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Targeting the cereal woman: Campaigns, gender, and Scottish independence

Emilia Y. Belknap *

Department of Politics and International Relations, The University of Southampton, 58 Murray Building, Highfield Campus, 59 Salisbury Rd, Southampton SO17 1TW, United Kingdom

Correspondence: E.Y.Belknap@soton.ac.uk

How do political campaigns construct and mobilize voter identities in high-stakes constitutional contests? This article examines the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum through twenty-three elite interviews with campaign actors from Yes Scotland and Better Together. It finds that both campaigns targeted women using gendered assumptions about risk, care, and economic security and were shaped by male-dominated leadership and normative logics. The study finds that these strategies not only responded to gendered voter cleavages but also actively reinforced voter identities. By analysing how gender shaped strategic thinking, message design, and organizational culture, the article contributes to broader debates on electoral behaviour, political representation, and the strategies of campaigns in shaping democratic choice.

Keywords: campaigns; constitutional change; gender gaps; referendums; Scottish independence; voter behaviour.

Political campaigns shape individual and aggregate voting behaviour, attitudes, and electoral outcomes. Existing research highlights the complexity of campaign structures, which comprise diverse actors, including parties, strategists, movements, politicians, and citizens, who work toward the shared objective of electoral success (Denver 1994; Pattie et al., 2011; Jacobson 2015; Farrell and Schmitt-Beck 2003). In the United Kingdom (UK), scholars have examined campaign strategies in General Elections (Graham et al., 2013; Anstead 2017; Harmer and Southern 2020; Townsley et al., 2022), as well as elections in its devolved arenas (Elliot 1999; Bradbury 2018; Mitchell and Henderson 2020). Recent scholarship has expanded

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to include the role of campaigns in referenda, particularly in the context of the 2016 UK European Union Referendum (Harmer and Southern 2018; Doukha and Mansouri 2021) and the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum (Mitchell et al., 2017; Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns 2021).

Campaigns often target stable and salient voter cleavages to maximize strategic efficiency (Mullen 2016). Instead of broad appeals, campaigns focus on key groups to mobilize support and avoid wasting resources. Feminist scholars have long shown that UK campaigns engage voters through gendered strategies shaped by power hierarchies (Norris 1993, 1999; Lovenduski 1999; Campbell 2012; Harmer and Southern 2018; Galpin 2022). Scholars have also shown that UK campaigns have regularly targeted voters in gendered ways to address gaps in gendered voter support (Norris 1996; Harmer and Wring 2013; Campbell and Childs 2015; Campbell 2016; Campbell et al., 2024). In 2017, the UK general election marked Britain's first modern 'gender gap', with women more likely to vote Labour than men (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021), a trend sustained in the 2019 general election (Ralph-Morrow, Shorrocks, and de Geus 2021). However, even before this shift, campaigns targeted women voters as a distinct electoral group (Campbell and Lovenduski 2005; Deacon, Wring, and Golding 2007; Campbell and Childs 2015). Most recently, in the 2024 UK general election, parties targeted subgroups of women voters using electoral archetypes rooted in psephological stereotypes (Sanders and Gains 2024; Campbell et al., 2024).

This article addresses a gap in research on how political campaigns engage with gender dynamics in the context of constitutional change. While gendered voting strategies have been widely examined in UK politics, less attention has been paid to how campaigns interpret and mobilize gender in high-stakes referenda. Using twenty-three qualitative interviews with senior actors from both the Yes Scotland[1] and Better Together (BT)[2] campaigns, this study analyses how gendered power relations shaped campaign messaging and organizational structures during the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. The Scottish case offers a compelling context for investigating these dynamics, not only because a consistent gender gap in support for independence has been well documented and continues with some evidence of a gender reversal (Brown et al., 2002; Kenny and Mackay 2014; Liñeira and Henderson 2021; Belknap 2024), but also because constitutional referenda are often framed as moments of risk or rupture, with campaigns drawing on perceived female caution and status quo preference to shape strategic appeals. As debates around national sovereignty, identity politics, and gendered representation continue to shape campaigns across the UK and beyond (Bennie, Mitchell, and

[1]The pro-independence campaign was the 'Yes Scotland' campaign and often referred to as the 'Yes' campaign or simply 'Yes'.
[2]The campaign opposed to independence was called 'Better Together', and referred to as 'BT', the 'No' campaign, or just as 'No'.

Johns 2021; Santia and Bauer 2023), this case offers critical insight into how political actors construct and mobilize gendered cleavages during moments of constitutional rupture.

This article advances understanding of gendered campaign strategy by showing how political actors interpreted gendered voting patterns and converted them into targeted, often stereotyped appeals in the context of a constitutional referendum. By centring the perspectives of campaign actors, this article reveals how gendered assumptions were not only reflected in but also foundational to campaign strategy, messaging, and organizational dynamics during the 2014 referendum. It shows that gender operated as a strategic lens through which both Yes Scotland and BT constructed voter archetypes, segmented target groups, and selected message carriers, which often drew on gender normative beliefs about risk aversion, care work, and household authority. These strategies reinforced gendered power hierarchies, shaping how women, particularly working-class and economically precarious women, were perceived and politically addressed. While the referendum occurred over a decade ago, its lessons remain salient for understanding how gender continues to be instrumentalized in contemporary campaigns, particularly in polarized or identity-based contests. The article, therefore, contributes not only to electoral studies and feminist political science but also to scholarship on constitutional politics by demonstrating that referenda are not just contests over national futures but also battlegrounds where gendered political identities are imagined, disciplined, and contested.

