

# Is Scotland more left-wing than England?



Is Scotland really more 'left-wing' or 'social democratic' in outlook than England, as is frequently claimed? And is there any evidence that devolution has led to greater divergence between Scottish and English public opinion? This briefing addresses these questions using data from the Scottish and the British Social Attitudes surveys. By John Curtice and Rachel Ormston

**43%**

of people in Scotland think the government should redistribute income, compared to 34% in England

- People in Scotland are a little more concerned than people in England about income inequality. They are also more willing to support income redistribution.
- But concern about income inequality and support for redistribution has fallen in both Scotland and England during the last decade.
- Although support for 'tax and spend' is a little higher in Scotland than in England, it has fallen heavily in both countries since 1999.
- Only one in five (20 per cent) of people in Scotland believe that no students should have to pay tuition fees – little different from the figure in England (18 per cent).
- Opposition to students paying any tuition fees has almost halved in both countries since 2000.
- Although Scotland is more social democratic in outlook than England, the differences are modest at best.
- Like England, Scotland has become less – not more – social democratic since the start of devolution.

## Introduction

Many Scottish politicians and commentators often pride themselves on living in a distinctively social democratic country: for example, the country's First Minister, Alex Salmond, has referred to 'our Scottish social democracy'. The relative weakness of the Conservative party north of the border is often cited as evidence that, in contrast to England, there is relatively little support in Scotland for ideas on the centre right.

Some developments since the start of devolution in 1999 appear to confirm this claim. For example, in England, individuals and their families are primarily responsible for paying for any personal care they need when they are older. In Scotland, such care is now provided for 'free' by the state. In England, university students will soon have to pay tuition fees of up to £9,000 a year. In Scotland, the fees of Scottish students attending Scottish universities are paid for by the Scottish Government.

There are also good reasons for wondering if devolution has intensified any differences in outlook between Scotland and England. Scotland now has its own, separate debates about many areas of public policy. The leading players in those debates – politicians, pressure groups, policy experts, etc. – tend to be further to the left when compared with those engaged in similar debates in England. If voters take their ideas about policy issues from what they see and hear debated in the Scottish media, then their outlook should have become even more social democratic in recent years.

In this briefing we ask three questions:

- Is Scotland more social democratic ('left-wing') than England?
- Has Scotland become more social democratic since 1999?
- Has the political gap between Scotland and England widened since 1999?

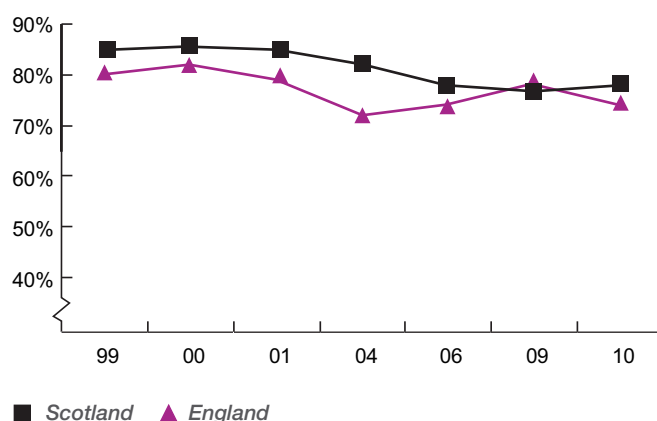
We define a social democrat as someone who is concerned about economic inequality and believes that the state should take action to reduce it. As well as looking at people's answers to survey questions that express such views directly, we also look at attitudes towards specific policies that might be associated with a social democratic outlook.

Our evidence comes from the Scottish and British Social Attitudes surveys (SSA and BSA) of NatCen Social Research. SSA has tracked trends public attitudes in Scotland since 1999, interviewing an annual sample of approximately 1,500 respondents. Many of the questions asked on SSA have also appeared on the British survey, providing an equivalent set of readings for England.

## Inequality

People in Scotland are slightly more concerned than people in England about levels of income inequality. In 2010, 78 per cent of people in Scotland, compared with 74 per cent in England, said that the gap between those on high incomes and those on low incomes was too large. In fact, as Chart 1 shows, with the exception of 2009, respondents to our Scottish survey have consistently been a little more likely than those in England to express this view.

**Chart 1 Trends in attitudes towards income inequality, Scotland and England 1999-2010**



*Per cent who say that the gap between those with high incomes and those with low incomes in Britain today is too large*

However, Scotland is now somewhat less concerned about income inequality than it was in 1999. The proportion saying that the income gap is too large has fallen from 84 per cent in 1999 to 78 per cent in 2010. Much the same change has happened in England too. So rather than moving apart on this issue, the two countries have moved in parallel.

