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## Voting Patterns in the British Referendum, May 2011

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## ***Introduction***

Referendums are relatively rare in most democratic countries, even more so in regard to the question of electoral reform. Over the past thirty years, nine national referendums were held on the issue of electoral reform in New Zealand, Great Britain, Italy and Slovenia altogether. Of these nine referendums more than half (five in total) resulted in the rejection of the proposed electoral reform (i.e. change of the national voting system) (Center for Research on Direct Democracy 2013).

In this paper we seek to examine some of the determining factors in influencing voting patterns in the Alternative Vote Referendum held on 5 May 2011 in Great Britain. In this referendum, people were asked to accept or reject a reform to the current majoritarian, single-member district electoral system used to elect members of Westminster and replace it with a mixed, more proportional electoral system, namely AV+. Under the new electoral system voters would be asked to cast two ballots- the first ballot would elect the majority of MPs (80 to 85 per cent) using the current majoritarian single member district electoral system. The second ballot would elect the remainder of MPs on a corrective top-up basis using a proportional and open party lists system. This addition is expected to significantly reduce disproportionality in the election results (Jenkins 1998, 50).

We argue that in the case of this referendum, which resulted in the rejection of the proposed reform, voters' party affiliation was the main determining factor in influencing voter behaviour, coupled with demographic factors such as education levels, ethno-linguistic fractionalization levels of the district and the geographic region of the constituency (Scotland, Wales or England).

This paper begins with a brief historical and literary review and a discussion of the theoretical basis for the hypotheses that will be examined below. The next

section presents an overview of the data: the referendum and local/regional elections results by constituency and explains how the two additional variables, ethno-linguistic fractionalization and education were operationalized. The following section presents the results of a correlation analysis between the dependent and independent variables and of two analysed models. Model A will present regression analysis of the relationship between the referendum results and voters' party affiliation with and without controlling for the geographical region of the constituency. Model B will present analysis of a multi-variant regression to test the influence of two additional variables on voter's decisions in England and Wales.

### ***Historical Background and Previous Research***

The electoral system currently used for electing the members of the British House of Commons (Commons) is a plurality system with single-member constituencies known as First-Past-The-Post (FPTP).<sup>1</sup> As a result, the governing party, i.e. the party that gained the largest number of seats in the Commons, is not always the party that gained the largest number of the electorate's votes. For example, in 2005 the Labour party won 55 per cent of the seats with only 35.2 per cent of the votes (Parliament 2012b). The discussion of electoral reform in Great Britain has been an ongoing debate for many years, a debate that gained renewed momentum during the 1990s. As part of their election manifesto in 1997, the Labour party pledged to commission a report on the electoral system with recommendations for reform which will be submitted to the public's approval in a referendum. And indeed, after the party's victory that year, the Jenkins commission published its report in 1998 which

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<sup>1</sup> According to this system, the winning candidate does not need an absolute majority of the votes cast in a constituency; she simply needs to gain more votes than any other candidate on a single count (Jenkins 1998, 5-12).

recommended the adoption of AV+. However, a referendum was never completed in the thirteen years of the Labour government. After the general election of 2010, a coalition government was established for the first time since World War II between the Conservatives and the Liberal-Democrats. As part of the coalition agreement (The Coalition Agreement 2012, 27) a referendum asking whether or not to change the FPTP election system to AV+ was held on 5 May 2011 and the results were as followed: overall turnout was 42.2 per cent of which 32.1 per cent voted “Yes” and 67.9 per cent voted “No” (Parliament 2012a).

In previous research conducted on the subject, different causes were associated with influencing voters in referendums, ranging from institutional (Donovan 1995; Hug and Sciarini 2002) to behavioural causes (Denver 2002; Vowles 1995). In the case of the British AV referendum several studies were held to analyse the reasons behind the voters' rejection of the proposed reform. Some simply tried to reflect on the process that surrounded the referendum from several perspectives, mainly that of the public media (Renwick and Lamp 2012). Others examined the effects of judgments about the possible costs and benefits of the suggested electoral reform, individual traits such as education, political knowledge, political interest and media consumption and the mobilisation of voters by campaigning (Clarke, Sanders, Stewart and Whiteley 2012; Laycock, Renwick, Stevens and Vowles 2013).

