and I don't find either of those things interesting. I really do like Social Policy [...] I learned that I'm someone that likes solutions to issues, and that kind of thing. I'm not really interested in the theories. [...] I'm most interested in how it affects actual people. (Gregg, T2)

Having been inspired by political participation to pursue 'Politics' degrees, Russel and Gregg encountered a mismatch between their experiences and the subject. Both later made fine-grained adjustments about what 'politics' meant for them. Russell described initial ambitions to stand for election or to lead the Young Scottish Greens, developing over the course of his studies as he reflected on his Indyref experiences:

It took me a long time to parse out which bits of doing the [independence] referendum I enjoyed [...] I think that being excited by the referendum, deciding that I wanted to go and do this politics thing, going to university, I think the thing which I learnt there is that I'm actually interested in the normative philosophy stuff, you know, how should we share out resources? [...] I think [during] the independence referendum, I thought the thing that I wanted to do was to get elected and enact policy and do all of this kind of thing. Then I realised that that wasn't actually what interested me. What interested me was thinking 'what should we do?' rather than actually going and doing it. (Russell T2)

Just as Anne, James, and Russell spoke of taking a step back from sustained formal political activities, Gregg and Russell reconsidered their initial study decisions – and political ambitions – over the course of their university degree. Here we see political engagement providing initial impetus toward studying politics, and commitments to both engagement and political studies as reflexively adapted in response to on-going experiences of both. Consistently striking is how participants narrated their educational pathways and decisions as informed by reflection on their participation experiences. IndyRef participation had a catalysing effect on their educational journeys which, in Russell's case, reverberated three years after the event:

The independence referendum was important insofar as it *shaped* what I wanted to do. My motivations [were already there] I think it's more like the independence referendum was the catalyst for some things I already wanted to do. (Russell T2)

Brian (T2) likewise described a catalysing effect:

Before the referendum, I was always interested in politics, kind of. [...] It was the independence referendum, really kicked it on a bit more. It's led me to where I am today. (Brian, T2)

To differing degrees and in various ways, Indyref was a touchstone in participants' accounts of their educational journeys. We previously explored the relationship between Indyref participation and youth transitions (Breeze et al. 2017) and our new data demonstrates that IndyRef participation also comprised a critical moment in participants' transitions into further and higher education.

'Just growing up'

All T2 participants developed a less combative approach to political debate after 2014. Brian emphasised 'respectful', 'open-minded', 'open debate' and spoke of the importance of listening to a range of diverging opinions and spoke of 'evolving' since Indyref. Gregg stressed the importance of being 'respectful', 'get[ting] out of your own bubble', and 'try[ing] your best to understand where people are coming from'. Russell described learning not to be drawn into arguments on social media 'I just keep scrolling [...] you're not going to change anyone's mind', as well as becoming 'less excited' about elections and a 'more rounded person'. Anne presented herself as calmer:

I used to be this angry, young radical wannabe politician [...] I'm a calm wannabe politician now [laughing]. I'm less angry and less aggressive, I'm more, open to discussion, more calm [laughing]. (Anne, T2)

Anne reiterated this in relation to discussions with university peers, including her flatmate who held 'totally different political views', describing being 'a lot older' in terms of listening to others' opinions rather than having 'arguments'. Russell described a shift in his thinking, away from a dogmatic approach to Scottish independence:

When I voted in the referendum, it was very much like 'this is literally just entirely right, nothing wrong, one thousand per cent sure', and I think maybe obviously some of that is just growing up and being, well, everything is less black and white. But also then interacting with new sources of information which say, 'oh, maybe here's some reasons why you were wrong'. [...] university has taken me down a peg and said, 'You don't know the answer to everything; sometimes other people are right'. (Russell, T2)

James differed in that while he was clear that ‘a lot of the people I disagree with politically, generally, I do enjoy chatting to them’, he spoke of conflicts with fellow activists and campaigners, some of whom he characterised as ‘extremely...good at manipulating people’. James described ‘cliques’, and ‘toxic environments’ and conveyed a sense that he was learning how to negotiate party politics, as well as transferable skills ‘to be fair, it’s something you could translate into just about any environment, like a managerial dispute’. The conflicts James described had not dampened his ambitions to one day stand for public office. James articulated the most overt commitment to a political career, and this lets us consider ‘growing up’ in a second sense: how participants imagined their employment futures:

I’d like to go down and work at Westminster at some point [...] I think anything to do with politics would be a good start and then maybe it will lead to something bigger in the future, but I’m not sure yet. (Anne, T2)

For Russell too, participation in electoral politics informed his aspirations, but led to a reconsideration of previous ambitions:

So the more I've done with canvassing and campaigning and stuff, the more I've realised that I do not want to be an elected politician. That's a terrible job and I never want to do that. [...] I much prefer writing essays about political theory and learning things than door knocking of a night. (Russell T2).

Gregg wasn’t sure what he wanted to do after university but was considering ‘something related to social policy’, and Brian was currently caring for a family member and considering a college course in journalism. Participants drew on experiences of political engagement, during and since Indyref, to think through their career ambitions and options in the world of work.

I think that I couldn't be a politician. I get too emotional, I think I would cry a lot [...] Making decisions is hard, I learnt, maybe in the past I would've gone down that road. (Gregg, T2)

Whether pursuing an explicitly ‘political career’ or not, participants mobilised their experiences of political participation to reflect upon who they were and what they wanted to do.

