

Does England Want Scotland To Leave Or Stay?

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Introduction

On September 18th those living in Scotland will decide whether they want their country to become an independent state or whether they would prefer to remain part of the United Kingdom. Those living in the rest of the UK will not have a vote. However, as the Prime Minister himself has pointed out (Cameron. 2014), they do potentially have voice, a voice that he urged them to express in the belief that most would prefer Scotland to remain part of the Union.

But is his assumption correct? After all, we might wonder whether the residents of England have had enough of what they might regard as Scotland's apparently endless demands for more, despite the fact that it enjoys a substantial measure of devolution when England has none and enjoys considerably higher levels of public spending per head. It has certainly been argued that England has become increasingly upset about the apparent advantages that Scotland enjoys as a result of the current constitutional settlement, not least amongst those with a strongly English rather than British sense of identity (Wyn Jones et al., 2013). Perhaps that resentment has spilled over into a feeling that if Scotland wishes to leave, then perhaps it should be wished good luck and politely allowed to do so. Maybe England has even come to think that the break-up of the UK would be in its own interests?

Even if England has not reacted to that extent, perhaps it is unwilling to sustain the status quo. All three of the principal political parties campaigning for a No vote in the referendum have said that if Scotland does vote to stay in the Union the Scottish Parliament should be given more powers and

responsibilities, not least in respect of taxation. But perhaps Scotland might find that England is not willing any longer to see Scotland to enjoy devolution while not doing so itself. Maybe the debate about Scotland's constitutional future has left an impression south of the border that means that once the Scottish referendum is over, politicians at Westminster are likely to face new pressures to change the way England is governed too.

In this briefing we examine how attitudes in England towards the Union with Scotland have evolved since the late 1990s when the devolved Scottish Parliament was first created. Our data come from NatCen's British Social Attitudes survey (BSA), which has been tracking attitudes in England towards the debate about Scotland and devolution ever since the advent of the Scottish Parliament in 1999, and again visited the subject in its most recent survey conducted between June and October of 2013 (Park et al., 2013). Although the survey conducts interviews in Scotland and Wales as well as in England, here we focus on the responses given by those living in England alone.

Governing Scotland

So how does England think that Scotland should be governed? Has it become increasingly inclined to feel that perhaps it might be better if Scotland were to leave the Union after all? To see whether or not this is the case, we can examine the responses to the following question that has been asked regularly on BSA since 1999. It reads:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union

Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union

*Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **some** taxation powers*

*Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has **no** taxation powers*

*Scotland should remain part of the UK **without** an elected parliament*

Both of the first two responses refer to Scotland becoming independent, while the third and fourth pair describes different varieties of devolution. The distinctions between them refer to debates about the form that independence and devolution respectively should take that are much less contentious now than they were in the 1990s. In any event, so far as the future of the Union is concerned it does not matter whether England thinks that an independent Scotland should be a member of the European Union or not. Either

proposition represents an absence of support for maintaining the United Kingdom. Thus in the table that follows we bring together those who gave either of the first two responses and simply label this 'independence', and equally combine the third and fourth responses under the label 'devolution'

Table 1. How England Thinks Scotland Should Be Governed 1997-2013

	1997*	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	14	21	19	19	19	17	19	26	25	21
Devolution	55	57	52	59	51	59	47	44	43	48
No Parliament	23	14	17	11	15	13	18	19	23	18
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3150	902	1928	2761	1924	1917	859	967	939	925
<i>Weighted base</i>	2536	905	1956	2786	1948	1929	870	974	937	936

* Source: British Election Study

As can be seen, there have been some signs in recent years that support for Scottish independence has grown a little. Until 2007 typically only around one in five were of that view, but when we returned to the subject in 2011 and 2012 this figure had increased to around a quarter. Equally, at the other end of the spectrum there were indications of growing opposition to Scotland having a parliament at all. By 2012 23% were of that view, more than double the proportion in 2001 (11%).

However, our most recent survey shows that neither trend has been maintained. At 21%, support for independence is now almost back to the level that was typically between 1997 and 2007, while opposition to the idea of any kind of Scottish Parliament has fallen by five points to 18% too. If the SNP's success in winning an overall majority in the Scottish Parliament (thereby opening the path to the independence referendum) in May 2011 did initially instigate something of a reaction south of the border it has apparently not been sustained.

Preferences for England

Much the same picture emerges from Table 2 which shows the results we have obtained when on a couple of occasions we have asked respondents directly whether or not they think it is in England's interests to remain part of the UK or not. The question we posed reads as follows:

Which of these do you think would be better for England ...

