

So Where Does Scotland Stand on More Devolution?

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Formally the referendum in September on Scottish independence is simply about whether or not the country should leave the UK and become an independent state. No other proposition is formally on the table. However, the Liberal Democrats put forward a proposal for more devolution (primarily of taxation) as long as eighteen months ago, while both Labour and the Conservatives are due to announce in the next few weeks to what conclusions they have come about the possibility that the Scottish Parliament might be given more powers and responsibilities. Meanwhile it is an open secret that those campaigning for independence are hoping that voters who back more devolution might come to doubt that it will actually happen and thus can be persuaded to vote Yes as a result. In this briefing we look at the latest evidence from the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey on how much support there appears to be for more devolution, how consistent people's attitudes are towards it, and what appears to incline to persuade people to prefer more devolution rather than independence.

How Much Support is There for More Devolution?

The two principal areas of domestic decision making that are still primarily the responsibility of the UK rather than the Scottish government are taxation and welfare benefits. However, as Table 1 shows, when in recent years SSA has asked voters who should have primary responsibility for making decisions in these areas, around three-fifth to two-thirds or so have typically said the Scottish Parliament rather than the UK government. In contrast only around a third have said Holyrood should run defence and foreign affairs. In short, it looks as though the instinctive reaction of most Scottish voters is that

domestic affairs should be decided in Scotland and that only foreign affairs should be left to Westminster. That suggests a considerable appetite for more devolution rather than independence.

Table 1 Who should make decisions for Scotland, 2007-13				
Which institution should make important decisions for Scotland about...?	Scottish Parliament	UK Government at Westminster	Local councils in Scotland	EU
Welfare benefits	%	%	%	%
2007	63	18	16	1
2009	60	19	16	1
2010	62	25	9	1
2012	64	19	13	*
2013	57	22	18	*
Taxation				
2007	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
2009	59	33	4	1
2010	57	37	3	*
2012	56	36	4	*
2013	59	32	6	*
Defence & Foreign Affairs				
2007	33	58	*	4
2009	31	61	1	3
2010	31	63	1	3
2012	34	59	*	4
2013	39	53	1	3

Sample sizes: 2007: 1508; 2009: 1495; 2010: 1197; 2011: 1197; 2012: 1229; 2013: 1497 n/a: not asked

However, at this point we should exercise some caution. Many of those who would like to see the devolution of welfare benefits and taxation may in fact be supporters of independence rather than devo max. Indeed when we ask voters to choose between four alternative divisions of power between Holyrood and Westminster (see Table 2), we discover that only a third or so choose the division that might be thought to correspond to 'devo max', that is

the Scottish Parliament deciding everything apart from defence and foreign affairs. In the most recent survey that proportion is barely any higher than the proportion who back having Holyrood decide everything (and thus by implication, independence). Still, both propositions appear to be more popular than the status quo whereby taxation and welfare benefits are the preserve of Westminster alongside defence and foreign affairs.

Table 2 Preferred Division of Powers in Scotland, 2010-13

Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?	2010	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%
The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland	28	43	35	31
The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else	32	29	32	32
The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest.	27	21	24	25
The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland	10	5	6	8
<i>Sample Size</i>	1495	1197	1229	1497

This evidence seems to be at odds with the claim that is sometimes made that what most Scots want is more devolution rather than either independence or status quo. Rather, it would appear that no single alternative can claim to have the support of a majority of Scots. However, a rather different picture again emerges if we ask respondents which of the four options is their second preference. More devolution may not be as widely supported as is sometimes claimed, but it appears that actually few oppose it. Overall, in the 2013 survey no less than 42% of all respondents said that the ‘devo max’ option would be their second preference. In particular, 79% of those whose first preference was independence said ‘devo max’ was their second preference, as did two-thirds (66%) of those whose inclination was to stick with the status quo.

That means that overall, the idea was either the first or the second preference of nearly three-quarters (74%) of all respondents. Consequently, on these figures if voters were to be asked to choose between either independence and ‘devo max’, the latter would win – by 61% to 39%. Equally in the event of a run off between the status quo and ‘devo max’, again ‘devo max’ would be the winner – by 62% to 38%. In other words, although it may not be the first preference of a majority of Scots, the idea of more devolution does appear to a ‘Condorcet winner’, that is the option that is preferred by more people when asked to choose between it and any of the widely touted alternatives.

How Consistent are People's Attitudes?