1. Gender, campaigns, and targeting 'the woman' voter

Voter targeting is central to understanding how political campaigns influence electoral outcomes. As vehicles of persuasion, campaigns operate not only through overt appeals to policy but also through strategic decisions about who to persuade and how. Over time, these strategies have shifted from broad, undifferentiated messaging toward increasingly segmented, data-driven approaches, enabled by advances in polling and digital micro-targeting technologies (Holbrook 1996; Conway et al., 2012). At the heart of this shift is a recognition that political attitudes are shaped less by factual reasoning than by the narratives individuals encounter, which activate emotions, values, and perceptions of risk and security (Fishbein and Coombs 1974; Ajzen and Fishbein 1975; Stimson 1975; Dawson 1979). Voter behaviour is often anchored in belief systems that persist regardless of empirical accuracy, influenced by ideological identities and interpretations of political reality (Hahn 1973; Sartwell 1992; Goertzel 1994; Durnan and Trafimow 2000). These dynamics are particularly salient in referendums, where binary choices heighten the stakes and constrain the discursive space, amplifying the role of narrative in structuring voter perceptions and narrowing the range of politically imaginable

outcomes (Leduc 2002; Farney and Levine 2008; Van de Vyver et al., 2018; Liñeira and Henderson 2021).

Campaigns are most likely to target a sociodemographic group when two conditions are met: a clear gap in political attitudes exists, and there is reason to believe that differentiated messaging will resonate across that divide. Unlike turnout strategies, which respond to gaps in engagement, persuasion strategies focus on attitudinal divergence. In high-stakes contexts, this enables campaigns to allocate resources efficiently toward undecided or persuadable voters, drawing on polling, segmentation, and issue-based appeals to tailor communications to group-specific concerns (Holbrook 1996; Dean 2005; Graham et al., 2013; Copeland 2023).

Among the various socio-demographic cleavages campaigns seek to engage, gender has often been recognized as analytically significant and strategically useful (Norris 1993; Lovenduski 1999; Campbell and Lovenduski 2005; Harmer and Southern 2020; Sanders and Gains 2024). Yet, some scholars have argued that gender has historically received only marginal attention in UK election campaigns, both in academic analysis and in strategic practice (Campbell and Shorrocks 2021), pointing to a gap between the potential salience of gender as a cleavage and its actual prioritization in campaign strategy. In related literature, scholars studying the relationship between gender and elections find that campaigns routinely draw on assumptions about gendered differences in political attitudes, risk sensitivity[3], and issue salience, shaping how they interpret and engage 'the woman voter' (Campbell and Lovenduski 2005; Wring et al., 2007; Kam, Archer, and Geer 2017; Harmernd Southern 2020; Santia and Bauer 2023).

In UK political scholarship, risk sensitivity or risk aversion has often been attributed, sometimes problematically, to women voters, framing them as more cautious or status-quo oriented (Johns, Bennie, and Mitchell 2011; Henderson, Delaney, and Liñeira 2014; Curtice 2015; Liñeira and Henderson 2021). By contrast, 'essentialized gender roles' describe the attribution of fixed, normative characteristics to women and men based on socially constructed ideas about femininity and masculinity. In the electoral context, such roles often cast women as carers, moral guardians, or household managers, thereby shaping the issues and frames used to engage them (Lovenduski 1999; Harmer and Southern 2020). However, these norms are not inherent but are reproduced through political discourse, media narratives, and institutional practices, making them both a product and a tool of campaign strategy. In this way, gender functions not merely as a demographic category but as a discursive and strategic tool, one through which

[3]In this study, 'risk sensitivity' refers to the tendency, observed in both empirical research and campaign discourse, for voters to prioritize the avoidance of perceived losses over the pursuit of potential gains, particularly in contexts of uncertainty or constitutional change (Kacelnik and Bateson 1997; Hintze et al., 2015).

campaigns construct voter identities and channel political narratives leading to gendered targeting.

Subsequent scholarship has moved beyond documenting sex-based voting differences to examining gender as a social and political structure that shapes political participation, preferences, and trust (Sapiro 1981; Shorrocks 2021; Stockemer and Sundström 2023). While the form and scale of gender gaps vary across time and place, systematic differences in issue salience and party alignment have remained consistent (Kanthak and Woon 2014). In both the UK and the US, for example, women have historically been framed as swing voters or undecided demographics, presumed to be less partisan and more responsive to values-based appeals (Campbell 2006).

In turn, UK campaigns have repeatedly constructed categories such as the 'Let Down Woman' (Campbell and Lovenduski 2005), 'school gate mums' (Deacon, Wring, and Golding 2007), and more recently, the 'Whitby Woman' or 'Waitrose Woman' (Campbell et al., 2024; Sanders and Gains 2024), tailoring messaging around family, healthcare, and education to align with presumed priorities. These granular archetypes, which combine gender with class, lifestyle, and geography, are not fixed but shift across electoral cycles, often reflecting the evolving priorities of political strategists and media consultants rather than lived experience. Campbell and Shorrocks (2021) demonstrate how the Labour and Conservative parties adapted their messaging in 2019 to account for both generational and economic differences among women voters.

While these electoral strategies are well-documented in general elections, far less is known about their operation in non-partisan referendum contexts, particularly regarding whether simplifications of gender persist, shift, or intensify when campaigns lack party infrastructure and voters face a binary choice. This is not only a gap in the literature but also a strategic distinction of consequence: referendums compel campaigns to build cross-cutting coalitions around the binary choice, demanding appeals that transcend party lines while addressing embedded identities and perceptions of risk.

Feminist institutionalist scholarship on constitutional politics has accounted for how gendered power is embedded and contested within institutional configurations during moments of constitutional change (Bell and Mackay 2013; Mackay and Waylen 2014; Waylen 2014). Mackay and Waylen (2014) argue that political institutions, such as constitutions or parliaments, are sites that illustrate how gendered power is distributed in society. Thus, they state, 'the creation of new institutions involves changing or creating new gendered rules, norms, and practices that will then shape actors' strategies' (Mackay and Waylen 2014: 493). Feminist constitutionalists have emphasized that constitutional frameworks are not gender-neutral but reflect and reproduce patriarchal power structures, given that constitutions in Western democracies were largely modelled by white

male elites (Irving 2017; Vickers 2017). These constitutions are thus power maps (Duchacek 1973) which outline how power is represented, how authority is exercised, and whose interests are prioritized (MacKinnon 2012; Vickers 2017; Irving 2008, 2017). From this perspective, referendums are not only contests over sovereignty or statehood but moments in which competing visions of political order and gendered power are put forward.