The same patterns are also evident in attitudes towards the distribution of wealth. In 2010, people in Scotland (59 per cent) were slightly more likely than those in England (55 per cent) to agree that 'ordinary people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth'. But the proportion of people in Scotland expressing that view has fallen by 12 points since 2000, in tandem with a not dissimilar drop of six points during the same period in England.

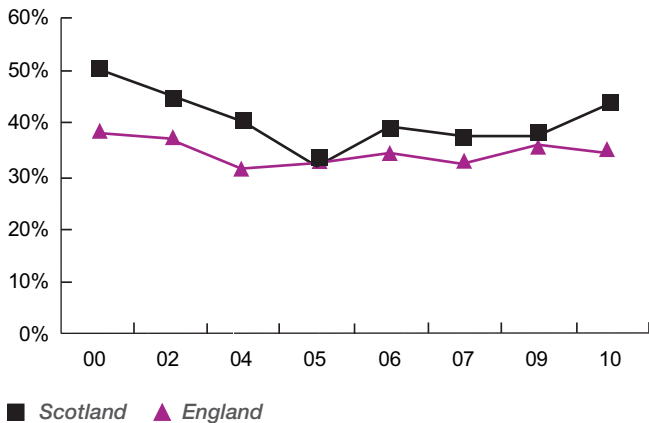
## Redistribution

Social democrats are not just concerned about income inequality – they also feel that it is the government's job to correct it. However, whereas 78 per cent of people in Scotland believe that differences in income are too large, only 43 per cent agree that government should redistribute

income from the better-off to the less well-off. Much the same pattern is found in England.

As Chart 2 shows, people in Scotland are also a little more social democratic than those in England on this criterion. Once again, though, the difference between the two countries is modest. The most recent reading of 43 per cent in Scotland is just nine points higher than the equivalent figure for England (34 per cent).

**Chart 2 Trends in attitudes towards income redistribution, Scotland and England 2000-10**



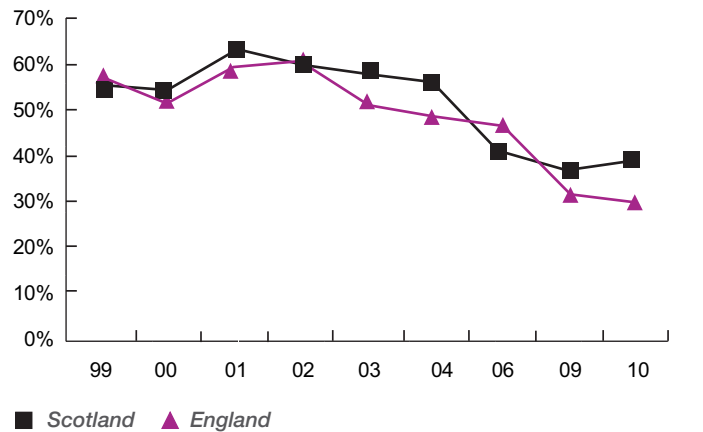
*Per cent agree that 'government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off'*

Once again too, there seems to have been something of a move away from a social democratic outlook in Scotland, most noticeably in the early years of devolution. As a result, the gap between Scotland and England has not widened during the course of the last decade. Scotland simply remains a little to the left of England on this issue.

## Tax and spend

Not all government spending disproportionately favours those who are less well off and not all taxation comes disproportionately from the better-off. However, it is nonetheless true in practice that support for higher levels of taxation and government spending is often associated with a social democratic outlook. Chart 3 shows the proportions of people in Scotland and in England who said that, if the government had to choose, it should increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits (rather than keep things as they currently are, or reduce both taxes and spending).

**Chart 3 Attitudes towards taxation and spending, Scotland and England 1999-2010**



*Per cent favour increasing taxes and spending more on health, education and social benefits*

People in Scotland are apparently rather keener on 'tax and spend' than their counterparts in England. In 2010, 40 per cent said that taxes and spending should be increased, compared with only 30 per cent of those in England. Moreover, the gap is bigger now than in any survey year since 1999.

Yet Scotland has not shifted in a more social democratic direction on this issue. In fact, the public north of the border has become less keen on increased taxation and spending – mirroring the trend in public opinion in England. At most, the trend away from a more social democratic position on this issue has been a little less marked in Scotland than in England.

