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**Ipsos MORI Scotland**

The  
Electoral  
Commission

# **REFERENDUM ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE: QUESTION TESTING**

# **TESTING OF THE PROPOSED QUESTION FOR THE REFERENDUM ON SCOTTISH INDEPENDENCE**

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

## Introduction

This report presents findings from the testing of the proposed question for the referendum on Scottish independence. The testing was conducted by Ipsos MORI Scotland on behalf of the Electoral Commission.

The overall aim was to assist the Electoral Commission in its independent assessment of the intelligibility of the Scottish Government's proposed referendum question: Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?

The specific objectives were to:

- identify any elements of the question which prove problematic for participants in the context of the Electoral Commission's Referendum Question Assessment Guidelines<sup>1</sup>
- explore the reasons for these problems
- explore possible ways of addressing these problems.

## Methods

The testing used a combination of depth interviews (with 203 participants) and focus groups (with 62 participants in 10 groups). Fieldwork was carried out between 17<sup>th</sup> November and 15<sup>th</sup> December 2012.

The sample included a broad range of people in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment and socio-economic status. It included native Gaelic speakers and people with English as an additional language. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of the wider population in terms of the proportion of participants with specific demographic or geographical characteristics. Instead, to maximise the chances of identifying the full range of issues, sampling was designed to ensure a wide range of participants with different characteristics in different circumstances, with an additional focus on those people who we might expect to have particular issues/difficulties (including young people aged 16-17 who had never voted before, people with lower levels of literacy, people with mild learning difficulties and blind people).

The sample size was relatively large for this type of research to enable us to undertake several rounds of fieldwork, making amendments to the question as required, and to test each version with a sufficient range of participants.

Participants were first asked to cast their 'vote' and then a member of the Ipsos MORI research team explored:

- whether participants completed the question according to their intentions (i.e. in line with their views on independence)
- whether they found the question clear and easy to understand

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<sup>1</sup> [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf)

- whether there were any specific words or phrases, or other aspects of the question, that caused difficulties
- whether the question was perceived to be neutral and free from bias.

In each interview or focus group, one question was used as the main ‘test’ question (participants were given this question at the beginning of the interview and asked to make their ‘vote’), with two other versions used as comparators to help elicit participants’ views on the main version being tested and the alternatives presented.

In total, four versions of the question were used in testing:

- Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country? Yes/No (i.e. the proposed question)
- Should Scotland be an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as ‘version 2’)
- Do you want Scotland to be an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as ‘version 3’)
- Should Scotland become an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as ‘version 4’).

The remit was to fully explore issues surrounding the intelligibility of the proposed question (‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’). The proposed question was therefore tested with all participants in all rounds of testing.

## **Main Findings**

The proposed question (and all other versions which were tested) enabled participants to vote in a way which matched their views on the issue. This was underpinned by two key factors.

Firstly, almost all understood that the question was about Scottish independence and most had at least some understanding of the issue (even if they felt there were many unanswered questions about what it might mean in practice). Although awareness of different aspects of the independence debate varied, almost all were able to comment on the questions and cast a vote based on their views at the time of testing.

Secondly, there was a widespread view that all the questions tested, including the proposed question, were easy to understand and straightforward to answer because they were short, used plain language and provided voters with a simple choice between ‘Yes’ and ‘No’.

The detailed findings which emerged from the testing, therefore, largely reflect participants’ perceptions of the neutrality of the questions and preferences for specific wording - rather than any fundamental difficulties participants experienced when completing the ballot paper.

## **Assessment of the proposed question (‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’)**

### *Understanding*

Almost all participants found the question easy to understand. Further, based on exploration of participants' reasons for voting the way they did, it is our assessment that all participants, with the exception of two, voted in line with their intentions. The dominant view was that the question was concise, clear, simple, and easy to understand.

It was evident, from exploration of their reasons for selecting 'Yes' or 'No', that participants understood the broad concept of 'independent country' and knew what some of the key issues were.

They also had a clear understanding that 'independent country' meant Scotland being separate from the rest of the UK. This was the case even among those who had very little knowledge about the other implications of a majority 'Yes'/'No' vote.

No participants highlighted the word 'country' as being problematic and there was no evidence of any confusion or misunderstanding caused by the use of the word. As a result, there was no discussion around potential alternatives such as 'state' or 'nation'. A couple of participants defined the question as being about whether or not Scotland should be an independent "state". However, they felt that 'country' is a better term to include in the question as it is more widely used and understood.

Participants liked the use of 'Yes' and 'No' as response options. Many commented that the response options were clear, easy to understand, and unambiguous. Only a few participants raised the issue of a 'third option' relating to 'Devo Max': while they were opposed to full independence, they wanted to see Scotland given more powers and would have preferred to have been able to record this view.

Further, given that they found the question easy to understand and complete, participants did not think there should be additional voter instructions or an introduction/preamble. There was strong support for keeping the question short and simple.

### *Neutrality*

The Electoral Commission's guidelines state that a referendum question "should avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another"<sup>2</sup>. We were not attempting to measure the neutrality of the question in some numerical sense. Rather, we explored *perceptions* of neutrality because, if the question is seen as tending to lead people in a particular direction, however subtly, that has the potential to undermine voters' confidence in the process.

The main problem to emerge from testing the proposed question was the issue of potential bias. In particular, the phrase 'Do you agree...' was seen by participants to be leading and to encourage a 'Yes' vote. This frequently came out when participants were prompted to think about the neutrality of the question and/or during the review of comparator questions, but was also mentioned spontaneously by many participants. This was the case both when the proposed question was tested first and when it was shown as a comparator.

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<sup>2</sup> [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf)

It is worth noting that participants' concern was that the question wording would subtly nudge some *other* people towards 'Yes'. Participants did not generally think that they themselves had been influenced and, across all testing, there was only one instance where the phrase 'Do you agree...' appeared to lead someone to vote the opposite way from how they intended. A few other participants said they felt they may have been slightly swayed towards 'Yes' by the phrase. However, the real problem with leading questions is that people do not realise that they are being influenced. Therefore, we do not know whether there were other participants whose responses were affected by the phrase.

Participants gave a number of explanations as to why they felt 'Do you agree...' was leading towards 'Yes', including: it implies that Scotland being an independent country is a 'good thing' because people are being invited to agree with a default position; the tone is quite forceful and demanding and seeks agreement with someone else's view rather than allowing voters to form their own personal view; it leads to the perception that people are being asked to agree with a decision that has already been made or with an issue on which popular opinion has already been formed - they are being asked to rubber stamp a decision that has already been made rather than *make* the decision; and it is easier to agree/go along with something than to disagree.

It should be noted that, although participants who voted 'No' were more inclined to criticise the question for being leading, many of those who voted 'Yes' also thought it was leading towards 'Yes'.

Overall, although participants thought that the question was biased towards 'Yes', they did not feel it would have a major impact on the result. They did not think it would influence voters who have a clear view on the issue. Further, they felt that any effects would be reduced by the time of the referendum, as people are given more information about the implications of Scottish independence. They felt it would probably only affect those who were very undecided, unsure or "easily led".

Much less commonly, the following aspects of the question were seen as potentially leading:

- *the lack of specific mention of separation from the rest of the UK in the question wording* – a few participants felt that the proposed question is biased because it does not specifically mention separation from the UK. As a result, they felt the question was one-sided, was "not being clear" about the implications of independence and so may lead people to consider a 'Yes' vote more than they might otherwise
- *the exclusion of specific reference to the status quo* – a few participants felt that, because the question does not explicitly state the option of Scotland remaining as part of the UK, it may lead people to consider a 'Yes' vote more than they might otherwise
- *the order of the response options* – a few participants suggested that having 'Yes' before 'No' is biased towards 'Yes'. However, participants did not have strong feelings about the order of response options and noted that 'Yes/No' is the "natural" and "usual" convention
- *the term 'independent'* – a very few participants felt the word 'independent' is loaded because it is an inherently positive term and

may encourage some voters, particularly those who are more inclined to make their decision based on emotional factors rather than fully weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, to vote 'Yes'. However, a more commonly held view was that the word 'independent' *should* be included in the question since it is a widely recognised term and encapsulates the central theme of the referendum.

## **Assessment of Version 2 ('Should Scotland be an independent country?')**

Version 2, 'Should Scotland be an independent country?', was tested as either the main version or as a comparator with all participants.

### *Understanding*

As with the proposed question, participants found version 2 clear, simple and easy to understand. Some preferred version 2 because it was shorter and more concise than the proposed question. That it was shorter did not, however, have any impact (positive or negative) on understanding.

No additional or different issues emerged in relation to the understanding of 'independent country', 'country', the Yes/No response options or the (lack of) need for additional instructions/a preamble.

### *Neutrality*

The key difference between the proposed question and version 2 was the omission of the phrase 'Do you agree...'. As a result of its omission, version 2 was largely seen as being more neutral than the proposed question and for this reason was the most favoured question in all rounds of testing. This was the case both when the version was used as the main question and when shown as a comparator.

