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Attitudes towards Scotland's Constitutional Future

**Initial findings from Scottish
Social Attitudes survey 2012**

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1 Introduction

Since the advent of devolution in 1999, ScotCen Social Research's Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey has been charting the views of people in Scotland on how well they think they are being governed at present and how they would like to be governed in future. As a result this high quality annual survey now provides the richest and longest running series of data on attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional future. Results from the 2012 SSA have now been released (24th January), the first reading to be taken by the survey since the independence debate stepped up a gear as the UK and Scottish Governments argued about how the referendum on independence should be conducted.

In this briefing we outline some of the key findings from the 2012 survey. We address three key questions:

1. How well does Scotland think it is being governed at present?
2. What are attitudes to and expectations of independence?
3. What demand is there for more devolution short of leaving the Union?

2 How do Scots view their present position?

One of the most striking findings of SSA in recent years has been that Scots have appeared rather happier with the deal they get out of the Union since the SNP first came to power in 2007.

For example, between 1999 and 2006 the proportion who felt that England benefited most economically out of the Union ranged between 30% and 42%. Since 2007 the figure has never been higher than 29% and has been as low as 23%. The latest figure, 28%, also falls within that lower range (Table 1). By far the most popular view these days is that both countries benefit equally.

	1999	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England benefits more	36	42	38	30	36	27	28	23	29	28
Scotland benefits more	22	16	18	24	21	25	24	26	22	22
Equal	36	36	39	40	34	39	40	45	44	45
<i>Sample size</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1663</i>	<i>1605</i>	<i>1508</i>	<i>1549</i>	<i>1508</i>	<i>1482</i>	<i>1495</i>	<i>1197</i>	<i>1229</i>

Note to table: Small number of respondents giving other answers or saying 'don't know' not shown.

A similar picture emerges when Scots are asked about their share of government spending. Between 2000 and 2006 the proportion who felt that Scotland got less than its fair share of public spending ranged between 47% and 59%. Since 2007 it has oscillated at much lower levels, between 36% and 42%, and, at 42%, the 2012 figure does not disturb this picture.

Scots also appear to have taken a more positive view of the achievements of devolution since the SNP came to power. For example, between 2004 and 2006 only between 35% and 43% felt that devolution was giving Scotland a stronger voice in the UK; since 2007 that figure has never been lower than 49% and in the 2012 survey stands at 59%.

3 Attitudes to independence

SSA has tracked Scots' preference for how they would like to be governed by asking an identical question on the subject in every survey since 1999. Included amongst the options is the proposition that 'Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK', either within or outside the European Union.

Between 1999 and 2006, support for independence ranged between 27% and 35%, averaging 30% across all eight readings taken during this period. Since 2007, however, support has tended to be lower. It fell to 24% in 2007 itself, and to 23% in 2010, recovering to 32% following the SNP's election success in 2011. It has now fallen back to 23% once again (Table 2). There is therefore no evidence of any long-term increase in support for independence either since the advent of devolution or since the SNP first came to power.

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scotland not in UK - Independent	27	30	27	30	26	32	35	30	24	28	23	32	23
Scotland in UK & Parliament - Devolution	59	55	59	52	56	45	44	54	62	56	61	58	61
Scotland in UK & no parliament - No Devolution	10	12	9	13	13	17	14	9	9	8	10	6	11
Don't know / Not Answered	5	3	4	6	6	5	8	7	5	8	5	5	5
Sample size	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594	1508	1482	1495	1197	1229

An alternative measure, (which has been asked since 2010) secures rather higher levels of support for a proposition that implies independence without actually using that term – that 'The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland'. However, support has dropped on this measure too during the last year – from 43% in 2011 to 35% in 2012.

Alongside this drop, there has been a fall during the last twelve months in expectations of what independence would bring. In particular, the proportion that think it would mean that more people had pride in their country has fallen from 67% to 55%, while the proportion who believe that it would mean Scotland had a stronger voice in the world has dropped from 51% to 42%. Even so, these are aspects of the independence debate where many Scots still take a relatively optimistic view of what would happen.

However, they remain less optimistic about some of the other more practical consequences. For example, only 34% think that Scotland's economy would be better under independence, while just as many, 34% feel it would be worse. Moreover, opinions on the likely economic impact of independence are particularly closely related to whether people currently support or oppose the idea. Meanwhile, contrary to the arguments recently put forward by some nationalist campaigners, only 19% think that independence would result in a smaller gap between rich and poor. Most (47%) simply think it would not make any difference.

Above all, however, the biggest barrier that continues to confront the Yes campaign is a widespread sense of unease about the prospect of independence. In 2012, 59% said they would be 'worried' if Scotland were to become independent. This figure is well up on the 46% who expressed a similar concern in 2011. Only 21% now say they feel confident about independence – and in the absence of that sense of confidence few are willing to back the idea.

4 An appetite for greater devolution?

Although a proposition for more devolution, such as 'devolution max' or 'devolution plus' will not now appear on the ballot paper, all three unionist parties are considering proposals for giving the Scottish Parliament more powers and responsibilities. At first glance such a step would appear to be popular.

Nearly two-thirds (64%) of Scots feel that the Scottish Parliament should make the important decisions for Scotland about the level of welfare benefits, while 56% say the same about tax levels. These figures for the two principal aspects of domestic policy that are still mostly reserved to Westminster are much the same as in previous years. In contrast, just 34% feel that the Scottish Parliament should be making the key decisions about defence and foreign affairs.

However, 'devolution max' is not necessarily the single most popular single option. While 32% say that the Scottish Parliament should make all decisions apart from defence and foreign affairs, this is less than the 35% who, as noted above, say the parliament should decide everything. In fact, more devolution only appears to have the support of a majority because most nationalists would regard it as an improvement on the status quo, and thus would back the idea alongside those for whom more devolution is their first preference.

Moreover, optimism about what more devolution would bring is, in general, no more widespread than optimism about independence. Exactly the same proportion (42%) think that more devolution would give Scotland a stronger voice in the world as think

that independence would. The proportions taking an optimistic view about the consequences for the economy (34%) are exactly the same too.

But there is less concern about the prospect of more devolution. Only 15% think that it would weaken Scotland's voice (independence, 22%), while no more than 25% reckon the country's economy would be worse (independence, 34%). Above all, however, only 32% say they would be 'worried' if more devolution were to be introduced, little more than half the 59% who say the same about independence. It would seem that the popularity of more devolution may lie in the opportunity it appears to afford for Scotland to enhance its ability to govern itself while avoiding some of the 'downside' risks it is thought independence might bring.

5 Methodological Note

The 2012 Scottish Social Attitudes Survey interviewed a probability sample of 1,229 adults face to face between July and November 2012. Data are weighted to reflect known patterns of non-response and the age and gender profile of the adult population in Scotland.

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