

Scottish independence

The state of the Union: public opinion and the Scottish question

The Scottish National Party's (SNP) success in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections has renewed and invigorated the long-running debate on Scotland's constitutional status. In the near future, it seems certain that people in Scotland will be asked to decide whether they wish to become independent and leave the UK. But does the SNP's electoral success reflect a desire for independence among people in Scotland? And is there any sign of weakening support in England for Scotland's current position within the Union?

Scottish support for independence

Only a minority of people in Scotland currently support independence, while there is no evidence of a long-term increase in support for Scotland leaving the UK. People's willingness to back the idea depends more on whether they think it would make Scotland's economy stronger than on whether they have a strong Scottish identity.

Around a third of people in Scotland favour independence, and there is no consistent evidence of an increase in support over time. At 32% support for independence is up 9 points on 2010, when it was at a record low of 23%, but is still lower than in 2005, when it stood at 35%.

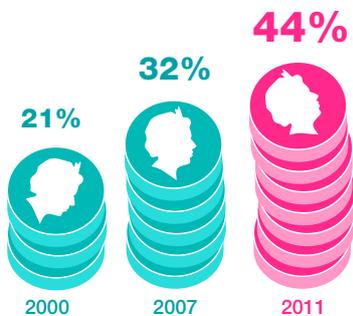


Only just over half (53%) of those who say they are "Scottish, not British" support independence, compared with over three-quarters of those who say that Scotland's economy would be a lot stronger if the country left the UK. But at present only 34% in Scotland think the economy would be stronger.



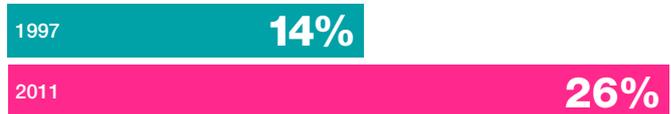
The English perspective

There is evidence of increasing unhappiness in England about the 'anomalies' thrown up by the current asymmetric devolution settlement, and of greater willingness to question its continuation.



Although less than half (44%) of people in England think that Scotland gets more than its fair share of public spending, that is double the proportion who were of that view little more than a decade ago.

Scotland should leave UK



Scotland remain part of UK but with its own Parliament



26% of people in England now believe Scotland should leave the UK compared with 14% in 1997. Conversely, support for Scotland remaining part of the UK but with its own Parliament has declined from 55% in 1997 to 44% in 2011.

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Commentators and politicians have advocated 'devolution plus' or 'devolution max'

Introduction

The success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in securing an overall majority in the 2011 Scottish Parliament election has had profound implications for the long-running debate about Scotland's constitutional status. The SNP's election manifesto included a commitment to hold a referendum on whether Scotland should become a separate country, independent from the rest of the UK.¹ Although there remain question marks over whether the Scottish Parliament has the legal authority to hold a ballot, the SNP's opponents have accepted that their electoral success has given the nationalists the moral right to do so. Meanwhile, the UK government has signalled a willingness to give the Edinburgh institution explicit authority to hold a vote (Scotland Office, 2012). Given these developments, it now looks inevitable that in the next couple of years, people in Scotland will be asked to decide whether they wish to dissolve the 300-year Union between their country and the rest of the UK.

However, current debates about Scotland's constitutional future are not focused solely on the merits or otherwise of independence. The SNP's victory in 2011 has also sparked renewed discussion about whether Scotland should have increased rights and responsibilities within the United Kingdom. This debate does not appear to have been quelled by the passage through the UK Parliament of the Scotland Act 2012. Prompted in part by the SNP's earlier success in forming a minority government in 2007, that Act grants the Scottish Parliament increased powers, including taxation powers. But even before the Scotland Act received Royal Assent, the debate about Scotland's powers within the Union already appeared to have moved on. Commentators and politicians have variously advocated 'devolution plus' (under which the Scottish Parliament would be responsible for raising more or less all of its own revenues (Thomson et al., 2011)) or 'devolution max' (under which most welfare benefits would also be devolved (Scottish Government, 2009)) as better reflecting the aspirations of Scotland for further self-government within the UK. Interestingly, discussion of these possibilities has in part been promoted by the SNP themselves, who have repeatedly shown a willingness to consider including some such option on the referendum ballot as an alternative to full independence. In contrast, the UK government, together with the Labour opposition, have opposed the inclusion of a 'second question' on the referendum ballot paper, although they have indicated they are open to considering options for further devolution should Scotland opt to remain within the Union (Cameron, 2012; Lamont, 2012).

While the future of the Union is currently being questioned most openly north of the border, ultimately the future stability of the UK depends on public opinion in England too. The current devolution settlement is already highly asymmetric. Many of Scotland's domestic affairs – health, education and public transport, for example – are determined by Scotland's devolved institutions, on which England is unrepresented. Yet public policy for England itself continues to be decided by UK-wide institutions in which Scotland does have a say. It has long been argued that this situation would eventually lead to an 'English backlash' – that people in England would be increasingly unhappy about the apparently advantaged position that Scotland enjoys within the Union. The risk of such a backlash might well be thought to be heightened if the rights of the Scottish Parliament were further extended. Meanwhile, maintaining Scotland's membership of the UK would certainly be made more difficult if people in England decided they would prefer the two countries to go their own separate ways.

This chapter addresses these three issues. First, we examine the level and character of support north of the border for Scottish independence. In particular, we assess how far the demand for independence appears to reflect a desire to express a distinctive sense of Scottish national identity, and how far it appears to be contingent on expectations of what independence might bring, including not least its material consequences. Second, we consider whether there is support north of the border for some form of ‘devolution plus’ or ‘devolution max’, that would extend Scotland’s say over its own domestic affairs while retaining its membership of the UK. Finally we consider whether there is any evidence of increasing unhappiness south of the border with the current asymmetric devolution settlement – an unhappiness that might perhaps lead people to regard Scottish independence as preferable to a Union that leaves England at a disadvantage.

