



Ready to take another leap? Public opinion on how Scotland should be governed

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Where do people in Scotland feel that their constitutional future should lie – as an independent country, as part of the UK but with a devolved parliament that has greater powers, or some other option? As the UK Parliament debates a Bill that would hand some tax-raising powers to Holyrood and the SNP campaigns to hold an independence referendum, this briefing presents findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey on how people in Scotland say they would like to be governed.

- Support in Scotland for independence has remained relatively constant since 1999 – at around a quarter to a third of the population.
- People are less likely to think that Scotland gets a bad deal out of the Union now than a decade ago. And those who think Scotland does reasonably well out of the Union are less likely to favour independence.
- Opinion about the likely impact of independence on Scotland's economy is evenly divided – around three in ten think the economy would be strengthened, but a similar proportion think it would suffer.
- Most people in Scotland feel the Scottish Parliament ought to have some responsibility for tax, and 57 per cent say most of the important tax decisions for the country should be made by Holyrood.
- A majority also thinks that the Scottish Parliament should make most of the important decisions about welfare benefits for Scotland – an area the UK government does not currently believe should be devolved.
- Nevertheless, most people in Scotland do not want their taxes, benefits or charges for services to be different from those elsewhere in the UK.

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About this briefing

The SNP came to power in Edinburgh in 2007 hoping that, if it demonstrated an ability to govern effectively, people would be increasingly persuaded of its case for independence. The party plans to campaign in this year's Scottish Parliament election on a platform of greater economic powers for the devolved administration. Meanwhile, the Conservative/Liberal Democrat government at Westminster is currently legislating to give the Scottish Parliament responsibility for raising some of its own revenues, rather than relying, as it does now, almost wholly on a block grant from Westminster. Under the proposed arrangements, from 2016 onwards around a third of Holyrood's budget would be funded in this way.

This briefing summarises key findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) on public attitudes to different options for the government of Scotland. It looks at support for independence and examines what factors underpin people's constitutional preferences. It also assesses the fit between the proposals currently being debated by the UK Parliament and the Scottish public's preferences for how their country should be run.

The data presented here (unless otherwise stated) are from SSA 2010, which was conducted between June and October of that year. The survey contained a module of questions on attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional future that was funded by the Nuffield Foundation (for further details see <http://www.nuffieldfoundation.org/scotlands-constitutional-future>). The views expressed here are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the position of either the Nuffield Foundation or ScotCen.

Only a minority of people in Scotland support independence

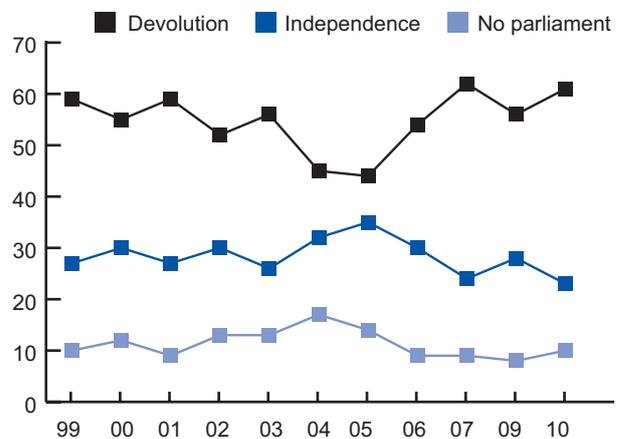
The SNP's success in the 2007 Scottish Parliament elections led many to ask whether support for Scotland leaving the UK was on the increase. The SNP themselves hoped that if they provided a spell of effective government, they would persuade more people of the case for independence. But is there evidence to support either of these propositions? Respondents to SSA were asked whether they felt Scotland should:

- be 'independent, separate from the UK' (either within or outwith the European Union)
- 'remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament' (either with or without taxation powers), or
- 'remain part of the UK without an elected parliament'.

Figure 1 shows that, on this measure, support for independence has remained at between roughly a quarter and a third since the Scottish Parliament was established in 1999. Moreover, there is no evidence that the SNP's electoral success either coincided with,

or was followed by, any increase in support for independence. In 2007, the proportion that favoured this option stood at just 24 per cent – the lowest recorded by the survey to date. And in 2010, after three years of SNP government, it was just 23 per cent.

