

Scottish Social Attitudes | 25 years of devolution in Scotland: Public attitudes and reactions

Authors: Sir John Curtice and Sophie Birtwistle



OCTOBER 2025

Contents

Introduction	4
National Identity	6
Values	11
Policy Challenges	17
Perceptions of Government	21
Constitutional Preference	28
Identity, Values and Constitutional Preference	33
Brexit	37
Does the issue matter?	44
Conclusion	50
Appendix	51
Methodology	53
Publication details	57

Introduction

The Scottish Parliament is now just over 25 years old. Its creation represented the biggest change in how Scotland is governed since at least the establishment of the Scotland Office in 1885 and arguably since the Treaty of Union in 1707. Its purpose, at least for the many unionists that supported the idea, was that it would demonstrate that the distinctive needs and wishes of Scotland could be accommodated within the framework of the UK and that, as a result, Scots would conclude that their country could be governed effectively within the framework of the Union and did not need to contemplate independence. However, others argued that the creation of distinct political institutions would run the risk that public opinion in Scotland would diverge from that in England and weaken the sense of British identity that helps bind all four parts of the UK together. Meanwhile, many nationalists anticipated that by demonstrating that Scotland could in fact govern itself, devolution would help fuel support for independence rather than undermine it.

Throughout this period, the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey^[1] has been charting social and political attitudes north of the border. Launched in 1999, SSA is an annual high-quality survey conducted by the Scottish Centre for Social Research (ScotCen) with the aim of providing impartial, in-depth evidence on the climate of public opinion in Scotland. Until 2019, respondents selected for interview at random were interviewed face to face by an interviewer and, in addition, completed a self-administered paper and pencil questionnaire. In 2021, during the pandemic, which made it impossible to interview people in their own homes, the survey was conducted in two parts. Some people (selected at random) were interviewed afresh via phone, while a separate sample responded as part of the ScotCen Opinion Panel, which comprises people who have responded to previous SSA surveys and agreed to answer further surveys online or by phone.

Meanwhile, since the pandemic, SSA has been undertaken online, but with potential respondent households still being selected at random and provided, if they wish, with an option to complete the survey over the telephone. Analysis suggests that this change in how the survey is conducted has not had a significant impact on the pattern of response.^[2] SSA is now undertaken in

parallel with the British Social Attitudes (BSA) survey^[3], which has performed a similar role and been conducted in much the same way since its foundation in 1983. The two surveys carry some questions each year in common, thereby making it possible to compare attitudes in Scotland with those in the rest of Britain. Further details are to be found in the appendix.

In this briefing, we use the unparalleled collection of data gathered by SSA to chart some of the key developments in Scottish public opinion since the advent of devolution. In particular, to evaluate whether devolution has, as many of its advocates hoped, strengthened the ties between Scotland and the rest of the UK or, as others argued, weakened them, we focus on two key questions.

First, have people's sense of identity and their attitudes diverged from those in the rest of Britain? With the advent of the parliament, decisions about how Scotland should tackle many of the policy issues and challenges it faces are taken in Edinburgh, not London. Consequently, the debate about these issues takes place in a distinct policy space that is occupied by different politicians, the balance of whose views – and thus the messages that voters hear – may be different from that emanating from Westminster. As a result, public opinion in Scotland may have become increasingly divergent from that in the rest of Britain. At the same time, the creation of distinctly Scottish institutions may have served to reduce adherence to the sense of British identity that potentially helps bind the four corners of the UK together and helps legitimate rule from Westminster.

Second, how do Scots feel about how they are governed after a quarter century of devolution? How well or badly is the devolved parliament thought to have performed? Has its creation witnessed a strengthening or a weakening of support for remaining part of the UK? Or perhaps has the real impact of the last quarter of the century not been so much to change minds as to defuse the issue in voters' minds? And in so far as attitudes have changed what role, if any, has the character of public opinion in Scotland and the pattern of national identity, whether changed or unchanged, played in shaping the distribution of attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed?

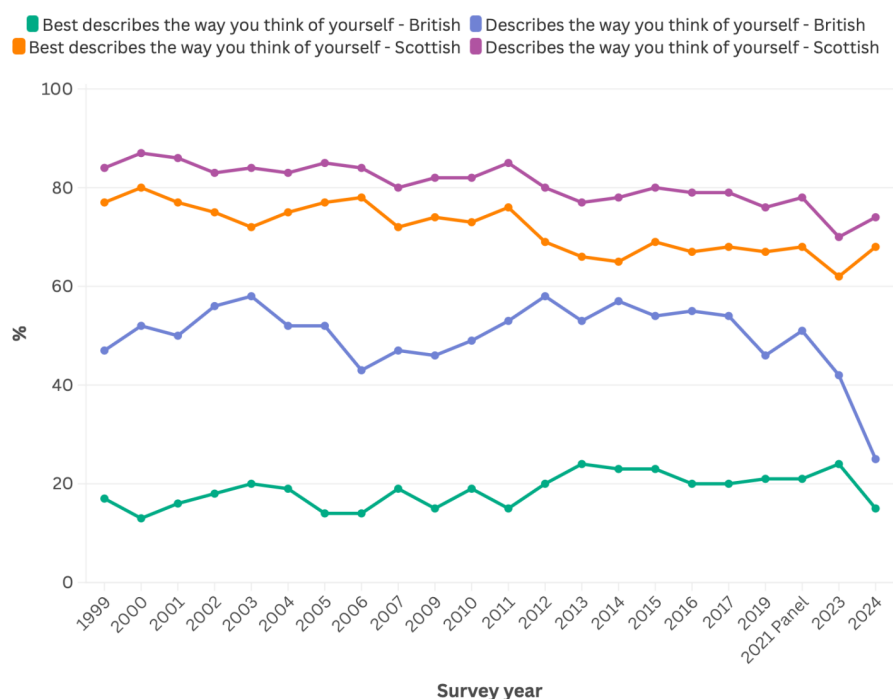
In the conclusion we summarise the key points that emerge and consider the possible implications for the next quarter century of Scotland's politics.

National Identity

We begin by examining the distribution of national identity. From its inception, SSA has ascertained people's sense of nationality by asking two different questions. In the first instance, respondents are presented with a list of all the identities associated with the islands of Britain and Ireland and are invited to state which of them, if any, describes the way they think of themselves. Respondents can choose as many identities as they wish. Should they select more than one, they are asked a follow-up question in which they are invited to indicate which one identity would best describe themselves if they were forced to choose.

In practice, most say they are either Scottish or British, while some, indeed, choose both. Figure 1, therefore, shows for each year of the survey the proportion who chose Scottish as one of their identities and the proportion who acknowledged being British. At the same time, it shows how many people said that Scottish was either their only identity or is the one that best describes themselves, together with the equivalent figure for those who say they are British.