The first two questions are addressed using data from the Scottish Social Attitudes survey. This survey is conducted in much the same way as British Social Attitudes but interviews sufficient people living in Scotland to provide robust estimates of public opinion there. The third question is answered using British Social Attitudes data but looking only at the views of those living in England.

Does Scotland want independence?

Since its inception in 1999, Scottish Social Attitudes has asked respondents the same question each year about how they would prefer Scotland to be governed. This question was first asked in two other surveys carried out by NatCen Social Research: one fielded immediately after the 1997 UK general election, and one conducted following the 1997 referendum on Scottish devolution. This means Scottish Social Attitudes is a unique source of evidence on trends in support for independence since the advent of devolution. The survey invites respondents to say which of five options is closest to their view about how Scotland should be governed:

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

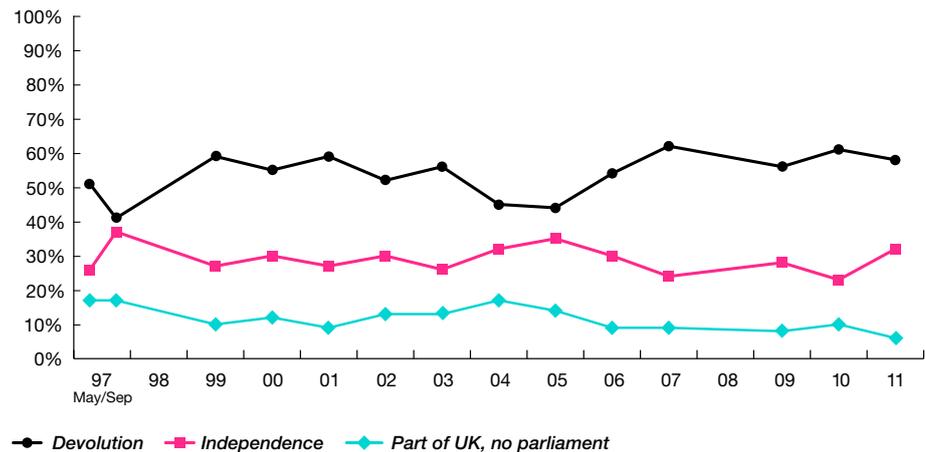
The first two responses refer to independence, either within or outside the European Union. The next two refer to devolution – Scotland having its own devolved parliament – either with or without taxation powers. The last option describes the status quo prior to devolution, that is, Scotland being part of the UK without its own parliament. In Figure 7.1 we have combined the responses to each of the first two pairs of options, so that we can see clearly the level of overall support each year for independence (middle line), devolution (top) and not having any Scottish Parliament at all (bottom line).

 **There has been remarkably little change since 1997 in the level of support for independence** 

There has in fact been remarkably little change since 1997 in the level of support for independence. In most years it has been somewhere between one quarter and one third. It reached a peak of 37 per cent in the immediate wake of the 1997 referendum on devolution and another of 35 per cent in 2005. But more recently support has, if anything, been on the low side, falling as low as 23 per cent in 2010.

Far from stimulating support for independence, the experience of having the SNP in power after 2007 seemed, if anything, to have depressed it (Ormston and Curtice, 2010; Curtice and Ormston, 2011). That drop appears to have been reversed in the immediate wake of the SNP's second and more spectacular electoral success in 2011. However, at 32 per cent the level of support for independence now is still in the range within which it has oscillated during the last dozen or so years, and still trails that for devolution (58 per cent) by some considerable margin. It is also clear that far fewer people currently support independence than were willing to vote SNP in the 2011 Scottish Parliament elections; indeed only 51 per cent of those who said they voted SNP in 2011 also favoured independence.

Figure 7.1 Attitudes in Scotland to how Scotland should be governed, 1997–2011



The data on which Figure 7.1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Sources: 1997 May: Scottish Election Study; 1997 Sept: Scottish Referendum Study; 1999–2011: Scottish Social Attitudes survey

In 1997 two readings were taken, one before the general election and one after

What leads people to support independence or not?

So support for independence remains a minority position, despite the SNP's electoral success. But what leads people to support independence or not? One possibility is that attitudes reflect people's sense of national identity. Perhaps people who feel Scottish rather than British are inclined to feel that Scotland should enjoy the full status of an independent state, just like any other nation (Gellner, 1983). However, previous research into levels of support for 'secessionist' movements around the world suggests that support also depends on perceptions of economic wealth and access to natural resources (Hechter, 2000; Sorens, 2005; Sambanis, 2006). Research on the basis of public support for Quebec sovereignty, for example, finds that while it is rooted in part in questions of identity and language, those who take a favourable view of the economic consequences of leaving Canada are also more likely to back the idea (Blais and Nadeau, 1992; Howe, 1998; Nadeau et al., 1999). Meanwhile in Scotland, the perceived material consequences of constitutional change have been cited as key influences on whether people voted 'Yes' in the 1997 referendum on devolution (SurrIDGE et al., 1998; SurrIDGE and McCrone, 1999; though see also Curtice, 1999). So we clearly need to examine how far support for independence is linked to perceptions of its consequences, and particularly its material consequences, as well as how far it appears to reflect a distinctive Scottish sense of national identity.

Table 7.1 shows what impact people in Scotland currently think independence would have, not only on various aspects of the country's material wellbeing but also on its sense of pride and its voice in the world (the full question text can be found in the appendix to this chapter). In each case, much the same question was also asked about devolution shortly after the 1997 referendum, in which a majority voted in favour of creating a Scottish Parliament. This means we can compare current levels of optimism about independence with the hopes and expectations people had for devolution when it had just been given the green light.

