



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH
Academy of Government

BRIEFING

**ELITE AND MASS ATTITUDES
ON HOW THE UK AND ITS
PARTS ARE GOVERNED –**

**PUBLIC PREFERENCES AND THE
PROCESS OF CONSTITUTIONAL
CHANGE**

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MARCH 2015
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Public preferences and the process of constitutional change

The Scottish referendum created a powerful momentum for discussions about further constitutional change affecting not only Scotland, but other parts of the UK and the United Kingdom as a whole. During the process however, attention was not paid equally to all groups and regions. While many elites commented on the preferences of the public in relation to options for the development of how the UK and its parts are to be governed, rarely were these statements backed up by empirical evidence.

This briefing investigates what public preferences across the UK actually look like and compares results from England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. It contrasts these findings with the insights gained from the elite interviews conducted and explores how the impact of the Scottish referendum is perceived, how current and future devolution options are evaluated, and to what extent people engage with the UK as a political entity.

The Lasting Legacy of the Referendum

For the elite interviews we can usefully distinguish between those who were interviewed in the context of their involvement in the Smith Commission process, those who were interviewed from elsewhere in the UK who are also dealing with issues of constitutional change, and those from broader civic society who are attempting to shape these processes.

One of the criticisms directed at the Smith Commission process was that the timetable was too accelerated to allow for full public consultation. For many this was especially problematic given that Scotland's independence referendum had brought so many people into the participative political process. Campaign organisations and third sector organisations in Scotland shared with us their perception that an alternative way to engineer constitutional change after the referendum was possible.

Our interviews with elites involved directly with the Smith Commission process – both politicians and civil servants – were notable in terms of the consistency of responses on this issue. There was very little reflection on the possibility that citizens in Scotland might want to pause, take longer, and consider fully the prospect of new powers and further devolution. The responses consistently demonstrated a view, sometimes implicit other times explicit, that giving the Smith process more time would simply have led to the same result. Underlying this was a sense that the views of the Scottish public were relatively well established around the issue of devolution and further powers. The need for a more extended period of public consultation and discussion was thus perceived to be less important.

Elites, and those amongst the public who are sceptical about political participation, may be surprised to find that only a minority of around one in four people within each part of the UK (England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively) said that too much time has been spent discussing how the UK should be governed (table 1). While another quarter thinks the current amount of time spent is right, just under half of respondents in each part said that actually too little time is spent at the moment. So the public across the UK seems to be interested and wants to discuss constitutional issues, contrary to the beliefs some commentators have held about a disinterested and disengaged public.

Table 1: Evaluation of how much time has been spent discussing how the UK is governed¹ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Too much	27	24	29	25
Right amount	29	27	25	25
Too little	44	48	46	50
Total (100%)	3285	1410	487	940

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Some may argue that this has to do with the current context following the Scottish independence referendum, which has brought such issues to the top of the agenda. Clearly, the majority of people across the UK do not think the independence question is going to disappear, with most thinking that Scotland will eventually become an independent country at some point in the future (table 2).

Table 2: “When if ever, do you think Scotland will become an independent country?” by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Never	41	31	41	46
Within 5 years from now	14	15	8	10
Between 5 & 10 years from now	23	32	24	24
After more than 10 years	23	22	27	20
Total (100%)	3131	1385	484	913

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

When we talked to elites they perceived the referendum to have had a major impact on political debate and policy discussion beyond Scotland. Our interviewees connected directly to the Smith Commission process shared a view that constitutional change in Scotland would not take place in a vacuum although were less precise on what the actual impact beyond Scotland is, or might be. Many respondents held the view that while it seems fairly clear how to deliver further powers to Scotland the picture was far less clear for England and other parts of the UK. This connects with the observations above that respondents close to the Smith process felt they had a ‘good read’ on devolution to Scotland and the demands of the Scottish public.

Many of the elites we interviewed who were connected to the Smith process directly took the view that whilst Scotland might have had a catalysing effect on the devolution debate across the UK, Scotland could not afford to stall its momentum to allow that wider debate to take place. Put simply, the view from some was that Scotland could not afford to allow its devolution agenda to move at the pace of the slowest part of the debate across the UK as a whole.

Civil servants that we interviewed were also, generally, fully aware of the linkages between further powers for Scotland and the picture across the rest of the UK. Several expressed to us the view that the situation in the rest of the UK, and particularly England, remains confused and messy.

