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Narrating constitutional futures: Comparative emotional and identity dynamics in the Scottish Independence and European Union referendums

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Abstract: Referendums in small states and territories are often marked by the elusive nature of a successful 'Yes' vote. This article examines the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum and the 2016 European Union (EU) Referendum (Brexit) as comparative cases to explore this dynamic. Drawing on the Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB), we analyse focus group and interview data to foreground the emotional and narrative dimensions of both campaigns. In Scotland, the Yes campaign sought to mobilise pride, empowerment, and a vision of self-determination, but these appeals were ultimately weakened by voter caution, concerns about economic risk, and fragmented elite messaging, resulting in a failed bid for independence. By contrast, in the EU referendum the Leave campaign was able to turn a change vote into a successful mobilisation, combining a populist narrative of sovereignty and control with emotionally resonant slogans such as 'Take Back Control'. Meanwhile, Remain's reliance on economic warnings was widely perceived as negative or scaremongering. Taken together, the two cases highlight how pro-change campaigns succeed or fail not only due to institutional constraints but also through their capacity to sustain emotionally resonant stories of transformation in the face of risk.

Keywords: Brexit, elections, leadership, narratives, referendums, Scotland, small states

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Introduction

Referendums have become a defining feature of contemporary constitutional politics (Qvortrup, 2017). They are invoked to legitimate major decisions about sovereignty, statehood, and membership of supranational organisations. Yet, in small states and territories, they frequently fail to produce the decisive 'Yes' votes required to enact constitutional change (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). This elusiveness raises important questions about how citizens weigh risks, evaluate leadership, and narrate political futures in moments of constitutional choice.

We contribute to these debates by drawing on qualitative data from the United Kingdom's two most recent high-stakes referendums: the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 European Union (EU) membership referendum. This article explains why achieving a

successful 'Yes' vote in sovereignty referendums is often difficult, particularly in small states and semi-sovereign territories.

Although the UK is not a small state, its Scottish independence and Brexit referendums offer instructive comparative leverage that helps illuminate these dynamics. Both contests placed sovereignty, identity, and economic risk at the centre of debate; both mobilised emotional as well as rational arguments; and both produced contrasting outcomes. In 2014, Scotland voted to retain the status quo by rejecting independence, while the 2016 referendum result ended in the UK leaving the EU, despite Scotland and Northern Ireland voting to remain. Analysing how ordinary citizens narrated these constitutional futures provides insights that travel beyond the UK and speak directly to the challenges faced in small states and territories.

The study draws on the subset of Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB) focus groups and interviews collected after the two referendums. These data capture voters' reflections on their decisions, the campaigns, and the wider meanings of the referendums. They allow us to foreground the interpretive dimension: how participants themselves made sense of risk, identity, belonging, and democracy. This perspective allows us to view referendums not only as institutional devices but as sites where citizens construct and contest narratives about political community and the future.

The central research question addressed here is: why are 'Yes' votes so difficult to achieve in sovereignty referendums, particularly in small-state contexts? Understanding this dynamic is important because referendums are often treated as decisive mechanisms of democratic choice yet frequently fail to produce clear or durable mandates for constitutional change. Despite extensive research on referendum behaviour, we still lack a clear explanation of why pro-change options so often fail to secure majority support, particularly in small-state contexts. The analysis suggests that, even in high-profile cases with intense campaigning, pro-change positions struggle to overcome four interlinked dynamics. First, perceptions of risk and uncertainty tend to weigh more heavily on voters than visions of opportunity. Second, the mobilisation of identity and belonging often advantages the status quo, particularly when pro-change narratives appear defensive or fragmented. Third, the absence of unified leadership and cross-party coordination undermines the credibility of pro-change campaigns. Finally, while referendums are valued as expressions of popular sovereignty, many participants doubt whether complex constitutional questions can be meaningfully resolved through a single binary vote.

These dynamics have particular resonance for small states and territories. In contexts where sovereignty claims are contested, economic vulnerabilities are heightened, and external dependencies unavoidable, the barriers to achieving a 'Yes' become especially formidable. The Scottish and Brexit referendums therefore provide instructive comparative lessons: they reveal how narratives of risk, pride, grievance, trust, and legitimacy circulate among voters and shape outcomes. While the political geography of the UK differs from microstates or non-sovereign territories, the interpretive patterns evident here shed light on the broader phenomenon of elusive affirmative votes in referendums and contribute to understanding why such outcomes remain difficult to achieve in small-state contexts.

The article is structured as follows. First, it reviews the literature on referendums in small states and territories, and situates this study within broader debates about narrative, emotion, and identity in constitutional politics. It then outlines the data and methodology, explaining the use of the QESB dataset and the application of reflexive thematic analysis. The main analysis develops four interrelated themes: (1) risk, reward and uncertainty; (2) pride, grievance and belonging; (3) leadership and trust; and (4) democratic legitimacy. The discussion draws out comparative insights from Scotland and Brexit and links these to the challenges faced by small

states and territories contemplating sovereignty referendums. The conclusion reflects on the broader implications for referendum design, emphasising that processes as well as outcomes matter, and that campaigns must cultivate unity, narrative resonance, and clarity of risk versus reward if they are to have any realistic prospect of producing a 'Yes'.