As for the influence of voters' party affiliation, here defined as the percentage of votes/seats gained by parties in the regional/local elections held on the same day as the referendum,<sup>2</sup> previous research has found a clear effect on voting behaviour (Hobolt 2009) thus motivating us to examine whether or not the same connection can

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<sup>2</sup> The Alternative Vote referendum coincided with elections to the devolved assemblies in Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales and with local elections in parts of England.

be found in the case of the British referendum. We believe that an examination of this potential influence can shed a different light on the causes which led to the referendum results and contribute to the growing body of empirical evidence regarding the connection between the two variables.

### ***Hypotheses***

The first hypothesis concerns the relationship between the results of the referendum and the results of the local/regional elections held that same day. Upon examining this relationship we expect to find a positive connection between the two. That is, if the parties in favour of the electoral change proposed in the referendum received major support by voters in the local/regional elections, then we expect to find also major support for the approval of the referendum in the same constituency. This hypothesis is based on the assumptions of Rational Choice theory, which is the main theoretical approach guiding this paper.

According to Rational Choice theory, when faced with a choice between two alternatives, the voter is expected to choose the policy option most convergent with her best interest (Downs 1957). However, this expectation presupposes that the voter has perfect information about the policy in question, a fact which Converse (1964) has found to usually remain untrue. Gathering, sorting and examining information requires a large investment of time and resources which most voters are not willing to make, which puts into question the validity of the Rational Choice theory in regards to voting. The solution to this problem has been found to reside in information shortcuts that allow the non-informed or low-informed voter to vote in a similar way to the well-informed voter and therefore in a rational way. These information shortcuts are cues and heuristics which appear in several forms such as elite cues, campaign events,

party identification/affiliation, polls, and opinion leaders (Sniderman, Brody and Tetlock 1991; Lupia and McCubbins 1998). In her book "Europe in Question" Sara B. Hobolt (2009) explains that in referendums, these shortcuts usually take the form of elite endorsements such as party or government endorsement. The voter is thus able to rely on her trust or distrust of certain elites (in our case, political parties) and their cues in order to weigh the options presented before her and form an opinion in a state of limited information.

The second hypothesis concerns additional factors which may influence voters' choice, namely ethno-linguistic identity and educational status. Here too we expect to find a positive relationship between these variables and the referendum result; that is, higher levels of education and ethno-linguistic fractionalization in a constituency will lead to higher levels of support for the proposed electoral change in the referendum.

This hypothesis is based on the significant role attributed to these factors in affecting individuals' levels of openness to change in general and to electoral reform in particular. When examining the question at hand, generally speaking, it seeks to address the issue of maintaining the status quo versus changing it. Thus, when we are faced with an electoral reform aimed at changing the current makeup of the political landscape, i.e. broadening representation by adopting a more proportional electoral system, one can formulate the question presented to the voter as "regarding this topic, are you conservative or non-conservative?". When formulated this way, we must then postulate about the different factors contributing to ones' level of conservativeness, and about other factors contributing to her openness towards changing the status quo.

One of the biggest contributors to liberal thinking is education. Multiple studies have shown that the higher the education level of the individual, the more

liberal are her views on various social issues (Jacoby 1988; Himmelstein and McRae 1988). This comes as no surprise when the assumption is that public education tends to broaden one's mind, and introduces new ideas and worlds previously unknown. As one becomes more familiarized with different views and ways of thinking, she is more susceptible to accepting other peoples' views, and therefore may also be susceptible to changes that will liberalise (or "open") the political environment. Furthermore, the proposed electoral reform was strongly supported by liberal Pro-reform interest groups such as The electoral Reform Society; Unlock Democracy; Take Back Parliament and by liberal political parties such as the Liberal Democratic Party, the Scottish National Party and Plaid Cymru (National Party of Wales). It is thus assumed that a more liberal view of politics will encourage greater support for a reform advocated by the liberal elites in Britain.

A second factor addresses the effect of ethno-linguistic affiliation of an individual's potency for supporting electoral reform referendums. As previously stated, this referendum, as others with similar characteristics, can be formulated as a question about change versus maintaining the status-quo. In this case: a change towards a more proportional electoral system versus maintaining the use of a strict majoritarian single-member district electoral system. Here we seek to draw on the theory postulating that ethnic minorities will show support for a more-proportional electoral system when possible. More specifically, because under proportional electoral systems votes are correlated more proportionally with the allocation of seats in parliament, then under a majoritarian electoral system, it stands to reason that ethnically-fragmentized constituencies would prefer the former electoral system rather than the latter. On the other hand, in constituencies where minorities exist but the ethnic fragmentation is not significant, we do not expect to find major support for a

more proportional electoral system. The logic guiding this premise is based on the calculation made by voters belonging to these minority groups. If an individual is part of a minority group that is "spread-out" among numerous constituencies she is more likely to achieve better representation under a proportional system than a majoritarian one, whereas minorities which constitute a local majority in a constituency are able to achieve representation under the majoritarian electoral system as well as under a more proportional one.