Certain implications would follow if some form of 'devo max' were to be introduced in Scotland. Indeed some of them will flow, when they are enacted, from the provisions for the partial devolution of income tax provided for in the 2012 Scotland Act. First the rates of taxation and of welfare benefits could be different in Scotland than in England. Second, rather than relying on a block grant from Westminster funded out of UK-wide taxes, the Scottish Parliament would have to fund itself from the revenues raised by taxes levied north of the border. But how acceptable are these implications? Is, for example, the level of support for different rates of taxes and benefits north of the border consistent with the apparent level of support for making Holyrood responsible for making decisions about taxation and welfare? Do people in Scotland think their services should be funded separately from those in the rest of the UK?

Table 3 suggests that rather fewer people accept the idea that the basic rate of income tax might be different in Scotland than in England than back the idea of devolving taxation to Holyrood. In the most recent survey just over half (52%) say that the basic rate of income tax should always be the same in Scotland as in England, while only just over two in five (41%) feel that is 'OK' for the two to be different. Meanwhile, there is even greater reluctance to accept that the proposition that the old age pension paid out by the government might be different on the two sides of the border. Only just over a third (37%) felt that it would be OK for that to happen.

Table 3 Attitudes Towards Policy Difference from England, 2011-13.

	2011		2012		2013	
	Basic rate of Income tax	Old Age Pension	Basic rate of Income tax	Old Age Pension	Basic rate of Income tax	Old Age Pension
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Should always be the same in Scotland as it is in England	50	56	51	63	52	58
Or, is it OK for it to be different in Scotland (either higher or lower) than in England?	48	41	44	34	41	37
<i>Sample Size</i>	596	596	623	623	1497	1497

Not that voters are wholly inconsistent in their views. A majority (55%) of those who feel that the Scottish Parliament should make most of the key decisions about tax feel it is OK for the basic rate of income tax to be different in Scotland than in England, while only 37% believe it should be the same. However, their level of support for a different rate of income tax is much lower

than the level of opposition to the idea amongst those who feel that decisions about tax should be the preserve of Westminster; no less than 80% of this group feel that rates should be the same on the two sides of the border. Meanwhile, when it comes to pensions even those who back leaving things in Holyrood's hands are more or less evenly divided between those who think the old age pension should always be the same (46%) and those who reckon it is OK for it to be different (48%).

But what of the idea of Scotland paying her own way rather than relying on a block grant from Westminster? And do people feel that the taxation and benefit system for Scotland should be separated out from that of the rest of the UK, or do they feel that the revenues from Scottish taxes should be shared with the rest of the UK, with benefits being paid for out of a UK-wide pot too?

On the first of these questions, SSA has asked the following question on three occasions in recent years:

Thinking about public services in Scotland, such as health and education, that are nowadays the responsibility of the Scottish Government. How do you think these services in Scotland should be paid for.....

...out of a sum of money decided by the UK Government and funded out of taxes collected across the UK, or

...out of taxes decided and collected by the Scottish Government in Scotland?

Table 4 reveals that on each occasion support for the principle of paying for devolved services out of revenues raised in Scotland has been only a little higher than is support for the current system of a 'block grant' decided by the UK government and funded out of UK-wide revenues. Moreover, there is certainly no sign that the idea of funding devolved services out of Scottish taxes has become more popular; if anything the opposite is true.

Table 4 Attitudes Towards the Funding of Devolved Services, 2009-13			
	2009	2012	2013
	%	%	%
Sum of money from UK government	40	44	46
Taxes decided and collected by the Scottish Government	53	52	50
Don't Know	7	4	4
<i>Sample Size</i>	<i>1495</i>	<i>1229</i>	<i>1497</i>

Again, voters are not wholly inconsistent. In the most recent survey two-thirds (67%) of those who think the Scottish Parliament should make most of the important decisions about taxes believe that devolved services should be funded out of Scottish taxes. But again their views are rather less consistent

than are those who think the UK government should make the key decisions about tax; as many as 77% of this group prefer to have a block grant.