Consistent with the findings from testing the proposed question, a few participants felt that other aspects of version 2 that were the same as the proposed question were potentially leading (i.e. the absence of specific reference to separation from the UK; the exclusion of the status quo option; the order of response options; and the use of the word 'independent'). However, as was the case in relation to the proposed question, criticisms of the neutrality of these aspects of the question were relatively uncommon.

## **Other versions tested ('Should Scotland become an independent country?' and 'Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?')**

Other alternatives tested, while also seen as more neutral than the proposed question, had other problems which make them less suitable alternatives than version 2. Specifically:

- 'Should Scotland become an independent country?' – the word 'become' instead of 'be' led to some ambiguity. This was mainly around the timescales for independence because 'become' may be interpreted as "at some point in the future". Linked to this, there was a

view that 'become' implies less certainty about the outcome in that independence "might happen, but might not"

- 'Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?' – the dominant view was that the word 'want' was inappropriate in the context of a referendum question: it was associated with childish demands and desires; there was a feeling that it "tugs at the heartstrings"; and there should be a distinction between *wants* and *needs*. Taken together, this resulted in a strong sense that 'want' encourages an emotional or idealistic response to the question, and this was inconsistent with the view that voters should make a more rational and considered decision by weighing up the arguments for and against independence.

## **Conclusions and recommendation**

The proposed question, 'Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?', was found to be easy to understand, clear, simple and concise. Participants were able to answer it in a way that matched their intentions. Further, almost all participants understood the broad concept of 'independent country' (even if they felt there were many unanswered questions about what it might mean in practice). Specifically, they understood that it meant separation from the rest of the UK.

The main problem with the proposed question was that it was widely perceived to be biased – by those who supported independence as well as those who opposed it – because it was felt that the phrase 'Do you agree...' might lead people towards a 'Yes' vote. Overall, although participants thought that the question was biased towards 'Yes', they did not feel it would have a major impact on the result and would probably only affect those who were very undecided, unsure or "easily led".

In light of this issue, we recommend that version 2, 'Should Scotland be an independent country?', be used in the referendum. As was the case with the proposed question, it was found to be easy to understand, clear, simple, concise and participants were able to answer it in a way that matched their intentions. It excludes the problematic phrase 'Do you agree...' and, as a result, it was widely perceived to be more neutral than the proposed question.

# 1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 This report presents findings from the testing of the proposed question for the referendum on Scottish independence. The testing was conducted by Ipsos MORI Scotland on behalf of the Electoral Commission.

## Background

- 1.2 In May 2011, the Scottish National Party (SNP) formed the Scottish Government with a commitment to bring forward a bill on holding a referendum on independence for Scotland in the current parliamentary session (2011-2016). Separate consultations were carried out by the UK and Scottish Governments on their respective positions regarding the administration of the referendum. The findings of the UK Government's consultation were published in the *Scotland's Constitutional Future*<sup>3</sup> report in May 2012, and those of the Scottish Government's consultation were published in the *Your Scotland, Your Referendum*<sup>4</sup> report in October 2012.

- 1.3 Following negotiations, on the 15<sup>th</sup> October 2012, the UK Prime Minister and the Scottish First Minister signed the '*Edinburgh Agreement*'<sup>5</sup> which outlines the terms, subject to parliamentary decision, under which the referendum will take place. In broad terms, the two Governments have agreed to work together on a referendum that will:

- have a clear legal basis
- be legislated for by the Scottish Parliament
- be conducted so as to command the confidence of parliaments, government and people
- deliver a fair test and a decisive expression of the views of people in Scotland and a result that everyone will respect.

- 1.4 Further, it was agreed that the referendum will:

- be administered using a single question
- be overseen by the Electoral Commission, in accordance with existing UK Parliament legislation on the running of referendums
- be open to 16 and 17 year-old voters, if the Scottish Parliament so decides
- take place before the end of 2014.

- 1.5 Since the agreement, the Scottish Government has confirmed that its preferred referendum question is:

*Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?*

- 1.6 The Electoral Commission has been asked, through a request under section 10 of the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000, to provide

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<sup>3</sup> <http://www.scotlandoffice.gov.uk/scotlandoffice/files/17779-Cm-8203.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00405470.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Resource/0040/00404789.pdf>

advice and assistance to the Scottish Government on the intelligibility of the proposed question.

- 1.7 It is against this context that the Electoral Commission asked Ipsos MORI Scotland to test the proposed question with members of the public.

### **Aims and objectives**

- 1.8 The overall aim of the testing was to assist the Electoral Commission in its independent assessment of the intelligibility of the proposed referendum question.

- 1.9 The specific objectives were to:

- identify any elements of the question which prove problematic for participants in the context of the Electoral Commission's Referendum Question Assessment Guidelines<sup>6</sup>
- explore the reasons for these problems
- explore possible ways of addressing these problems.

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<sup>6</sup> [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf)

## 2 METHODS

- 2.1 In summary, the testing used a combination of depth interviews and focus groups to test the question among a sample of 265 participants in a range of locations across Scotland. Participants were first asked to cast their 'vote' and then a member of the Ipsos MORI research team explored:
- whether participants completed the question according to their intentions (i.e. in line with their views on independence)
  - whether they found the question clear and easy to understand
  - whether there were any specific words or phrases, or other aspects of the question, that caused difficulties
  - whether the question was perceived to be neutral and free from bias.
- 2.2 The full topic guides used in the research are included as Appendix B and Appendix C.

### Qualitative research

- 2.3 The aim of a question testing exercise such as this is to identify any problems with a question, explore the reasons for those problems and explore ways in which they might be solved. A qualitative approach was therefore most appropriate. Qualitative research is essentially exploratory and, in this context, is concerned with identifying the *range* of issues and the reasons *why* people think or feel as they do.
- 2.4 It was not a quantitative exercise and we were not attempting to extrapolate to the wider population in order to estimate the proportion of voters who will, for example, give a particular response, interpret the question a certain way or misunderstand a particular phrase.
- 2.5 It is also important to be clear that we were not attempting to measure the neutrality of the question in some numerical sense. Rather, we explored *perceptions* of neutrality because, if the question is seen as tending to lead people in a particular direction, however subtly, that has the potential to undermine voters' confidence in the process.

### Sampling and recruitment

- 2.6 Testing was carried out with a total of 265 research participants, broken down as follows:
- 183<sup>7</sup> interviews across eight locations in Scotland (Aberdeen, Dumfries, Dundee, Edinburgh, Glasgow, Inverness, Stirling and Stornoway) – these will be referred to as the 'core sample'
  - 52 participants in eight focus groups (in Ayr, Edinburgh, Falkirk, Glasgow, Huntly, Kelso, Oban and Stornoway)

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<sup>7</sup> 22 interviews were carried out in Inverness and 23 in each of the other seven locations.

- 20 interviews with groups who might be expected to have additional difficulties with the question – these will be referred to as ‘specific groups’:
  - 6 with blind participants
  - 8 with participants with low levels of literacy
  - 6 with participants with mild learning difficulties
- 10 participants aged 16 years<sup>8</sup> in two focus groups carried out in schools (one in the Lothians and the other in Tayside).

2.7 The sample included a broad range of people in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, educational attainment and socio-economic status. It included native Gaelic speakers and people with English as an additional language. The sample was not intended to be statistically representative of the wider population in terms of the proportion of participants with specific demographic or geographical characteristics. Instead, sampling was designed to ensure a wide range of participants with different characteristics in different circumstances to maximise the chances of identifying the full range of issues, with an additional focus on those people who we might expect to have particular issues/difficulties. The sample size was relatively large for this type of research to enable us to undertake several rounds of fieldwork, making amendments to the question as required, and to test each version with a sufficient range of participants.

2.8 We deliberately did not set quotas based on past voting behaviour or views on Scottish independence as asking participants questions on these topics at the recruitment stage might have affected recruitment (those who were more interested in the referendum - and therefore more informed - may have been more willing to take part than those who were less interested). It may also have affected the way they answered the question in testing. Given the size of the sample and the other quotas, we anticipated that the range of political views would naturally fall out but, to ensure that we did not inadvertently end up with a skewed sample, we monitored this throughout the testing by keeping track of the number of participants who supported/opposed independence and asking about past voting behaviour at the end of the interviews. As anticipated, the number of participants who supported/opposed independence was broadly in line with recent polling on the issue.

2.9 Table 2.1 below shows the profile of the 183 participants who comprised the core sample.

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<sup>8</sup> The core sample also included 13 participants aged 16-17.

**Table 2.1: Profile of the core sample**

Characteristic	Number of participants
<b>Sex</b>	
Male	88
Female	95
<b>Age</b>	
16-17	13
18-20	12
21-44	53
45-64	52
65+	53
<b>Highest Educational Qualification</b>	
Higher/A level or equivalent, or above	83
Less than Higher or equivalent	100
<b>Social Grade<sup>9</sup></b>	
AB	26
C1	45
C2	38
DE	74
<b>Ethnicity</b>	
Minority ethnic group	17
<b>Language</b>	
Native Gaelic speaker <sup>10</sup>	11
English as an additional language (not including Gaelic speakers)	18
<b>Total</b>	<b>183</b>

2.10 Table 2.2 below shows the location and composition of the focus groups. Additionally, each focus group contained a broadly equal mix of men and women and at least five people who said they were absolutely certain to vote were recruited for each group. Across the groups, four minority ethnic participants took part. The Stornoway group included four native Gaelic speakers<sup>11</sup>.