Table 7.1 Expectations in Scotland of devolution in 1997 and of independence in 2011²

		Devolution, 1997			Independence, 2011		
		Better/ stronger	No difference	Worse/ weaker	Better/ stronger	No difference	Worse/ weaker
Pride in country	%	77	20	1	67	27	2
Voice in the world*	%	60	22	11	51	27	19
Standard of health service	%	65	28	6	37	35	19
Standard of living	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	34	34	23
Economy	%	64	24	12	34	26	29
Taxes**	%	3	20	76	10	29	53

n/a = not asked

*In 1997 the question referred to "voice in Europe"

**Those who thought taxes would be "higher" are classified as saying things would be 'worse', while those who thought they would be "lower" are classified as saying things would be 'better'

Sources: 1997: Scottish Referendum Study; 2011: Scottish Social Attitudes

With the exception of taxation, more people think things would be better under independence than would be worse

For the most part the balance of expectations appears to be relatively favourable towards independence. With the exception of taxation, where there is a widespread feeling that taxes would be higher, more people think that things would be better under independence than think they would be worse. However, the excess of optimists over pessimists is much greater in respect of the less immediately material consequences than it is when it comes to the material (and especially the economic) ones. For example, while 67 per cent feel that people in Scotland would have more pride in their country as a result of independence, just 34 per cent feel the standard of living would improve, while 23 per cent think it will get worse. Moreover, people are much less optimistic about the prospect of independence now than they were about devolution in 1997. Again, this is especially so with respect to the anticipated material consequences. While then, 64 per cent thought Scotland's economy would be stronger as a result of devolution, now just 34 per cent feel it would be stronger if Scotland became independent. While independence is far from being widely regarded as a wholly disastrous prospect, it would appear that most people in Scotland have yet to be persuaded that it would bring significant material benefits.

Moreover, despite the generally favourable balance of opinion on some of the anticipated consequences of independence, the prospect of independence is widely regarded with a degree of unease. This emerges most clearly in responses to the following question:

If Scotland were to become independent, would you feel confident about Scotland's future, worried, or neither confident nor worried?

No less than 46 per cent say that they would be worried (either "very" or "quite"). Just 31 per cent indicate that they would feel confident (again either "very" or "quite"), while a further 22 per cent state that they would be neither confident nor worried. It would seem that above and beyond its anticipated specific consequences, independence is regarded as something of a risk by a substantial section of the population.

But how far are any of these expectations linked with people's attitudes towards independence? Are people only likely to support the idea if they think it would benefit Scotland's economy or standard of living? And do any of these expectations make much difference once we take into account people's sense of national identity? These questions are best answered by using multivariate analysis (described in more detail in the Technical details chapter). This enables us to assess and summarise the strength of the relationships between a variety of expectations about independence and national identity on the one hand, and levels of support for independence on the other. We can also check whether there are any demographic differences in attitudes, above and beyond any differences relating to national identity or expectations.

The results of our analyses are summarised in Table 7.2. First though, we should note that how confident or worried people feel about independence is strongly associated with support for the idea. No less than 85 per cent of those who feel very confident about independence support the idea, while only six per cent of those who are very worried about the prospect wish to leave the UK. As a result our measure of confidence dominates the results if it is included in any model of support for independence. This means that any such model might be regarded as simply re-describing rather than explaining support for independence. We therefore model support for independence (as measured by our long-standing question reported in Figure 7.1) and confidence separately, in the knowledge that having confidence in independence appears to play an important role in fostering support for the idea.³

Table 7.2 Summary of attitudes, expectations and characteristics associated with support for and confidence in independence, in Scotland

More likely to support independence if	More likely to feel confident about independence if
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think Scotland's economy would be better under independence - Have a strong Scottish rather than British national identity - Think people in Scotland would have more pride in their country under independence - Think Scotland would have a stronger voice in the world under independence - Age is less than 65 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Think Scotland's economy would be better under independence - Think people in Scotland would have more pride in their country under independence - Think Scotland would have a stronger voice in the world under independence - Think taxes would be lower under independence - Think the standard of living would be higher under independence - A man - Age is 18–34 or 45–64

This table summarises the results of regression analyses that are reported in full in Tables A.2 and A.3. In the case of the 'Independence' model, variables are listed in the order in which they were entered into the model. In the case of the 'Confidence' model variables are listed in the order of the strength of their relationship in the final model⁴

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

So far as support for independence is concerned, expectations about the impact of independence both on the economy and on national identity appear in our multivariate model. However, economic expectations are more closely related to support than is national identity, a finding illustrated by Table 7.3. There is a 43 percentage point difference in the level of support for independence between those who say they feel Scottish not British and those who say they are British not Scottish. But there is no less than a 74 point difference in support for independence between those who feel Scotland's economy would be a lot stronger and those who think it would be a lot weaker if the country were to leave the Union. By this measure, at least, material expectations appear to be the more important of the two considerations in voters' minds.

Table 7.3 Support in Scotland for independence by national identity and economic expectations⁵

National identity	% support independence	Economic expectations	% support independence
Scottish, not British	53	Lot stronger	78
More Scottish than British	32	Little stronger	46
Equally Scottish and British	12	No difference	32
More British than Scottish	11	Little weaker	10
British, not Scottish	10	Lot weaker	4

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes*

Economic expectations prove to be unambiguously the most important correlate

Economic expectations are not, however, the only expectations about independence associated with support for the idea. So too are beliefs about some less immediately material considerations – in particular, views about whether independence would mean people in Scotland had more pride in their country, and whether it would bring Scotland a stronger voice in the world. The former in particular might be regarded as a more 'affective' or 'emotional' consideration, in much the same way as national identity. Meanwhile, younger people are somewhat keener on independence than their older counterparts, irrespective of their expectations about the consequences or their national identity. Overall, as Table 7.4 shows, 42 per cent of 18–24 year olds support independence, compared with 24 per cent of those aged 65 and older.