In the case of Great Britain, it has already been stated that under the pure majoritarian electoral system used for electing the members of Westminster, votes of minorities are under-represented (Fieldhouse and Sobolewska 2013). A relatively proportional electoral system, such as the AV+ reform suggests, would bring at least some of these votes into account. Evidence from Russia and New Zealand, for example, indicates that ethnic minorities indeed received higher political representation after changing the electoral system single-member district system to a more representational one (Karp and Banducci 2008; Moser 2008).

The reason we focus on ethnic minorities is that quite often ethnic minorities, such as those vastly existent in the United Kingdom, also often constitute political minorities on a large number of issues and as stated above are under-represented under the current electoral rules. There is also evidence from the United States relating to African Americans, for example, that indicates that despite the fact that African Americans do not constitute a small minority at all, various parameters still distinguished them from white and Christian population in the country. The findings show that mistrust in the political system is relatively high among this group, partly because of the American majoritarian single-member district electoral system. In addition, this mistrust leads to vast support for changes in the political system in



general and in the electoral and party system in particular, naturally towards more proportional ones (Avery 2009).

To conclude, we expect to find that in constituencies with high levels of education and ethno-linguistic fractionalization there will also be a high level of support for the electoral reform proposed in the referendum. The reason for this is the voters' assumed desire to create a British electoral system that would favour their chances of achieving a more appropriate representation.

### ***Data and Method***

The British Alternative Vote (AV) Referendum was held on 5 May 2011 (Parliament 2013a). The results were collected by constituency to constitute the dependent variable (Yes to AV) which stands for the percentage of votes in favour of the electoral reform proposed. Minimum percentage of favoured support is 20.3; maximum favoured support is 60.7 with a median value of 30.2, mean 31.45 and standard deviation of 6.606. On the same day as the referendum, regional and local elections were held and Scotland (Parliament 2013f), Wales (Parliament 2013e) and England (Parliament 2013d)<sup>3</sup>. For the regional elections in Scotland and Wales, the data stands for the aggregated percentage of votes received by parties that were in favour of the referendum- Labour, Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (only in Scotland) and Plaid Cymru (National Party of Wales, only in Wales). For the local elections in England, the data stands for the proportion of seats in the local authority gained by parties that were in favour of the referendum- Labour, Liberal Democrats and Green. Together, this variable (Pro AV Party) was coded to vary

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<sup>3</sup> For the constituencies where no local election was held in 2011, the data was collected from previous local elections in 2010 (Parliament 2013c) and 2009 (Parliament 2013b).

between 0 and 1 with mean value of .51, median of .55 and standard deviation of .293. For both variables N=435.<sup>4</sup>

In addition, two dummy variables were created in order to control for the possible influence of the geographical region of the constituency: one for Scotland (Dummy Scotland- N of 1=73, N of 0=366) and one for Wales (Dummy Wales- N of 1=40, N of 0=399) with England as the base model (N = 326).

Out of 439 constituencies, ten voted in favour (over 50 per cent Yes votes) of which eight were in England, two in Scotland and none in Wales.<sup>5</sup> In addition, the three regions vary in the voting patterns of their electorate overall. The average turnout and voting in favour of the referendum in English constituencies was 41.92 per cent and 30 per cent respectively; in Wales the average turnout was almost the same, 41.56 per cent with an average of favoured votes slightly higher at 34.6 per cent. In Scotland on the other hand, the average turnout was significantly higher than in the two other regions, 50.49 per cent and an average favoured vote at 36.5 per cent which was also higher than in England and Wales.

All variables described above will be used to analyse Model A, a multi-variant regression analysis of the relationship between the percentage of favoured votes in the referendum and favoured votes for parties supporting the referendum while controlling for the possible influence of the geographic region of the constituency.

In order to analyse Model B of the paper, two additional control variables were generated only for English and Welsh constituencies. The reason for omitting the Scottish constituencies from the analysis is the difficulties we encountered in the

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<sup>4</sup> The total number of constituencies in the referendum is 440. However, we have four constituencies in England with no data for the local elections and we do not examine the case of Northern Ireland because the significant difference in the party system there does not allow for the comparison made in the paper.