**Table 2.2: Composition of the focus groups**

Group	Location	Age	Social Grade
1	Edinburgh	18-24	ABC1
2	Glasgow	18-24	C2DE
3	Oban	40-59	ABC1
4	Kelso	25-39	C2DE
5	Stornoway	60+	Mix
6	Huntly	40-59	C2DE
7	Ayr	60+	C2DE
8	Falkirk	25-39	ABC1

2.11 Participants were recruited in the following ways:

<sup>9</sup> Participants were classified into one of the six social grades commonly used in social research. These are based on the current or previous occupation of the chief income earner in the household. Broadly speaking, the groups ABC1 correspond to professional, managerial and clerical occupations and groups C2DE refer to skilled-manual occupations, unskilled manual occupations and the economically inactive.

<sup>10</sup> The referendum question will be in English so the interviews and focus groups involving Gaelic speakers were conducted in English.

<sup>11</sup> See footnote above.

- participants who comprised the core sample were recruited on-street by a trained Ipsos MORI recruiter on the day of interviewing
- focus group participants were recruited door-to-door or on-street in advance of the focus group
- participants from the specific groups were recruited separately with assistance from specialist organisations (a society for the blind, a community learning centre running classes for people with low levels of literacy, and two organisations working with people with learning difficulties)
- 16 year olds were recruited with assistance from two state secondary schools.

2.12 All participants who had given up their free time to take part (i.e. all but the 16 year olds in schools), were offered and given a small monetary incentive (£15 - £25 depending on the length of time involved) to thank them for their help.

### **The testing process**

2.13 The testing with the core sample and the focus groups was divided into five rounds and testing with the specific groups was divided into two rounds. In each interview or focus group, one question was used as the main 'test' question (that is, participants were given this question at the beginning of the interview and asked to make their 'vote'), with two other versions used as comparators to help elicit participants' views on the main version being tested.

2.14 The remit of the testing was to fully explore issues surrounding the intelligibility of the proposed question ('Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?'). With this in mind, the proposed question was tested with all participants in all rounds of testing.

2.15 In total, four versions of the question were used in testing:

- Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country? Yes/No (i.e. the proposed question)
- Should Scotland be an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as 'version 2')
- Do you want Scotland to be an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as 'version 3')
- Should Scotland become an independent country? Yes/No (referred to as 'version 4')

2.16 Prior to the start of the testing, the Electoral Commission provided the wording for the two comparator questions (versions 2 and 3) to be used in the initial round. As mentioned above, these alternative questions were used in the testing in order to elicit further views from participants on both the proposed question and the alternative presented.

2.17 Following the initial round of testing, there was strong evidence to suggest that there were some problems with version 3 (see paragraphs 3.65 – 3.70 for full details). Therefore, in agreement with the Electoral Commission,

version 3 was dropped and version 4 was developed for testing in subsequent rounds. The wording of version 4 was developed in response to findings from the initial round of fieldwork.

- 2.18 In subsequent rounds, there was no strong evidence to justify any further changes to the questions being tested. For example, we did not test a version which included the phrase ‘...separate from the rest of the UK’ because there was no strong evidence that the absence of such a phrase caused a problem (See section 3 for full details on the research findings).
- 2.19 During testing, it emerged that version 2 may provide a solution to a problem of perceived bias identified in relation to the proposed question. Therefore, in agreement with the Electoral Commission, it was decided to test version 2 as the main alternative version alongside the proposed question.
- 2.20 As can be seen from Table 2.3, in rounds 2 to 4, the question given to participants as the main version was rotated (for example, in round 2, half the participants were given one version as the main question and the other half were given another version as the main question).

**Table 2.3: Design of each round of testing and question versions used**

Round of fieldwork	Method	Location(s)	Main question used	Comparator 1	Comparator 2	Proportion of participants shown each rotation
<b>Core sample &amp; focus groups</b>						
1	Interviews	Dumfries Glasgow	Proposed	Version 2	Version 3	All
1	Focus groups	Edinburgh Glasgow	Proposed	Version 2	Version 3	All
2	Interviews	Stirling Edinburgh	Proposed	Version 2	Version 4	c. Half
			Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	c. Half
2	Focus groups	Oban Kelso	Proposed	Version 2	Version 4	All
3	Interviews	Dundee Stornoway	Proposed	Version 2	Version 4	c. Half
			Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	c. Half
3	Focus groups	Stornoway	Proposed	Version 2	Version 4	All
4	Interviews	Aberdeen	Proposed	Version 2	Version 4	c. One third
			Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	c. One third
			Version	Proposed	Version 2	c. One third
4	Focus groups	Huntly Ayr Falkirk	Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	All
5	Interviews	Inverness	Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	All
<b>Specific groups &amp; 16 year olds</b>						
1 (specific groups)	Interviews		Proposed	Version 2	Version 3	All
2 (specific groups)	Interviews		Version 2	Proposed	Version 4	All
1 (16 year olds)	Focus group		Proposed	Version 2	Version 3	All
2 (16 year olds)	Focus group		Version 2	Proposed question	Version 4	All

2.21 The proposed question was tested as either the main version or as a comparison with all participants. Table 2.4 below shows the number of times each version was tested in depth interviews with the core sample and the specific groups.

**Table 2.4: Number of times each version was tested as main version or comparator**

Version	Number of times tested as main version	Number of times tested as comparator	Total number of times tested
Proposed question	110	93	203
Version 2	85	118	203
Version 3	0	33	33
Version 4	8	162	170

### The conduct of the depth interviews

2.22 All interviews were carried out by the four members of the Ipsos MORI research team (the authors of this report). Each member of the team conducted approximately a quarter of the interviews.

2.23 With the permission of participants, interviews were digitally recorded. The researchers also took notes during, and immediately after, each interview. On average, interviews lasted around 20-25 minutes.

2.24 At the start of each interview, participants were given a mock ballot paper (see Appendix A) with the question to be tested and were asked to complete it as they would if it was the day of a referendum and they had gone along to vote.<sup>12</sup> To avoid their interpretation or understanding of the question being influenced, recruiters and researchers made no specific reference to Scottish independence before participants completed the mock ballot paper. (At the recruitment stage, they were simply told that the research was “about how people can make their voice heard on a national issue” and, at the start of the interview, they were told that the research was “to see whether people understand and can easily complete a draft question on a ballot paper for an upcoming referendum”).

2.25 After the ballot paper was completed, a semi-structured interview was carried out with each participant with the aid of a topic guide<sup>13</sup> designed by Ipsos MORI and approved by the Electoral Commission (attached at Appendix B). The interview explored: initial reactions to the question, whether there was anything they found off-putting or particularly liked, how easy or difficult it was to complete, how they decided which response to select, whether any aspects were unclear or confusing, their understanding of ‘independent country’, whether more guidance or instructions would have been helpful, whether they thought the question was encouraging people to vote in a particular way, and how they thought the question might be improved. Participants were then shown another version of the question and asked about their reactions to that: how they thought it compared with the

<sup>12</sup> In the interviews with blind participants, the researcher read out the question on the ballot paper.

<sup>13</sup> A topic guide is a document that outlines the topics that should be covered in an interview/focus group. It gives examples of the types of questions that might be asked, but order of questions and the precise wording will vary as a result of the researcher’s exchange with the participants.

main version they were shown and whether they thought it was better/worse (overall and in relation to specific aspects). They were then shown a third version of the question and, again, were asked about their reactions: how they thought it compared with the first two versions they were shown and whether they thought it was better/worse (overall and in relation to specific aspects).

### **The conduct of the focus groups**

- 2.26 All focus groups were moderated by the same four members of the Ipsos MORI research team who conducted the depth interviews. Each member of the team conducted two or three of the groups.
- 2.27 With the permission of participants, interviews were digitally recorded and were transcribed for analysis. The groups with 16 year olds in schools lasted around 50 minutes and the other groups lasted around 90 minutes.
- 2.28 As in the depth interviews, at the start of each group, participants were given a mock ballot paper with the question to be tested and were asked to complete it (on their own) as they would if it was the day of a referendum. Again, to avoid their interpretation or understanding of the question being influenced, recruiters and researchers made no specific reference to Scottish independence before participants completed the mock ballot paper.
- 2.29 After the ballot paper was completed, a group discussion was carried out with the aid of a topic guide designed by Ipsos MORI and approved by the Electoral Commission (attached at Appendix C). The discussions covered the same topics as the depth interviews but – to take advantage of the dynamics of a group and the opportunity for participants to build on, and react to, each others' ideas – there was an exercise where participants designed their own 'ideal' question. There was also more discussion around awareness and understanding of the issues and areas where more information was required in advance of the referendum.