Literature review and theoretical framing

Referendums have long been used to decide questions of sovereignty, independence, and constitutional change. In small states and non-sovereign territories, they carry weight: a single plebiscite can determine international recognition, economic orientation, or membership in regional bodies. Scholars emphasise how structural vulnerabilities, external dependence, economic volatility, and limited state capacity, heighten risk perceptions and frequently advantage the status quo (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012). Hepburn and Elias (2011) similarly highlight how sub-state referendums unfold within asymmetrical power relations with larger states, making decisive 'Yes' votes especially challenging. However, while this literature identifies structural constraints, it often treats voter behaviour as a downstream effect of these conditions, offering limited insight into how such risks are interpreted and experienced by citizens themselves.

Case studies reinforce these dynamics. The Falkland Islands referendum, for example, produced a decisive vote to retain British sovereignty, but this was underpinned by unusually strong elite unity and explicit external guarantees. British political elites presented a consistent message of long-term military protection, diplomatic backing, and economic support, while Argentina's claims were framed as posing clear risks to local autonomy (Aldrich & Connell, 2016). These assurances narrowed the range of plausible futures presented to voters, substantially reducing uncertainty and reinforcing the status quo option. By contrast, the repeated New Caledonia referendums (2018, 2020, 2021) illustrate how fragile consensus and economic risk sustain recurring 'No' outcomes (Connell, 2021). Scotland (2014) and the UK's EU referendum (2016) echo these patterns, underlining that referendums in small or dependent polities rarely deliver clear mandates for change (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018). Yet such accounts often privilege institutional and elite-level explanations, leaving underexplored how ordinary voters make sense of competing claims about risk, identity, and future outcomes.

Comparative scholarship on islands and non-sovereign territories further reinforces these themes. Veenendaal (2016) shows how smallness in the Dutch Caribbean skews debate through clientelism, weak media, and limited deliberation. Grydehøj (2016; 2020) demonstrates the paradox of Greenland's sovereignty debates, where economic dependence is simultaneously narrated both as a constraint and as a pathway to independence. Prinsen (2018) introduces the idea of "Islandian sovereignty" to describe how non-self-governing islands often reject independence in referendums while pursuing hybrid forms of autonomy. Burgos-Rivera (2023) demonstrates, in work on New Caledonia and Puerto Rico, that binding referendums only emerge when metropolitan and territorial elites coordinate to define options. Similar lessons can be drawn from the Caribbean, where mandatory referendums institutionalise the principle that "the people decide" but often entrench status quo outcomes unless elite bargains provide clarity (Hintjens & Hodge, 2012; Hendry, 2012). Together, these studies stress that sovereignty referendums are embedded in structural and elite dynamics that rarely favour affirmative outcomes. However, they provide less clarity on the micro-level processes through which such structural conditions are translated into voter decisions, particularly the role of narrative, emotion, and lived experience.

Beyond institutional design, recent scholarship increasingly emphasises the interpretive dimensions of referendum politics. Voters do not simply weigh material costs and benefits; they also filter campaigns through identity, belonging, and affect. Cram (2012) shows how often debates about the EU are infused with questions of who "we" are as a political community. Reuchamps and Suiter (2016) explore referendums as contests over constitutional belonging rather than purely policy decisions. Emotion is central here: Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen (2000) demonstrate that anxiety, enthusiasm, and anger structure political judgement. Applied to referendums, these insights underscore the role of fear, pride, hope, and anger in shaping outcomes (Renwick, 2017; Tierney, 2016). While this body of work foregrounds affect and identity, it often remains theoretically oriented, with fewer studies examining how these dynamics are articulated in voters' own accounts of referendum experiences.

Research on independence referendums underscores this affective dimension. Black et al. (2021) show how Yes Scotland and Better Together deployed hope and fear-based appeals in dynamic interplay, with each side's rhetoric shaping the salience of the other. Paterson (2024), drawing on ontological security theory, highlights how the Yes campaign framed independence simultaneously as continuity, rupture, and an embrace of existential anxiety, echoing Liinpää's (2020) account of how referendums make everyday nationalism "louder" amplifying banal identities into overt political claims. Rivera Otero et al. (2025) describe how an "emotional regime" structured the Catalan referendum, where positive emotions towards the ingroup and negative emotions towards the outgroup crystallised affective polarisation. Brouard et al. (2021), examining New Caledonia's 2018 referendum, show that anger with the territory's national status increased independence support, while pride in being French reduced it. However, much of this work focuses on campaign strategies or aggregate patterns, rather than how voters themselves reflect on and narrate these dynamics in retrospect.