Nevertheless, the critical importance of economic expectations in shaping attitudes towards independence is further underlined by our model of whether people feel confident or worried about independence. In this case economic expectations prove to be unambiguously the most important correlate, while expectations of what would happen to taxes and living standards under independence matter too. At the same time, perceptions that independence would enhance national pride and strengthen Scotland's voice in the world are once again significant. National identity, however, is not. It would seem that while some people support independence simply because they feel Scottish, such feelings do not necessarily translate into a sense of confidence in the prospect.

Meanwhile, we should also note that just as younger people are more likely to support independence, they are also more likely to feel confident about it (see Table 7.4). In addition, we find that men are more likely to feel confident about independence than women, irrespective of their expectations of what consequences it would bring. This latter difference may well help explain why, as Table 7.4 demonstrates, men appear more willing than women to support independence, a pattern that has been identified by many previous surveys (McCrone and Paterson, 2002), though it is one that disappears once we take into account where people stand on the variables that appear in our model of support for independence.

Table 7.4 Support for and confidence in independence by sex and age, in Scotland

	% support independence	% feel confident about independence	Weighted base	Unweighted base
Sex				
Men	36	37	573	528
Women	29	25	625	669
Age group				
18–24	42	33	143	81
25–34	36	37	189	143
35–44	31	38	207	212
45–54	35	27	220	227
55–64	31	26	186	193
65 plus	24	26	245	337

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes*

So far our findings have shown that independence remains the preference of a minority in Scotland, albeit a considerable one. This is despite the fact that around three-fifths (62 per cent) of people in Scotland say that they are “Scottish, not British” or “More Scottish than British”. For many people then, feeling a strong sense of Scottish national identity is not sufficient reason for backing independence. Even among those who deny they are British at all, only just over half (53 per cent) back leaving the UK. To be willing to support independence, most people also need to be convinced it would bring some benefit, including above all some economic advantage; otherwise they are inclined to feel worried about the prospect. And at present, although only a minority reckon an independent Scotland would be economically weaker than it is now, optimism about the material consequences of independence is far from being widespread either. It seems unlikely that a majority of people in Scotland will decide to vote in favour of independence unless they can be persuaded that leaving the UK would be an economically advantageous course of action.

More devolution for Scotland *within* the UK?

While support for leaving the Union may only be a minority position at present, and as we saw earlier (Figure 7.1) a majority (58 per cent) favour some form of devolved government, this does not necessarily mean the Scottish public are happy with the current devolution settlement. After all, Scottish Social Attitudes has persistently found that far fewer people (in 2011, 38 per cent) feel that the Scottish Government has most influence over the way that Scotland is run than feel it should have most influence (in 2011, 78 per cent) (Ormston and Reid, 2012).⁶ This contrast would certainly suggest that a move towards more powerful devolved institutions would be in step with the broad thrust of public opinion.

Views in Scotland on who “ought to make most of the important decisions for Scotland” in various policy areas provide more precise evidence for that assertion. As Table 7.5 shows, in 2010 two-thirds of Scottish Social Attitudes respondents said that the Scottish Parliament ought to have that role so far as the health service is concerned, while almost as many said the same about schools. These of course are both areas where primary responsibility already lies with the Scottish Parliament. However, as many said the same of welfare benefits, and nearly three in five said so for taxes, both of which are still largely the preserve of Westminster. The one policy area where a majority of people in Scotland feel that decisions should be made by the UK government is defence and foreign affairs, where only around three in ten reckon the Scottish Parliament should make the decisions.

Table 7.5 Views in Scotland about who should make important decisions for Scotland, 2010

		Scottish Parliament	UK government at Westminster	Local councils in Scotland	European Union
Who ought to make important decisions about ...					
... health service	%	66	26	5	*
... schools	%	62	14	23	*
... welfare benefits	%	62	25	9	1
... level of taxes	%	57	37	3	*
... defence and foreign affairs	%	31	63	1	3

In each case the weighted and unweighted base is 1495

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

Responsibility for defence and foreign affairs is, of course, arguably the essence of being an independent state. This last finding is thus in line with our earlier evidence on the level of support for independence, at around three in ten. But otherwise, it would seem that the instinctive reaction of the majority of people in Scotland is that decisions about the country’s domestic affairs, including the financially crucial areas of taxation and welfare benefits, should be made in Edinburgh. It is often argued that these two areas – and especially welfare benefits – should remain primarily a UK-wide responsibility because the resources for insuring individuals and communities against the risks (such as unemployment) to which they are subject are best pooled across the country as a whole. At the same time, opponents of devolving benefits argue that a common welfare system is crucial to ensuring that all UK citizens enjoy exactly the same social rights (see, for example, Commission on Scottish Devolution, 2009). However, it seems that these arguments cut little ice with the Scottish public.

68%

in Scotland say the Scottish Parliament should decide the basic rate of income tax

A critical reader of these findings might wonder whether references in our questions to “taxation” and “welfare benefits” are rather abstract. Perhaps some survey respondents do not fully appreciate the implications of the proposition that decisions about these areas should primarily be made by the Scottish Parliament rather than the UK government. Maybe if we referred explicitly to specific, high profile taxes and benefits, the pattern of response might look different. These considerations prompted us to ask on our 2011 survey who should make most of the important decisions for Scotland about “the basic rate of income tax” and “the old age pension paid out by government”.⁷ However, in practice the answers proved to be little different from those shown in Table 7.5. Sixty-eight per cent say the Scottish Parliament should make decisions about the basic rate of income tax, while 65 per cent say the same of the old age pension. Just 29 and 33 per cent respectively nominate the UK government.⁸ So it appears that – whatever way the question is asked – there is majority support in Scotland for devolving responsibility for the bulk of the country’s domestic affairs, including the key areas of taxes and benefits, to the devolved institutions.