The Brexit referendum offers a revealing contrast. Despite a gender-age gap in attitudes (Fowler 2023) and gender-based resentment mobilizing men to vote Leave (Green and Shorrocks 2023), both the Leave and Remain campaigns largely failed to engage gender explicitly (Guerrina and Murphy 2016). Feminist scholars have highlighted how key issues, such as childcare, labour protections, and social care, were marginalized in both tone and content, despite Brexit's disproportionate impact on women (Guerrina and Masselot 2018; Haastrup, Wright, and Guerrina 2019). Instead, campaigns deployed masculinized narratives centred on control, crisis, and national sovereignty, sidelining relational or care-based values (Guerrina, Exadaktylos, and Guerra 2018). This exemplifies a case where gendered cleavages were visible yet strategically ignored, resulting in a form of gendered silence rather than segmentation.

The 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum, by contrast, presents a case where gender was both publicly visible and internally acknowledged. A persistent gender gap, where women were more likely to be undecided or opposed to independence (Ormston 2014; Curtice 2014), posed a clear strategic challenge to both the Yes and No campaigns. While previous research has examined how Women for Independence (WFI) mobilized a feminist pro-independence identity (McAngus and Rummery 2018), little attention has been paid to how official campaign actors interpreted and responded to this gendered divide. This article addresses that gap, presenting a case study of elite-level campaign thinking under conditions of constitutional uncertainty, where risk, identity, and legitimacy were closely tied to gender.

Existing studies on gender and referendums, including in Scotland (Henderson, Delaney, and Liñeira 2014; Alonso 2018; Liñeira and Henderson 2021) and Catalonia (Verge, Guinjoan, and Rodon 2015), found that women's support for constitutional change is often shaped by concerns about economic precarity and political uncertainty. However, such studies focus largely on voter behaviour and offer limited insight into how campaign elites interpreted and acted on these patterns. This article shifts the focus to campaign strategy, using elite background interviews from opposing sides of the campaign to explore how gendered assumptions shaped message development, voter targeting, and campaign structure. In doing so, it demonstrates that campaigns do not simply react to gendered attitudes, but they also participate in constructing and reinforcing them.

By extending the study of gendered targeting beyond general elections to the referendum context, this research offers new insight into how voter identities are interpreted and mobilized in moments of constitutional contestation. Referendums differ in key ways; they simplify complex political alignments into a binary choice, typically between the status quo and change, and compel campaigns to build broad coalitions across ideological and demographic divides. These dynamics raise important questions:

1. How did campaign actors interpret and respond to gendered voter cleavages, and how did these interpretations shape their messaging, targeting strategies, and organizational practices?
2. To what extent did gendered assumptions about risk, caution, and stability inform campaign strategy in a high-stakes constitutional context?
3. How did the official Yes and No campaigns differ in their approaches to gendered voter engagement?

This study investigates these questions through an in-depth analysis of the gendered nature of the campaigns in the 2014 Scottish Independence Referendum. The next section outlines the research design, including the selection of elite participants, data collection methods, and analytical framework used to examine how gender was operationalized within campaign strategy.

2. Research design and methods

This qualitative study used semi-structured elite interviews to investigate the gendered strategies deployed by the Yes Scotland (pro-independence) and BT (anti-independence) campaigns during the 2014 Scottish independence referendum. Political elites play a fundamental role in shaping campaign narratives and strategic decision-making; their perspectives offer valuable insights into how gendered cleavages were conceptualized, mobilized, and acted upon (Aberbach and Rockman 2002; Harvey 2011; Mikecz 2012; Childs and Webb 2012). Situated within feminist political science, this research draws on methodological traditions that emphasize how gendered power structures shape political behaviour, campaign communication, and constitutional change (Childs and Krook 2006; Considine and Deutchman 2008; Campbell 2016).

The 2014 referendum featured two official campaigns: Yes Scotland, backed by the Scottish National Party, the Scottish Greens, and the Scottish Socialist Party, and BT, supported by Labour, the Conservatives, and the Liberal Democrats. Each campaign received £1.5 million for expenditures over the official period (30 May to 18 September 2014). The referendum's high-stakes, cross-party context disrupted traditional cues and pressured message coordination and identity building. Within

Table 1. Research participants by campaign

Campaign	Number of participants
BT	13
Yes Scotland	9
Think-Tank Commentator	1
Total	**23**

this context, gender emerged as both a public and strategic concern due to the well-documented gender gap in support for independence found in voting behaviour and social attitude data across time (Belknap 2024).

A total of twenty-three semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior campaign actors (see Tables 1 and 2). Approximately forty participants were contacted, and all those who responded were interviewed. Participants were purposively selected for their roles in shaping messaging, targeting, and overall campaign strategy. These elites included campaign managers, senior strategists, spokespeople, politicians, party officials, and board members who had direct influence over how voters were engaged and addressed. This definition of 'elite' follows prior work that conceptualizes campaign elites as key agents of interpretive power (Harvey 2011; Mikecz 2012; Considine and Deutchman 2008). Attention was paid not only to their roles but also to how gender intersected with institutional authority.