<sup>5</sup> The paper does not include voting patterns in North Ireland due to the fact that the political party composition in this region differs significantly from that of England, Scotland and Wales, making the comparative analysis with the other regions not possible.

process of collecting the data. This is because the Office for National Statistics 2011 census that was used to generate the data for England and Wales does not cover the Scottish constituencies (Office for National Statistics 2013). A separate census is conducted in Scotland (Scotland's Census 2013) which uses different constituency boundaries than the ones used in the regional and referendum votes, making the inclusion of these constituencies in the analysis not possible.

In this model we hope to find what, if any, was the influence of these variables on our dependent variable and whether they influenced the effect of party affiliation (Pro AV Party) which was the focus of the regression analysis in Model A.

The first control variable in Model B measures the relative aggregate level of highest educational qualification achieved by residents of each constituency in England and Wales. This was calculated by using data drawn from questions regarding individual levels of qualification in the 2011 British census in which respondents were asked to indicate all types of qualifications they held, out of twelve options. All responses were combined into a five-category index of highest qualification level which varies between 'no qualifications' and level 4 qualifications and above (academic degree). Another category was given for 'other qualifications' (which includes vocational or work related qualifications, and for foreign qualifications where an equivalent UK qualification was not indicated.<sup>6</sup> The index value for each constituency is:

$$\sum_{n1}^{n6} NnKn$$

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<sup>6</sup> For full description of education index values see Appendix.

For which,  $N_{n, \dots, 6}$  stands for the percentage of each educational level in the constituency and  $K_n$  stands for the constant score. The calculated educational level for each constituency (N=366) was coded to vary between 0 and 1 with mean value of .31, median of .3 and standard deviation of .156.

The second control variable measures the ethnic diversity in a constituency via an index used almost universally in the empirical literature for ethno-linguistic fractionalization (ELF). Here it is used for calculating the ethno-linguistic fractionalization in English and Welsh constituencies. The formula measures the probability that two randomly drawn individuals from the overall population belong to different ethnic groups. In particular, if we consider a society composed of  $K \geq 2$  different ethnic groups and let  $p_k$  indicate the share of group  $k$  in the total population, the resulting value of the ELF index is given by:

$$1 - \sum_{k=1}^K p_k^2$$

Even though this is a relatively simple index, it is popularly used for macro as well as for aggregated data (Bossert, D'Ambrosion and Ferrara 2011). The index consists of the prominent ethnic groups in British society and several aggregate categories for groups that are either mixed or too small. These groups include white British, Irish, Gipsy, other whites, Arab, Indian, Bangladeshi, Chinese, other Asians, African, Caribbean, Other black, mixed ethnic, other ethnic group. The variable (N=366) ranges from 0 to 1, mean value of .23, median of .14 and standard deviation of .211.

## ***The Results***

At first, we conducted a correlation analysis between the independent variables- favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum, education and ethnic-linguistic fractionalization and the dependent - favoured voting in the referendum. The results show that the three independent variables have a strong positive relationship with favoured voting in the referendum (.5767; .3853; .5501, respectively) and all relationships are statistically significant ( $p = .0000$ ).<sup>7</sup>

### *Model A*

Table 1 presents the multi-variant regression analysis conducted in Model A. The results reveal that, as expected according to our first hypothesis, a positive relationship between favoured voting in the referendum and favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum indeed exists. Favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum facilitates an increase in voting "Yes" in the referendum ( $b = 13, p = .000$ ). After controlling for the potential effect of the geographic region of Scotland and Wales (with England as the base model), the results still show a positive relationship between the two variables but to a lesser degree ( $b = 11.528, p = .000$ ). In addition, when examining the particular effect of the two dummy variables, the results reveal that if a constituency is located in Scotland it facilitates an increase in favoured voting in the referendum ( $b = 2.028, p = .013$ ) and if a constituency is located in Wales it also facilitates the an increase in favoured voting in the referendum ( $b = 1.155$ ) but this result is not statistically significant.

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<sup>7</sup> Results only reported, not shown.

<i>Table 1</i>	<b>Model A</b>			<b>Model B</b>	
Yes To AV (dependent)	Without regional control	With regional control	$\beta$	All Independent Variables	B
(Independents)					
Pro AV Party	13.001** (.885)	11.528** (1.058)	.51	9.699** (.846)	.43
Scotland	-	2.028* (.815)	.11	-	-
Wales	-	1.155 (.958)	.05	4.664** (.723)	.23
Education Level	-	-	-	8.107** (.723)	.39
Ethno-Linguistic Fractionalization	-	-	-	9.627** (.981)	.36
R <sup>2</sup>	.332	.342	.342	.638	.638
N	435	435	435	362	362

Note: \*\* $p \leq 0.05$ , \* $p \leq 0.1$ ; Standard Errors in parentheses.