In the UK, Brexit revealed similar emotional dynamics. Andreouli and Nicholson (2018) find that voters narrated the campaign through moralised stories of belonging and control rather than cost–benefit logics. Moss et al. (2020) extended this to show how citizens valorised their own reliance on gut feeling while disparaging others for emotional voting. Quantitative studies reinforce these findings: Goodwin, Clarke and Whiteley (2017) show that alongside immigration and sovereignty concerns, emotional reactions and risk assessments decisively shaped vote choice. Research on the aftermath has highlighted how Brexit entrenched affective polarisation, with Leave/Remain identities now central axes of emotional division (Hobolt, Leeper & Tilley, 2020). Nevertheless, these studies say more about the presence of emotion and risk in referendum behaviour than about how voters themselves interpret and narrate those dynamics.

Earlier work on Quebec and Scotland likewise documents how emotion and identity shape outcomes. Nadeau et al. (1999) and Clarke et al. (2004) show that nationalist cleavages and partisan identification often underpinned by affect, structured referendum voting behaviour. Tierney (2016) and Curtice (2015) underscore that Yes campaigns in Scotland struggled to overcome risk-aversion linked to currency and EU membership, illustrating how material and emotional dimensions combine. In Brexit, the pro-change side prevailed despite elite disunity, because Leave narratives successfully mobilised sovereignty, grievance, and mistrust in elites (Shipman, 2016; Clarke et al., 2017). Yet the territorial divergence of the vote with Scotland and Northern Ireland rejecting Brexit highlights how identity-driven narratives produced fractured outcomes.

Taken together, this literature reveals three limitations: a focus on structural and elite-level explanations, a reliance on quantitative approaches, and limited attention to how voters themselves narrate and interpret constitutional choice. While this literature provides important insights into referendum voting behaviour, much of it relies on quantitative approaches that identify correlates of vote choice, such as attitudes to immigration, sovereignty, and economic risk (Clarke, Goodwin & Whiteley, 2017). Less attention has been paid to how voters themselves interpret and narrate these issues in their own terms, particularly through qualitative accounts of emotion, identity, and democratic legitimacy (Moss, Robinson & Watts, 2020). Moreover, existing studies rarely connect these interpretive dynamics explicitly to the persistent difficulty of achieving affirmative outcomes in sovereignty referendums, particularly in small-state contexts. As a result, we still lack a clear account of why pro-change campaigns struggle to translate support into a successful 'Yes' vote, particularly in small-state contexts where uncertainty and vulnerability are heightened. This article addresses this gap by drawing on qualitative evidence to examine how voters narrate constitutional choice, and how these narratives shape the difficulty of achieving affirmative outcomes in referendum contexts, particularly in small states and territories.

Data and methodology

This article draws on data from the Qualitative Election Study of Britain (QESB), an ongoing project designed to provide in-depth qualitative insights into how citizens experience and interpret major electoral and constitutional events. The QESB complements large-scale surveys by foregrounding the lived narratives of voters. For the two referendums considered here, the 2014 Scottish independence referendum and the 2016 referendum on the UK's membership of the EU, the project generated a rich body of focus group and interview material.

Our analysis adopts an interpretive approach, viewing referendums not simply as institutional mechanisms but as narrative and emotional contests. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) reflexive thematic analysis of published QESB referendum data (Carvalho & Winters, 2023; Carvalho, Winters & Oliver, 2023), we foreground how voters articulated risk, belonging, trust, and legitimacy in their own words. Our theoretical claim is that referendum outcomes are shaped less by objective facts than by the ways citizens narrate constitutional futures. Extending insights from small state scholarship (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018; Connell, 2021), we argue that the 'elusive Yes' problem is both structural and narrative: it reflects institutional vulnerabilities *and* the difficulty of sustaining emotionally resonant stories of transformation in the face of risk-aversion and elite division. As Carvalho, Winters and Oliver (2023) note in their release of the EU referendum dataset, the transcripts provide verbatim accounts of participants' views, with pseudonyms used to attribute individual contributions.

Data collection

For the Scottish independence referendum, five focus groups were conducted in Dundee in the months following the September 2014 vote. Dundee was selected due to its electoral distinctiveness, including its strong support for independence and the variation in marginal constituencies within and surrounding the city. Participants were recruited through a combination of snowball sampling and internet-based recruitment, generating a group of 27 participants reflecting a mix of age, gender, political affiliation, and referendum position. Based on a pre-selection questionnaire, participants were organised into groups of Yes voters, No voters, and campaign activists from both sides. Discussions centred on motivations for voting, perceptions of the campaigns, and reflections on the outcome. Although not statistically representative, the sample provides valuable insight into how individuals reflect on and make sense of referendum experiences in their own terms.

For the EU referendum, a series of 14 semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out in summer 2016, shortly after the June vote. Participants were drawn from the existing QESB panel, recruited via prior waves of the study (2010 and 2015 general elections and the 2014 Scottish referendum), and included respondents from England, Scotland, and Wales. The interviews typically lasted 20–30 minutes and explored voting decisions, impressions of the campaigns, and views on the broader political consequences. Together, these datasets capture the voices of ordinary citizens at key constitutional moments. While they are not statistically representative, they provide a valuable window into how these voters narrated the issues of risk, identity, leadership, and legitimacy. Rather than aiming for representativeness, the strength of the data lies in capturing recurring interpretive patterns in how voters understand constitutional choices, patterns that are likely to be relevant in other referendum contexts where similar questions of risk, identity, and sovereignty arise, allowing readers to assess how far these experiences may resonate beyond the UK case. In this sense, the value of the QESB data lies in its ability to capture how voters articulate political meanings, rather than to estimate the distribution of attitudes across the electorate.