### **A note on the timing of the research**

- 2.30 The fieldwork was conducted between 17<sup>th</sup> November and 15<sup>th</sup> December 2012 – approximately two years before the referendum. While some participants had not yet decided how they would vote, and others had a current position but thought they might change their minds depending on what information/arguments were presented over the next couple of years, this did not cause a problem in terms of testing the question. Almost all participants were aware of the debate on Scottish independence and they were able to answer the question on the mock ballot paper for the purposes of the research exercise and discuss their understanding of the question and their reactions to it. Even the very few participants who felt they could not answer either 'Yes' or 'No' at this stage understood the meaning of the question and were able to comment on specific aspects.

### 3 MAIN FINDINGS

#### Overall findings

- 3.1 The proposed question (and all other versions which were tested) enabled participants to vote in a way which matched their views on the issue. This was underpinned by two key factors.
- 3.2 Firstly, almost all understood that the question was about Scottish independence and most had at least some understanding of the issue. Although awareness of different aspects of the independence debate varied, almost all were able to comment on the questions and cast a vote based on their views at the time of testing.
- 3.3 Secondly, there was a widespread view that *all* the questions tested, including the proposed question, were easy to understand and straightforward to answer because they were short, used plain language and provided voters with a simple choice between 'Yes' or 'No'.
- 3.4 The detailed findings which emerged from the testing, therefore, largely reflect participants' perceptions of the neutrality of the questions and preferences for specific wording, rather than any fundamental difficulties participants' experienced when completing the ballot paper.

#### Assessment of the proposed question ('Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?')

- 3.5 The proposed question, 'Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?', was tested as either the main question or as a comparator question with all participants. This section details the findings from the testing of the proposed question, including:
  - the understanding of the question (which includes an assessment of whether the question was to the point, unambiguous and avoids misleading voters)
  - the neutrality of the question.

#### *Understanding*

##### *Overall understanding*

- 3.6 Almost all participants found the question easy to understand.
- 3.7 Further, based on exploration of participants' reasons for voting the way they did, it is our assessment that all participants, with the exception of two, voted in line with their intentions. The exceptions were:
  - one participant selected 'Yes' but was in favour of Scotland remaining part of the Union. She misunderstood 'independent country' as meaning that Scotland would be given more powers but would still remain part of the UK (see 3.14 below)

- another participant selected ‘Yes’ even though she stated later in the interview that she wanted Scotland to remain part of the UK. She felt that the inclusion of ‘Do you agree’ had affected her response (see 3.30 below).
- 3.8 The dominant view was that the question was concise, clear, simple, and easy to understand.
- 3.9 Indeed, some participants expressed surprise that the question was so straightforward. In particular, they contrasted the simplicity of the question with other ballot papers they had used in previous elections, for example, the ballot paper used for the local government elections, which was viewed as complex by comparison.
- 3.10 Most of the participants who might be expected to have more difficulty, namely those aged 16-17 (who had not previously voted), people with low levels of literacy, those with learning difficulties, and those who use English as an additional language also found the question easy to understand and complete.

#### *Understanding of ‘independent country’*

- 3.11 All participants (with the exception of only a very few – discussed below) understood the concept ‘independent country’ and were able to describe it in at least general terms. Participants’ initial, unprompted responses included:
- being separate from the rest of the UK
  - “separate from England”<sup>14</sup>
  - “separate from England, Wales and Northern Ireland”
  - “separate from Westminster”
  - “standing on our own two feet”
  - “running our own affairs”
  - “going it alone”
  - control over one’s “own destiny”
  - Scotland “managing on its own”
  - being “self-sufficient”
  - “looking after yourself without relying on anyone else”.
- 3.12 It was clear, from exploration of their reasons for selecting ‘Yes’ or ‘No’, that participants understood the broad concept of independence and knew what some of the key issues were.
- 3.13 They also had a clear understanding that ‘independent country’ meant Scotland being separate from the rest of the UK. This was the case even among those who had very little knowledge about the other implications of a majority ‘Yes’/‘No’ vote. It should be noted that specific probing was carried

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<sup>14</sup> Throughout the report, we have used double quotation marks to indicate direct quotes from participants or documents. Single quotation marks are used to when we have paraphrased what participants said or to refer to words or phrases in the question.

out to check understanding of 'independent country' where participants had not already explicitly mentioned 'separation from the rest of the UK', or equivalent, in their explanation of what the term meant.

3.14 Only a very few participants did not understand 'independent country'. These participants tended to have no interest in politics and said they would be unlikely to vote in the referendum. Two of the misunderstandings were:

- that 'independent country' meant Scotland would be given more powers but would still remain part of the UK. As a result, this participant, who had low literacy skills, selected 'Yes' but in subsequent probing it became clear that she was in favour of Scotland remaining part of the Union<sup>15</sup>:

*"I thought we'd still be under the United Kingdom, even though we are independent. I took that to be we'd still be part of the United Kingdom."*

- interpreting 'independent' in relation to individuals e.g. living independently – this was a participant with mild learning difficulties who may have been more familiar with the use of the word in this context.

3.15 A few participants, including the participant who voted contrary to the way she intended, felt that understanding would be improved by the addition of '...from the UK'<sup>16</sup>, '...separate from the UK', or something similar. In the main, these participants were relatively well informed about the constitutional debate but had concerns that the question assumes that all voters will know as much as them. While *they* understood clearly that 'independent country' implied 'separate from the UK', they felt that the addition of this phrase would remove any potential ambiguity. It was also suggested that it would clarify that the question was not about whether Scotland should be independent from the European Union.

*"The wording is a little bit presumptuous, perhaps. There is nothing to say that Scotland is currently part of the UK."*

*"It's very easy for me because I know, but maybe not for someone that's not aware of the ins and outs of the politics of it."*

3.16 However, it should be noted that these concerns were not borne out by the testing. As noted above, participants had a clear understanding that

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<sup>15</sup> This misunderstanding of 'independent country' occurred when version 2 was being tested as the main version. However, for the purposes of reporting, it is included here in the discussion of the proposed question. Given that it relates to the phrase 'independent country', which was included in all versions, it was not related to any specific aspect of version 2 and it is likely that it would have occurred regardless which version was used.

<sup>16</sup> Although it may be more correct to say 'from the rest of the UK', participants tended to say "independent from the UK" or "separation from the UK" so we have generally used this wording when referring to directly to points they made.

'independent country' meant Scotland being separate from the rest of the UK and none thought the question related to independence from the European Union. This indicates that the lack of a phrase such as 'separate from the rest of the UK' is not a source of ambiguity.

- 3.17 It was more common for participants to suggest adding these phrases in response to concerns about the neutrality of the question, and reminding people of the implications, rather than to aid understanding (discussed in more detail below at 3.23).
- 3.18 It is unclear whether the addition of 'separate from the UK' to the question would have improved the understanding of 'independent country' among the very few participants who did not understand the term. While it might have assisted the participant who misunderstood the term as meaning that Scotland would be given more powers but would still remain part of the UK, the other issues were related more to a general lack of interest and engagement in politics.
- 3.19 While participants had a clear understanding that 'independent country' meant separate from the rest of the UK, a common and strongly held view was that there were many unanswered questions about what being an 'independent country' would mean in practice. Participants wanted more information about the specific implications of independence, particularly around the advantages and disadvantages, before the actual referendum in 2014. That said, participants acknowledged that they are likely to become much more informed about the implications of a 'Yes'/'No' vote in the lead up to the referendum (see section 4 for more discussion on voter education).

#### *Understanding of 'country'*

- 3.20 No participants highlighted the word 'country' as being problematic and there was no evidence of any confusion or misunderstanding caused by the use of the word. As a result, there was no discussion around potential alternatives such as 'state' or 'nation'. A couple of participants defined the question as being about whether or not Scotland should be an independent "state". However, they felt that 'country' is a better term to include in the question as it is a more widely used and understood.

#### *Response options ('Yes'/'No')*

- 3.21 Participants liked the use of 'Yes' and 'No' as response options. Many commented that the response options were clear, easy to understand, and unambiguous. Only a few participants raised the issue of a 'third option' relating to 'Devo Max': while they were opposed to full independence, they wanted to see Scotland given more powers and would have preferred to have been able to record this view.

#### *Additional instructions/preamble*

- 3.22 Given that they found the question easy to understand and complete, participants did not think there should be additional voter instructions or an introduction/preamble. There was strong support for keeping it short and

simple. Further, while some participants suggested that it might be helpful to include more information about the implications of independence on the ballot paper in the main, participants felt that information for voters should be provided in advance rather than on the ballot paper. Indeed, many felt that more information on the ballot paper would only complicate what was a straightforward question:

*“It’s straight to the point, ‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’ [If you] have a big sentence, a big ginormous sentence with five or six lines, how are you going to know that people understand exactly what you’re stating?”*

## **Neutrality**

3.23 The Electoral Commission’s guidelines state that a referendum question “should avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another”<sup>17</sup>. As noted in the Methods section above, we were not attempting to measure the neutrality of the question in some numerical sense. Rather, we explored *perceptions* of neutrality because, if the question is seen as tending to lead people in a particular direction, however subtly, that has the potential to undermine voters’ confidence in the process.

3.24 The main problem to emerge from testing of the proposed question was the issue of potential bias. In particular, the phrase ‘Do you agree...’ was seen by participants to be potentially leading. Much less commonly, the following aspects were seen as potentially leading:

- the lack of specific mention of separation from the rest of the UK in the question wording
- the exclusion of specific reference to the status quo
- the order of the response options
- the term ‘independent’.