Drawing on feminist institutionalist insights (Mackay, Kenny, and Chappell 2010; Chappell and Waylen 2013), the analysis examines how the gender of elite actors influenced their legitimacy, access to decision-making, and influence over campaign tone. Elite interview data offer a top-down view (Childs and Webb 2012) of how gendered cleavages shaped campaign strategy. A feminist methodological lens informed the research throughout, centring questions of power, hierarchy, and representation. Feminist scholars have often employed interviews and oral histories to highlight the institutional processes through which gender is encoded into political life (Reinharz 1992; Ezzy 2002; Kenny and Mackay 2017). This study builds on that tradition by interrogating elite understandings of gendered voter behaviour in the context of constitutional rupture.

Interviews lasted 20–70 min and were conducted remotely in 2020. Participants were recruited via email and provided with an information sheet and consent form in advance. The semi-structured format ensured consistency across thematic areas while allowing space for individual elaboration, enabling participants to reflect on gendered messaging, voter segmentation, and campaign rationales. Questions focused on the perceived gender gap in support for independence, strategic responses to that gap, and broader considerations of how gender shaped campaign tone and priorities. The interview schedule, information sheet, and consent forms are included in Appendix A, B, and C.

Table 2. Research participants by campaign affiliation and gender

Participant number	Campaign affiliation[4]	Gender
1	BT	Man
2	Think Tank Analyst	Woman
3	BT	Man
4	BT	Man
5	BT	Woman
6	BT	Woman
7	BT	Woman
8	BT	Woman
9	BT	Man
10	BT	Woman
11	BT	Man
12	Yes Scotland	Man
13	BT	Man
14	BT	Woman
15	Yes Scotland	Man
16	Yes Scotland and WFI	Woman
17	Yes Scotland and WFI	Woman
18	Yes Scotland and WFI	Woman
19	Yes Scotland	Man
20	Yes Scotland	Man
21	Yes Scotland	Man
22	Yes Scotland and WFI	Woman
23	BT	Woman

To strengthen the empirical grounding of the interview data, triangulation was undertaken with publicly available campaign materials and scholarly analyses of campaign content. These included archived speeches, social media content with text and photographic media, and news articles. For example, key themes cited by participants, such as fairness, economic security, and perceptions of risk, were cross-referenced with campaign outputs where still accessible, to assess their presence in the broader discursive environment. This triangulation validated elite accounts and situated their narratives within the observable campaign record.

Secondary literature provided an additional layer of interpretive context. Studies by Dekavalla (2016) and Dekavalla and Sanchez (2017), for example, analysed the framing of the referendum campaigns in the media and the voices heard in TV coverage. Engström (2020) conducted a multimodal comparison of the main official campaigns of the referendum on Twitter. Other scholars have provided detailed insights into how the campaigns framed constitutional change, as well as the aftermath of the referendum (Bennie, Mitchell, and Johns 2024; Henderson et al., 2022; Keating and McEwen 2020), which were used for triangulating the

[4]The strategic role of each participant has been noted but cannot be provided due to the nature of ethical identity protection and participant anonymity.

data. These analyses helped identify convergence and divergence between strategic intent and public messaging. Lastly, the 'insider account' *Project Fear* (Pike 2015) also provided a behind-the-scenes account of BT, enriching the interpretive depth of the study.

Data were analysed thematically. Coding was conducted inductively, grounded in the narratives and language of participants rather than imposed via a predefined codebook. The process began with line-by-line coding of all transcripts in NVivo, producing an initial set of descriptive codes that captured recurring concepts, actors, and campaign frames. These codes were refined through iterative reading and comparison, merging overlapping concepts and grouping related ideas into broader thematic categories. This process generated three overarching thematic domains: Yes Scotland and pro-independence themes, BT and anti-independence themes, and neutral or contextual codes, each containing multiple sub-themes (e.g. *Women as Voters*, *Risk or Risk Aversion*, *Economic Arguments*). A summary of the final themes and sub-themes is provided in Appendix C. The analytical orientation was informed by research identifying risk perception, stability, and institutional trust as salient factors shaping women's attitudes toward constitutional change (Johns, Bennie, and Mitchell 2011; Henderson, Delaney, and Liñeira 2014; Verge, Guinjoan, and Rodon 2015). These concepts did not structure the analysis but helped direct attention to how elites invoked gendered assumptions about risk and persuasion in justifying their strategies.

Although elite interviews inevitably raise concerns around self-presentation and retrospective narrative construction (Lovenduski and Norris 2003), these are treated here not as limitations but as objects of inquiry. What matters is not simply what actors recall, but how they narrate their choices in ways that align with institutional roles, political loyalties, and broader cultural scripts. This study does not verify strategic effectiveness. Instead, it examines how campaign actors perceived gender as a political issue, how it was framed, why it mattered, and how it became actionable within the context of a constitutional campaign. Through this approach, the article reveals how political elites interpreted and operationalized gender in a context of heightened political uncertainty.

Feminist institutionalist theory provides a lens through which to read elite interpretations not as neutral strategic assessments, but as consequences of institutionally situated actors negotiating gendered expectations. By paying attention to who had the power to define strategy and how their gender shaped assumptions about risk, credibility, and 'appropriate' voter messaging, this study uncovers how gendered institutional dynamics shaped not only outreach decisions but also the perceived legitimacy of experimentation with alternative forms of engagement.

3. Findings

This section presents four core findings on how gender shaped the organization, targeting, and messaging of the 2014 Scottish independence referendum

campaigns. The referendum concluded with a No vote (55% to 45%) on an unprecedented 84.6% turnout (Electoral Commission 2014). Crucially, this outcome was shaped by a pronounced gender gap: surveys recorded 39% of men but only 27% of women in favour of independence (Mowbray 2014). This persistent divide frames the findings below, which analyse how campaign actors understood, targeted, and mobilized gender in the run-up to that result. First, both campaigns were male-dominated in leadership and decision-making. This gender imbalance influenced the tone and perspectives privileged in decision-making, contributing to notable missteps, such as BT's 'Cereal Woman' advert.