Analytical approach

The analysis presented here employs Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework for reflexive thematic analysis. This approach was chosen for its flexibility in identifying patterns of meaning across qualitative datasets while remaining sensitive to context and language. The analysis proceeded through several stages: transcripts were read closely to generate initial codes (e.g. "risk with no return", "pride in voting Yes", "mistrust of elites"); these were grouped into candidate themes; through iterative re-reading and refinement, four core themes were developed that captured the interpretive dynamics most salient across both referendums: (1) risk, reward and uncertainty; (2) pride, grievance and belonging; (3) leadership and trust; and (4) democratic legitimacy.

Following Braun and Clarke's reflexive approach, themes are treated not as objective categories, but as interpretive constructs developed by the researchers in dialogue with the data. The analysis therefore reflects both participants' meaning-making and the researcher's interpretive lens.

Reflexivity

The research team's positionality is important to acknowledge. As principal and co-investigators of the QESB, we were integrally involved in the design, collection, and interpretation of the data. Our academic backgrounds in political science and governance shape the questions we asked, and the themes emphasised. Reflexive thematic analysis requires recognising that researchers are not neutral observers but active interpreters. For example, in developing the theme of "pride and belonging", we were attentive to how participants linked their referendum choices to national identity, but our decision to foreground this theme reflects our interest in identity politics and referendums.

Ethics

Both datasets were collected under the ethical protocols of the University of Dundee (Ethical Review Numbers: UREC15051/UREC14145), with informed consent obtained from all participants. Anonymity and GDPR compliance were guaranteed. Potentially identifying information was removed from the transcripts and participants were assigned aliases for longitudinal tracking. Both datasets are publicly available (Carvalho, Winters & Oliver, 2023; Carvalho and Winters, 2023).

Limitations

Like all qualitative studies, this analysis has constraints. The sample sizes were modest: five focus groups in Scotland and a series of short interviews after the Brexit vote. While participants were recruited to capture diversity, qualitative data are not generalisable. The aim is therefore analytic rather than statistical generalisation, identifying interpretive patterns that may be relevant to comparable referendum contexts, including small states and territories. The retrospective nature of some accounts also means memories may have been reshaped by subsequent events. Nonetheless, a QESB strength is that it captured how citizens articulated their own narratives. It provides insights into the meanings that voters attach to constitutional referendums that survey data alone cannot offer.

Findings

Risk, reward and uncertainty

Across both referendums, participants narrated their choices through the lens of risk rather than reward. In Scotland, economic and currency doubts dominated: in one focus group voters summed up the dilemma bluntly as an impossible gamble: "We don't have a crystal ball … generally people fear change … we don't know what's going to happen" (Scottish FG, Voters 3). Activists recalled how the No campaign played on pension fears, while others described growing "anxious about the divisiveness and the very clear agendas" as polling approached (Scottish FG, Voters 2). Even Yes supporters admitted to wavering: "I was even scared of voting Yes, what was it going to mean, I was like swaying" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). For many, independence came to feel like "a leap into the dark" (Morisi, 2016).

Brexit interviewees expressed a similar calculus. Erica reflected: "Going it alone is just too risky" (EU interview, Erica, r11), whilst Damian worried about a "shock to the status quo … that really concerns me" (EU interview, Damian, r5). Others highlighted the frustration of navigating competing claims: "It's not that I didn't want information … but I was like, 'Well that's not true! And that's not true!' So … what's true?" (EU interview, Natasha, r2). Fiona likewise recalled: "I got very confused, felt very uninformed in making a decision" (EU interview, Fiona, r1).

Some Leave supporters reframed risk by portraying uncertainty as unavoidable and, in some cases, suggesting that continuity itself entailed danger. Charles, for example, suggested that existing EU trade negotiations could be "incredibly dangerous … which wasn't gonna be the case before" (EU interview, Charles, r3), while Vince described it metaphorically: "It was just voting for a mystery box, and you don't know what's in that box" (EU interview, Vince, r9). Rather than eliminating uncertainty, these accounts accepted it as a condition of political choice, challenging Remain's attempt to present risk as uniquely associated with change.

Taken together, the two cases reveal a consistent pattern: uncertainty featured prominently in how participants recalled and justified their referendum choices. Voters more readily described what they feared might happen than the rewards they hoped to secure. This triangulates with wider patterns in sovereignty referendums. In Greenland, arguments about economic dependence and "readiness" for independence consistently advantaged the status quo, even when based on paradoxical or shifting assumptions (Grydehøj, 2020). In New Caledonia, emotions channelled these risk perceptions, with anger at colonial legacies pushing some towards independence while pride in French identity reinforced the existing attachment to France (Brouard et al., 2021). Similar dynamics are evident elsewhere, where structural dependency and information uncertainty have kept independence support below the threshold for change (Connell, 2021).