Meanwhile if anything support for the idea that Scottish taxes should only be used to pay for public expenditure in Scotland is even less popular than is the proposition that devolved services should be funded out of Scottish taxes. In Table 5 we report the pattern of response when people are asked the following questions about taxation:

*Regardless of what happens at present, how do you think the money raised by the income tax paid by people in Scotland **should** be used? Should it be used to help pay for public services across the UK as a whole, or should it be used to help pay for services in Scotland only?*

*How do you think the money raised through taxes on North Sea Oil in Scottish waters **should** be used? Should it be used to help pay for public services across the UK as a whole, or should it be used to help pay for services in Scotland only?*

At the same time we also show what they say when people are asked the following questions about how welfare benefits paid to people in Scotland should be funded:

What about the cost of paying benefits to people in Scotland who lose their job through no fault of their own? Regardless of what happens at present, should the money to pay this come from the taxes collected across the UK as a whole, or from those collected in Scotland only?

And what about the cost of paying the government old age pension to people in Scotland? Should the money to pay this come from the taxes collected across the UK as a whole, or from those collected in Scotland only?

Table 5 Attitudes towards Pooling Revenues and Risks, 2013		
	Scotland only	UK as a whole
	%	%
Income Tax Revenues	48	47
North Sea Oil Revenues	44	50
Unemployment benefit	36	58
Old Age Pension	34	61

Sample size: 1497

Public opinion in Scotland proves to be evenly divided when people are asked whether they think the revenues from income tax in Scotland should only be applied to expenditure in Scotland. Meanwhile, the idea that the revenues from North Sea Oil is actually marginally the minority view, with only 44% in favour. However, where voters draw back most of all from the implications of 'devo max' is when they are asked how welfare benefits should be funded.

Only just over a third think that either unemployment benefit or the old age pension paid to people in Scotland should be wholly funded out of Scottish taxes alone.

Thus acceptance of some of the likely implications of moving towards greater devolution of taxation and welfare benefits is rather less than the level of support for the idea that the Scottish Parliament should be primarily responsible for making decisions about taxation and welfare. While many of those who back the devolution of taxation and welfare do accept it implies a need for Scotland to pay its own way and opens up the prospect of different tax and benefit rates on both sides of the border, there is also a significant proportion who do not. Evidently support for the idea of the Scottish Parliament being responsible for domestic affairs such as taxation and welfare benefits is more about symbolism than substance – though albeit not necessarily any less real for that. But perhaps it suggests that any moves towards the further devolution of taxation and benefits might prove best able to satisfy public opinion if it still retained a significant element of UK-wide revenue sharing and policy co-ordination rather than leaving Scotland to go it entirely alone.

Why Do People Support More Devolution Rather than Independence?

But why do people support more devolution in the first place? In particular why do those who back the idea do so in preference to independence? Is it because they think that more devolution would be better able to bring material benefit to Scotland? Or is their preference for more devolution rooted rather more in doubts about the likely benefits of independence? The answers to these questions can give us some clues as to the likelihood those who want more devolution might in the end be willing to back independence.

In its last two surveys SSA has asked its respondents what they thought would happen if 'devo max' were to be introduced. Would Scotland's economy be better or worse? Would Scotland's voice in the world be stronger or weaker? Would there be more or less money to spend in public services? In Table 6 we summarise the pattern of responses that we received. We also show the pattern of responses when respondents were asked the same questions of independence in 2013.

Table 6 Expected Consequences of ‘Devo Max’ and Independence, 2012 and 2013

	Devo Max 2012		Devo Max 2013		Independence 2013	
	Better/ Higher	Worse/ Lower	Better/ Higher	Worse/ Lower	Better/ Higher	Worse/ Lower
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pride in country	51	3	42	3	51	4
Scotland’s Voice in the World	42	15	35	15	38	25
Economy	34	25	30	20	30	34
Money for Public Services	n/a	n/a	30	21	32	30
Standard of Living	31	17	27	15	22	28
Pensions	n/a	n/a	22	9	22	13
Taxes	6	49	4	48	5	56

Sample size: Devo Max 2012: 1229; 2013: 1497; Independence 2013: 1340
n/a = not asked. Those saying ‘No Difference’ not shown.
In the case of Taxes, ‘Better’ = ‘Lower’ and ‘Worse’ = Higher.

The prospect of ‘devo max’ is clearly regarded with no more than modest enthusiasm. In most instances only around a third or so of Scots feel that its introduction would produce a more positive outcome, while in the case of pensions (22%) and (especially) tax (only 4% think they would be lower) the figure is much lower. Only when it comes to the impact that it might have on the degree of pride that people might have in their country is ‘devo max’ regarded positively by more than two-fifths. Meanwhile, we might note that in each case where we have a reading for both 2012 and 2013, the proportion who think that ‘devo max’ would deliver a beneficial outcome is lower now than it was twelve months previously.