3.25 It is worth noting that, across all these aspects, participants’ concern was that the question wording would subtly nudge some other people towards ‘Yes’. Participants did not generally think that they themselves had been influenced and, across all testing, there was only one instance where the question (and specifically, the phrase ‘Do you agree...’) appeared to lead someone to vote the opposite way from how they intended (discussed further at 3.30 below). A few other participants said they felt they may have been slightly swayed towards ‘Yes’ by the phrase. However, the real problem with leading questions is that people do not realise that they are being influenced. Therefore, we do not know whether there were other participants whose responses were affected by any of these aspects.

*‘Do you agree...’*

3.26 The phrase ‘Do you agree...’ was commonly felt to be leading and to encourage a ‘Yes’ vote. This frequently came out when participants were

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<sup>17</sup> [http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf](http://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0006/82626/Referendum-Question-guidelines-final.pdf)

prompted to think about the neutrality of the question and/or during the review of comparator questions, but was also mentioned spontaneously by many participants. This was the case both when the proposed question was tested first and when it shown as a comparator.

3.27 Participants gave a number of explanations as to why they felt ‘Do you agree...’ was leading towards ‘Yes’:

- it implies that Scotland being an independent country is a ‘good thing’ because people are being invited to agree with a default position:

*“Someone else thinks it’s right: Do you agree?”*

- the tone is quite forceful and demanding and seeks agreement with someone else’s view rather than allowing voters to form their own personal view. For example, the question was read as ‘Are you with us?’:

*“It makes you feel like you’re just a wee minnow and this big almighty power has said, do you agree with me and we should be independent, kind of militant and I don’t like it at all.”*

*“Do you agree with ME?”*

*“That’s almost like someone telling you it should and [asking] ‘do you agree?’”*

- it leads to the perception that people are being asked to agree with a decision that has already been made or with an issue on which popular opinion has already been formed – they are being asked to rubber stamp the decision rather than *make* the decision

*“Scotland’s gonna be independent and are you alright with that?”*

*“It’s going to happen. Don’t you agree?”*

*“Do you agree with the rest of us?”*

*“It’s going to be independent, do you agree? It doesn’t matter what you say, it’s going to happen really.”*

- it is easier to agree/go along with something than to disagree. Related to this, a few participants felt that if they disagreed they might be asked to justify their answer, while others said the question made them feel that they would be unpatriotic by ‘disagreeing’:

*“People just like to keep other people happy, you want to agree with people, you don’t want to disagree with them.”*

*“You’re free to say no, but it goes against the grain with that word [agree], you don’t feel comfortable putting no”.*

*“Do you agree...’ gives you this feeling that you do not want to disagree because people might then ask you ‘why do you disagree’ and you don’t have an answer. So it’s easier to say ‘yes’”.*

*“It sounds very unpatriotic if you go against it, as if you’re not being Scottish.”*

- some participants, who were undecided about how they would vote, felt that the phrase suggests that ‘Yes’ is the ‘correct’ answer.

3.28 It should be noted that, although participants who voted ‘No’ were more inclined to criticise the question for being leading, many of those who voted ‘Yes’ also thought it was leading towards ‘Yes’. A few ‘Yes’ voters stated a preference for the proposed question over other versions because they felt it would lead to more ‘Yes’ votes. However, it was much more common for ‘Yes’ voters who felt that the question was leading to say that ‘Do you agree...’ should be omitted from the question.

3.29 Overall, although participants thought that the question was biased towards ‘Yes’, they did not feel it would have a major impact on the result. They did not think it would influence voters who have a clear view on the issue. Further, they felt that any effects would be reduced by the time of the referendum, as people are given more information about the implications of Scottish independence. They felt it would probably only affect those who were very undecided, unsure or “easily led”:

*“[‘Do you agree...’] ... doesn’t push my vote either way, I came in with my mind already decided to be honest, but if I was on the fence it could potentially sway me [...] Because it was like it’s whether you want independence or not, I suppose, I didn’t really read into the whole, ‘Do you agree...’ sort of thing. I was already mind set on something.”*

*“...you’re going to go in with your own state of mind, anyway, aren’t you? Like most people are going to go in, or the majority are saying, ‘Yes, I agree with it’ or ‘I don’t agree with it’ and it will be the minority that don’t.”*

3.30 There was only one instance where the phrase seemed to make someone vote the *opposite* way from how they intended. The participant, who was aged 16-17 and had therefore never voted before, selected ‘Yes’ but subsequently talked about why she was opposed to independence. Asked why she answered ‘Yes’, she was shocked when she realised what she had done and felt that ‘Do you agree...’ had influenced her vote:

*“I think it’s the first bit, the ‘Do you agree...’. Your eye just catches the ‘agree’ bit, so it does. I’ve not really put my mind into it. And I’ve ticked ‘Yes’ instead of ‘No’ [...] I think it’s just when I saw agree, I was like, I need to agree. But I don’t.”*

3.31 However, as noted above, the main concern was not that the phrase would cause such overt errors, but that it would subtly nudge some people towards 'Yes'. We do not know whether there were other participants whose responses were affected by the wording.

3.32 The following changes were suggested by participants to help overcome the perceived bias of 'Do you agree...':

- replace 'Do you agree...' with an alternative phrase. Suggestions included: "Do you think...", "Do you want..." (see discussion on version 3 at 3.62 below) and "Would you like...":

*[Referring to their group's suggestion of "Would you like Scotland to become an independent country?"] "... you're not agreeing with somebody, you're not disagreeing with somebody, it's asking YOU; would you like it?"*

*"I think by saying 'agree', the decision has been made by a higher party: do I agree with the SNP? [...] obviously the decision has been made. Not, 'do you think', so I prefer the word 'think', instead of 'agree'."*

- remove 'Do you agree...' so the question would become 'Should Scotland be an independent country?' (i.e. version 2 which is discussed below)

*"I think you can just [...] take off the 'do you agree...' bit and just put 'Should Scotland be an independent country', Yes or No, and that would be more like generalised rather than having this biased view on it."*

- add the opposite position to balance the question e.g. '...or disagree', '...or not agree', so the question would become 'Do you agree or disagree that Scotland should be an independent country?' This would also require a change to the response option from 'Yes'/ 'No' to 'Agree'/'Disagree'.

#### *The lack of specific mention of separation from the rest of the UK*

3.33 A few participants (predominantly those who voted 'No') felt that the proposed question is biased because it does not specifically mention separation from the UK. As a result, they felt the question was one-sided, was "not being clear" about the implications of independence and so may lead people to consider a 'Yes' vote more than they might otherwise. In order to overcome this issue, participants felt '...from the UK' or '...separate from the UK' should be added to the question.

#### *The exclusion of specific reference to the status quo*

3.34 A few participants were critical that the question does not explicitly present the status quo as an option.

*“It’s very one-sided. It’s not about should Scotland continue to be part of the Union [...] I don’t think the question is giving enough information on what you’re voting on.”*

- 3.35 Participants who held this view felt that, without explicitly stating the option of Scotland remaining as part of the UK, the question may lead people to consider a ‘Yes’ vote more than they might otherwise.
- 3.36 The following suggested changes were made by participants to overcome this issue:
- adding ‘...or should it remain part of the UK’. Participants who suggested this change also noted that it would require changing the response options to: ‘Scotland should be an independent country’; and ‘Scotland should remain part of the UK’
  - Flipping the question to: ‘Do you agree that Scotland should remain part of the UK?’
  - replacing ‘independent country’ with ‘separate from the rest of the UK’: ‘Do you agree that Scotland should be separate from the rest of the UK’.

#### *Order of response options*

- 3.37 A few participants suggested that having ‘Yes’ before ‘No’ is biased towards ‘Yes’. However, they also recognised that the counter argument could be made if the response options were switched and that one option has to come first.
- 3.38 Some participants suggested presenting both options side-by-side on the ballot paper.
- 3.39 However, participants did not have strong feelings about the order of response options and noted that ‘Yes/No’ is the “natural” and “usual” convention.

*“If someone says ‘what do you think?’, [they say] ‘yes or no?’ They don’t tend to say ‘what do you think, no or yes?’”*

#### *Neutrality of the term ‘independent’*

- 3.40 A very few participants felt the word ‘independent’ is loaded because it is an inherently positive term and may encourage some voters, particularly those who are more inclined to make their decision based on emotional factors rather than fully weighing up the advantages and disadvantages, to vote ‘Yes’. This was for two reasons:
- in this context, the word is positively associated with “freedom” and images of “Braveheart” and therefore encourages an emotional and less considered response. To counter this, it was suggested that ‘an independent country’ could be replaced with ‘separate from the rest of the UK’ or be flipped to ask about whether Scotland should remain

part of the UK (as was suggested as a potential solution to the exclusion of a status quo option).

*“I think between ‘independent’ and ‘separated’, ‘independent’ is more about you saying Braveheart, people being like owning our own country, but the word ‘separated’ is about what this is actually about, it’s about separating from the UK Government.”*

- the opposite of ‘independent’ is ‘dependent’ and, on that basis, it is difficult for people to argue against a proposal for Scotland to be independent. To avoid this, a suggestion was to add ‘...from the UK’ to the question.