This reflects a broader status quo bias in referendum politics, where the asymmetry between loss and gain systematically disadvantages pro-change campaigns (Christin, Hug & Sciarini, 2003; Bowler & Donovan, 2000; Liñeira & Henderson, 2019). For smaller polities, the challenge is formidable: unless uncertainty can be credibly reframed as opportunity, promises of reward rarely persuade when risk feels immediate, tangible, and one-sided.

Pride, grievance and belonging

Across both referendums, voters connected their choices to feelings of pride, grievance, and belonging. These emotions shaped how participants narrated the meaning of their vote and reflected broader dynamics of identity politics, where pride and grievance structure how political communities imagine themselves (Bond, 2015; Cram, 2012; Reuchamps & Suiter, 2016). Similar dynamics are visible in small-state contexts, where external dependence sharpens identity trade-offs (Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018).

Scottish Yes activists recalled a campaign saturated with everyday pride: "People felt happy and positive" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). They spoke of flags in windows, local buzz, and doing it "for the good of everybody" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). One activist emphasised that "the working class in Dundee felt they had a chance, an opportunity, control in their hands" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). Others tied independence to cultural traditions: "I had them singing Auld Lang Syne … explaining the traditions" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). Yet scepticism of nationalism was also voiced: "The last thing that we need to do … is to draw more boundary lines … I am proud of being Scottish, but this sort of nationalistic thing is a bad idea" (Scottish FG, Voters 2). Some No voters instead located pride in the referendum process itself: "If we don't have beliefs and are not allowed to show those beliefs we're not living in a democracy" (Scottish FG, Activists 1). These narratives illustrate how referendum campaigns can simultaneously amplify everyday nationalism and civic pride (Liinpää, 2020; Tierney, 2012).

The EU referendum elicited a markedly different emotional repertoire. Leave voters often spoke in terms of grievance and sovereignty. Whitney described this as "this kind of misguided nostalgia for days gone by when things were better" (EU interview, Whitney, r8), reflecting how Brexit mobilised resentment toward Brussels and a sense of lost control. Such accounts resonate with research identifying Euroscepticism as rooted in anger and resentment (Verbalyte & von Scheve, 2017) and with findings that Brexit deepened affective polarisation (Hobolt, Leeper & Tilley, 2020).

By contrast, while Leave mobilised grievance and sovereignty, many Remain voters framed belonging in qualified or pragmatic terms rather than through strong affective attachment. Erica, for example, described the EU as "part of a collaboration" (EU interview, Erica, r11), presenting membership less as an identity to be embraced than as a functional arrangement worth preserving. This reflects a form of contingent or defensive belonging, grounded in risk avoidance and the perceived costs of disruption rather than positive emotional identification.

Not all pro-Remain accounts, however, rested on defensive attachment to institutions. Vince emphasised "so many opportunities … travelling, embracing different cultures, uniting with Europe" (EU interview, Vince, r9), expressing an orientation towards openness and mobility that was cultural rather than institutional. His account highlights how support for European integration could coexist with limited attachment to the EU as a governing structure, reinforcing the absence of a thick, shared identity capable of countering Leave's emotive sovereignty narrative. Such accounts are not uncommon, but they did not coalesce into a shared identity narrative with the emotional coherence of Leave's appeal.

Among Leave supporters, belonging was often rearticulated in narrower national terms. Walt, for instance, reflected a layered but bounded identity when he stated, "Although I'm Scottish and I'm British, I consider myself British" (EU interview, Walt, l1), illustrating how national belonging could be affirmed without reference to Europe at all.

As other scholars note, Remain struggled to generate affirmative narratives of identity. Instead, it leaned heavily on tragedy (risk, loss, catastrophe) combined with technocratic forecasts which produced ambivalence amongst voters (Menon & Salter, 2016). Spencer and Oppermann (2019) argue that the Leave narrative was far more consistent and romantic, while Remain's was fragmented and defensive.

The contrast is significant. In Scotland, the Yes campaign sought to mobilise pride and belonging as positive forces, while Brexit was driven more by grievance and nostalgia, deepening division rather than fostering unity. The Catalan referendum in 2017 underlines this dynamic: Rivera Otero et al. (2025) show how pride and positive affect clustered around the independence ingroup, while grievance and hostility defined the outgroup. This mirrors the polarisation observed in Brexit and highlights how fragile identity-based appeals can both mobilise and divide. For small states and territories, the implication is therefore not that grievance-based narratives are ineffective, as Brexit demonstrates that they can be electorally successful, but that they tend to mobilise support in ways that deepen division and weaken the perceived legitimacy and durability of outcomes (Prinsen, 2018; Brouard et al., 2021).

Comparative evidence suggests that referendums are more likely to sustain both inclusive identity narratives and trust in leadership when pro-change campaigns combine elite unity with credible guarantees and broadly shared visions of the future. The 1995 Quebec referendum, for example, came close to success partly because the Yes campaign articulated a civic, inclusive nationalism alongside relatively coherent leadership (Clarke et al., 2004). Similarly, early phases of the Scottish Yes campaign briefly achieved this balance by linking independence to social democracy and collective empowerment before uncertainty and elite fragmentation eroded confidence.