Second, women were identified early as the largest and most decisive undecided voting bloc. Internal polling consistently showed women as less committed to independence than men, which made them a central focus for persuasion. Both campaigns relied heavily on essentialist assumptions about women as risk-averse caregivers and household decision-makers, and these beliefs guided segmentation strategies, message design, and the selection of message carriers.

Third, these gendered strategies often reflected simplified archetypes—the cautious mother, the caring professional, the patriotic man—rather than intersectional understandings of identity. While the Yes campaign sought to align independence with care, fairness, and intergenerational responsibility, BT anchored its appeals in economic stability and security, portraying independence as a leap into the unknown.

Finally, the pro-independence movement's grassroots women's network, WFI, contrasted sharply with BT's limited, top-down women's outreach. This divergence reveals deeper asymmetries in how each side approached questions of voice, legitimacy, and the political utility of gender.

The remainder of this section develops these findings in five parts. Section 3.1 examines the overall campaign narratives, 3.2 analyses the gendered leadership structures, 3.3 explores how gendered assumptions shaped voter targeting, 3.4 considers the role of message carriers and symbolic figures, and 3.5 reflects on the final vote and the persistence of the gender gap.

3.1 Broad campaign narratives

Both campaigns sought to frame the referendum as a stark choice between two contrasting futures. Yes Scotland emphasized social justice, economic prosperity, and democratic renewal, framing independence as the route to a fairer and more representative Scotland. In contrast, BT prioritized economic security, political stability, and the risks of constitutional change, positioning itself as the cautious steward of the status quo.

A Yes campaign strategist described the focus as threefold: creating a more prosperous economy, achieving a fairer and less unequal society, and ensuring that Scotland had governments reflective of its political composition. The campaign

framed independence as a means to rectify the perceived democratic deficit in Scotland, portraying Westminster as unrepresentative of Scottish political preferences. Interview data substantiated that pro-independence actors consistently cited themes of equality, representation, and economic empowerment as central to their campaign. Organizationally, Yes Scotland sought to position itself as a grassroots movement, emphasizing community engagement and local activism. This strategic positioning was highlighted by campaign actors on both sides of the constitutional debate despite evidence that the SNP centralized strategic decisions and funding. As one Yes actor reflected, the campaign was 'set up by the SNP, for the SNP, with the SNP'. Still, the emergence of a decentralized, localized movement was crucial to how both actors and voters perceived the campaign's legitimacy.

While Yes Scotland adopted a rhetoric of hope and progress, BT prioritized certainty and continuity. BT structured its campaign around economic security, political stability, and the risks of constitutional change. One campaign actor stated that the BT campaign's messaging was 'instrumental', and by maintaining the status quo, the campaign assured voters that the security of remaining in the UK outweighed the uncertainty of independence. A key BT campaigner stated that while Yes Scotland promised a more progressive and fairer Scotland, BT deliberately avoided such arguments, concentrating instead on economic concerns. BT actors frequently described Yes Scotland as unbound by facts and constrained only by their 'imagination'. This contrasted with BT's reliance on 'arithmetic' and 'depressing facts'. While Yes Scotland idealized political transformation, BT constructed itself as the sober guardian of economic truth, weighed down by responsibility. Campaign actors from both sides described the referendum as a choice between an optimistic vision of independence and the security of remaining within the Union. This contrast shaped voter engagement and influenced how campaign actors interacted with different demographic groups.

3.2 Gendered internal structures

Interview data with participants from both sides indicated that leadership structures in both campaigns were male-dominated, with men shaping strategic priorities and constraining the range of perspectives that informed decision-making. Participants agreed that while Yes Scotland had a formal, 'impeccably' gender-balanced board, men dominated key positions in campaign strategy and decision-making. A BT campaigner described a similar gender power imbalance, stating that almost all senior figures in the campaign were 'very young, very male', except for Kate Watson, one of the few female campaign members, who oversaw campaign events rather than policy development or press relations. The female BT campaigner explained that women in the campaign were asked to lead in 'events, communications, and other roles which were traditionally female'. A WFI member highlighted both campaigns' male-dominated leadership, observing that

key discussions often excluded women's perspectives, and she noted, 'hilariously led by two white men named Blair', referring to Blair Jenkins (Yes Scotland) and Blair McDougall (BT). Reflecting on televised debates between the two men, she remarked that they were 'as is quite typically in politics, two boys talking about currency', and it was 'crystal clear' that 'neither one of them cared about those women' they hoped to reach.

Women involved in BT described negative experiences on the campaign trail, with one interviewee stating that the referendum campaign 'was not a joyous civic event' and that BT campaigners, particularly women, were targeted with online harassment. Gendered experiences of campaigning shaped how participants remembered the referendum. Women on the No side described feeling marginalized both online and within their campaign structures, raising questions about the gendered dynamics of both campaign cultures. While Yes Scotland framed independence as a hopeful and community-driven movement, BT cast itself as the guardian of stability. The male-dominated leadership of both campaigns influenced these narratives, reinforcing traditional gendered assumptions about voter priorities. These power dynamics highlight the intersection of political strategy, gender, and voter behaviour in shaping Scotland's independence debate.

3.3 Gendered voter targeting

Both campaigns relied on gendered interpretations of voter behaviour, shaping their engagement strategies accordingly. Across both campaigns, undecided women were consistently treated as the pivotal constituency. Internal polling showed women were significantly less likely than men to support independence. Campaigners on both sides developed strategies based on essentialist assumptions: that women were more cautious, pragmatic, and resistant to political risk, while men were more receptive to nationalist symbolism. These beliefs shaped not only the tone and content of campaign messages but also the design of voter segmentation into gendered archetypes. Gendered appeals were often differentiated by social roles such as the undecided mother, the working-class woman, or the grandmother concerned with her grandchildren's future. These figures structured how campaign actors segmented women as voters, as discussed in the sections below.