However, this does not mean that some form of ‘devolution max’ is necessarily the option for Scotland’s future that is most preferred by a majority living north of the border. This becomes apparent in the pattern of responses to a question on Scotland’s constitutional future that has been asked on Scottish Social Attitudes in the last two years. Unlike the question summarised in Table 7.1, this more recent question includes an option intended to refer to ‘devolution max’. The question reads as follows:

Which of the statements on this card comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?

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

The first statement is intended to imply independence (without referring explicitly to that word). The second is intended to describe ‘devolution max’, while the third and fourth statements refer to the status quo and no devolution at all respectively.

Table 7.6 Constitutional preferences in Scotland with ‘devolution max’ option, 2010 and 2011

	2010	2011
Preferred distribution of decision-making authority	%	%
Scottish Parliament make all decisions (independence)	28	43
UK government decide defence/foreign affairs; Scottish Parliament the rest (devolution max)	32	29
UK government decide taxes, benefits & defence/foreign affairs; Scottish Parliament the rest (status quo)	27	21
UK government make all decisions (no devolution)	10	5
<i>Weighted base</i>	1495	1197
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1495	1197

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

As Table 7.6 shows, in fact the principle of ‘home rule’ or ‘devolution max’ appears to be the first preference of only around three in ten people in Scotland and is apparently only a little more popular than the status quo. Meanwhile, in our most recent survey at least, it appears to be less popular than independence which, when described as it is here, attracts rather more support than it did at the question reported in Figure 7.1 (albeit still only from a minority).⁹ Evidently there is something of a puzzle to be unravelled here.

The solution is, in fact, relatively simple. Most people who believe that Scotland should be independent also believe taxation and welfare benefits should be decided by the Scottish Parliament.¹⁰ But so too do over half of those who oppose independence.¹¹ Thus the responses reported in Table 7.5 give the impression that ‘devolution max’ has majority support not because it is necessarily the single most popular option, but rather because it is the one option around which both ‘nationalists’ and many ‘unionists’ can seemingly potentially coalesce. It is perhaps not so surprising after all that the SNP have been willing to keep open the possibility that a ‘second question’ on more devolution might appear on the ballot paper, while both the UK government and some Labour politicians have indicated a willingness to contemplate further devolution too.

What about England?

We have seen that some form of ‘devolution max’ may be the constitutional option that best meets the aspirations of the majority in Scotland. Yet whatever Scotland’s preferences may be, any move to introduce further devolution in Scotland also needs to be acceptable to the public in England – otherwise it may put the stability of the Union at risk. But the more that is devolved to Scotland, the greater the apparent risk that the anomalies created by asymmetric devolution will come to be unacceptable to the public south of the border. Such a risk might be considered even more serious if there are already signs of an ‘English backlash’ taking place in response to the existing devolution settlement. And there are indeed some signs of such a development (for a more extended discussion see Ormston, 2012).

This is perhaps most evident in respect of views about the current financial arrangements, under which funding of the devolved institutions is primarily via a block grant from Westminster. These arrangements, which in fact pre-date the Scottish Parliament, result in public spending per head in Scotland being some 20 per cent or so higher than in England (HM Treasury, 2011). In popular debate, this has sometimes been presented as an arrangement that enables Scots to enjoy free university tuition, free personal care for older people, and free prescriptions, all at England’s expense at a time when England itself is unable to afford such policies (see, for example, Heathcoat Amory, 2007; Heffer, 2007). Table 7.7 shows the pattern of responses in England over the last 10 years or so on the question of whether Scotland gets more or less than its fair share of public spending. Until 2007, a little over two in ten in England were of the view that Scotland secured more (either “much” or “a little”) than its fair share. But in 2007 that proportion increased to around three in ten, and since 2008 it has consistently been about four in ten. Although there is no evidence of a further increase since 2008, it is nonetheless the case that nowadays more people in England think that Scotland gets more than its fair share of public spending than believe it does not.

4 in 10

in England think Scotland gets more than its fair share of public spending

On the other hand, in spite of this increase, the perception that Scotland receives an unfair share of public spending remains a minority one. One reason for this is that, when asked this question, around one in four people in England say they do not know. This suggests that Scotland's share of public spending is not a particularly salient issue for many people in England. It is also arguable that the more responsibility the Scottish Parliament is given for raising its own tax revenues, the less it will be possible to present any higher level of public spending in Scotland as the result of an unfair subsidy provided by English taxpayers. So, in this instance at least, more devolution for Scotland could be regarded as increasing the fairness of constitutional arrangements for both Scotland and England.