¹ Question wording: “Following the referendum on Scottish independence in September 2014, a wide range of proposals have been made for changes in the way the UK is governed. Do you find that there has been enough time to discuss all ideas, do you think the process is happening too fast or do you think too much time is spent on this discussion?”

In the North West, where there is currently considerable debate on devolution to Greater Manchester (and other areas such as Merseyside), all interviewees broadly agreed that the referendum had catalysed discussions that had already commenced. Elites close to the so-called ‘Devo Manc’ deal were clear that the referendum itself was not a trigger but that it injected a new sense of urgency into negotiations with the UK Government (specifically, the Treasury).

Focussing exclusively on the referendum as an explanation for the interest in discussions about constitutional issues across all parts of the UK is not sufficient. While the desire for further discussion about how the UK is governed was very similarly pronounced across the UK, the feeling of how much the referendum impacted on the different countries differed substantially (table 3.) Unsurprisingly, Scots were most likely to agree that the referendum had a lasting impact (82%). But while a majority in England agreed that the referendum had a lasting impact for them, only about 3 in 10 people said this in Northern Ireland and Wales respectively. The referendum may be a strong focal point in British politics with effects beyond Scotland, but reducing the interest in constitutional change to it does not do justice to people’s views, in particular in Northern Ireland and Wales.

Table 3 Perception of a lasting impact of the independence referendum on own country² by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Agree/Strongly agree	52	82	28	31
Neither agree nor disagree	25	10	35	35
Disagree/Disagree strongly	23	8	37	34
Total (100%)	3808	1595	574	1119

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Public Assessments of Devolution

The motivations for engaging with questions about how the UK is governed differ across its constituencies. While a plurality of people in each of the four parts of the UK thinks that they get less than their fair share of government spending (table 4), there is a lot of variation in the extent.

While people in Wales were distinctively least satisfied with the financial arrangements (68% said that their share of spending was not fair), numbers were lowest in Northern Ireland (37%), where the comparatively largest group says that their part received more than their fair share (30%). England and Scotland fall between the two and are very similar to one another in this regard. So not only do we need to distinguish between different parts of the UK, we also need to be careful to group all devolved parts together, assuming that views within each will mirror views in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales respectively.

² Question wording: “To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The Scottish independence referendum in 2014 has had a lasting impact on [England/Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland].’”

Table 4: Perceptions about own country's share of government spending³ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
A little/Much more than fair share	20	21	30	9
Pretty much fair share	37	35	33	23
A little/Much less than fair share	43	44	37	68
Total (100%)	3406	1465	545	1059

"Don't know" responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Furthermore, we should not assume that similar evaluations of the status quo translate into principles for future policy directions in the same way in different countries. While there was a majority in all four parts for the proposition that any further devolution should be linked to countries' ability to pay for themselves (table 5), the extent differed greatly. This principle was very popular in England (82%), but to a lesser extent in Scotland (67%) and Northern Ireland (64%). Welsh respondents, probably unsurprisingly given the findings above, were least likely to agree to financial constraints on further devolution of powers (54%).

Table 5: Should further devolution be linked to ability to pay⁴ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Yes	82	67	64	54
No	18	33	36	46
Total (100%)	3268	1284	458	872

"Don't know" responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

In our elite interviews we discussed the issue of asymmetric devolution across the UK with several respondents. Several respondents close to the Smith Commission process remarked that they felt it inappropriate for identical powers to be handed to the constituent nations of the UK. One respondent remarked on the issue of devolving Corporation Tax to Northern Ireland – which Smith Commission members were aware of during their deliberations – and the need to explain at the Smith Commission table the differences between Scotland and Northern Ireland so as to resist Corporation Tax devolution.

In reference to Wales, the same respondent stressed that it was crucial for Welsh devolution to 'develop in its own way' and to think about 'what is suitable for Wales?' 'Wales has to start thinking for itself' – the implication being that the calls for powers to Wales to match powers for Scotland must cease given Wales' specific economic circumstances, geography, and position within the Union.

A civil servant respondent confirmed that Smith did not officially consider questions of devolution outside of Scotland, stressing that it was not possible to wait for developments elsewhere given the timescales of Smith. The respondent remarked that there was a danger that the parties at the table might argue in favour of waiting for something more holistic, at odds with the imperative to keep to the agreed Smith Commission timescale. However, developments in the rest of the UK, and

³ Question wording: "Does [England, Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland] get more than, less than or pretty much its fair share of government spending?"