Figure 1: Prevalence of British and Scottish Identity, 1999–2024



There is one clear finding. Most people living north of the border identify as Scottish. However, that has always been the case ever since the advent of devolution. Indeed, at 74%, the proportion who, in our latest survey, say that Scottish is at least one of the ways in which they would describe themselves, is actually ten points down on the equivalent figure for 1999 (84%).

Intriguingly, much of the decline appears to have happened in the run up to the 2014 independence referendum. In 2011, 85% said they were Scottish, but by 2013, the figure had fallen to 77%. Since then, the figure has never been higher than 80%, whereas before 2011 it was never lower than that figure. The trend is much the same if we look at those who say Scottish is either the only identity or is the one that best describes themselves.

In contrast to feeling Scottish, being British is much less widely acknowledged. Typically around half have said that British was at least one of their identities. However, when forced to choose a single identity, the proportion has usually been closer to 20%. Evidently, while many Scots acknowledge being British – on average just under two in five (39%)^[4] did so between 1999 and 2021 – for many it is secondary to their sense of being Scottish. Meanwhile, until recently at least, there has been little sign of any long-term decline in identifying as British, while in contrast to Scottish identity, the proportion

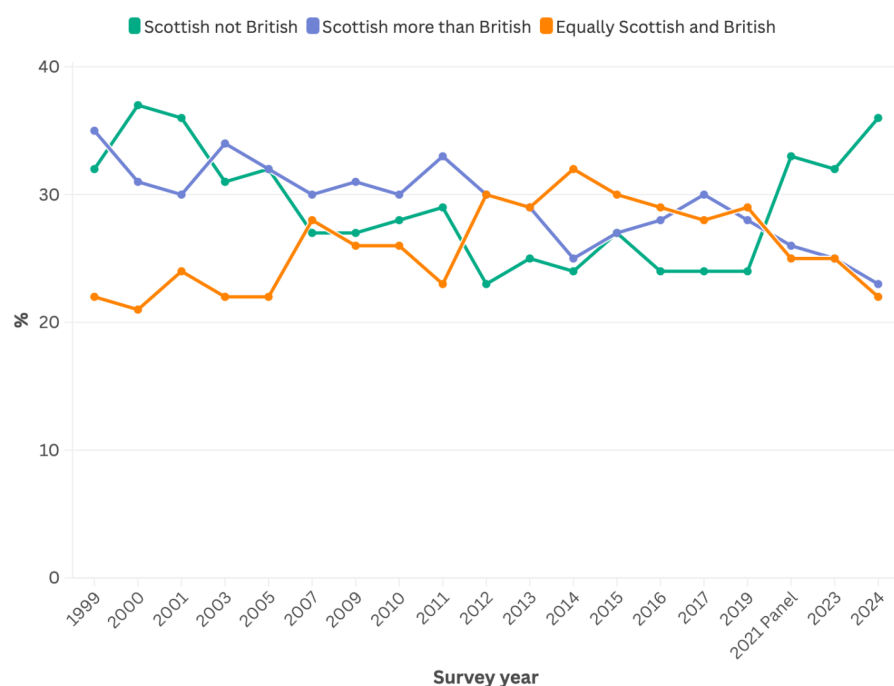
doing so (57-58%) was rather higher in the run-up to the independence referendum. That said, in the wake of a decline in our latest survey to just 13% in the proportion who acknowledge being both British and Scottish, those who say British is at least one of their identities fell markedly from an already relatively low figure of 42% in 2023 to just 25% in 2024.

Our second approach to measuring national identity is often known as the Moreno scale, after the name of the Spanish political scientist who introduced the English-speaking world to the approach. It presents people with a set of five ways of describing the relative strength of their Scottish and British identity. These read as follows:

- *Scottish not British*
- *More Scottish than British*
- *Equally Scottish and British*
- *More British than Scottish*
- *British not Scottish*

In a further indication that most people prioritise their Scottish identity over whatever British identity they feel, relatively few state that they are either ‘More British than Scottish’ or that they are ‘British, not Scottish. Moreover, the proportion doing so has not significantly changed over the last thirty years. In 1999, just 7% offered one or other of those two responses, while at 10% the figure was little different in 2024. Figure 2, therefore, just charts the trend over time in the proportion who give one of the other three, more popular, responses.

Figure 2: Responses to the Moreno National Identity Scale, 1999–2024



The three trends we observed in Figure 1 are also largely evident here. At 36%, the proportion who now say they are ‘Scottish, not British’ is little different from the 37% who expressed that view in 2000. During much of the intervening period, only around one in four Scots explicitly denied being British. At the same time, there is again evidence of an increased acknowledgement of being British in the run up to the independence referendum. The proportion saying they were ‘Equally Scottish and British’ increased from 23% in 2011 to a record high of 32% in 2014. At the same time, those who said that year that they were either ‘Scottish, not British’ or ‘More Scottish than British’ fell below a half (49%) for the first and only time. However, in our most recent survey, the proportion who say they are ‘Equally Scottish and British’ has fallen back again to just 22%, while those saying they are wholly or mostly Scottish has risen to a record high of 60%. Here too, then, there are signs that the strength of British identity has weakened a little over the last couple of years.

British national identity is not, then, strong in Scotland. However, this has been the case ever since the advent of devolution. There is little sign that the creation of distinctive Scottish political institutions has resulted in a long-term, secular decline in its prevalence. Indeed, ironically, the period leading up to the independence referendum, when Scotland’s place in the Union was

particularly being questioned, seems to have stimulated some Scots into acknowledging having a British identity alongside their Scottish one. That said, that increase has now been reversed, and over the last couple of years in particular it appears that the prevalence of British identity does seem to have weakened somewhat.

Values

If the distribution of national identity has, for the most part, not markedly changed since the introduction of devolution, what about the country's values and attitudes? It is often argued that Scotland is more 'left-wing', 'social democratic' or 'progressive' than England. If so, then maybe the advent of distinct political institutions and policy debates north of the border has created an environment in which left-wing ideas are advanced more commonly than in England, that this helps to push public opinion in a leftward direction, and thus in turn helped to widen the divergence of outlook between Scotland and England?

One of the biggest decisions facing any government is how much to spend on the provision of public services and how much to raise in taxation to pay for this spending. Spending rather more and raising taxes to do so is often regarded as a more left-wing point of view while cutting back on spending and reducing taxes is a stance more commonly found among those on the right. Might Scotland therefore be keener than England on more taxation and spending?

Since its foundation in 1983, the British Social Attitudes (BSA) has regularly asked its respondents the following question, which has also appeared on many SSA surveys since 1999:

"Suppose the government had to choose between the following three options. Which do you think it should choose?"