Table 7.7 Attitudes in England towards Scotland's share of public spending 2000–2011

	00	01	02	03	07	08	09	10	11
Compared with other parts of the UK, Scotland's share of government spending is ...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... much more than its fair share	8	9	9	9	16	21	18	21	22
... a little more than its fair share	13	15	15	13	16	20	22	17	22
... pretty much its fair share	42	44	44	45	38	33	30	29	30
... a little less than its fair share	10	8	8	8	6	3	4	3	3
... much less than its fair share	1	1	1	1	1	*	*	1	*
Don't know	25	23	22	25	22	23	25	28	23
<i>Weighted base</i>	1956	2786	2931	1929	870	1001	992	928	974
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1928	2761	2897	1917	859	982	980	913	967

Base: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

65%

in England in 2010 agreed Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on laws that only affect England

However, the same could certainly not be said of the so-called 'West Lothian' question – the name coined for the argument that it is unfair that Scottish MPs can continue to vote in the House of Commons on English laws when, since devolution, MPs representing England cannot vote on similar laws for Scotland (Conservative Democracy Task Force, 2008). In this case, the more power and responsibility that is devolved to the Scottish Parliament, the more such an imbalance may appear to be an unfair anomaly. In any event, as can be seen from Table 7.8, the current position on this issue is widely regarded with disapproval in England. Around three-fifths in 2010 agreed that Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote on laws that only affect England. Moreover, there are signs that feelings about this issue have become somewhat more intense – the proportion who "agree strongly" that the situation is unfair has gradually increased from 18 per cent in 2000 to 31 per cent in 2010 (our most recent reading). Given this, it is perhaps not surprising that in January 2012 the UK government created a commission chaired by a former House of Commons clerk, Sir William McKay, to see whether the procedures of the House of Commons could be amended to address concern on this issue – although it is widely regarded as difficult to solve, both technically and politically (Hazell, 2006).¹²

Table 7.8 Attitudes in England towards the West Lothian question, 2000–2010

	2000	2001	2003	2007	2010
Now that Scotland has its own parliament, Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote in the UK House of Commons on laws that only affect England	%	%	%	%	%
Strongly agree	18	19	22	25	31
Agree	45	38	38	36	35
Neither agree nor disagree	19	18	18	17	17
Disagree	8	12	10	9	6
Strongly disagree	1	2	1	1	1
<i>Weighted base</i>	1721	2387	1548	752	794
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1695	2341	1530	739	773

Base: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

Do people in England think that England too should enjoy some measure of devolution?

Do these signs that people in England are growing rather more concerned about the apparent unfairness of the current devolution settlement mean that they are also coming to the conclusion that England too should enjoy some measure of devolution? Whether, though, such a development would make it easier or more difficult for the Union to be maintained is the subject of continued debate (Hazell, 2006). We asked respondents for their views as follows:

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 ...

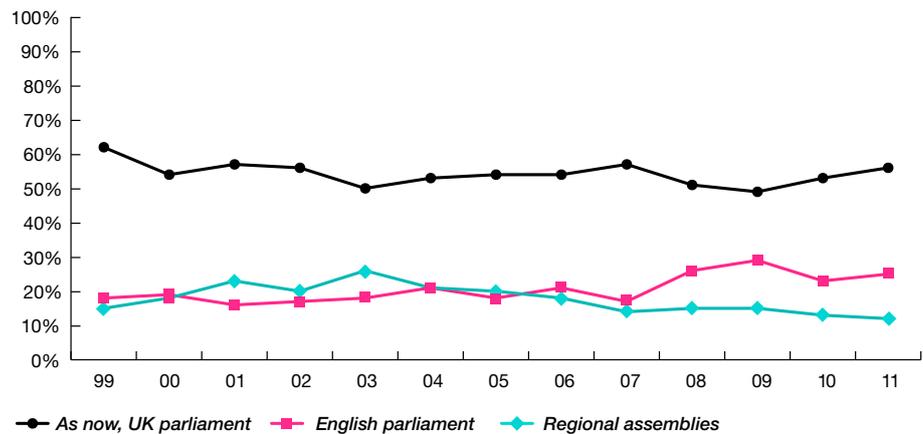
... for England to be governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament,

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?¹³

As Figure 7.2 shows, in practice there is little sign that England has come to embrace devolution for itself. A little over half (56 per cent) believe England's laws should continue to be made by the UK Parliament, in line with most of our readings since the advent of devolution in 1999. Support for the creation of an English Parliament similar to that which now exists in Scotland (the third option in our question) stands at just one in four (25 per cent), though it garners rather more support nowadays than it did between 1999 and 2007. Even less popular, favoured by one in eight (12 per cent), is a more limited form of devolution to each of the regions of England; the popularity of this idea has clearly waned since the defeat in a referendum in November 2004 of proposals to create an elected regional assembly in the north-east of England (Sandford, 2009).¹⁴ There seems to be little immediate prospect of building a majority consensus for a system of devolution for England that would in any way match the apparent desire for self-government north of the border.

Figure 7.2 Attitudes in England to how England should be governed, 1999–2011



The data on which Figure 7.2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter
 Base: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

26%
 in England support the idea that Scotland should leave the UK

However, the most important question about public opinion in England, at least as far as the future stability of the Union is concerned, is whether people are sufficiently dissatisfied with the apparent privileges enjoyed by Scotland that they are beginning to think it might be better if Scotland were to become independent after all. In Table 7.9, we show how people in England have responded when asked the question about how Scotland should be governed that has been asked regularly on Scottish Social Attitudes (reported in Figure 7.1). This shows there is some evidence of increased support in England for the idea that Scotland should leave the UK. Between 1999 and 2007 the proportion who supported that proposition was around one fifth, but in 2011 increased to about one quarter (26 per cent).¹⁵ So while the idea that the Union should be broken up remains even more clearly a minority view in England than it is in Scotland, it seems that support in England for the continuation of the UK is potentially vulnerable to erosion.