⁴ Question wording: "Should any further transfer of power to Wales, Northern Ireland or Scotland be linked to their ability to pay for it themselves through taxation?"

particularly the ‘English Votes for English Laws’ issue were ‘the elephant in the room’ when the Smith Commission met.

One of our civil servant respondents remarked that the UK Treasury would always say that devolution is not a blanket and that asymmetry is a part of it. Several respondents – both politicians and civil servants – raised questions as to whether this asymmetry was sustainable in the long term.

One elite respondent was quite clear that Northern Ireland devolution progressed in its own way and was, in a sense, insulated from broader developments across the UK. Devolution there could be characterised as insulated, shaped by the specific history of Northern Ireland, and self-interest. There is, we were told, less of a concern about making sure Northern Ireland gets precisely the same powers as other devolved authorities, and more concern that it gets the right package of powers for its specific history and circumstance.

Interviewees in the North West were also keen to impress their distinctiveness. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA), for example, was described as a ‘trailblazer’ given three decades of experience working together across 10 local authorities. Therefore, the notion that other more recently combined authorities should automatically get the same set of powers as what is proposed for Greater Manchester was seen by some as inappropriate. We were told that the GMCA, through the package of proposed powers, will be able to show what is possible through enhanced, institutionalised cooperation and other authorities may follow in its footsteps, or find their own unique ways. Within the broad contours of shifting power from Whitehall to groupings of local authorities there are, respondents suggested, any number of ways to configure specific arrangements. It must be place-based and specific to local needs and desires.

It would be a mistake though to infer from this information that people in the UK only think in terms of their respective sub-entities and not in terms of the United Kingdom as a political entity at all. Nearly 6 out of 10 in England, Wales and Northern Ireland respectively said that all devolved administrations should have control over the same powers (table 6). Approval for this proposition is slightly lower in Scotland (50%), however that means that even within the country undergoing the most extensive devolution process on many dimensions, half of the population likes the idea of a uniform application of devolution across different parts.

Table 6: Should all devolved administrations have control over the same powers⁵ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Control over same powers	59	50	58	58
Able to have different powers	41	50	42	42
Total (100%)	3041	1408	537	971

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

⁵ Question wording: “Some people suggest that all devolved administrations (Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland) should have control over the same powers, while other suggest that they should be able to have different powers. Which view do you agree with?”

The UK as a Single Political Unit

When asked about the notion of a UK-wide constitutional convention, to consider devolution in a more holistic way, few of our elite respondents ruled this out as a bad idea. Perhaps unsurprisingly interviewees across the UK who were Labour elected politicians tended to be most supportive of the idea (put forward by Ed Miliband). One civil servant remarked to us that, ‘the way we do constitutional reform in this country is either we take a really, really long time and we don’t get anywhere, I give you the House of Lords. Or we do things quickly and very poorly, most of the devolution settlements. And we are in this space again right now’. Interviewees from civic society organisations were supportive of the idea of a convention but quick to point out that the devil would be in the detail. It would be, they stressed, vital to construct the convention in a way that granted public access and created a sense of agency. It would, they feared, be all too easy to have a relatively superficial public consultation process such as that of the Smith Commission (see briefing on the Smith Commission).

The majority of people across all of the UK also welcome the proposition to hold a constitutional convention to develop proposals for how the UK should be governed in the future (table 7). With about 6 out of 10 people in each part welcoming such an idea and just fewer than 10% rejecting it, it suggests two things. First, the majority of people across the UK is interested in the creation of discussions about how the UK is governed that involves lay people and experts. Second, it means that people are largely willing to engage with the UK as a political entity, although they have concerns that clearly manifest themselves in specific differences in evaluations and attitudes across the different parts of the UK, as shown above.

Table 7: View on proposals for a constitutional convention⁶ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Agree/Strongly agree	60	61	63	60
Neither agree nor disagree	31	30	28	32
Disagree/Strongly disagree	9	9	9	8
Total (100%)	3672	1498	561	1078

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Over 70% of people across the UK would be willing to contribute to such a convention themselves if asked to do so. Few would give up more than 10 hours (around 20%), but crucially, a general willingness to participate in such a process is present not just in one part, but across the UK (table 8). Although Scots have had the referendum experience, people in other areas are not less likely to engage in a hypothetical constitutional convention. It is also not the case that regions with lower satisfaction about the representation of one’s own part of the UK would see less willingness to engage. So a different perception and focus within a particular area of the UK does not mean that most people are not considering the UK as a political entity that they could engage with.