Voter data collection underpinned these targeting strategies. Yes Scotland and BT used door-to-door canvassing, surveys, and focus groups to measure voter attitudes. Yes Scotland used a one-to-ten scale to gauge support for independence, focusing on voters between four and seven. BT used a 0-to-100 scale and further segmented its data by gender, income, and geography. A Yes strategist noted that younger men were more likely to be decisive in their voting preference, while wealthier voters tended to be disengaged. Similarly, a BT strategist described how, in the latter stages of the campaign, focus groups revealed complexities beneath headline voter preferences, requiring further segmentation. When described, this segmentation was largely gendered.

Women were not just a marginal concern; they were framed as moral anchors within households. As one BT campaign strategist put it, 'women were influential not just as voters, but in terms of their partners, their children, and their parents'. This view shaped both the content of messaging and the choice of messenger. Across interviews, campaigners routinely described men as more receptive to nationalist rhetoric and 'flag' symbolism.

Both campaigns segmented the electorate into smaller, gendered subgroups. A Yes strategist explained that their core messaging for women sought to 'align independence with values of fairness, care, and long-term social progress'. These themes are evident in publicly available materials. Engström's (2020) multimodal analysis of 2014 campaign tweets identified Yes Scotland's emphasis on 'fair wage plans', NHS protection, and investment in public services, as well as BT's rationalizations based on economic risk and expert authority. However, one BT participant noted that these themes were built around familiar social roles—'young women looking after their kids, older women looking after their mum and dad, teachers, nurses'—rather than adopting an intersectional approach (Crenshaw 1989).

For example, Yes Scotland also sought to appeal to older women, a key No-voting demographic, by connecting independence to their children's and grandchildren's futures. They encouraged young Yes supporters to speak with their older relatives, leveraging family networks to counter older voters' attachment to the union. As a prominent Yes politician reflected, 'We weren't going to shift the older vote outright, but we could appeal to them as parents and grandparents'. This approach aligned with gendered understandings of women as caretakers, reinforcing themes of intergenerational responsibility. This framing, grounded in caregiving and intergenerational responsibility, mirrors strategies employed in environmental campaigns, where appeals to maternal concern and the protection of future generations have also been gendered and moralized (Atkinson 2014; Cousins 2021). Drawing on these tropes allowed the Yes campaign to embed constitutional change within broader narratives of social care and collective obligation.

In comparison, BT focused on reinforcing perceptions of economic risk and family security. The most visible example of BT's approach was the 'Cereal Woman' advert, which encapsulated the campaign's gendered assumptions and generated intense debate about the role of gender in referendum politics. In the advert, a fictional stay-at-home mother is depicted in her kitchen deliberating over her referendum vote while holding a coffee mug. She felt undecided and anxious about independence and concluded that remaining in the UK was the safer choice. (Better TogetherUK 2014). The portrayal reinforced gendered assumptions about political decision-making, with the woman typically deferring to her husband's political engagement while she remains hesitant, uninformed, and risk-averse. Further, the advert reflected normative gender roles in terms of care and work, positioning the husband as the politically engaged breadwinner and the wife

as prioritizing family security. While widely criticized on social media for its patronizing tone (#PatronizingBTLady), BT actors contended that the advert was based on focus group insights and, therefore, resonated with segments of the target audience. Though responses were mixed, the advert became a recognized and gendered symbol of the referendum (Law 2015; McAngus and Rummery 2018).

Campaigners acknowledged that such strategies reproduced limitations. Despite efforts to frame independence as socially just and future-oriented, Yes Scotland struggled to connect with more vulnerable or working-class women. One board member admitted they were 'not getting to the ordinary women with a longer road to travel' and reflected on observed societal gender inequalities in Scotland:

> In Scotland, particularly, working-class women or certain women who had never paid, as they call it here, the Big Stamp, the big insurance stamp—[had] always been in jobs that didn't give them financial freedom and independence. [. . .] How could you imagine it for a country? Men, whether they agreed with it or not, have experienced independence for huge swathes of their lives; even if they're manual workers working in a shipyard, there's a level of independence about 'I'm going for a pint'. And 'I'm doing this!' Or 'I'm doing that!'. Women at that point, I don't think (had that in 2014), although we (women) have it more so now (in 2021). That was a big gap for us (Yes Scotland).

Another Yes Scotland member recounted a campaign event where a young mother's fears at an event crystallized the challenges of making independence materially relevant:

> She said, 'I'd love to vote yes (for independence).' She said, 'but I'm on benefits [. . .], and I've got a job for the first time in my life, and I'm a single parent now with three kids'. And she said, '[. . .] I work only 15 hours a week. And I'm dead proud of myself because I've got a job, and I'm contributing'. And she said, 'But on a Thursday night, I wish I could go to a food bank because we've got no food. I can't feed my kids'. And she said, 'I'm terrified I'll lose that'.

Reflecting on this exchange, the Yes Scotland actor acknowledged that the campaign had failed to provide convincing answers to women in similar situations. He recognized that these concerns were not adequately addressed, and that the movement needed to articulate a clearer, more reassuring vision of how independence would benefit working-class women. Another Yes Scotland board member reinforced this idea, stating that the 'absolute brunt of the move for independence' would likely 'fall on the shoulders' of working-class women in Scotland. These

accounts highlight how economic precarity could shape women's voting intentions and limited the resonance of aspirational messaging.

This engagement gap contributed to the rise of WFI. This autonomous pro-independence organization sought to create spaces where women could discuss independence without fear of confrontation, organizing informal coffee mornings and community gatherings. One WFI leader described how they structured their outreach: 'We wanted to talk to as many women as possible in environments that allowed their voices to be heard'. Their approach was distinct from Yes Scotland's, focusing less on traditional gendered appeals and more on empowering women through democratic participation. Unlike the SNP-led Yes campaign, WFI framed independence as a feminist issue, arguing that Scotland could only achieve gender equality through self-governance.

