

Will the EU referendum trigger the break-up of the United Kingdom?

If England drags Scotland out of the EU, there will be trouble. But if Scotland keeps England inside, it could be double

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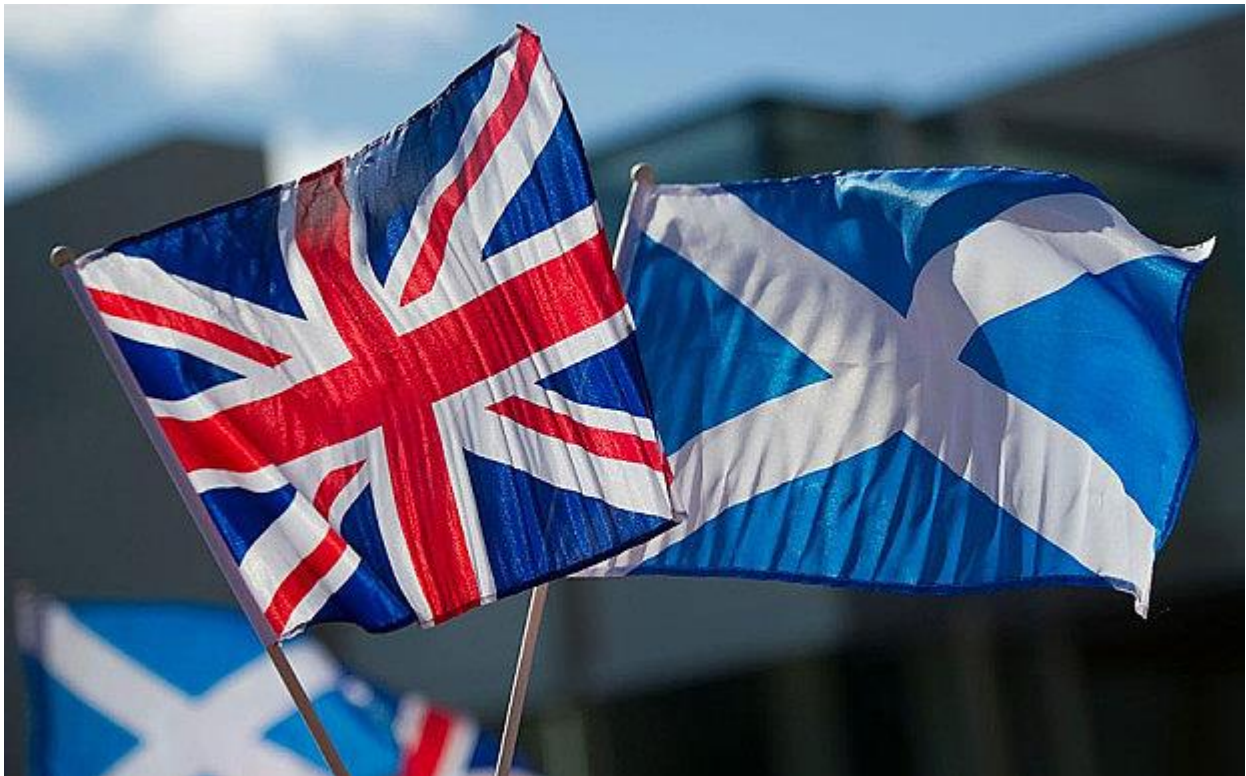
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The fact that so many Scottish business people are terrified of the possible consequences of backing the unionist case confirms that something has gone very wrong Photo: Alamy

By Prof Richard Rose

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On the night of the EU referendum, there will be three counts that matter. The first will show whether there is an overall British majority for staying in or leaving the EU. The second will show whether English voters are on the winning or the losing side. The third will show how likely it is that the United Kingdom will stay together.

"conflict between Britain's nations on future relations with the EU would be a huge headache to the Prime Minister"

That might sound drastic to some readers. But large differences in support for the EU among different nations of the UK mean that many potential results are bad for the Union. Unless England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland all agree in their answers to the referendum question, factions in each will be able to [reject the result as illegitimate](#).

England contributes five sixths of the British electorate. To produce a UK majority for leaving the EU, regardless of the preference of other Britons, would therefore require 61 percent of English voters to endorse Brexit.

Opinion polls, however, show [English voters tend to be evenly divided, and often favour of Brexit](#). Even if a British poll reported 51 per cent in favour of remaining in the EU, a majority of English respondents would be in favour of Brexit. This is because other UK nations are much more pro-European.

The National Centre for Social Research calculates that 55 per cent of Welsh, 64 per cent of Scots and 75 per cent of Ulster voters endorse the European Union on the basis of more than a dozen polls taken in the past year. These numbers are also more stable than the equivalent figures in England.

So collectively, Scots, Welsh and Northern Irish voters will contribute about 11 per cent of the pro-EU vote. English voters would only have to add another 40 per cent to the UK total to create an absolute majority keeping the UK in Europe. But that would mean most English voters had endorsed leaving the European Union – only to have their wishes overridden by the other UK nations.

On the other hand, if 53 per cent of English voters voted to leave the EU, this would be enough to take the UK out of Europe against the preference of a majority of Scots, Welsh and Ulster voters.

The only result which would keep the UK united would be a narrow English majority in favour of remaining in the EU. In that scenario, all four parts of the United Kingdom were of one mind. For this to be true we would expect to see a UK-wide majority of more than 53 per cent.

On the basis of current polling, that is unlikely. Only ten of 30 most recent results from major British polling firms reported a pro-EU majority so large that most English respondents agreed with their fellow Britons. An additional 13 polls showed majorities of up to 53 percent in favour of remaining in the EU, but such a narrow lead implies that most English people would be held in Europe against their will. And seven of the 30 polls, including two reported last Sunday, actually showed enough English opposition to the EU to overpower the other nations' leads.

A conflict between Britain's nations on future relations with the EU would be a huge headache to the Prime Minister. Part of the argument for Scottish independence in 2014 was that England would no longer be able to "impose" decisions on Scotland. An English-led withdrawal of the UK from the European Union [could trigger another referendum in Scotland](#)

on the linked issues of leaving the UK and joining Europe. That would confront the Westminster government with simultaneously negotiating the UK's withdrawal from Europe and Scotland's withdrawal from the UK.

Yet the opposite outcome – a UK majority to remain in the EU, and an English majority to leave – would also be a nightmare for Downing Street. Conservative Eurosceptics could denounce the result as illegitimate, but it would be politically impossible for the Eurosceptics to win a referendum on the issue of England withdrawing from the United Kingdom.

Even if a narrow English majority went along with other Britons and voted to stay in the EU, there could still be an absolute majority of Conservatives voting to leave. Determined Eurosceptics could then adopt [Jeremy Corbyn's doctrine that the party leader should represent his party's members](#). This argument could be used as a weapon to extract promises of further anti-EU actions from Cabinet ministers wanting to succeed David Cameron as the next Conservative prime minister.

Whatever the feelings of English voters on the emotive issue of Europe, there is no escaping the fact that the outcome of the forthcoming EU referendum will be decided by the total vote of the United Kingdom. That is the price England pays for being British.

Richard Rose is a professor of public policy at University of Strathclyde Glasgow and a commissioning fund awardee of [The UK in a Changing Europe](#)