- *Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits*
- *Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now*
- *Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits*

For the years in which the question was also asked on SSA, Figure 3 shows the proportion of respondents who said that taxes and spending should be

increased, together with the equivalent figure for those living in England as measured by BSA.

Two key points emerge. First, rarely has there been a marked divergence of view between Scotland and England. Although typically – though not every year – the proportion of people in Scotland who say that taxation and spending should be increased has been a little higher than in England, the difference has rarely been more than a few percentage points. Moreover – and crucially – there is no consistent evidence that the difference between Scotland and England has widened over time. True, in our most recent survey, 50% of people in Scotland back more tax and spend, whereas only 41% of those living in England express that view. However that nine-point difference is not unprecedented – it was ten points in 2010 only to narrow again thereafter.

Second, the trend over time in the level of support for more taxation and spending has been strikingly similar on both sides of the border. During the years when New Labour were in power at Westminster – and both taxation and spending increased – support for more taxation and spending declined in a largely parallel fashion in both Scotland and England. Meanwhile, after taxation and spending were subsequently cut back in the wake of the financial crash and Labour's loss of office, gradually support for more taxation increased once again in both countries. Meanwhile, more recently, there has in both countries been some movement again away from support for more taxation and spending following the substantial increases that occurred during the 2019-24 Parliament in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic – though, in both cases, support for more tax and spend has not as yet at least fallen back to the levels witnessed around the time that Labour lost office in 2010. In short, voters in Scotland and England have been strikingly similar in how they have reacted to the ups and down in government policy over the last 25 years.

Figure 3: Support for increasing taxes and spending more on health, education and social benefits, Scotland and England, 1999–2024



Still, perhaps we might see more divergence between Scotland and England if, instead of looking at attitudes towards immediate government policy, we examine instead people's underlying values. Both BSA and SSA have regularly fielded a series of questions designed to measure two underlying value dimensions. One is a left-right dimension that distinguishes between those (on the left) who think that there is too much inequality and the government should be endeavouring to reduce it, and those (on the right) who are less concerned about inequality and think the government should instead be focusing on the delivery of economic growth from which all might benefit. Where people stand on this dimension is ascertained by the two surveys from the extent to which they agree or disagree with each of the following propositions:

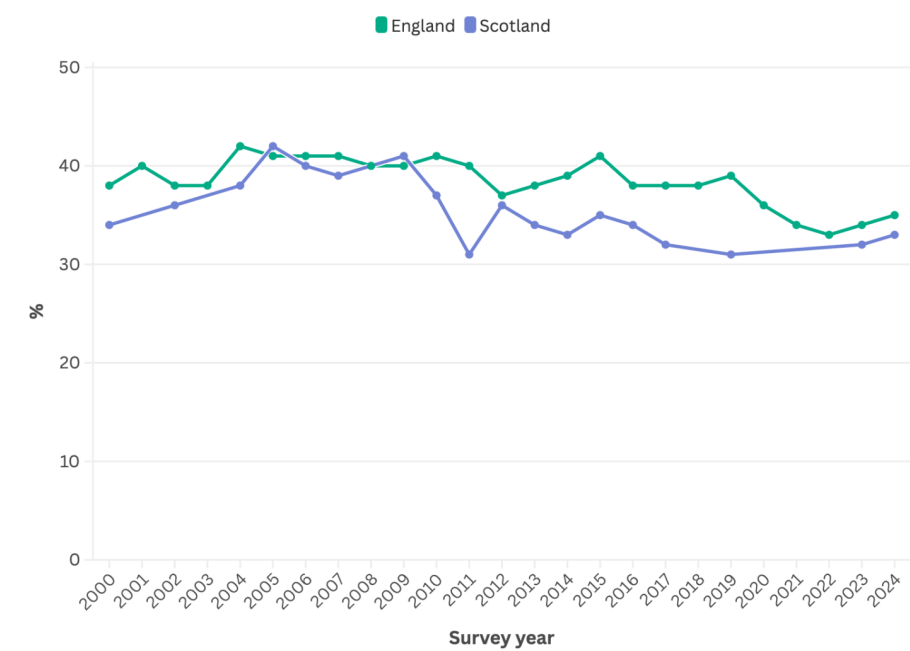
- *Government should redistribute income from the better-off to those who are less well off*
- *Big business benefits owners at the expense of workers*
- *Ordinary working people do not get their fair share of the nation's wealth*
- *There is one law for the rich and one for the poor*

- *Management will always try to get the better of employees if it gets the chance*

The pattern of people’s responses to all five questions is turned into a score that ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 is the most left-wing point of view (the respondent strongly agrees with all of the above) and 100 is the most right-wing (indicating strong disagreement with all the propositions).

Figure 4 shows the average score for respondents to SSA in Scotland and to BSA in England recorded since 2000. In any one year, this score has nearly always been lower in Scotland than in England. Moreover, whereas in the noughties the difference was typically relatively small – on average just a couple of points – between 2010 and 2019 it was rather bigger (on average five points). Here there would seem to have been evidence of an increased divergence. However, in the two most recent surveys, conducted in 2023 and 2024, the gap has, once again been just two points. If Scotland and England had been moving further apart, it looks as though the trend may now have been reversed. All we can conclude so far is that Scotland is, as it has always been in the devolution years, a little more left-wing than England.

Figure 4: Average left–right scale score in Scotland and England, 2000–2024



Note: In the scale 0=most left-wing; 100= most right-wing.

Our second scale is a libertarian-authoritarian scale. Those at the authoritarian end of the scale favour a high degree of social conformity and social order. Those at the libertarian end, in contrast, place a greater emphasis on individual autonomy and freedom. Where people stand on this scale has also been found to be associated with whether they have a socially conservative or a socially liberal outlook, that is, whether they believe that homogeneity of culture, social mores, and morality is necessary for social cohesion, or whether a degree of diversity in cultural and social practices is to be valued and celebrated. People's position on this scale is identified by whether they agree or disagree with the following six propositions:

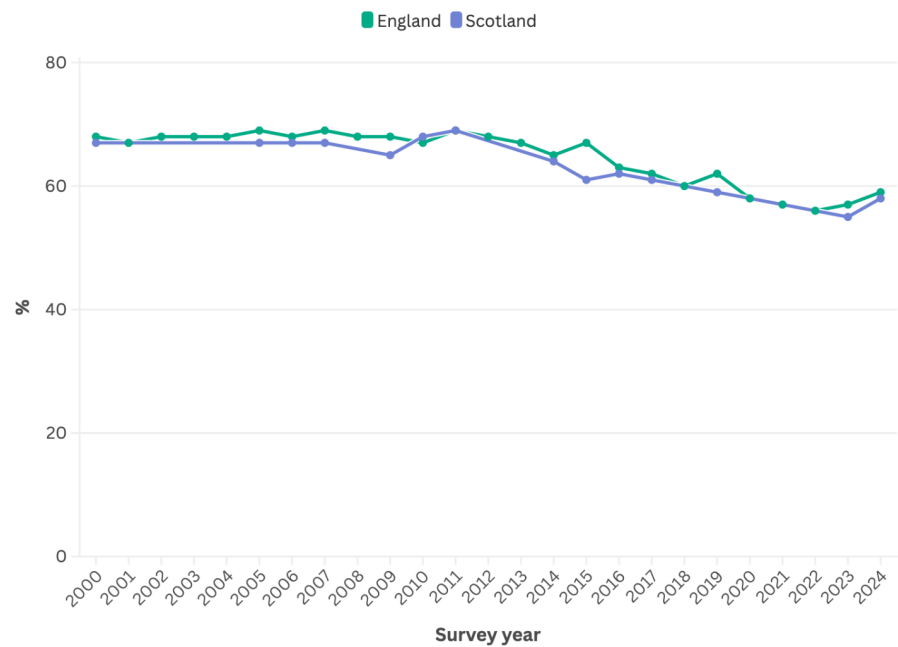
- *Young people today don't have enough respect for traditional British values*
- *People who break the law should be given stiffer sentences*
- *For some crimes, the death penalty is the most appropriate sentence*
- *Schools should teach children to obey authority*
- *The law should always be obeyed, even if a particular law is wrong*
- *Censorship of films and magazines is necessary to uphold moral standards*

Again, people's responses are turned into a score between 0 and 100, with 0 representing then most libertarian point of view (indicating disagreement with all the propositions) and 100 the most authoritarian (agreement with every item).

Figure 5 shows the average score in each year in Scotland and in England. There is barely any difference between them. Although Scotland usually emerges as slightly more libertarian than England, the differences between their average scores is rarely more than a point or two. In short, here there is no sign of divergence at all. Rather, both countries have witnessed over the last decade or so much the same gradual shift in a more libertarian direction,

such that the average score in both countries is nine points lower now (and thus more libertarian) than it was in 2000.

Figure 5: Average libertarian–authoritarian scale score in Scotland and England, 2000–2024



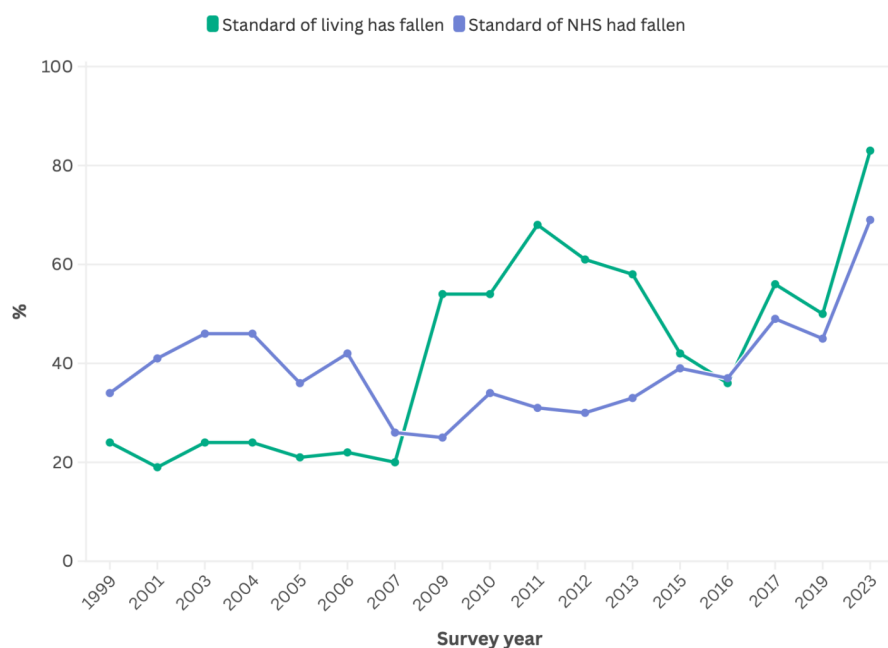
Note: In the scale, 0=most libertarian, 100=most right wing.

Policy Challenges

There is, then, little sign of any marked, consistent divergence between Scotland and England in people's attitudes or values. Perhaps one reason for this is that, despite devolution, the policy challenges facing the government in Edinburgh have been similar to those that have beset administrations in London. Maybe too, the economic circumstances that people have experienced in Scotland over the last decade have been much the same as those in England.

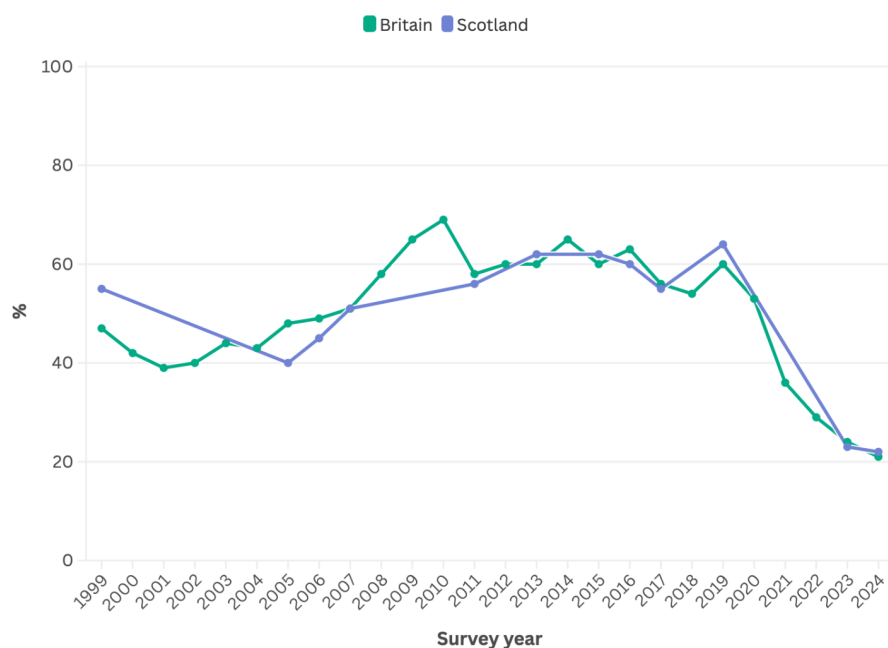
People in Scotland are certainly less happy with the state of the health service and with their standard of living now than they were in the early years of devolution. As Figure 6 shows, the financial crash of 2008-9 was followed by a marked increase in the proportion of people in Scotland who said the general standard of living had fallen. In 2001, just under one in five (19%) felt that way. By 2011, a little over two-thirds (68%) reckoned the country was less well off. Although by 2016 the figure had dropped back to 36%, more recently it has soared to 83% in the wake of the pandemic and the subsequent cost of living crisis. Meanwhile, although the proportion who felt that the standard of the health service had fallen dropped somewhat between 2006 (42%) and 2009 (25%), it began to edge up again thereafter – and in our most recent reading, taken after the pandemic and its adverse impact on waiting lists, it has reached a high of 69%. Meeting the hopes and aspirations of people in Scotland has not got any easier during the last 25 years.