Conclusion

Our research demonstrates how participants described being inspired to self-directed learning *as a result* of their on-going involvement in and reflection on independence politics. Strikingly,

referendum participation can itself be understood as an educational moment, having educational outcomes and consequences. Our participants were galvanised to discover more about the issues at hand, even when disappointed with the result or disillusioned with political discourse. They drew on their engagement experiences in deciding about continuing education, and in some cases saw Indyref as catalysing a decision to study specific subjects at university. Participants narrated political engagement as involving learning how to become more open to and respectful of other views. They saw themselves as ‘growing up’ and developing a more ‘mature’ engagement with politics *in and through* their on-going participation. They drew upon engagement experiences to imagine their futures in the world of work, including aspirations for political careers.

The literature tends to position young people as *either* disengaged, to be corrected through educational interventions to cajole participation and produce informed citizens *or* as hyper-engaged harbingers of exciting new forms of activism and politics. Our research offers a nuanced contribution to these debates and responds to the need to ‘acknowledge that both engagement and disengagement are simultaneously occurring’ (Farthing 2010: 181). Our analysis has shown how participants continued to be active in (in many ways very traditional, institutional, formal) electoral politics in some ways and decreased their involvement or shifted focus in others, while remaining very much engaged, active, and interested.

Low youth participation remains a recurrent theme in the literature, and Flanagan et al. (2012: 34-35) argue that young people can delay civic responsibility until reaching ‘mature (full) adulthood’ and becoming ‘settled and secure’ (ibid). The extent to which contemporary adulthood can be considered homogeneously ‘secure’ is questionable under conditions of austerity and precarity, when ‘cues to encourage participation have disappeared’ (Kimberlee 2002: 85). By contrast, for our participants, political engagement was a central aspect of *how* they negotiated their post-compulsory educational pathways and participation experiences informed how they imagined their adult futures in the world of work. Our analysis suggests that political participation can be an integral part of ‘growing up’, rather than delayed to a more adult future. Our primary contribution is in evidencing how the relationship between political education and political participation is neither linear nor uni-directional. Put simply, participating in political events – particularly IndyRef– can be educational experiences in and of themselves, and can lead to educational outcomes.

In focusing on a small, strategic sample not far removed from the high point of engagement, our research shares several of the methodological shortcomings of biographical outcomes studies (Giugni 2004). It is too early to say how enduring the ‘outcomes’ charted here will be, especially since participants demonstrated high levels of reflexive adaptation, considering their participation experiences when negotiating educational pathways or revising their career aspirations. It is clear that the context formed by ‘youth transition regimes’ can have a ‘crucial role in defining young people’s political action strategies’ (Soler-i-Martí & Ferrer-Fons 2015: 92). What we have demonstrated is that, in young people’s accounts, political engagements and subsequent reflections can react back on transitions to adulthood, informing educational trajectories as well as career aspirations, as when the more campaigning Russell did, the less he wanted to be an elected politician.

There is a growing body of work that considers the centrality of reflexivity to youth participation. Our findings are in broad agreement with Manning’s, particularly around how participants mobilised reflexivity to ‘(re)interpret themselves and their politics and to prioritise and accommodate their primary concerns’ (2013: 29). Manning characterises such an approach as ‘individualistic in form’ (ibid) and this is supported by Vromen et al. who argue that there is ‘shift in young people’s citizenship away from dutiful norms to personalised, self-actualising norms’ (2015: 80). There is undoubtedly an element of self-actualisation in our participants’ accounts; learning about themselves via their first experience of voting in IndyRef, their on-going reflection on this event, and their continued and varied in/formal political engagements.

However, these participants remained committed to ‘dutiful’ engagements including voting and party membership, an in the ‘buzz ...beauty ... love’ with which James experienced envelope stuffing. Our analysis also shows commitment to political dialogue; seeking out multiple perspectives in conversation with those around them, in families and among their peer groups in educational settings. For our remarkably engaged sample, ‘dutiful’ and self-actualising engagement co-occurred and complemented both on-going engagement and some stepping back from intense participation. These simultaneous trends are infused with the relational; learning in and through social relationships and interaction as well as perhaps more individualised reflexivity. By evidencing some of the educational consequences of Indyref engagement, we have made a broader contribution to nuancing the dis/engagement dichotomy that can structure and limit research in this field.

In concluding, it is essential to re-visit how our analysis is based in participants' *accounts of* educational consequences of political engagement. Our aim was to explore how participants articulated the relationship between political participation and political learning. This is where the key strengths of the study lie: in offering a much needed focus on how those first-time voters and engaged young citizens themselves make meaning of their participation (Bang 2009: 128-9, Marsh et al. 2007). Our analysis cannot establish whether there is a causal relationship between referendum participation and the educational consequences we have outlined here, limited as it is by a small and unrepresentative sample. Our data may in part be marked (like any social research) by 'participants' well-meaning tendency to fill the time by doing what they think is expected of them' (Guantlett, 2007: 100). Participants may very well describe their political and educational experiences differently if talking to a peer rather than a researcher explicitly interested in their political experiences. Despite – and in some senses because of – these limitations, the study makes a valuable contribution to showing how young people draw on their participation experiences to inform and reflect upon both their ongoing political learning *and* other important aspects of their lives, including educational trajectories:

If it wasn't for [Indyref], then I wouldn't have had this journey to embark on to begin with, if it wasn't for that entire debate. Brian (T2)

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