BT made attempts to develop a comparable grassroots women's campaign, but these efforts were limited and short-lived. A group called Women Together (WT) was launched as a pro-Union counterpart to WFI and, drawing on McAngus and Rummery's comparative analysis (2018), WT lacked the autonomy, organizational infrastructure, and activist base that characterized WFI. It operated more as an extension of the BT campaign than as a standalone feminist organization. Events were typically top-down, party-led, and media-focused, with little evidence of a sustained effort to frame the Union in gendered or feminist terms. This imbalance points to a deeper divergence in how each side approached questions of legitimacy, voice, and the political utility of gender.

In its latter stages, BT's gendered targeting centred on voter segments such as 'comfortable pragmatists' and 'unconnected security seekers', largely female public sector workers whose livelihoods were tied to state-funded services. As one campaign director explained, 'Women were concerned with the public finance aspect of independence because it spilled into their interests regarding careers and finances'. Recognizing that these voters were motivated more by stability than ideology, BT amplified economic fears around public service funding, the pound, trade, and welfare security. A UK Government adviser reflected, 'We were aware in developing the messages that female voters would be susceptible to the risk arguments ... it focused on their uncertainty about what might seem like a leap in the dark'. The adviser reflected on this, stating, 'That was powerful ... and that was what the voters in the middle, particularly women, cared about'.

3.4 Campaign strategies and gendered message carriers

Campaign actors in both camps knew the messenger could matter as much as the message. Choices of message carriers were shaped by gendered perceptions of credibility, relatability, and audience appeal. Women politicians were positioned as persuasive voices for cautious or undecided female voters, while male politicians were deployed to address groups seen as more receptive to nationalist or

patriotic appeals. For BT, this logic informed both high-level strategy and local campaigning. One No-side politician described standing outside a supermarket with 'two baskets of shopping ... one from Scotland and one from Ireland', using a visual price comparison to imply that the cost of living would rise outside the union. This approach was explicitly designed to appeal to women: 'The messaging worked well for women as it did for some men, but women were the bigger voter pool we could target', reflecting assumptions about their role as primary grocery shoppers and household managers. More broadly, women were seen as a larger undecided bloc whose emotional and economic investment in stability could be leveraged to maintain the status quo. As one strategist put it, the female gender advantage 'contributed very significantly towards that 40% of committed' No voters.

Men were not ignored, but they were segmented differently. Working-class men were seen as susceptible to Yes Scotland's narrative of 'reclaiming lost economic security' through independence. A UK Government adviser explained:

> They didn't have the job security their fathers had ... so they thought perhaps life wouldn't be as bad if they had more responsibilities themselves in an independent Scotland.

To counter this, BT deployed male politicians such as Jim Murphy (then Labour MP and former Secretary of State for Scotland) and George Galloway (then Respect MP, long known for his populist style) to industrial heartlands, where Galloway 'worked particularly well in former industrial areas ... predominantly men audiences would listen to him in ways they wouldn't to some of our other figures'. Middle-class men were targeted with messages reframing a No vote as patriotic:

> We had to make sure that the messages we were developing were couched in terms of, 'If you vote No, that is a patriotic thing to do'. We didn't want it to be seen as 'if you voted against independence, you weren't voting against Scotland, and all that Scotland could do'.

Yes Scotland also made deliberate gendered choices. Nicola Sturgeon (then Deputy First Minister) was prominently featured in debates and public appearances because she was thought to resonate better with women than Alex Salmond (then First Minister of Scotland and SNP leader). Some campaign actors argued that Salmond himself contributed to the gender gap, 'the root cause', in their words, an interpretation that existing research suggests was overstated (Johns, Bennie, and Mitchell 2011), but which shaped internal strategy. In the final months, Sturgeon and Fiona Hyslop (then Cabinet Secretary for Culture and External Affairs) were

foregrounded to 'soften' the party's image. However, Salmond returned for high-profile debates to energize male supporters. BT similarly foregrounded female figures such as Ruth Davidson (then leader of the Scottish Conservatives) and Kezia Dugdale (a rising figure in Scottish Labour as Spokesperson for Education and Lifelong Learning, and later its leader), were described as 'leaders [that] women could identify with', while continuing to rely on male politicians for male-dominated audiences.

While women were perceived as cautious, economically anxious caregivers, men were patriotic defenders of the Union or receptive to nationalist rhetoric. These choices, again, reinforced essentialized assumptions on how to target men and women. It should be noted that comparative lessons from other referendums, where gender gaps have also been linked to risk perceptions (Young 2000; Verge, Guinjoan, and Rodon 2015), were notably absent from the reflections of actors. In practice, message carriers did more than represent the campaign; they embodied and reproduced the gendered voter identities the campaigns sought to persuade, reinforcing the broader narrative frames that shaped the referendum outcome.

3.5 Scotland votes No

As the findings above illustrate, campaign strategies were deeply shaped by gendered assumptions. These dynamics were reflected in the outcome, where heightened uncertainty among women translated into greater reluctance to support independence (Bell and Mackay 2013). Although women were not more pessimistic than men, they were more likely to feel underinformed and uncertain about the economic consequences of independence (Henderson, Delaney, and Liñeira 2014). This heightened uncertainty lowered the likelihood of voting Yes, contributing to the gender gap in the final result.

Interview narratives highlight another underexplored dimension: the gendered nature of national identity. Campaigners often described male voters as responsive to emotive nationalist appeals such as sovereignty, history, and symbolism. At the same time, women were framed as pragmatic, sceptical, and anchored in the everyday realities of British statehood, including welfare, healthcare, and pensions. This reflects differentiated modes of national identification, where Scottishness and Britishness were lived and narrated differently across gender lines. Existing research indicates that identity in referenda is relational and situated, intersecting with concepts such as affect, security, and belonging (Belknap 2024). Yet campaign strategy largely treated identity as a static variable rather than a gendered process. By foregrounding economic security and institutional trust, campaigns may have overlooked deeper registers of attachment and ambivalence (Bell and Mackay 2013) embedded in women's constitutional choices.