Figure 6: Perception that the standard of the NHS and the general standard of living has fallen in Scotland, 1999–2023^[5]



Yet there is nothing unique about this experience. The health service is one of the devolved institutions' most important responsibilities. Decisions about how the NHS is run in Scotland are taken in Edinburgh rather than London. However, as Figure 7 shows, in any one year, levels of satisfaction with the health service have tended to be much the same on both sides of the border. This has especially been the case over the course of the last decade. Although the level of satisfaction never reached the peak of 69% registered across Britain as a whole in 2010 (the figure in Scotland that year was 55%), since then levels of satisfaction have moved in tandem. While Scotland has indeed witnessed a sharp decline in satisfaction with the NHS in the wake of the pandemic, at 22%, the latest figure is almost exactly the same as it is across Britain as a whole (21%).

Figure 7: Satisfaction with the NHS in Scotland and Britain, 1999–2024



Meanwhile, Table 1 reveals that, when they have been asked whether their household is living comfortably on its current income or whether it is struggling, people in Scotland have tended to be a little more likely than those across Britain as a whole to say that they are living comfortably – and, conversely, a little less likely to say they are struggling. However, the proportion stating they are living comfortably has fallen sharply in the wake of the pandemic and the ensuing cost of living crisis. In 2023, just 35% said they were living comfortably, down from 56% just four years earlier. This sharp fall largely mirrors what has happened across Britain as a whole. Here too, those living comfortably on their current income fell from 47% in 2020 to 36% in 2023, and, in contrast to Scotland (where the figure is now 41%), has not increased in our latest survey. In short, there is no sign that Scots have reacted differently to the challenges that have faced them and their governments in recent years.

Table 1: Feelings about household income, Scotland and Britain, 2010-2024

	Scotland		Britain	
	% Living really comfortably/ comfortably on present income	% Really struggling/ struggling on present income	% Living really comfortably/ comfortably on present income	% Really struggling/ struggling on present income
2010	54	16	49	17
2011	54	17	44	21
2013	53	16	45	20
2016	59	11	53	15
2019/20	56	14	47	17
2023	35	27	36	26
2024	41	24	35	26

Note: In the 2019/20 row, the SSA data were collected in 2019 and the BSA data in 2020.

Perceptions of Government

There is then relatively little sign that the attitudes and values of people in Scotland have diverged from those of their counterparts in Britain. True, the country is a little more left-wing than England in its outlook, but this is no more the case now than it was when devolution was introduced at the turn of the century. Most people in Scotland appear to be more heavily invested in their Scottish identity than any British one they might acknowledge, but, the last couple of years apart, there is little sign that they have become less willing to say they feel British. Meanwhile, their reaction to the difficulties that have beset the economy and the health service in recent years has been remarkably similar to that of those living south of the border.

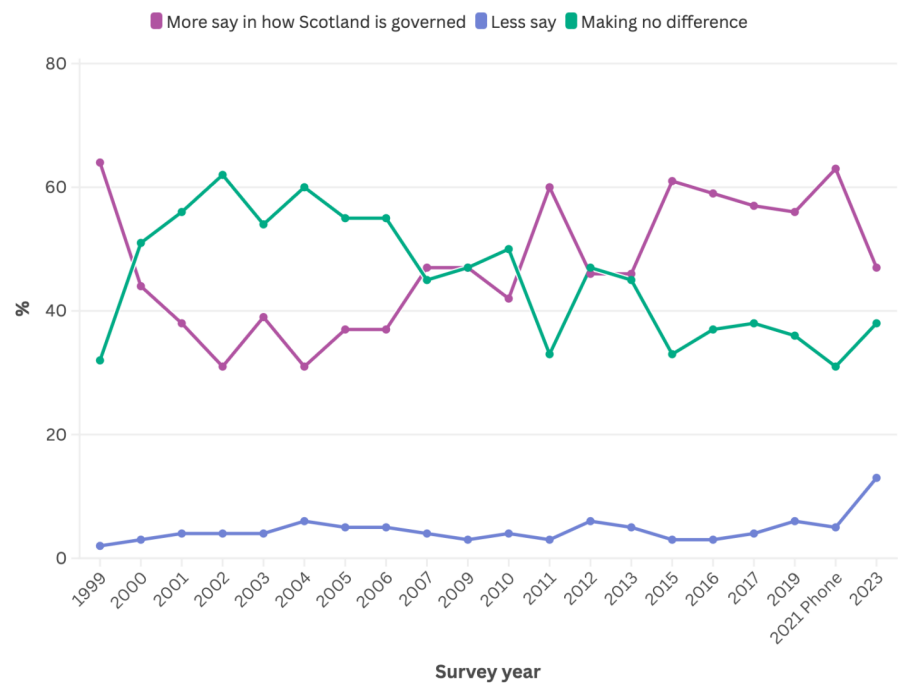
Still, it might be the case that the experience of their nation having its own political institutions has had an impact on how people feel their country should be governed. Maybe, as nationalists have always hoped, they feel that devolution has worked out well and has demonstrated that a country that, as we have seen, has a distinct sense of national identity should now seek independence. But equally, maybe they have drawn the opposite conclusion, either because they feel the experience of devolution and the policy challenges it has faced has raised questions about the country's ability to govern itself, or because the success of devolution has demonstrated that Scotland can enjoy a large measure of self-government within the framework of the UK.

One of the aspirations for devolution set out by its supporters was that by (i) moving much of the government of Scotland to Edinburgh rather than it being 400 miles away in London, and (ii) engaging in more consultation with the public, the new institution would make people feel they had more say in how they were governed. Indeed, as Figure 8 shows, when people were asked in 1999, nearly two-thirds (64%) felt that this was, indeed, what would happen. However, the proportion who in the early years of devolution felt this was what was actually happening, was much lower; in 2002 and 2004 it stood at just 31%. Yet, even then, few felt that ordinary people had less say as a result of devolution. Meanwhile, the proportion who reckoned that people were having more say rose during the 2007-11 Parliament and then increased to as

much as 60% in the immediate wake of the 2011 election when the Scottish National Party (SNP) won an overall majority. Equally, the figure was 61% in 2015, following the independence referendum the previous year and it remained at a relatively high level thereafter. Perhaps unsurprisingly, it appears that the experience of the referendum helped to persuade Scots that devolution was indeed giving them more say.