Figure 1 – Constitutional preference, 1999-2010



People have become happier with the deal Scotland obtains from the Union

The proportion who feel Scotland does badly out of the Union appears to have fallen over the last decade, and has been particularly low since the SNP has been in power. In 2000, between two and three times as many people (42 per cent) felt that England's economy benefited more from the Union as reckoned that Scotland's did (16 per cent). In contrast, between 2007 and 2010, the proportions of people agreeing with either of the two propositions have been more or less equal. Similarly, in 2000, well over half (59 per cent) felt Scotland got less than its fair share of government spending; between 2007 and 2010, that figure has been just 36–38 per cent.

These trends may help explain why support for independence is not increasing. Those who think Scotland does reasonably well out of the Union are less likely to favour independence than those who think it does badly. Just 9 per cent of those who think Scotland's economy benefits more from the Union favour independence, compared with nearly half (49 per cent) of those who think England's economy benefits more. Similarly, only 14 per cent of those who think Scotland gets at least its fair share of government spending support independence, compared with 38 per cent of those who think Scotland gets less than its fair share.

Opinion is split on the expected impact of independence on Scotland's economy

Public opinion in Scotland on the likely impact of independence on the country's economy is evenly divided. In 2009, 31 per cent felt independence would result in a stronger economy, while a very similar proportion (32 per cent) felt the economy would be weakened. One in five said independence would make

no difference and around one in ten said they did not know how the economy would be affected.

Those who fear that independence would result in a weaker economy are less likely to back the idea. In 2009, just 10 per cent of those who felt Scotland's economy would be weaker under independence wanted to leave the UK, compared with 49 per cent of those who felt independence would strengthen the economy. Thus, the relatively widespread perception that Scotland's economy would be weaker under independence also seems to be helping depress support for the idea.

The UK government is currently legislating to devolve further tax-raising powers to Holyrood

The opposition parties at Holyrood (Labour, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats) responded to the SNP's success in the 2007 election by agreeing to create a commission on the future of devolution. Reporting in June 2009, the commission, which was chaired by Sir Kenneth Calman, recommended that certain tax rates in Scotland, including, most notably, a portion of income tax, should become the responsibility of the Scottish Parliament. The revenue from those taxes, representing approximately a third of Holyrood's budget, would go directly to the Scottish Government, and the block grant from Westminster would be reduced accordingly.

Before the 2010 general election, these recommendations were largely accepted by all three opposition parties. A Bill to enact most of the proposals is currently before the UK Parliament and has also been examined by the Scottish Parliament. It represents the biggest change in the devolution settlement since the creation of the Scottish Parliament in 1999.

But do people in Scotland want the Scottish Parliament to have responsibility for setting at least some taxes? Or might they wish devolution to go even further than Calman proposed?

Most people feel that the Scottish Parliament should have responsibility for tax

Fewer than one in five people in Scotland (18 per cent) think decisions about taxes and the overall level of public spending in Scotland should be made by the UK government alone. The remainder are more or less evenly divided between those who think that both the Scottish Parliament and the UK government should have a say in taxation and spending, and those who reckon that the Scottish Parliament alone should make those decisions. This suggests there might be an appetite for the devolution of greater responsibility for taxation and spending than that proposed by Calman.

This proposition is also supported by responses to a question about who should make most of the important decisions for Scotland about taxes (see Figure 2).

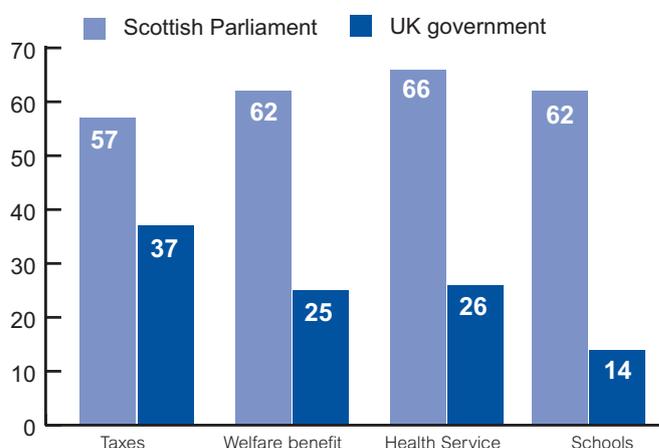
While 57 per cent of people say the Scottish Parliament should have this role, only 37 per cent nominate the UK government. Moreover, even among those who believe that both the Scottish Parliament and the UK government should have a say, more (54 per cent) feel that the former should make most of the decisions than feel this should be done by the latter (41 per cent).