$\beta$  analysis reveals that the relative effect of favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum in regional/local elections ( $\beta = .51$ ) is five times as much as the relative effect of the geographic region of Scotland ( $\beta = .11$ ), and ten times as much as the effect of the geographic region of Wales ( $\beta = .05$ ). When looking at Model A as a whole, R<sup>2</sup> reveals that favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum accounts for 33 per cent of the explained variance of favoured voting in

the referendum (Yes to AV). When controlling for the geographical region of the constituencies, the explained variance in the model increases only slightly to 34 per cent.

### *Model B*

Our second hypothesis states that high levels of education and ethnic linguistic fractionalization will increase favoured voting in the referendum. The results of the multi-variant regression analysis of Model B as shown in Table 1 reveal that indeed, while holding all other independent variables constant, education and ethnic linguistic fractionalization increase favoured voting in the referendum ( $b = 8.107, p = .000$ ;  $b = 9.627, p = .000$ , respectively). As for our main independent variable, favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum, the analysis reveals that while holding all independent variables constant, similarly to Model A, it increases favoured voting in the referendum but to a lesser degree ( $b = 9.699, p = .000$ ). In addition, the effect of the geographic location of Wales in this model is positive as well, that is, if a constituency is located in Wales it facilitates an increase in favoured voting in the referendum ( $b = 4.664, p = .000$ ).

The  $\beta$  analysis for this model reveals that the relative effect of favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum ( $\beta = .43$ ) is stronger than the relative effect of education ( $\beta = .39$ ) and of ethnic linguistic fractionalization ( $\beta = .36$ ) but not to a significant degree. The relative effect of Wales, however, is significantly weaker than the other variables ( $\beta = .23$ ). Upon examining Model B as a whole,  $R^2$  indicates that all independent variables together account for 64 per cent of the explained variance of favoured voting in the referendum. In addition, a closer look at the results of  $R^2$  analysis in Model A for England and Wales only (.29) shows that controlling for

education and ethnic linguistic fractionalization more than doubles the explained variance of favoured voting in the referendum.<sup>8</sup>

### *Robust Regression Analysis*

In order to further challenge our findings, we conducted robust regression analyses for the two models. In both, favoured voting for parties supporting the referendum retained its effect on favoured voting in the referendum in the reduced model. In model A, the dummy variable for Wales retained its effect and is still not statistically significant whereas the dummy variable for Scotland also retained its effect as in the reduced model but with a variation in the statistical significance ( $p = .056$ ). In model B, all variables - dummy for Wales, education and ethnic linguistic fractionalization also retained their effect as in the reduced model.

### *Conclusions*

The results of the multi-variant regression analysis in the reduced model and in the robust analysis of Model A support our first hypothesis that there is a positive connection between the voters' party affiliation and their vote in the referendum. This strong positive relationship remains even after controlling for the geographical region. This constitutes reinforcement for the suggested limited rationality, employed by the voters. In the absence of a realistic ability to gather and analyse information regarding the referendum in question, the voters turn to their elites, in this case the political ones, and follow party cues guiding them which ballot to cast. This of course raises a question of the unique importance of the referendum, and whether or not such uniqueness indeed exists. If voters tend to follow their parties' cues without

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<sup>8</sup> Results only reported, not shown.



independent considerations of their own, one might pose the question of why is this referendum preferable to a standard vote in parliament (perhaps with certain limitations on the required majority to except the proposal). The answer is at least two-fold. First, there is an important symbolic nature, an intrinsic value, to a national referendum which allows the people to feel as if they are taking an active part in shaping their own political system. Second, practically, not all voters followed their party-cues as given to them and acted accordingly. For those that did not, the referendum indeed has instrumental value, as they decide for themselves which electoral system they prefer.

As for geographic characteristics, it is interesting to note that while the coefficients of the dummy variable for Scotland is statistically significant, the dummy variable for Wales is not. This conclusion suggests that a difference exists in the general voting behaviour between English, Scottish and Welsh voters and that the Scottish voters in particular supported the referendum stronger than the English and Welsh. This is not the first case or the only arena in which Scotland tends to distinguish itself from England and Wales. It is generally thought that Scotland holds, in many aspects, and for various reasons, a different set of cultural values, that would cause a different perspective of certain political institutions to be adopted, and thus perhaps a different set of actions to be taken in result. Although within the boundaries and limitations of this research paper it is not possible to determine whether or not this is indeed the case, it may well be the reason for the unique voter behaviour seen in Scotland. Thus, the afore-mentioned finding will definitely benefit from further investigation that will account for the reasons behind these patterns.