However, that perception may now be receding. Certainly, in our most recent reading in 2023, the proportion saying that having the Scottish Parliament was giving ordinary people more say in how they were governed had slipped to 47%, while a record 13% said that it was giving them less say. Still, on this criterion at least, the reputation of the parliament has been markedly better over the last decade or so than it was in the early years after its foundation.

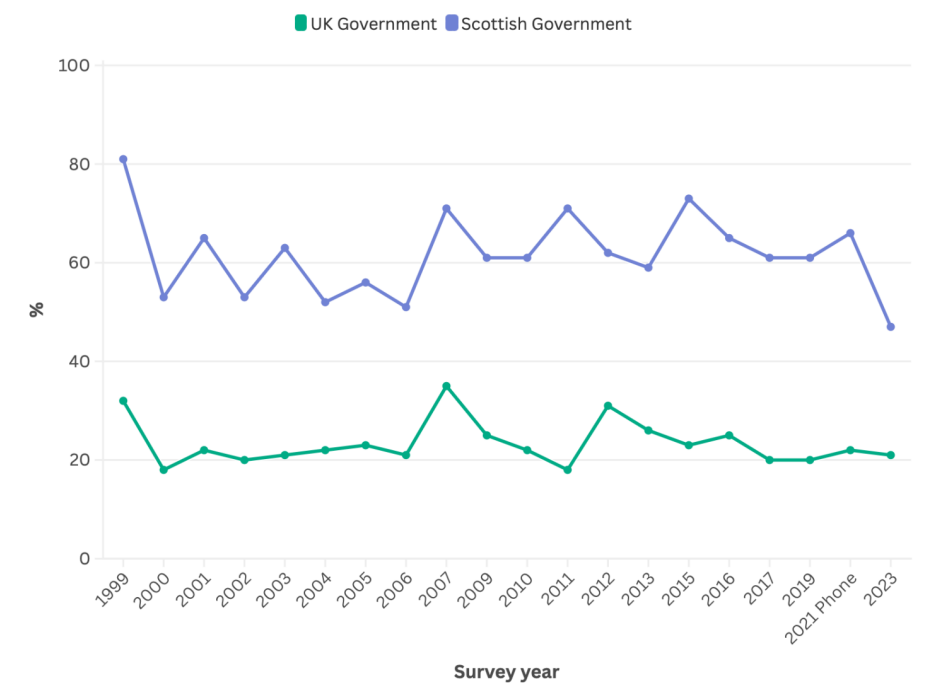
Figure 8: Having a Scottish Parliament gives ordinary people more say/less say/makes no difference, 1999–2023^[6]



Note: The question wording in each year was:
1999 “Will a Scottish Parliament...”
2000 “Do you think that having a Scottish Parliament is going to...”
2001 “Do you think that having a Scottish Parliament is giving...”

The optimism associated with the initial creation of the Scottish Parliament is also evident in Figure 9. As it first met in 1999, as many as 81% said they trusted the new institution to look after Scotland’s best interests either ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’. Thereafter, in tandem with the picture we saw in Figure 8, the mood soon became a little more circumspect, with between a half and two-thirds saying that they trusted the Scottish Parliament (and, from 2004, the Scottish Government) to that extent. But from 2007 onwards, the proportion rose to between around 60% and 70%, reaching a peak of 73% in 2015. In our most recent reading, however, the proportion fell to less than half (47%) for the first time. Here too, there is some evidence that confidence in the devolved institutions may have fallen somewhat in the recent past.

Figure 9: Trust the Scottish Government and UK Government to work in Scotland’s best interests just about always or most of the time, 1999–2023^[7]



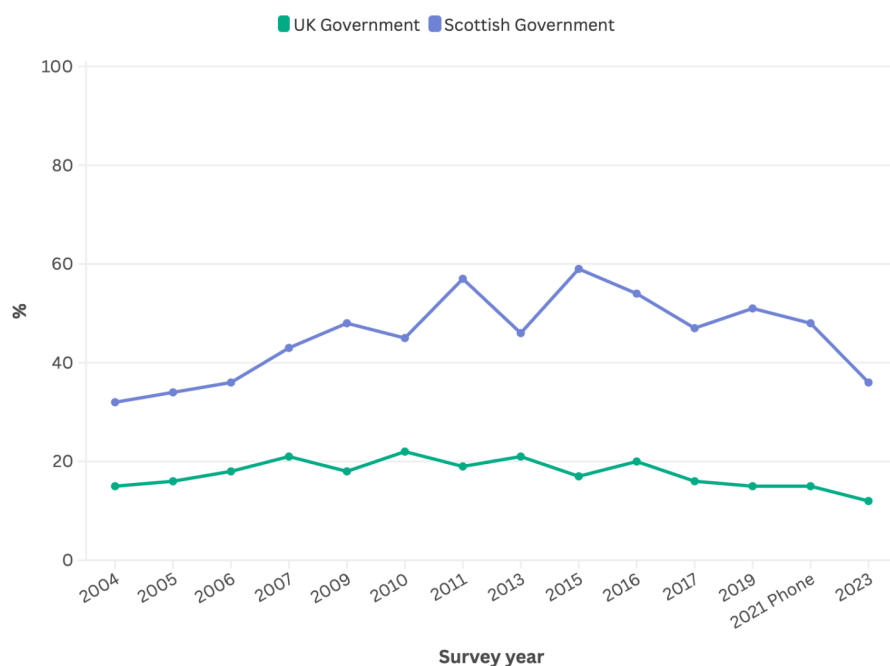
Note: Prior to 2004, the Scottish Government question asked about the Parliament. In 2004, an experiment was run whereby half the sample was asked about the Scottish Parliament and half was asked about the Scottish

Executive. The change of wording made negligible difference to the responses given therefore the combined results are shown here. In 2009, the wording was changed again to ask about the 'Scottish Government' rather than the 'Scottish Executive', following the September 2007 name change.

However, Figure 9 shows that people in Scotland have consistently been more likely to say they trust the Scottish Parliament/Government to work in Scotland's best interests than they are to say the same of the UK Government. In most years only just over one in five have said that they trust the UK Government 'just about always' or 'most of the time', albeit the figures were slightly higher in 2007 and 2012. Perhaps, unsurprisingly, the Scotland-only devolved institutions have persistently been seen as better able than the UK Government to look after the country's territorial interests.