The proposals currently being debated by the UK Parliament may not go far enough for the Scottish public

Not only will most of the key decisions about tax remain in the hands of the UK government after the Scotland Bill is enacted, but decision-making on other key issues – most notably, welfare benefits – will remain with Westminster too.

At first glance, this decision would appear to be out of tune with public opinion in Scotland. Indeed, as Figure 2 shows, more people (62 per cent) think the Scottish Parliament should make most of the important decisions about welfare benefits for Scotland than take the same view about taxes. Opinion on who should be responsible for decisions about welfare benefits is in fact broadly in line with that in respect of two areas that are already devolved to the Scottish Parliament – the Health Service and schools.

Figure 2 – Who should make most of the important decisions for Scotland? (2010)



A similar picture is presented by responses to a question that asked people which of the following statements came closest to their own view:

- The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland
- The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else
- The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest
- The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland

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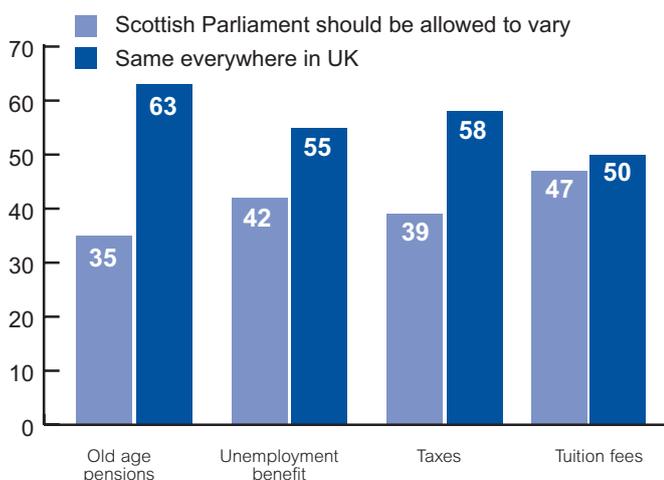
Thirty-two per cent back the idea that all decisions apart from defence and foreign affairs should be made by the Scottish Parliament, while another 28 per cent think that all decisions should be made by that body – a combined total of 60 per cent. Only 37 per cent want either no devolution at all (10 per cent) or would like the Scottish Parliament to be barred from making decisions about taxes and benefits (27 per cent).

So, although only a minority of people in Scotland want independence, it would seem there is still a desire for a greater devolution of power over Scotland's domestic affairs than will be enacted by the Scotland Bill.

But people do not necessarily want Scotland to diverge from England in key areas like tax and benefits

However, on closer inspection, the situation appears to be more nuanced. Although people may feel that decisions about taxes and benefits should be made by the Scottish Parliament, this does not necessarily mean they feel that the levels of taxes, benefits or charges for services should be different (either higher or lower) in Scotland from the rest of the UK. As Figure 3 shows, even in the case of university tuition fees, where the position in Scotland has been different from that in England for some ten years, opinion on whether the Scottish Parliament should be allowed to vary these is evenly divided.

Figure 3 – Should things be different in Scotland? (2010)



Similarly, there is little enthusiasm for the prospect of the Scottish Parliament introducing welfare benefits and taxes at levels different from those in the rest of the UK. Even among those who say Holyrood should make most of the decisions about these areas, opinion about the merits of allowing it to set higher or lower rates is quite evenly balanced.

So, on one hand, a majority of people in Scotland appear to think the Scottish Parliament should make most of the decisions about taxes and welfare benefits. On the other, a majority also wants the rates of taxation and benefits to be the same as elsewhere in the UK. It would seem, therefore, that while the Scottish Parliament is widely regarded as the place where decisions for Scotland should be made, this does not mean that people are ready to accept that taxes and benefits might actually be different on either side of the border.

Methodology

- This briefing is based on findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA).
- SSA was established in 1999 by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen), part of the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen), the UK's largest independent, not-for-profit research institute.
- SSA involves c. 1500 face-to-face interviews annually with a representative, probability sample of the adult (18+) population of Scotland. The response rate has ranged between 54 per cent and 65 per cent since 1999.

Further details

For more information about these findings, or for other queries about the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, please email ssa@scotcen.org.uk or ring 0131 228 2167 and ask to speak to a member of the SSA team.