3.41 However, a more commonly held view was that the word ‘independent’ *should* be included in the question since it is a widely recognised term and encapsulates the central theme of the referendum:

*“Well that’s what it’s all about [being] ‘independent’ [...], so it has to be stated into it somewhere that it’s going to be an independent country.”*

*“[...] it’s the way it is being termed and the way people understand it so that’s how I feel it should be in the question.”*

### **Assessment of version 2 (‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’)**

3.42 Version 2, ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’, was tested as either the main version or as a comparator with all participants. In the early stages of testing, version 2, alongside versions 3 and 4 (see below) was used as a stimulus to draw out participants’ views of the proposed question. However, in later rounds of testing, version 2 was also tested as the main version. This section details the findings from the testing of version 2, relating to:

- understanding (which includes an assessment of whether the question was to the point, unambiguous and avoids misleading voters)
- neutrality
- other positive and negative comments (in comparison with the proposed question).

### ***Understanding***

3.43 As with the findings for the proposed question, participants found version 2 clear, simple and easy to understand. Some preferred version 2 because it was shorter and more concise than the proposed question. That it was shorter did not, however, have any impact (positive or negative) on understanding.

*“Very straightforward, I hope it’s going to be like that.”*

*“It’s straightforward; a spade’s a spade. It doesn’t go on or anything. It’s straight to the point.”*

- 3.44 A few participants felt that version 2 was *too simple* and *too easy* to answer and the brevity of the question was potentially problematic because it encouraged people to vote too quickly and without enough consideration (see below at 3.59).
- 3.45 The proposed question and version 2 differed only in that the latter omits the phrase ‘Do you agree that...’ and the order of words is changed from ‘Scotland should...’ to ‘Should Scotland...’. As such, no additional or different issues emerged in relation to the understanding of ‘independent country’, ‘country’, the Yes/No response options or the (lack of) need for additional instructions/a preamble.

### **Neutrality**

#### *Omission of ‘Do you agree...’*

- 3.46 The key difference between the proposed question and version 2 was the omission of the phrase ‘Do you agree...’. As noted above at 3.32, some participants spontaneously suggested version 2 as a potential solution to the perceived bias of ‘Do you agree...’.
- 3.47 As a result of its omission, version 2 was largely seen as being more neutral than the proposed question and for this reason was the most favoured question in all rounds of testing. This was the case both when the version was used as the main question and when shown as a comparator.

*“That’s asking the question without putting ideas into your head.”*

*“I think it’s as pretty well balanced as you could make it.”*

*“This is a much more neutral approach [than the proposed question] and it’s perfectly clear.”*

- 3.48 Version 2 was viewed as more neutral than the proposed question as participants interpreted the question as asking people to state their *own* personal preference rather than agree with ‘someone else’s view’ (as described above at 3.27). As might be expected, this view was particularly common among those who felt that the proposed question was leading:

*“In that one [version 2] they are asking me – they haven’t decided yet. In [the proposed question] it sounds like they’ve decided.”*

- 3.49 However, some other participants, particularly those who did *not* think that the proposed question was leading, preferred the proposed question because it explicitly addresses the voter – ‘Do you...’ (see 3.53 below).

### *The tone of 'should'*

3.50 However, a few participants felt that use of the word 'should' made the question leading towards 'Yes'. Two reasons were given for this:

- 'should' was interpreted as being a word that would be used by someone making a suggestion about something they wanted to happen. This interpretation was most common among participants who had English as an additional language: they felt that the tone of 'should' was quite forceful and harsh, particularly when compared to 'Do you...' which was seen as "more polite"
- the absence of the opposite position – 'should not' – could potentially encourage voters towards a 'Yes' vote.

### *Neutrality of other aspects of the question*

3.51 Consistent with the findings from testing the proposed question, a few participants felt that other aspects of this version that were the same as the proposed question were potentially leading – namely, the absence of specific reference to separation from the UK (see 3.33); the exclusion of the status quo option (see 3.34); the order of response options (see 3.37); and the use of the word 'independent'(see 3.40). However, as was the case in relation to the proposed question, criticisms of the neutrality of other aspects of the question were relatively uncommon.

### **Other views on version 2**

3.52 Other issues that emerged in relation to version 2 were about lack of personalisation (the fact it did not contain 'you') and a view that the question was *too* short and simple. However, it should be noted that these aspects relate to participants' personal preferences rather than the understanding or neutrality of the question.

### *Personalisation*

3.53 As described above, participants who felt that the proposed question was potentially leading because of the phrase 'Do you agree...', generally preferred version 2 as it was (implicitly) asking people for their own view rather than asking them whether they agreed with "someone else's position" (the 'you' in the proposed question was superseded by the 'agree').

3.54 By contrast, other participants did not like version 2 as it does not address the voter directly (it excludes 'you...'). As a result, the question was perceived to be too blunt and severe.

*"[It's as if they are saying] Give me a yes or a no and get out of my face!"*

3.55 Participants who held this view felt that the wording and tone of the proposed question and version 3 (see 3.70 below for more discussion) was 'softer', 'friendlier', 'more conversational', and they liked the fact that these questions addressed the voter personally:

*“I don't like it [version 2], it is not personal. It is not asking you anything, well yes it is asking you, [but] it's not [addressing] the person. I just don't like it.”*

*“[The proposed question and Version 3] are treating you like an individual.”*

- 3.56 That said, it is important to make clear that participants understood that version 2 was asking about their personal view, even in the absence of the words ‘you’ or ‘your’ in the question.
- 3.57 It is worth noting that, in round 1 of testing, participants who had a preference for personalised wording tended to prefer version 3 (‘Do you want...’ – see below at 3.70 for more information) to the proposed question. Throughout the remainder of testing, the absence of version 3 may have meant that these participants selected the proposed question as their preference because, of the three questions, it was the only version to address the voter directly (it included ‘...you...’).
- 3.58 However, other participants were positive about the absence of ‘Do you...’ in version 2. They felt the wording may encourage voters to consider what is best for the whole of Scotland (both now and in the future) and not just for them as individuals. Some felt this may also reduce the likelihood of participants voting in an emotional rather than a rational/considered way.

#### *Too short and simple*

- 3.59 While many participants expressed a preference for Version 2 on the basis that it was more concise, a few participants felt that the question was “too simple” and it therefore encourages people to vote quickly and without due consideration. One participant (who was undecided and very anxious about the decision), preferred the proposed question because it was longer and he felt it gave him “more time to think”. He felt the tone of version 2 was:

*“Hurry up and vote; Yes or No!”*

- 3.60 A few felt that the very simplicity and directness of version 2 might lead people to ‘Yes’ because it “went straight to the heartstrings” and encouraged an emotional rather than a considered response.
- 3.61 These participants believed that the ideal question should somehow ‘make people think more’ and tended to equate the greater length of the proposed question with more time to think. This view was more common among ‘No’ voters who had concerns that some people would not fully consider the pros and cons of independence before making their vote (and would therefore vote ‘Yes’).

## Assessment of other versions

3.62 The following questions were also tested as part of the research:

- **version 3:** Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?
- **version 4:** Should Scotland become an independent country?

3.63 Once again, participants generally felt that both of these questions were easy to understand, and it was clear that they could vote in a way which matched their view on Scottish independence. In line with the findings for version 2, there was broad agreement that both of these questions were less biased towards a 'Yes' vote than the proposed question, because of the omission of 'Do you agree...'.

3.64 A number of additional issues emerged when testing versions 3 and 4 and these are discussed in turn below.

### ***Version 3: Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?***

3.65 The dominant view which emerged when testing version 3 was that the word 'want' was inappropriate in the context of a referendum question. There were several, linked, underlying reasons for this: associations of 'want' with childish demands and desires; feeling that 'want' "tugs at the heartstrings"; and a view that there should be a distinction between *wants* and *needs*. However, all of these reasons were related to personal preferences and were not linked directly to the understanding or neutrality of the question.

*"You can say 'do you 'want' a new designer handbag?' Yes. Should you buy it? No."*

3.66 Taken together, these associations resulted in a strong sense that 'want' encourages an emotional or idealistic response to the question, and this was inconsistent with the view that voters should make a more rational and considered decision by weighing up the arguments for and against independence. Those who opposed independence were particularly vocal about the fact that people should vote with their 'heads not hearts'.

*"There's things I want that I shouldn't want. 'Do you want X' [...] takes out that thought of 'will we benefit from [independence]?'"*

3.67 For these reasons, participants generally felt that 'should' was a more appropriate word than 'want'.

3.68 *'Could Scotland be an independent country?'* (with the emphasis on 'could') was also suggested by some participants in an attempt to overcome the perceived risk of people voting emotionally rather than rationally. Although this clearly would not work as a referendum question, what they were trying to get at was a question that forced people to think about whether independence was a viable, realistic option.

3.69 Nonetheless, there were some positive comments made in relation to version 3. Participants in one focus group spontaneously suggested version

3 because they felt that 'want' provides a clearer mandate than the word 'should' i.e. X% of the voters want, or do not want, Scotland to be an independent country.