Leadership and trust

Participants frequently reflected on political leaders and whether they could be trusted. In Scotland, many dismissed Alex Salmond in harsh terms: an "aloof, idiot … fool, poor leader" (Scottish FG, Voters 1), or "duplicitous, untrustworthy and power hungry" (Scottish FG, Voters 3). While some admired the advocacy of Salmond and Nicola Sturgeon, others feared independence was too tightly bound to a single party, underscoring the difficulty of establishing cross-party legitimacy (Tierney, 2016; Curtice, 2015). More broadly, mistrust in elites undercut attempts to mobilise confidence in the Yes campaign's leadership. As Gloria put it: "… I don't believe that we know what is going on in the country and therefore whatever politicians say from any persuasion is not to be trusted" (Scottish FG, Voters 2). This reflects a recurrent pattern in sovereignty referendums: elite cues are pivotal but fragile, and divided or distrusted elites often doom pro-change coalitions (Corbett, 2015; Qvortrup, 2014; Renwick, 2017).

In the Brexit interviews, similar concerns emerged. Mistrust attached strongly to Prime Minister David Cameron and Chancellor George Osborne. Taylor recalled, "At one time, if Mr Cameron or Mr Osborne had said, 'a plague of locusts will hit this country if you vote Out' I wouldn't have been surprised. It almost became farcical" (EU interview, Taylor, l3). She concluded: "Ghastly. Absolutely ghastly … Scaremongering, bullying tactics which I wouldn't expect to hear from a Prime Minister of this country and a Chancellor of the Exchequer" (EU interview, Taylor, l3). Such testimony underlines a broader critique, developed by Spencer and Oppermann (2019), that the Remain campaign leaned too heavily on technocratic warnings and

economic forecasts, which failed to inspire confidence. As Taylor observed, Cameron may have believed his arguments, but "people didn't trust him" (EU interview, Taylor, l3); a striking disjuncture between conviction and credibility.

The role of the Labour Party was also contested. Jeremy Corbyn was criticised for not campaigning "hard enough or with enough passion" (EU interview, Whitney, r8), echoing wider concerns that he lacked conviction and failed to provide a rallying point. The weakness of Remain's leadership compounded elite divisions: unity among leaders was present in form but undermined by mistrust in their motives and messages. As Renwick (2017) notes, elite unity is necessary but not sufficient if the tone is uninspiring or negative.

By contrast, Leave leaders were often distrusted yet regarded as more effective communicators. Whitney described Boris Johnson as using the referendum as "a political platform … more interested in [his] own career" (EU interview, Whitney, r8). Erica likewise admitted: "… I don't think I trusted the people who were leading the Leave campaign either" (EU interview, Erica, r11). Yet these same leaders were credited with providing clarity and conviction: their simple slogans cut through where Remain's complex arguments faltered. This distinction between distrust of individuals and belief in the narrative echoes wider findings on populist leadership, where divisive figures can command symbolic resonance even when their personal credibility is doubted (Clarke et al., 2017; Shipman, 2016).

Taken together, the picture that emerges across both referendums is one of deep cynicism towards political elites, a lack of trusted leadership, and the failure of pro-change campaigns to cultivate cross-party legitimacy. In Scotland, mistrust in Salmond constrained the Yes movement, while in the EU referendum neither Cameron nor Corbyn could credibly carry the Remain case. The absence of leaders perceived as authoritative and believable reinforced voter scepticism, leaving space for Farage and Johnson, whose messages resonated despite doubts about their honesty. Comparative research suggests this is not accidental. Burgos-Rivera (2023) shows that New Caledonia's binding referendums were only possible because metropolitan and territorial elites forged settlements that defined clear options and a legitimate process, whereas Puerto Rico's elite divisions blocked meaningful outcomes. Similarly, Barrow-Giles and Yearwood (2023) argue that in the Caribbean context mandatory referendums can place "the people" at the constitutional centre, but only when elite bargains provide clarity and transparency. In small states and territories, credibility rests less on the charisma of individual leaders than on the ability of elites to reach common ground. Without consensus, even persuasive figures face entrenched doubts; with it, referendum processes can be anchored in stability and legitimacy.

Democratic legitimacy

Participants valued having a direct say but questioned whether referendums were adequate tools for decisions of this scale. Yet doubts were widespread. Several reflected that the quality of information and the binary nature of the vote weakened their capacity to make choices they regarded as genuinely informed or grounded in meaningful democratic deliberation.

In the Brexit interviews, scepticism about the instrument itself was explicit. Finn reflected on proposals for a second referendum, linking notions of accountability and legitimacy: "I think there is a huge problem with the integrity of a referendum if you are just going to say, 'well, we didn't get the answer right, we're going to have to have another one'. … there might be a case behind the argument that the referendum was won on false pretences … but it seems to me … not particularly robust as a result. However, … it's a bit worrying if you're going to undermine the result … and just ask for another one" (EU interview, Finn, r12). Others questioned whether a referendum was an appropriate mechanism for decisions of this

scale and complexity. Vince argued: "The referendum was very democratically done, I suppose. Whether it should have been, I always think it probably shouldn't have been giving that responsibility to the people" (EU interview, Vince, r9).