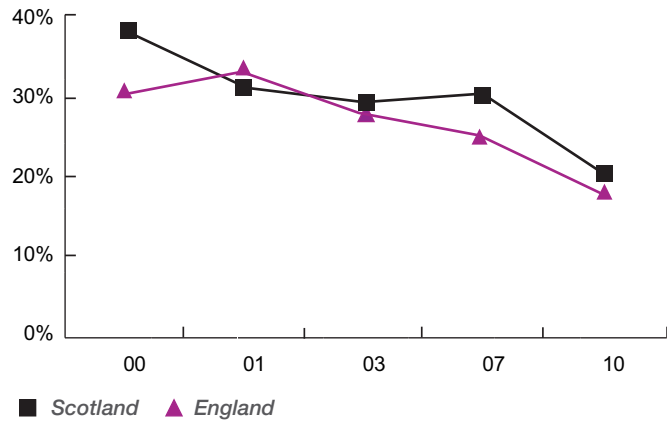
Government spending – on both sides of the border – increased considerably during the 2000s. So perhaps it should not be surprising that the public's appetite for more spending has gradually been satisfied. But what is clear is that Scottish appetites for more spending have been satisfied in much the same way as they have for the English.

## Distinctive policies

Two of the most distinctive policies introduced in Scotland since the start of devolution have been the abolition of university tuition fees and the introduction of 'free' personal care. Whether these policies really are social democratic is open to question: critics argue that they disproportionately favour those who are (or, in the case of tuition fees, who will be) better off. On the other hand, advocates of free university tuition argue that the policy results in greater equality of educational opportunity.

Either way, if people in Scotland have been influenced by the different policies and debates that have taken place there since devolution, we would expect public opinion on tuition fees not only to be different in Scotland and England, but also to have diverged.

**Chart 4 Trends in attitudes towards tuition fees, Scotland and England 2000-10**



*Per cent say that no students or their families should have to pay towards the cost of their tuition*

Yet Chart 4 shows that neither of these expectations is fulfilled. Opposition to tuition fees is at much the same level in Scotland as it is in England. In 2010, just 20 per cent of people in Scotland said that no students should have to pay tuition fees, similar to the 18 per cent who said the same in England. The level of opposition to tuition fees in Scotland has also fallen in the last decade; it is now little more than half what it was in 2000, when 38 per cent said no one should have to pay. And in this, Scotland has experienced much the same change of mood as England. Apparently people on both sides of the border have gradually accommodated themselves to the reality of tuition fees, although of course, these data tell us nothing about the level at which people think tuition fees ought to be set.

## Conclusion

Three main findings have emerged in this briefing:

1. Scotland is more social democratic than England – but the difference is only modest.

2. However, Scotland has become less – not more – social democratic since the advent of devolution.
3. As a result, the gap between Scotland and England has not widened at all. Rather, opinion in Scotland has moved in parallel with that in England, leaving the difference in outlook between them largely unchanged.

These findings provide some important insights into the consequences of devolution. On the one hand, the policy differences that have emerged exaggerate the differences in public opinion that exist, thereby raising questions about the degree to which devolution has necessarily resulted in a better fit between public policy and public opinion in different parts of the UK. On the other hand, devolution has not served to widen the gap between English and Scottish public opinion on some of the central issues facing governments today. To that extent at least, accommodating Scotland within the framework of the United Kingdom looks to be no more difficult a job now than it was a decade ago.

## Funding and methodology

- The questions on which this briefing is based were primarily funded in 2010 by the Economic and Social Research Council (grant RES-000-22-4108), with additional funding from the Department for Work and Pensions.
- The 2010 British and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys were conducted between June and October 2010.
- The questions used in this briefing were administered to probability samples in England and Scotland. The sample size in 2010 was 1,495 in Scotland and 2,795 in England, though some 2010 questions were administered to a third of the sample in England (913 people).
- Both surveys were conducted face-to-face (using Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing) with an additional pen and paper self-completion component.
- Data are weighted to adjust for non-response and to ensure that the samples are as representative of the populations of Scotland and Britain as possible.

## Obtaining further findings

Further findings from these and related questions are reported in Curtice & Ormston 'The road to divergence?' in Park et al (eds) *British Social Attitudes: the 28th report*, Sage (2011).

For more information on this research or for general enquiries about the Scottish and British Social Attitudes surveys, please contact [j.curtice@strath.ac.uk](mailto:j.curtice@strath.ac.uk) or [Rachel.Ormston@scotcen.org.uk](mailto:Rachel.Ormston@scotcen.org.uk).