However, this is not the only criterion on which the devolved institutions are more highly regarded than is the UK Government at Westminster. As illustrated in Figure 10, people in Scotland have consistently been more likely to say that the Scottish Government is 'very good' or 'quite good' at listening to people before making decisions than they are to say the same of the UK Government. In the case of the latter, rarely have many more than one in five said it is good at doing so. In contrast, never have less than 32% said the Scottish Government was good at listening. That said, we again see a now familiar trend over time. The proportion who expressed a favourable view of the devolved government increased from 2007 onwards and reached a peak of 59% in 2015 following the independence referendum. At the same time, however, here too devolution came out less favourably in our most recent reading in 2023. Just 36% now said they thought the Scottish Government was good at listening, the lowest proportion since 2006.

Figure 10: Proportion who think the UK Government and Scottish Government are 'very good' or 'quite good' at listening to people's views before taking decisions, 2004-2023^[8]

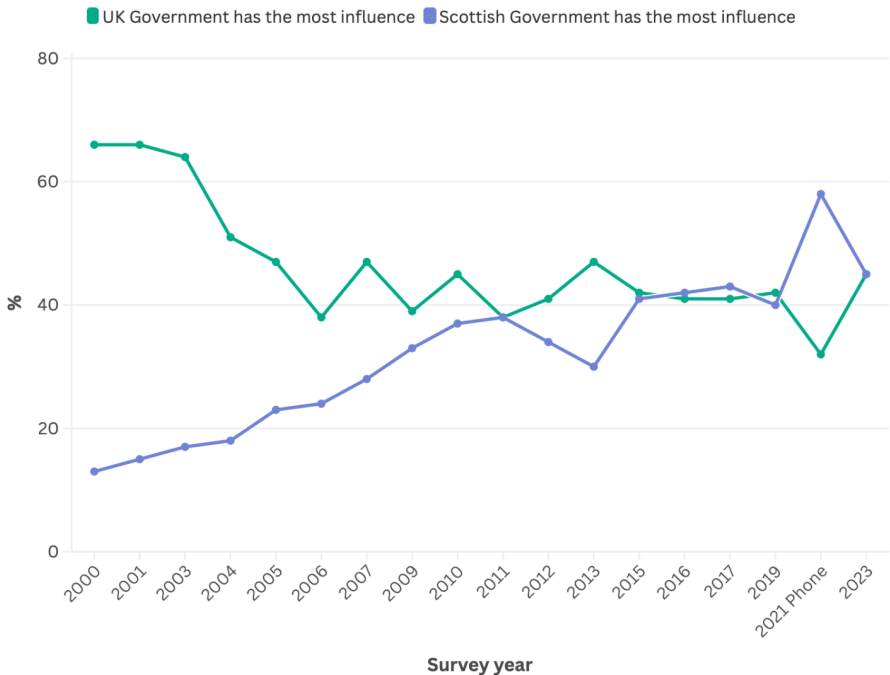


But irrespective of how it makes decisions, how powerful are the devolved institutions thought to be? From the outset, the new institutions had responsibility for much of domestic policy north of the border. That alone might mean they were thought to matter. Meanwhile, their ambit was expanded further in legislation passed by the UK Parliament in 2012 and 2016, and, as a result of which, the Scottish Parliament is now responsible for most aspects of income tax north of the border and has extensive responsibilities for the payment of welfare benefits. Consequently, we might anticipate that the devolved institutions are more likely to be thought powerful now than when they were initially created. That said, given that the UK Government still has primary responsibility for decisions about the economy, makes key decisions that affect the budget of the devolved institutions, and is wholly responsible for defence and foreign affairs, people might still feel that the UK Government has a lot of influence over what happens north of the border.

Initially, expectations of the influence the new parliament would have were high. In 1999, 41% anticipated that the Scottish Parliament would have most influence over how Scotland is run, slightly more than the 39% who believed the UK Government would have most influence. In practice, as Figure 11 shows, it took ten years or so before the expectation that the devolved institutions would be as influential as the UK Government was reflected in the collective

judgement of the electorate. Initially nearly two-thirds said the UK Government had most influence, while less than one in five reckoned the Scottish Government did. However, the proportion who felt the Scottish Government had most influence gradually increased over time, such that by 2011 as many people felt the devolved institution was most powerful as believed the UK Government was (41% in both cases). Meanwhile, since the independence referendum, similar proportions have consistently nominated one or other of the two governments. The one exception was in 2021, when as many as 58% said the Scottish Government had most influence, while only 32% said the UK Government. This may reflect the fact that responsibility in Scotland for handling the issue that dominated people’s lives at that time, the COVID-19 pandemic, lay primarily with the Scottish Government. But even though that increase in the perceived influence has since reversed, it seems this is one instance where voters’ original expectations of devolution have eventually at least largely been met.

**Figure 11: Who has most influence over the way Scotland is run?
2000–2023^[9]**



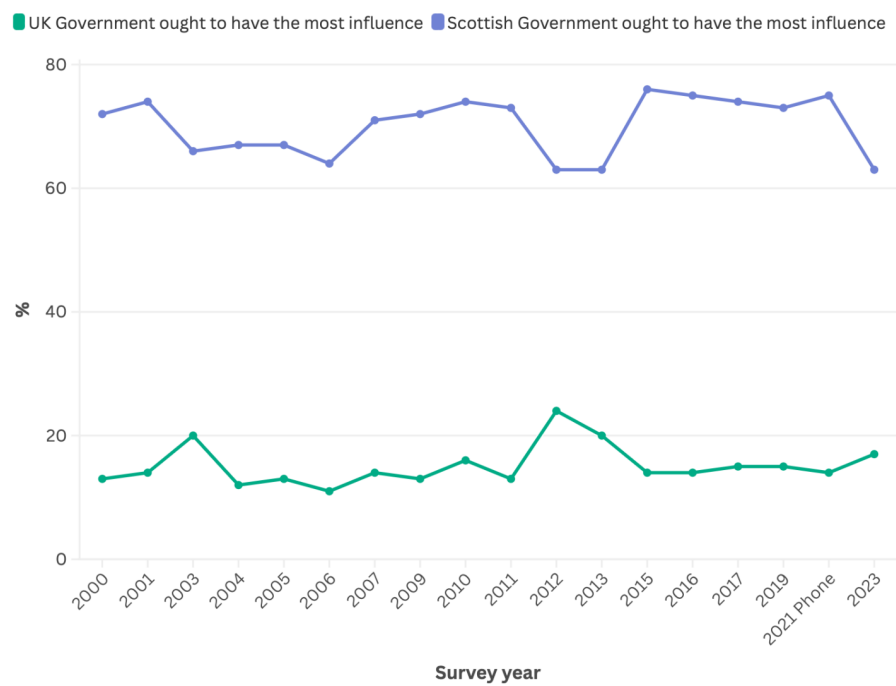
Note: The question also offers as possible answers, local councils in Scotland and the European Union. The figures for these options are not shown.