Concerns also focused on how campaigns were conducted. Charles expressed that the referendum was poorly structured and able to be captured by different groups pushing their own agendas he suggested the vote was "fatally flawed … Remain was fully defined, we knew what Remain was. We didn't know what Leave was. And because people imagined different things, I think people are gonna be very angry … the things that people thought they were voting for … the Leave campaign is now saying 'Oh well … we never said that!'" (EU interview, Charles, r3). For some voters, the conduct of the campaigns shook their faith in democracy itself. Olivia recalled: "There was so much lying going on … my belief in democracy was shaken" (EU interview, Olivia, r6).

The consistent theme is ambivalence: citizens valued the chance to decide but doubted whether the campaigns and information environment met democratic standards. Underlying these doubts were implicit expectations that referendum campaigns should be transparent, fair and informationally balanced, enabling voters to make an informed and contestable choice rather than navigate competing claims perceived as misleading or strategic. As Renwick (2017) notes, poor-quality campaigns can corrode legitimacy by undermining the sense that voters have made an informed, considered choice. When democratic standards were perceived to be violated, trust in both campaigns and political elites was undermined, deepening uncertainty rather than resolving it.

Scottish participants were aware of this tension, balancing pride in direct participation with scepticism about partisan campaigning. EU referendum participants reinforced these concerns, linking legitimacy not only to the act of voting but also to accountability, information quality, and trust in elites. Hobolt, Leeper and Tilley (2020) add that Brexit identities hardened into opinion-based groups whose polarisation rivalled traditional partisanship, making it harder for either side to accept outcomes as legitimate. This illustrates how referendum campaigns can entrench division rather than resolve it, underscoring the contingent nature of legitimacy in small states and territories.

Comparative research reinforces this point. Tierney (2012) argues that referendums can revitalise democracy by engaging citizens with fundamental questions of sovereignty, but only when they are designed with deliberative safeguards. Scholars further note that many island territories use referendums not as final settlements but as recurring opportunities to renegotiate their constitutional status with metropolitan states. In this view, legitimacy depends less on a single plebiscite than on whether repeated contests sustain dialogue and incremental change (Prinsen & Blaise, 2017). Similarly, Barrow-Giles and Yearwood (2023) warn that without elite clarity and public trust constitutional referendums risk becoming sources of frustration rather than empowerment.

Taken together, these accounts show how citizens can simultaneously value referendums as expressions of democratic choice and question their adequacy as mechanisms for resolving complex constitutional questions. In smaller polities, what endures is often less the outcome than the confidence placed in how it was reached. When citizens question the fairness or adequacy of the process, confidence in the settlement is weakened, demonstrating that transparency, information quality, and accountability matter as much as the numbers on polling day (Connell, 2021).

Discussion and comparative insights

This article has shown how participants in both the Scottish independence and Brexit referendums narrated their choices through emotions, identity and uncertainty. Here we interpret those findings and consider what they reveal about the dynamics of sovereignty referendums in small states and semi-sovereign territories. Four interrelated themes stand out: (1) risk and uncertainty; (2) pride, grievance and belonging; (3) leadership and trust; and (4) democratic legitimacy. Read together, these help explain why affirmative outcomes are so difficult to secure, and why even decisive results often fail to resolve underlying divisions.

A central insight is the prominence of uncertainty. While referendums are often framed as providing clarity, participants across both cases described them as confusing and unsettling, more an exercise in "guesswork" than informed choice. This mirrors some of the small states literature, which emphasises how immediacy and vulnerability sharpen the emotional weight of political decisions (Baldacchino and Hepburn, 2012; Veenendaal, 2020). Risks were consistently perceived as more salient than potential rewards. Unless uncertainty is recast as opportunity, campaigns for constitutional change face inherent disadvantage.

The Scottish and Brexit referendums illustrate this dynamic differently. In Scotland, the Yes campaign projected confidence in national capability, yet metaphors of unpredictability and fear of loss repeatedly overshadowed appeals to pride. In Brexit, Leave reversed the logic: portraying EU membership as the greater danger, it reframed continuity as risk and departure as security. Both cases underline that sovereignty referendums rarely hinge on rational forecasts, but on how uncertainty is narrated, a challenge that is magnified in small and vulnerable polities.