Table 7.9 Attitudes in England to how Scotland should be governed, 1997–2011

	97*	99	00	01	02	03	07	11
How Scotland should be governed	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independent, separate from UK and EU, or separate from UK but part of EU	14	21	19	19	19	17	19	26
Part of UK, with own parliament either with or without some taxation powers	55	57	52	59	51	59	47	44
Part of UK, without an elected parliament	23	14	17	11	15	13	18	19
Don't know	8	8	11	10	14	11	15	11
<i>Weighted base</i>	2492	905	1956	2786	1948	1929	870	974
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3150	902	1928	2761	1924	1917	859	967

*Source: British Election Study
 Base: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

Conclusions

There is no doubt the Union between Scotland and the rest of the UK is closer to being dissolved than at any time in its 300-year history. Its future looks set to rest in the hands of the Scottish public, who will make their opinion known via a referendum within the next couple of years. However, at present it appears that leaving the UK remains a minority preference, not least because people in Scotland are doubtful that it would bring them much material benefit.

But the demand for outright independence is not the only challenge facing the Union. A majority of people in Scotland may currently be disinclined to vote to leave the UK, but many who support the Union nonetheless want Scotland to be responsible for most of its domestic affairs, including taxation and welfare benefits. As a result, it appears a scheme of devolution that goes considerably further than the current settlement, even as amended by the 2012 Scotland Act, may be able to generate a widespread consensus. Any such scheme would constitute a much looser Union than has hitherto been in place.

Yet a potential question mark remains over how England would react to such a development. England continues to show little sign of wanting devolution for itself. But there is evidence of growing discontent with the asymmetries of the current devolution settlement, a discontent that may now be beginning to be accompanied by some erosion of previous support for the Union. Some of England's discontent, such as that over finance, might in fact be addressed via more devolution for Scotland. But other areas of concern, such as the West Lothian question, would be likely to become more pressing. Ensuring that both Scotland and England continue to remain happy with the Union could well require an ability and willingness to find some constitutionally imaginative solutions.

Notes

1. Such a commitment had also been included in the SNP's 2007 election manifesto. However, as a minority government between 2007 and 2011, the SNP lacked the votes in the Scottish Parliament needed to pass legislation authorising a ballot.
2. In the case of the first two items the unweighted and weighted sample size in 1997 is 676. In the case of the remaining items the unweighted size is 657 and the weighted 659. The unweighted sample size for all items in 2011 is 1156 and the weighted 1167.
3. Support for independence has been modelled using binary logistic regression in which the dependent variable is support for independence (either inside or outside the European Union) versus any other response. Confidence in independence has been modelled using ordinal logistic regression in which the dependent variable is a five-point scale ranging from "very confident" to "very worried".
4. In contrast to binary logistic regression, the ordinal logistic procedure in SPSS does not provide a stepwise facility. This means we do not know the order in which the variables would be entered using such an approach. However, an alternative analysis of the data on confidence in independence using stepwise binary logistic regression revealed that the order in which the variables were entered using that approach was much the same as the order of the Wald scores reported by the ordinal regression.

5. Bases for Table 7.3 are as follows:

National identity	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>	Economic expectations	<i>Weighted base</i>	<i>Unweighted base</i>
Scottish, not British	351	346	Lot stronger	114	110
More Scottish than British	391	381	Little stronger	286	286
Equally Scottish and British	270	278	No difference	307	296
More British than Scottish	56	62	Little weaker	198	204
British, not Scottish	56	68	Lot weaker	147	149

6. The full question wording was as follows:

Which of the following do you think has most influence over the way Scotland is run?

And which do you think ought to have most influence over the way Scotland is run?

[the Scottish Government, the UK government at Westminster, local councils in Scotland, the European Union]

7. Note that, unlike the questions reported in Table 7.5, these questions did not offer the answer options “local councils in Scotland” or “European Union”. As so few respondents chose these options when they were offered, their exclusion will have made little or no material difference to the pattern of response.
8. We should note though that the balance in favour of decisions being made in Edinburgh rather than London is in both cases somewhat less than for the already devolved area of university tuition fees, where no less than 86 per cent think decisions should be taken by the Scottish Parliament and only 10 per cent say responsibility should lie with Westminster.
9. Note that in contrast to the question reported at Figure 7.1, independence is not referred to here as involving ‘separation’ from the rest of the UK. In general, survey questions that include ‘separation’ in their description of independence have tended to elicit lower levels of support than those that do not.
10. In the case of welfare benefits, the relevant figure in 2010 was 82 per cent while in the case of taxes it was 83 per cent.
11. The relevant 2010 figures are 61 per cent for welfare benefits and 54 per cent for taxes.
12. Debarring Scottish MPs from voting on English laws would not necessarily prove unpopular with the general public north of the border either. When the question presented in Table 7.8 was last asked by Scottish Social Attitudes, in 2009, 47 per cent agreed that Scottish MPs should not vote on English laws, while only 22 per cent disagreed.
13. 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. In Figure 7.2 the figures shown for 2003 are those for the two versions combined.

14. It has also been suggested that the creation of directly elected mayors in the major cities of England might provide a focus for greater devolution in a manner that, along with the creation of the Greater London Assembly, it has already done. However, as the Constitutional reform chapter shows, public opinion towards directly elected mayors is somewhat equivocal and, in practice, when 10 of England's largest provincial cities were asked in May 2012 to vote in a referendum on whether they should have such a mayor, only one voted in favour.
15. This increase would appear to be attributable to the increased concern about Scotland's share of public spending, albeit not wholly so. Those who think that Scotland secures more than its fair share are markedly more likely to support Scottish independence (33 per cent) than are those who do not think it secures more than its fair share (19 per cent). The increase in support for Scottish independence between 2007 and 2011 among those who say that Scotland secures more than its fair share is, at five points, a little less than the seven point increase in the population as a whole. At the same time, the equivalent figure among those who feel Scotland does not secure more than its fair share is, at two points, well below the general increase of seven. Some of that overall increase of seven points must therefore have arisen because of the rise between 2007 and 2011 in the proportion who think that Scotland secures more than its fair share.