⁶ Question wording: “Some people have proposed to hold a series of meetings and events in which ordinary citizens and experts from across the UK could develop proposals for how the UK should be governed. This is sometimes referred to as a constitutional convention. To what extent do you agree or disagree with this proposal?”

Table 8: Extent of own contribution to potential constitutional convention⁷ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
None at all	25	24	26	30
Up to 5 hours	33	29	31	31
5 to 10 hours	22	24	23	20
11 to 15 hours	8	9	7	6
Over 15 hours	12	14	13	13
Total (100%)	3232	1324	493	959

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

This does not only hold true for the reflection of the UK as an entity within and in contrast to its sub-units, but also in relation to the outside, and in particular to views about its relation to the European Union (EU). There are some differences in views about the UK’s long-term strategy towards the EU (table 9), with Scots being slightly less likely to favour an exit from the EU. Overall, however, there is no majority for an exit from the EU in any part of the UK, but a strong majority throughout for a reduction of powers of the UK (including Scotland). The differences between England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are therefore rather nuanced and not as large as sometimes made out.

Table 9: Views on Britain’s long term EU strategy⁸ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Leave the EU	31	22	26	28
Stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU’s powers	43	46	45	41
Leave things as they are	16	20	17	19
Stay in the EU and try to increase the EU’s powers	7	8	8	7
Work for the formation of a single European government	2	3	5	4
Total (100%)	3646	1457	549	1082

“Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Importantly though, the majority of people in all four constitutive parts of the UK see an exit of the UK as a decision that should be taken by the population as a whole and not by separate parts (table 10). While there is some significant support for Nicola Sturgeon’s proposition that a majority in each of the four parts would be required for the UK to decide to leave the EU following a referendum (ranging from 32% in England to 45% in Scotland), it is a minority position. The majority across all parts of the UK thinks that, for a referendum on the UK’s membership of the EU, what should count is the overall result.

⁷ Question wording: “If you were offered to take part in such a process of a constitutional convention, how much time would you be willing to spend over a period of one month, if any at all?”

⁸ Question wording: “Do you think Britain’s long-term policy should be to leave the European Union (EU), to stay in the EU and try to reduce the EU’s powers, to leave things as they are, to stay in the EU and try to increase the EU’s powers or to work for the formation of a single European government?”

Table 10: Preference for a veto for each UK country in EU referendum⁹ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Majority in each country required	32	45	40	36
Overall majority decides	68	55	60	64
Total (100%)	3322	1426	520	1000

"Don't know" responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

Conclusion

Taken together, the findings suggest that on the one hand people indeed hold different views about constitutional preferences and the evaluation of how well their own sub-unit of the UK does. Grouping together different devolved constituencies can be very misleading as the perceptions differ substantially. However, the majority of people also engage with the UK as a political entity, both internally when it comes to principles of uniform application of constitutional arrangements and externally, when it comes to decision making about membership in the EU. Navigating this complex nexus of orientations is not straight forward, but necessary if we aim to understand people's views about the political structures and processes in the country.

Rather than assuming where differences may lie between different parts of the UK, assessing where actual divergences exist is crucial if we aim to develop political processes that allow people to feel their concerns are represented equally across the UK. This is not the case at the moment. While English and Scottish respondents split nearly in the middle over the question of whether their countries are respectively well represented in the discussions about how the UK is governed (table 11), Welsh and Northern Irish respondents largely felt not well represented (72% and 76% respectively).

Table 11: View on representation of interests of own country in constitutional change process¹⁰ by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Interests are rather/very well represented	48	44	24	28
Interests are rather/very poorly represented	52	56	76	72
Total (100%)	3232	1459	540	1013

"Don't know" responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

⁹ Question wording: "Consider that a referendum on whether the UK should remain part of the European Union or not will be held in 2017. Some people have suggested that for the UK to leave the EU a majority of voters in each of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland would have a veto on whether the UK leaves. Others have suggested that only an overall majority of all voters in the UK voting to leave would be required. Which of these do you agree with?"

¹⁰ Question wording: "Do you think that [England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, Wales]'s interests are properly represented in the discussions of how the UK is governed, or do you think that they are not properly represented?"

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