- 3.70 Other positive comments were in relation to the word 'you'. Some participants favoured version 3 because of the explicit emphasis on the individual voter's view, whereas this is only implicit in version 2 and lacking in the proposed question where the emphasis was seen to be on someone else's viewpoint.

#### ***Version 4: Should Scotland become an independent country?***

- 3.71 The replacement of the word 'be' with 'become', following findings from the first round of fieldwork, was the only difference between versions 2 and 4. Therefore, almost all of the discussion of version 4 focused on the impact that 'become' has on the question. Three main themes emerged.
- 3.72 Firstly, there was a perception that 'become' leads to more ambiguity around the timescales for independence because it may be interpreted as "at some point in the future". Linked to this, there was a view that 'become' implies less certainty about the outcome in that independence "might happen, but might not". Together, these concerns led to a fear among some participants, particularly supporters of independence, that the lack of clarity implied by 'become' may be used to delay, perhaps indefinitely, the process of independence.
- 3.73 Secondly, participants thought that 'become', unlike 'be', has connotations of change. This was welcomed by some for a variety of reasons. It was suggested that the focus on change better reflects the process of change that the country would undergo, rather than giving the impression of independence happening by the "flick of a switch". Those who opposed independence tended to say that emphasising change would encourage voters to think more carefully about the pros and cons of independence and consider what would be involved in reaching a settlement on the many different issues to be resolved. As a result, it was suggested that some people who might otherwise vote 'Yes' (based on an "emotional" reaction) would vote 'No'.
- 3.74 Thirdly, it was suggested that the word 'become' slightly affected the neutrality of the question, but there was no clear agreement on its impact. Some associated 'become' with positive images, such as growth, and therefore felt that this may influence people to vote 'Yes'. Others felt that the greater emphasis on change may lead people to vote 'No' because, generally, people are resistant to change. Still, others felt that, in the absence of reference to 'separation from the UK', the emphasis on change from the current situation resulted in a more balanced question than version 2.
- 3.75 On balance, version 2 was favoured more than version 4. While both questions were seen as better than the proposed question in terms of neutrality, the additional level of ambiguity introduced by the word 'become', was perceived to be problematic.

## 4 VOTER INFORMATION

- 4.1 The focus of the research was on the proposed question but we also explored what additional information, if any, participants felt they needed ahead of the actual referendum.
- 4.2 While it may not be possible to meet some of the demands (e.g. the desire for an objective, ‘official’ summary of the pros and cons of independence), the findings give an indication of some of the other types of information that the respective Governments, campaigns and the Electoral Commission could provide.

### ***Information on the pros and cons of independence***

- 4.3 Participants felt that there were, as yet, many unanswered questions on the issue. They anticipated that a great deal more information would be available in the lead up to the referendum. They thought this would be provided by the different campaigns and by the media – but many also wanted information from an “objective”, “independent” body or person that they could trust to give them an un-biased, accurate assessment of what would happen in different circumstances<sup>18</sup>.

*“I need to know in simple terms from someone who is totally unbiased what the implications would be of becoming, or not becoming, independent.”*

- 4.4 Few of these participants were clear who might provide this information but academics and the Electoral Commission were occasionally mentioned.
- 4.5 There were also frequent calls for a relatively short (e.g. one page) summary of the pros and cons of independence. ‘No’ voters, in particular, felt that the full implications of independence should be clearly spelled out in advance so that people made their decision based on a real understanding of what would be involved. Some wanted this information to be on the ballot paper itself (or provided on a separate sheet along with the ballot paper) but, more commonly, participants wanted it provided in advance: the dominant view was that additional information on the ballot paper would be confusing and it was better to keep it as simple as possible.
- 4.6 There was also a view that voters should be made aware of which aspects would require to be negotiated afterwards and could not, therefore, be known/settled before the referendum (e.g. EU membership).

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<sup>18</sup> The economic impact was the issue most commonly raised. Participants also mentioned the currency, the monarchy, defence, immigration and citizenship. An English participant who had lived in Scotland for many years wanted to know if he would be allowed to remain and a participant who lived in Dumfries, but worked in England, wanted to know what her position would be.

### ***Information on the process***

4.7 Few participants raised questions about the referendum process or what would happen in the immediate aftermath of a 'Yes' vote. However, questions that were raised included:

- Will the result of the referendum be decisive? (Or will it just be "taken into account" with the final decision being made by government?)
- In the event of a 'Yes' vote, could the government still decide not to go ahead?
- Would a particular threshold of 'Yes' votes need to be reached?
- What would happen if the next government was not in favour of independence? Could they overturn the result?
- Who would be Prime Minister (or equivalent) the day after the referendum?
- Would there be an election for the Scottish Parliament immediately after the referendum?

## 5 CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATION

- 5.1 The proposed question, ‘Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?’, was found to be easy to understand, clear, simple and concise. Participants were able to answer it in a way that matched their intentions. Further, almost all participants understood the broad concept of ‘independent country’ (even if they felt there were many unanswered questions about what it might mean in practice) and, specifically, they understood that it meant separation from the rest of the UK.
- 5.2 The main problem with the proposed question was that it was widely perceived to be biased – by those who supported independence as well as those who opposed it – because it was felt that the phrase ‘Do you agree...’ might lead people towards a ‘Yes’ vote. Overall, although participants thought that the question was biased towards ‘Yes’, they did not feel it would have a major impact on the result and would probably only affect those who were very undecided, unsure or “easily led”.
- 5.3 In light of this issue, we recommend that version 2, ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’, be used in the referendum. As was the case with the proposed question, it was found to be easy to understand, clear, simple, concise and participants were able to answer it in a way that matched their intentions. It excludes the problematic phrase ‘Do you agree...’ and, as a result, it was widely perceived to be more neutral than the proposed question.
- 5.4 Other alternatives tested, while also seen as more neutral than the proposed question, had other problems which make them less suitable alternatives than version 2. Specifically:
- ‘*Should Scotland become an independent country?*’ – the word ‘become’ instead of ‘be’ led to some ambiguity. This was mainly around the timescales for independence because ‘become’ may be interpreted as “at some point in the future”. Linked to this, there was a view that ‘become’ implies less certainty about the outcome in that independence “might happen, but might not”
  - ‘*Do you want Scotland to be an independent country?*’ – the dominant view was that the word ‘want’ was inappropriate in the context of a referendum question: it was associated with childish demands and desires; there was a feeling that it “tugs at the heartstrings”; and there should be a distinction between *wants* and *needs*. Taken together, this resulted in a strong sense that ‘want’ encourages an emotional or idealistic response to the question, and this was inconsistent with the view that voters should make a more rational and considered decision by weighing up the arguments for and against independence.

## APPENDIX A

### Mock ballot paper

BALLOT PAPER	
Vote (X) ONLY ONCE	
Do you agree that Scotland should be an independent country?	
YES	<input type="checkbox"/>
NO	<input type="checkbox"/>

## APPENDIX B

### Topic guide for depth interviews

#### Introduction

Introduce self, Ipsos MORI

Thank participants for agreeing to be interviewed; mention should take a maximum of c 30 minutes.

Research commissioned by the Electoral Commission which involves talking to members of the public to see whether people understand and can easily complete a draft question on a ballot paper for an upcoming referendum.

Mention that neither the Electoral Commission nor Ipsos MORI are linked with any political party.

Mention anonymity of respondents and MRS (Market Research Society) code of conduct. We are not interested in how they vote, just whether they find the question on the ballot paper easy to understand and answer.

Ask permission to record.

#### Making their 'vote'

Firstly, we would like you to complete the ballot paper as if this was the day of the referendum. Please answer the question on the ballot paper as you would if I was not here. Although I'm not interested in the option you vote for, it will make it a more realistic test of the question if you treat it as 'real' and vote in the way you think you would actually vote. Just work at your own pace. I will be looking to see how you get on. But, don't worry, this is not a test of you, it's a test of the question! One thing that is helpful for me to understand how you are getting on is for you to 'think aloud' and say what you are thinking about as you read and fill in the form.

*[INTERVIEWER: note any important comments made in think aloud, expressions, hesitations or body language.]*

## Interview

I'd now like to chat to you about what you just filled in.

### 1 Overall intelligibility/impressions

**How did you find completing the question?**

- Was it easy or difficult to understand and complete?

**What did you have in mind when you were completing it?**

**Did you read the question fully, scan it, or did you skip any of it?**

- Why did you scan/skip that aspect?

**What do you think of the question?**

- Anything off-putting about it?
- Anything you particularly liked about it?

**How could the question be improved?**

### 2 Voter intention

**Do you feel confident or not confident that you have been able to answer the question in a way that matches your views on this issue?**

- What makes you feel confident?
- Why do you not feel confident?

**How did you decide which response to select?**

**Did you consider voting for a different option?**

**What would happen if a majority voted 'Yes'?**

**And how would that differ from happens at present?**

**What would happen if a majority voted 'No'?**

### 3 Understanding

**Did you feel it was clear what you were being asked?**

- What was clear/unclear?