The results of the multi-variant regression analysis in the reduced model and in the robust analysis of Model B in which we tested alternative explanatory factors of voter behaviour in the AV referendum revealed several intriguing insights. As expected, we found that when controlling for Wales, education and ethnic linguistic fractionalization, party affiliation still has a strong relationship with voter behaviour in the referendum. Furthermore, the three control variables also have strong positive effect on voting behaviour in the same referendum and the addition of these variables increases the level of explained variance from 29 per cent to 64 per cent. Here it is important to note that this significant increase in explained variance is also the result of a weakness in our research, caused by the limitations of the data in regard to the effects of the controlled variables on Scottish constituencies. A large scale study, in which extensive resources can be employed, will be able to contribute to the examination of these variables on referendum voting in Scottish constituencies as well.

So according to our hypothesis, as education level rises, so does the likelihood of a voter to cast a “Yes” ballot. This supports the formation of the referendum question as a liberal-conservative one, seeing as the suggested electoral reform would entail larger publics being taken into consideration. Whether this would be the case even if the suggested reform was less-generalizing but more restrictive of electoral vote counts, is a matter for a future study. Of course it would also be interesting to try and generalize the conclusion that education has a positive effect on the acceptance of reform referenda. Are educated individuals more susceptible to change, with no regard to the nature of that change? Another interesting future analysis, based on personal surveys, might be to examine whether there is or there is not a correlation between education and adherence to party cues – does the fact that you are better

educated, and thus politically-aware, make you less susceptible, and less in need of party cues that will affect your decision?

As for the second finding derived from Model B, it seems that ethnically-fragmented electoral districts indeed show more support for the electoral reform than other, less fragmented districts. This supports our hypothesis regarding the expected support of the latter districts of the more-proportional features of the AV+, over the current, purely majoritarian system. It is important to note that such fragmentation would have an electoral effect also when dealing with non-ethnic facets. The suggested linkage is in fact relevant to any type of division within a district, which has an effect on political views and needs. So one might speculate that also when dealing with a politically-fragmentized region, as no group constitutes a clear majority, a relatively proportional electoral system would be preferred. This is of course a topic for a future enquiry.

Seeing as Model B was successful in explaining only 64 per cent of the cases, it is worth contemplating on alternative explanations to what might have affected the remaining 36 per cent of the voters in the referendum. One such explanation would be a form of political conservatism, and perhaps more generally – a certain fear of change, that might be caused by the suggested reform. In addition, segments of society might have different sets of interests revolving this issue. Especially when considering that such an electoral reform may cause imbalance to the current “political equilibrium”, so to speak, between these different groups, or social segments.

## *Appendix*

Education Variable index consists of the highest level of qualification which was derived from the question asking people to indicate all types of qualifications held. People were also asked if they held foreign qualifications and to indicate the closest equivalent. There were 12 response options (plus 'no qualifications') covering professional and vocational qualifications, and a range of academic qualifications.

These are combined into five categories for the highest level of qualification, plus a category for no qualifications and one for other qualifications (which includes vocational or work related qualifications, and for foreign qualifications where an equivalent qualification was not indicated):

- No Qualifications: No academic or professional qualifications
- Level 1 qualifications: 1-4 O Levels/CSE/GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma, NVQ level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic/Essential Skills
- Level 2 qualifications: 5+ O Level (Passes)/CSEs (Grade 1)/GCSEs (Grades A\*-C), School Certificate, 1 A Level/ 2-3 AS Levels/VCEs, Intermediate/Higher Diploma, Welsh Baccalaureate Intermediate Diploma, NVQ level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/General Diploma, RSA Diploma Apprenticeship
- Level 3 qualifications: 2+ A Levels/VCEs, 4+ AS Levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma, Welsh Baccalaureate Advanced Diploma, NVQ Level 3; Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds Advanced Craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National, RSA Advanced Diploma
- Level 4+ qualifications: Degree (for example BA, BSc), Higher Degree (for example MA, PhD, PGCE), NVQ Level 4-5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher level, Foundation degree (NI), Professional qualifications (for example teaching, nursing, accountancy)
- Other qualifications: Vocational/Work-related Qualifications, Foreign Qualifications (Not stated/ level unknown).

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