4. Discussion

Taken together, these findings challenge the notion that gendered voting behaviour in the 2014 referendum reflected pre-existing attitudes or natural risk aversion among women. Instead, they reveal how both campaigns actively constructed gendered political identities through strategic choices rooted in institutional power dynamics and elite perceptions. Rather than merely responding to gendered cleavages, campaigns shaped them—crafting messages and segmenting voters through essentialized assumptions about women as cautious, domestic, and emotionally anchored. Women were not addressed as a diverse electorate, but as symbolic archetypes: mothers, caregivers, and household managers. These portrayals echoed entrenched political myths about femininity and risk yet often failed to capture the complexity of women's (and men's) lived experiences, particularly among those facing economic precarity or political marginalization.

First, a core finding of this study is that gendered assumptions were not ancillary but central to elite strategic thinking. Campaign actors consistently interpreted polling data through a gendered lens, especially internal figures showing that women were more undecided and more cautious about constitutional change. While such findings shaped message content, they also reinforced essentialist narratives. For example, BT's 'Cereal Woman' advert not only reflected a data-driven attempt to engage women; it distilled a belief that women were politically hesitant, apolitical, and motivated primarily by fear. As one campaign actor admitted, 'any woman would have stopped it', yet a male-dominated leadership greenlit the campaign. This demonstrates how gendered power hierarchies within campaign organizations shaped not only who decided strategy but also how gender itself was conceptualized.

Second, while Yes Scotland appeared to challenge dominant narratives by associating independence with social justice and equality, it too struggled to reach women, particularly working-class and economically precarious women. Specifically, the evidence shows that these groups felt overlooked by the campaign's aspirational framing. Interviews with elites depicted memories from the campaign trail of women on low incomes or in insecure employment, fearing the consequences of constitutional rupture more than they felt empowered by the promise of transformation. Women were routinely constructed as carers and service users, with messaging tailored accordingly, but this often reinforced reductive or essentialized assumptions. These findings build on recent studies of UK general elections, which show that voter segmentation often relies on essentialized gender archetypes (Sanders and Gains 2024; Campbell et al., 2024). However, this insight is extended to the referendum context, where cross-cutting appeals intensified these simplifications.

The logic of segmentation rarely engaged with structural inequality or multiple forms of marginalization; instead, it operated within campaign logics that

prioritized persuasion over transformation. In this sense, the campaigns instrumentalized aspects of gendered experience without necessarily acknowledging the complexity of women's lived realities. As one Yes actor acknowledged, women who lacked personal autonomy in their own lives found it difficult to imagine independence for the nation. These reflections underscore that gendered messaging, which overlooks the intersecting experiences of class, care, and precarity, is likely to falter, even in movements that claim to be socially progressive.

Third, the study suggests that referendum campaigns may amplify the role of gendered assumptions due to their binary, high-stakes framing. Unlike general elections, where partisan cues can diversify outreach, referendums compel campaigns to build broad coalitions and simplify messages around risk and identity. In this context, women were seen as both persuadable and influential within their families, leading to intensive targeting based on presumed emotional and economic concerns. This instrumental view reflects how referendums create incentives to lean heavily on normative stereotypes when trying to consolidate undecided blocs.

This finding differs from gendered targeting in general elections, where parties often construct varied archetypes (e.g. 'school gate mums', 'Whitby Women') while also allowing broader programmatic appeals. In the referendum context, the dominance of a binary choice and the heightened salience of risk appeared to harden essentialist assumptions, narrowing the imaginative range of what women could be seen to want politically. Importantly, while such patterns are visible in other referendums such as Brexit or Catalonia, what distinguishes the Scottish case is that campaigners explicitly recognized gender as a strategic variable, even as their responses remained stereotypical.

This study also shows that moments of constitutional change do not automatically enable more inclusive forms of political agency. While feminist institutionalists have argued that the creation or reform of political institutions can open space to redefine political roles and promote gender equality (Mackay and Waylen 2014), this potential is shaped and often constrained by the actors who hold strategic authority and the assumptions embedded in campaign discourse. In the 2014 referendum, women were frequently framed not as autonomous political agents, but through reductive tropes: as risk-averse, relational, and anchored in domestic concerns. These representations limited the imaginative scope of campaign appeals and often excluded the lived realities of working-class and precarious women from the political narratives constructed around them. The emergence of groups such as WFI offered a counterpoint, not as an idealized feminist alternative, but as evidence that alternative modes of engagement and representation were possible, even as they remained marginal to official campaign structures.

Ultimately, this evidence demonstrates that campaigns not only reflect but also reproduce and entrench gendered social structures. The elite narratives and

strategic decisions examined in this study reveal that gender was not treated as one of many intersecting cleavages but as a central axis of differentiation, risk calibration, and voter appeal. Despite polling showing increased female support for independence in the final weeks, the dominant campaign narratives remained tethered to a narrow vision of 'the woman voter', shaped more by assumption than lived experience.

For political practitioners, these findings suggest the need for more inclusive campaign structures and message design processes that reflect the diversity of the electorate. For scholars, the study expands our understanding of gendered campaigning by showing that referendums, despite their distinct format, share and intensify many of the gendered dynamics visible in general elections. Crucially, this study contributes to the growing literature that views campaigns not merely as technical instruments of persuasion but as cultural producers that shape democratic possibility. In future referendums and constitutional campaigns, gender must be approached not as a demographic obstacle to overcome but as a site of political heterogeneity where agency, identity, and legitimacy are all in play.

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Supplementary data

Supplementary data is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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Ethical approval

All human participants were provided with information sheets and consent forms prior to participation (Appendix B). All participants gave recorded verbal consent to participate in the research before its commencement. Participant data has been anonymized, and such alterations have not distorted the scholarly meaning. Ethical

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