**What does this question mean in your own words?**

**Is there anything that's a bit confusing?**

Probe for detail

**How could the question be made clearer?**

**What words or phrases, if any, are difficult to understand?**

- What is it about [word or phrase] that is difficult to understand?

**[If not mentioned above:] What do you think is meant by:**

- "Independent country"

**Would you have liked more guidance or instructions?**

- What information would you add?
- Would that be provided as part of the question or separate to the question?

**Do you feel everyone would understand this question? What sort of people would have difficulties?**

**What aspects of the question would people have difficulty understanding?**

- For each aspect mentioned: What is it about [aspect] that would cause difficulty?

**What did you think about the order of response options?**

- Would you change the order?

**4 Neutrality/Impartiality**

**Who do you think came up with the wording for the question(s)?**

What makes you say that?

**Do you think the question is trying to persuade you to give a particular answer?**

- How do you think the person who wrote this question wants you to vote?

**Did you feel there was a 'correct' answer to this question(s)?**

- What makes you feel that way?

**TURN TO RATING SCALE FOR NEUTRALITY**

Here is a scale of how balanced the question is. Some people have said that the question is completely balanced. Others have said that it encourages people to consider a 'No' vote, while others have said it encourages people to consider a 'Yes' Vote.

**Where on the scale do you feel the question sits?**

- What about the question makes you say that? [PROBE SPECIFIC WORDS OR PHRASES]
- What changes could be made to make the question more balanced?

**Do you think everyone would feel this question(s) was fair?**

- What aspects in particular would they think were unfair?
- What changes would make them think it was fair?

**5 Comparison with other question(s)**

**SHOW PARTICIPANTS COMPARATOR QUESTION(S)**

[ROTATE ORDER OF ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS ACROSS INTERVIEWS]

**What do you think of this question?**

**How does this version compare to the question you completed?**

- Do you think it's better or worse?

**Explore each difference in turn and ask participant for their views**

e.g. This version used the word X instead of X: Do you think this is better/worse than the design you completed?

**If you had been given this question, do you think you would have voted differently?**

**Which question do you think is easier to understand?**

**Which is fairer?**

**If you could make up to three changes to the question, what would they be?**

**6 Interest in politics information (for sampling)**

INTERVIEWER: MARK ANSWERS ON OBSERVATION SHEET:

**How interested would you say you are in politics?**

**What was the last election you voted in?**

**Thanks and close**

Is there anything else that you would like to add, that hasn't already been mentioned? We would like to thank you for taking part and remind you that the findings will be used by the Electoral Commission to inform the design of the question to be used in the referendum on Scottish independence.

## APPENDIX C

### Topic guide for focus groups

#### Introduction

Introduce self, Ipsos MORI

Thank participants for agreeing to take part in the discussion; mention should take a maximum of 1 hour 30 minutes.

Research commissioned by the Electoral Commission (at this point introduce Electoral Commission staff) which involves talking to members of the public to see whether people understand and can easily complete a draft question on a ballot paper for an upcoming referendum.

Mention that neither the Electoral Commission nor Ipsos MORI are linked with any political party.

Mention anonymity of respondents and MRS (Market Research Society) code of conduct.

Ask permission to tape record discussion. Mention that recordings are for analysis purposes only.

Clarify purpose of discussion: We are not interested in how you vote, just whether you find the question on the ballot paper easy to understand and answer, so you don't need to tell people how you voted if you don't want to. However, if you would be happy to tell people how you answered then please feel free to do so during the discussion.

#### Exercise 1 – Making their 'vote'

To begin, on your own, I would like you to complete the ballot paper as if this was the day of the referendum. Please answer the question on the ballot paper as you would if I was not here. Although I'm not interested in the option you vote for, it will make it a more realistic test of the question if you treat it as 'real' and vote in the way you think you would actually vote. Just work at your own pace. Don't worry, this is not a test of you, it's a test of the question!

#### Exercise 2 – highlighting potentially problematic areas

Now that you've voted I'd like you to please use the red pen in front of you to underline any words or phrases that you feel people might have difficulty understanding. There might not be any. I'd also like you to use the blue pen to underline any words that people will find easy to understand. Again, there might not be any. Please do this on your own. If you have any questions, raise your hand and I'll come over.

## Discussion

I'd now like to chat to you about the ballot paper.

### 1. Overall intelligibility and understanding

**Overall, how did you find completing the question?**

- Was it easy or difficult to understand and complete?

**What did you have in mind when you were completing it?**

**What were your first impressions of the question?**

- Anything off-putting about it?
- Anything you particularly liked about it?

**Did you feel it was clear what you were being asked?**

- What was clear/unclear?

**What does this question mean in your own words?**

**Do you feel confident or not confident that you have been able to answer the question in a way that matches your views on this issue?**

- Why do you not feel confident?

### 2. Understanding

**So, what words or phrases did people underline?**

**FOR EACH WORD OR PHRASE SELECTED:**

**What is it about [WORD/PHRASE] that people would have difficulty with?**

**Does anyone disagree and think it's easy to understand?**

- What about it makes it easy?

**What do you think is meant by [WORD/PHRASE]?**

**What sort of people would have difficulties understanding this [WORD/PHRASE]?**

**How could the question be made clearer?**

PROMPT, IF NOT MENTIONED ABOVE:

**What do you think is meant by [WORD/PHRASE]?**

- "Independent country"

### 3. Views on other aspects of the question

**Would you have liked more guidance or instructions?**

- What information would you add?
- Would that be provided as part of the question or separate to the question?

**What did you think about the order of response options?**

- Would you change the order?

### 4. Neutrality

**Who do you think came up with the wording for the question(s)?**

- What makes you say that?

**Do you think the question is trying to persuade you to give a particular answer?**

- How do you think the person who wrote this question wants you to vote?

**Did you feel there was a 'correct' answer to this question(s)?**

- What makes you feel that way?

### Exercise 3 – Neutrality scale

DISTRIBUTE SCALE FOR NEUTRALITY:

Here is a scale of how balanced the question is. Some people have said that the question is completely balanced. Others have said that it encourages people to consider a 'No' vote, while others have said it encourages people to consider a 'Yes' Vote. Please mark on the scale where you feel the question sits.

**Where do you feel the question sits?**

- What about the question makes you say that? [PROBE SPECIFIC WORDS OR PHRASES OR ASPECTS MENTIONED]
- What changes could be made to make the question more balanced?

**Do you think everyone would feel this question(s) was fair?**

- What aspects in particular would they think were unfair?
- What changes would make them think it was fair?

### 5. Question design

**When designing a question for the referendum what do you think are the most important things to consider?**

[MODERATOR TO NOTE ON WHITEBOARD]

### Exercise 4 – Designing the 'ideal' question

SPLIT PARTICIPANTS INTO SMALL GROUPS (APPROX 2-3):

READ OUT: *I'd now like everyone to work in small groups to identify changes that you would make to the question and come up with your own question, if possible. Don't worry if you can't come up with the exact wording, although if you do manage to, then great!*

*When designing your question, please think about the following guidelines. That the question should:*

- *be easy to understand*
- *be to the point*
- *be unambiguous*
- *avoid encouraging voters to consider one response more favourably than another*
- *avoiding misleading voters.*

ASK EACH GROUP TO EXPLAIN WHAT THEY'VE COME UP WITH.

**Why did you make those changes?**

**What do others think about the changes?**

- Do you think it's better or worse than the question you completed?

**What aspects do you think are better?**

**What aspects are worse?**

## 6. Comparison with other question(s)

I'd now like to get your thoughts on possible alternative questions that we've come up with for the purposes of the discussion.

HAND OUT ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS. NOTE: ROTATE ORDER OF ALTERNATIVE QUESTIONS DISCUSSION ACROSS FOCUS GROUPS.

FOR EACH ALTERNATIVE QUESTION:

**What do you think of this question?**

**Explore each difference in turn and ask participant for their views**

- e.g. This version used the word X instead of X: Do you think it's better or worse than the original question you completed?

**What aspects do you think are better?**

**What aspects are worse?**

**If you had been given this question, do you think you would have voted differently?**

**Which question do you think is easier to understand?**

**Where on the scale do you feel the question sits?**

- What about the question makes it different to [VERSION]? [PROBE SPECIFIC WORDS OR PHRASES]

## 7. Knowledge and awareness of the referendum and independence

To finish, I'd like to have a general discussion about the referendum

**How much, if anything, do you know about the referendum on Scotland's independence?**

- Where does your knowledge come from?

**What about the referendum would you like more information on?**

**Is it something you feel particularly strongly about?**

**What would happen if a majority voted 'Yes'?**

**And how would differ from happens at present?**

**What would happen if a majority voted 'No'?**

**Based on all of the discussion this evening/afternoon, do you feel confident or not confident that you have been able to answer the question in a way that matches your views on this issue?**

Probe any changes in confidence:

- Why do you feel more confident than before?
- Why do you feel less confident than before?
- What could be done to ensure that you are confident that your answer matches your views?

**Is there anything else that you would like to add, that hasn't already been mentioned?**

**Thanks and close**

We would like to thank you for taking part and remind you that the findings will be used by the Electoral Commission to inform the design of the question to be used in the referendum on Scottish independence.