Leadership and trust in elites proved equally significant, though in different ways across the two cases. In Scotland, independence was tightly associated with the SNP, generating enthusiasm among supporters but limiting cross-partisan credibility. Salmond and Sturgeon were remembered as effective but divisive figures, while the cross-party Better Together campaign offered breadth at the expense of inspiration, and was often recalled primarily for its negative messaging. In the Brexit referendum, Remain was fronted by leaders who were widely mistrusted (Cameron, Osborne) or perceived as half-hearted (Corbyn). Leave, by contrast, benefited from figures such as Johnson and Farage who were frequently described as untrustworthy, yet highly effective communicators. This suggests that while fractured or distrusted leadership often weakens pro-change campaigns, Brexit represents an important exception: emotionally resonant narratives were able to compensate for low leadership credibility. In small states and semi-sovereign territories, where elite networks are narrow and divisions highly visible, the capacity for such narratives to override leadership distrust may be more limited (Burgos-Rivera, 2023; Fisher, 2024).

The emotional repertoire of identity appeals also diverged. In Scotland, Yes campaigners mobilised pride and empowerment, embedding independence in cultural traditions and a positive vision of self-government. No voters, by contrast, often expressed pride in the democratic process itself. Brexit, however, leaned more heavily on grievance and nostalgia. Leave mobilised themes of national recovery and control, while Remain's identity appeals were defensive, grounded in attachment to Europe but lacking the broader resonance of Scottish pride. These contrasts highlight the delicate balance between pride and grievance: pride alone may not overcome economic fears, while grievance can galvanise disruption but often at the cost of lasting polarisation.

Finally, both referendums provoked doubts about democratic legitimacy. Some valued the chance to decide, but others questioned whether complex constitutional choices could or should be reduced to a binary vote. Many felt misled by campaign claims, compounding scepticism about whether the outcomes represented informed mandates. These reflections echo wider critiques that legitimacy depends not just on procedure but also on deliberation, inclusion, and campaign quality (Reuchamps & Suiter, 2016; Renwick, 2017). In small states and territories, where sovereignty questions are existential, poorly designed processes or low-quality campaigns can erode legitimacy even where results appear clear (Veenendaal & Connell, 2018).

Considered together, the two referendums reveal a central paradox. In Scotland, a long-running and comparatively positive campaign was widely remembered as inclusive and legitimate, yet it failed to secure a Yes vote. Brexit, by contrast, succeeded electorally by mobilising grievance and reversing the risk calculus, even as it generated enduring mistrust and division. This contrast highlights a crucial distinction between the conditions that secure referendum victories and those that sustain democratic legitimacy afterward. The wider lesson for small states and territories is that the barriers to achieving a 'Yes' are both structural and interpretive. Campaigns must reframe uncertainty, sustain inclusive identity appeals, and present leaders who command cross-cutting trust; where these conditions are absent, the advantage lies with the status quo, and referendums risk amplifying rather than resolving political fault lines.

Conclusion and policy implications

This article has sought to explain why achieving a successful 'Yes' vote in sovereignty referendums is often difficult, particularly in small states and territories. Although the UK is not a small state, its Scottish independence and Brexit referendums offer comparative insights that help illuminate the structural dilemmas faced by smaller polities. In this sense, the difficulty of securing a 'Yes' vote is closely tied to how voters interpret risk, identity, leadership, and the legitimacy of the process itself.

Both cases demonstrate how constitutional choices are shaped less by policy detail than by perceptions of risk, the persuasiveness of identity stories, the cohesion of political leadership, and the credibility of the process itself. Our comparative analysis shows how these dynamics played out in practice. In Scotland, voters encountered a campaign infused with pride and belonging but undermined by elite division and persistent uncertainty about the economic future. In Brexit, by contrast, Leave prevailed through a consistent and emotive narrative of grievance and possibility, despite deep scepticism about the credibility of its leaders. This suggests that emotionally resonant narratives can, under certain conditions, compensate for weak or distrusted leadership, though often at the expense of post-referendum cohesion. Testimony from citizens across both cases underlines this: uncertainty was remembered more vividly than opportunity, identity was often invoked in narrow or defensive ways, and mistrust of elites left many questioning whether they were able to make a genuinely informed choice. These accounts resonate with the small states literature, which emphasises both the structural and interpretive barriers to constitutional change (Baldacchino & Hepburn, 2012; Corbett & Veenendaal, 2018).

For small states and territories considering sovereignty referendums, the lesson is clear: achieving a successful 'Yes' vote requires more than a compelling policy case. It demands narratives that reframe uncertainty, leadership coalitions that voters trust, and procedures that command broad legitimacy. Without these conditions, structural vulnerabilities such as external dependence, exposure to uncertainty, and electorates inclined towards caution make affirmative outcomes highly improbable.

These referendums reveal a broader paradox at the heart of sovereignty votes: campaigns that succeed electorally may do so through emotionally powerful narratives that bypass leadership credibility yet leave deeper questions of legitimacy unresolved. For small states and territories, where political communities are socially dense and divisions are harder to absorb or contain, this trade-off is particularly acute. The lesson is not that referendums should be avoided, but that their design and conduct matter profoundly. Balanced campaigns, informed debate, and inclusive deliberation are essential not only for fairness but for sustaining trust beyond the vote itself. Leaders must build broad coalitions rather than rely on polarising appeals, and legitimacy should be judged by the quality of the process as much as by the numbers on polling day. Only under these conditions can referendums generate outcomes that are not only electorally decisive but also perceived as legitimate and democratically durable.

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