We should also note that in most cases, the proportion who think that devo max would have a positive impact is much the same as the equivalent proportion who think independence would be beneficial. To that extent at least devo max is no more popular than independence. However, what is also true is that in most cases fewer people think that devo max would do any harm than say the same of independence. Thus, for example, whereas 25% think that independence would weaken Scotland’s voice in the world, only 15% say the same of ‘devo max’. Similarly, whereas 34% believe that independence would be harmful for Scotland’s economy, only 20% believe that ‘devo max’ would be.

So while most Scots are not enthused about the prospect of more devolution, they see little reason to be wary of it either. Indeed, whereas as many as 55% say they would be ‘worried’ if Scotland were to become independent, and only

24% 'confident', when the same question is asked of 'devo max' only 28% indicate that they would be worried, while 38% say they would feel 'confident' about such a prospect. Enjoying more devolution while remaining within the framework of the Union seems to be a prospect with which Scots are at least comfortable if not enthused.

But what of the views of those whose preferred constitutional option is more devolution? How beneficial do they think it would be? And is it evident that it is their distinctive enthusiasm for more devolution that causes them to reject independence as an alternative? Table 7 addresses these questions by looking at the examples of the anticipated impact of independence and 'devo max' on (a) Scotland's economy, and (b) its voice in the world. In each case it shows separately for those whose first preference is independence, 'devo max', the status quo and no devolution (as measured at Table 2 above), and the proportion who think that the relevant constitutional option would have a beneficial impact.

Table 7 Expectations of Independence and Devo Max by Preferred Division of Powers, 2013

	Preferred Division of Powers			
% expect Independence to improve	Independence	Devo Max	Status Quo	No Devolution
Economy	59	27	8	4
Scotland's Voice in the World	69	38	13	11
<i>Sample size</i>	422	434	329	114
% expect Devo Max to improve				
Economy	46	35	14	8
Scotland's Voice in the World	55	40	16	8
<i>Sample size</i>	459	481	377	126

It is immediately apparent that what most distinguishes those whose first preference is 'devo max' from those who support independence is not what they think the consequences of 'devo max' would be, but rather what they anticipate would happen as a result of independence. Although they are not quite as likely to be sceptical of the consequences of independence as those who would prefer the constitutional status quo (or indeed no Scottish Parliament at all), they are far more doubtful that it would deliver a benefit than are those who say they back independence. Those who support independence are 32% points more likely to think that Scotland's economy would be better under independence than are those who back 'devo max'. At 31 points, the equivalent gap in the case of Scotland's voice in the world is almost identical.

In contrast, supporters of independence and 'devo max' are not that far apart when it comes to the anticipated consequences of introducing more devolution. As we might anticipate those who support independence are less likely to feel optimistic about the consequences of 'devo max' than they are of independence, while the opposite is true of those whose first preference is 'devo max' (though perhaps what we might not have anticipated is that, nevertheless, supporters of independence are still more likely to feel that 'devo max' will have a beneficial impact than are supporters of 'devo max' themselves). In contrast both groups are set apart in their outlook from those who would prefer to keep the constitutional status quo, who are barely any more likely to be optimistic about the consequences of 'devo max' than they are of independence.

So what sets supporters of 'devo max' apart from those who back independence is not their enthusiasm for more devolution but rather doubts they have about what independence would bring. To that extent at least, most of them are unlikely to be won over by the Yes side in the referendum simply on the grounds that they have come to suspect that more devolution might not happen after all. They will also need to be rather more convinced than they are now that independence would actually deliver a benefit to Scotland. And at the moment according to the 2013 SSA it seems that they are three times as likely to say that they will or likely to vote No (61%) in September than they are to indicate that they anticipate voting Yes (20%).

Conclusion

There is widespread support for the introduction of further devolution within the framework of the Union. Nearly three-quarters say that it is either their first or their second choice for how Scotland should be governed. Yet its popularity seems to rest on the perception that it is a safe option that can do little harm rather than a widespread belief that it would do good. Meanwhile, acceptance of the likely consequences of devolving power and responsibility for taxation and welfare benefits lags behind apparent support for the idea itself. That suggests the idea may well need further debate and discussion so that the public can develop a clearer view of its merits. What remains to be seen is whether the publication in the coming weeks by Labour and the Conservatives of proposals for more devolution fosters that debate.