...for England to remain part of the United Kingdom along with Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,

or, for England to become an independent country, separate from the rest of the United Kingdom?

Just over three-quarters (78%) say that it is better for England to remain part of the UK while only around one in six (16%) reckon that it would be better for England to be independent. The most recent figures are almost exactly the same as the ones first recorded six years ago. Meanwhile we might note too that the proportion who think it would be in England's interest to leave the United Kingdom is rather smaller than the proportion who support Scottish independence. Indeed, only 51% of those who say that Scotland should be independent think it would be better if England left the UK.

Table 2. Should England Stay in the UK? 2007 and 2013.

	2007	2013
	%	%
Remain part of the UK	77	78
Become an independent country	16	16
<i>Unweighted base</i>	859	925
<i>Weighted base</i>	870	936

So it appears that the Prime Minister was right after all in believing that most people in England would prefer Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Indeed support south of the border for the maintenance of the Union seems to be more or less as strong now as it was when the Scottish Parliament was first created in 1999. Of course it does not necessarily follow that English support for retaining the Union will prove persuasive when Scots decide how to vote in September.

But are people south of the border content with the situation whereby Scotland enjoys a considerable measure of devolution, but England does not?

BSA has asked its respondents the following question on a regular basis ever since 1999¹:

With all the changes going on in the way the different parts of Great Britain are run, which of the following do you think would be best for England ...

...for England to be governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament, for each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health, or, for England as a whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers?

Table 3 How England Thinks It Should Be Governed, 1999-2013

Following is best for England...	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	62	54	57	56	50	53	54	54	57	51	49	53	56	56	56
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health*	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18	14	15	15	13	12	15	15
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law making powers	18	19	16	17	18	21	18	21	17	26	29	23	25	22	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2718	1928	2761	2897	3709	2684	1794	928	859	982	980	913	967	939	925
<i>Weighted base</i>	2722	1957	2786	2931	3742	2721	1815	936	870	1001	993	928	974	937	936

* In 2004–6 the second option read “that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing”. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

Although a substantial minority are in favour of some form of devolution for England – either in the form of a parliament for England as a whole or else of assemblies or each of England’s regions – there is no sign that the minority is growing. According to our most recent survey, just over one in three (34%) back either an English Parliament (19%) or regional assemblies (15%)²; these

¹ In 2004–2006 the second option read “that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing”. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

² As we might anticipate, support for the even more radical step of England becoming an independent country is much higher amongst this group than it is amongst those who say they favour the status quo. No less than 31% think it would be in England’s interest to leave the UK, compared with just 8% of those who say that England should continue to be governed by the UK Parliament. Thus, arguably the level of support in England for some form of devolution per se is even lower than the figures in Table 3 imply.

figures are almost exactly the same as in 1999 when again 15% wanted regional assemblies and 18% a Parliament. Signs that were in evidence a few years ago of growing support for an English Parliament – as many as 29% backed the idea in 2009 – have not been sustained. Instead we find that rather over half (56%) back the status quo whereby England's laws are made by the UK Parliament, much as has been the case throughout most of the period since 1999, though that of course does not necessarily mean that they are content for Scottish MPs to have a say in what those laws should be (Curtice et al., 2013).

A Question of Identity?

There is then little sign of an English reaction to developments in Scotland. Attitudes south of the border to how both Scotland and England itself should be governed look much the same now as they did a decade and a half ago. But what of those with strong sense of English rather than British identity? Perhaps here there are signs here of weakening support for maintaining the Union? It seems not. Even amongst those who say they are English and deny that they are British (who constitute no more than 14% of adults in England) the proportion backing Scottish independence or who believe that it would be in England's interests to leave the UK shows no sign of increasing. Just 27% of this group now back Scottish independence, compared with 29% in 1999. Only 24% feel it would be in England's interests to leave the UK, down from 29% in 2007.

Conclusion

As the Prime Minister assumed, most people in England would like Scotland to remain part of the United Kingdom. Indeed, if that were not the case it might be thought difficult to make the case for a No vote in the referendum in the first place. At the same time, public opinion in England still shows relatively little interest in devolution for itself, thereby suggesting that further proposals for devolution for Scotland can be developed without them having to be negotiated as part a wider constitutional settlement for the UK as a whole. But how far England is willing to express these views – or Scotland to take any notice of them – remains to be seen.

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