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Acknowledgements

NatCen Social Research is grateful to the Nuffield Foundation for the financial support that enabled us to ask the 2010 and 2011 Scottish Social Attitudes questions reported in this chapter. The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

Appendix

The data for Figure 7.1 are shown below:

Table A.1 Attitudes in Scotland to how Scotland should be governed, 1997–2011

	May		99	00	01	02	03	04	05	06	07	09	10	11
	97	97												
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independent, separate from UK and EU, or separate from UK but part of EU	26	37	27	30	27	30	26	32	35	30	24	28	23	32
Part of UK, with own parliament either with or without some taxation powers	51	41	59	55	59	52	56	45	44	54	62	56	61	58
Part of UK, without an elected parliament	17	17	10	12	9	13	13	17	14	9	9	8	10	6
Don't know	5	4	5	3	4	6	6	5	8	7	5	7	5	5
<i>Weighted base</i>	882	676	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594	1508	1482	1495	1197
<i>Unweighted base</i>	882	676	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594	1508	1482	1495	1197

Sources: 1997 May: Scottish Election Study; 1997 Sept: Scottish Referendum Study; 1999–2011: Scottish Social Attitudes survey

The full question text for the 2011 questions reported in Table 7.1 is given below. In each case there were five answer options: in addition to the middle option of “no difference”, respondents could choose “a lot” or “a little” to indicate the strength of their positive or negative view. In the table these two sets of responses have been combined.

Thinking now about what might happen if Scotland were to become an independent country, separate from the rest of the United Kingdom but part of the European Union.

Do you think that, as a result of independence, taxes in Scotland would become higher, lower or would it make no difference?

As a result of independence would Scotland's economy become better, worse, or would it make no difference?

As a result of independence would the standard of the health service in Scotland become better, worse, or would it make no difference?

As a result of independence would people in Scotland have more pride in their country, less pride or would it make no difference?

As a result of independence would the standard of living in Scotland be higher, lower, or would it make no difference?

As a result of independence would Scotland have a stronger voice in the world, a weaker voice, or would it make no difference?

Tables A.2 and A.3 report full details of the multivariate modelling, the results of which are summarised in Table 7.2.

This model is based on a stepwise regression with insignificant variables not entered. Dependent variable is support independence versus not doing so based on responses to the question detailed at Table A.1. Independent variables are shown in the order of entry into the model. All such variables apart from age are entered as interval level variables. In the case of the 'impact on independence' variables the higher the score, the more positive the evaluation. In the case of national identity, the higher the score the more Scottish and less British someone feels. In the case of age, the coefficients are simple contrast coefficients with the reference category shown in brackets.

Table A.2 Binary logistic regression of support in Scotland for independence

	Coefficient	Standard error	p value
Impact of independence on economy	0.52	0.10	0.000
National identity: Scottish rather than British identity	0.58	0.09	0.000
Impact of independence on pride	0.52	0.11	0.000
Impact of independence on voice in the world	0.37	0.09	0.000
Age (65 plus)			
18–24	0.84	0.29	0.003
25–34	0.55	0.26	0.038
35–44	0.26	0.26	0.323
45–54	0.56	0.25	0.000
55–64	0.63	0.27	0.025
Constant	3.64		
Nagelkerke (adjusted) R ²	0.39		
<i>Unweighted base: 1096</i>			

Source: *Scottish Social Attitudes 2011*

This model is based on an ordinal regression of a five-point scale ranging from 'very confident' to 'very worried'. The higher the score on the dependent variable, the more confident and less worried someone was about independence. Independent variables are listed in rank order of their Wald scores, with variables that proved to be insignificant at the 5% level removed. In the case of the 'impact on independence' evaluations, all of which are entered as interval level variables, the higher the score the more positive the evaluation; in the case of impact on taxes, a high score represents a belief that taxes would be lower. In the case of age and sex coefficients are simple contrast coefficients with the reference category shown in brackets.

Table A.3 Ordinal logistic regression of confidence in independence

	Coefficient	Standard error	p value
Impact of independence on economy	0.80	0.08	0.000
Impact of independence on pride	0.47	0.08	0.000
Impact of independence on voice in the world	0.39	0.07	0.000
Impact of independence on taxes	0.40	0.07	0.000
Impact of independence on standard of living	0.28	0.08	0.001
Sex (Women)			
Men	0.47	0.11	0.000
Age (65 plus)			
18–24	1.01	0.11	0.000
25–34	0.43	0.19	0.023
35–44	0.32	0.18	0.078
45–54	0.16	0.18	0.370
55–64	0.01	0.19	0.950
Thresholds (Very confident)			
Very worried	-6.67		
Quite worried	-3.93		
Neither confident nor worried	-2.34		
Quite confident	-0.23		
Nagelkerke (adjusted) R ²	0.54		
<i>Weighted base: 1161</i>			

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2011

The data for Figure 7.2 are shown below:

Table A.4 Attitudes in England to how England should be governed, 1999–2011

	99	00	01	02	03*	04	05	06	07	08	09	10	11
How England should be 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
Each region of England to have own assembly that runs services like health	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18	14	15	15	13	12
England to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	18	19	16	17	18	21	18	21	17	26	29	23	25
<i>Weighted bases</i>	2722	1956	2786	2931	3742	2721	1815	936	870	1001	992	928	974
<i>Unweighted bases</i>	2718	1928	2761	2897	3709	2684	1794	928	859	982	980	913	967

Base: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

**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 shown for 2003 are those for the two versions combined*

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Publication details

Park, A., Clery, E., Curtice, J., Phillips, M. and Utting, D. (eds.) (2012), *British Social Attitudes: the 29th Report*, London: NatCen Social Research, available online at: www.bsa-29.natcen.ac.uk

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First published 2012

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ISBN 978-1-907236-24-2