Between 2000 and 2003, the question was asked of the Scottish Parliament. In 2004, an experiment was run whereby half the sample was asked about the Scottish Parliament and half was asked about the Scottish Executive. The change of wording made negligible difference to the responses given, therefore the combined results are shown here. In 2009, the wording was changed again to ask about the 'Scottish Government', rather than the 'Scottish Executive', following the September 2007 name change.

Constitutional Preference

We are, though, still left with our central question, which is who Scots think should be running Scotland and whether they have changed their views during the devolution years. Figure 12 gives us an initial indication. In a follow-up to the question whose results were shown in Figure 11, SSA has also regularly asked which institution ought to have most influence over how Scotland is run. Consistently, a clear majority have said the Scottish Government should have most influence – the proportion has never been less than 63%. The figure was at its highest (76%) in 2015, shortly after the independence referendum, and was still well over 70% in 2019 [and 2021]. However, our most recent reading, taken in 2023, saw the proportion fall back down again to the previous record low of 63%. That said, those saying the UK Government should have most influence have never constituted as many as a quarter of Scots. There seems to be a near consensus that Scotland should, primarily at least, be run by its own distinct government.

Figure 12: Who ought to have most influence over the way Scotland is run?, 2000–2023^[10]



Note: The question also offers as possible answers, local councils in Scotland and the European Union. The figures for these options are not shown.

Between 2000 and 2003, the question was asked of the Scottish Parliament. In 2004, an experiment was run whereby half the sample was asked about the Scottish Parliament and half was asked about the Scottish Executive. The change of wording made negligible difference to the responses given, therefore the combined results are shown here. In 2009, the wording was changed again to ask about the 'Scottish Government', rather than the 'Scottish Executive', following the September 2007 name change.

However, that still leaves the question of just how powerful that government should be and what constitutional status it should enjoy. Ever since the first SSA in 1999, the survey has asked its respondents which of the following options comes closest to their view as to how Scotland should be governed:

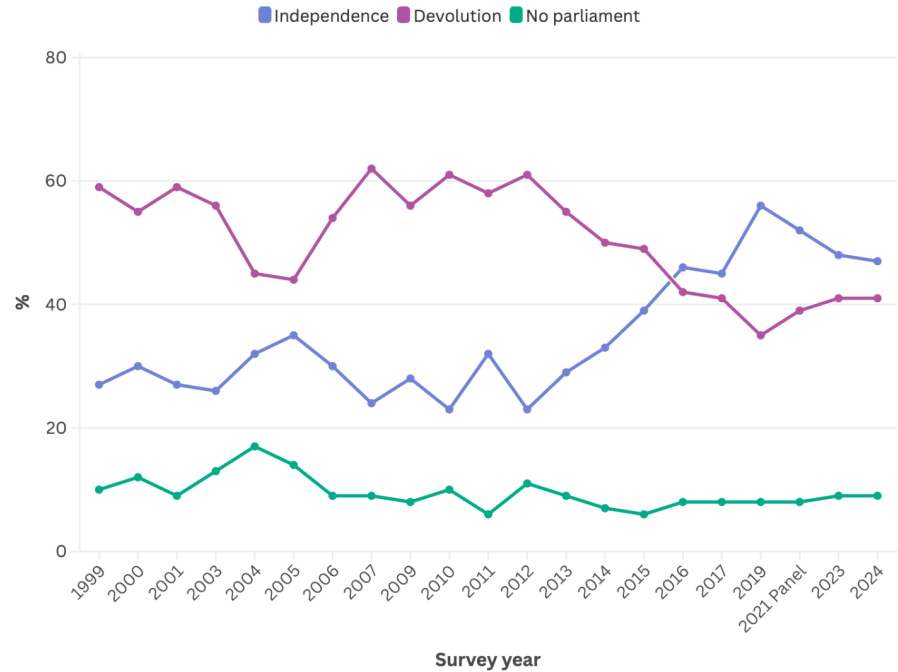
- *Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK and the European Union*
- *Scotland should become independent, separate from the UK but part of the European Union*
- *Scotland should remain part of the UK, with its own elected parliament which has some taxation powers*
- *Scotland should 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*

In practice, relatively few respondents say Scotland should be independent but not part of the EU. Equally, few say that while Scotland should have its own elected parliament it should not have any taxation powers. To simplify matters, in Figure 13 we combine those who chose either of the first two (independence) options and also bring together those who pick either the third or the fourth option, both of which refer to Scotland having an elected parliament within the framework of the UK. This is the only survey question on how Scotland should be governed that has been asked in the same fashion on a survey throughout the quarter century of devolution. It thus provides us

with a unique insight into how attitudes towards Scotland’s constitutional status have evolved in the wake of devolution.

It is immediately clear from Figure 13 that devolution has not had the beneficial impact on support for the Union for which unionists had once hoped. It shows that, up to and including 2012, support for independence oscillated between just under a quarter and a little over a third. Thereafter, however, as the campaign for the 2014 independence campaign got under way, support began to increase. By the time of the 2015 survey, the first SSA to be undertaken after the 2014 ballot, a then record high of 39% were saying that Scotland should be independent. Subsequently, the option has always been the single most popular choice, albeit the proportion expressing that view only exceeded a half in 2019 and 2021. Although, at 47%, the latest figure is somewhat below a half, it is evident that although a majority voted to remain in the UK in 2014, the independence referendum occasioned what has proven to be a long-term increase in support for leaving the UK. Conversely, support for Scotland having its own parliament within the framework of the UK now stands at no more than around two in five, compared with nearly in three in five when the parliament was first established. That said, at 9% the view that Scotland should not have a parliament at all is, as it has always been, very much a minority one.

Figure 13: Constitutional preference in Scotland, 1999 – 2024



Still, although the evidence on the long-term trend provided by this question is invaluable, it gives us relatively little idea of the range of powers that people in Scotland feel a devolved parliament should have. In particular, during the run-up to the 2014 ballot there was some discussion of the idea of ‘devo-max’, that is, that the Scottish Parliament should be responsible for all of Scotland’s domestic affairs, leaving just defence and foreign affairs to the UK, thereby potentially putting the country in a not dissimilar position to that of the crown dependencies of the Isle of Man, Jersey, and Guernsey. Meanwhile, the changes that were made to the powers and responsibilities of the Scottish Parliament after the 2014 referendum moved the constitutional settlement closer to the devo-max position. In the light of these developments, since 2011 SSA has regularly asked its respondents the following question:

"Which of these statements comes closest to your view about who should make government decisions for Scotland?"

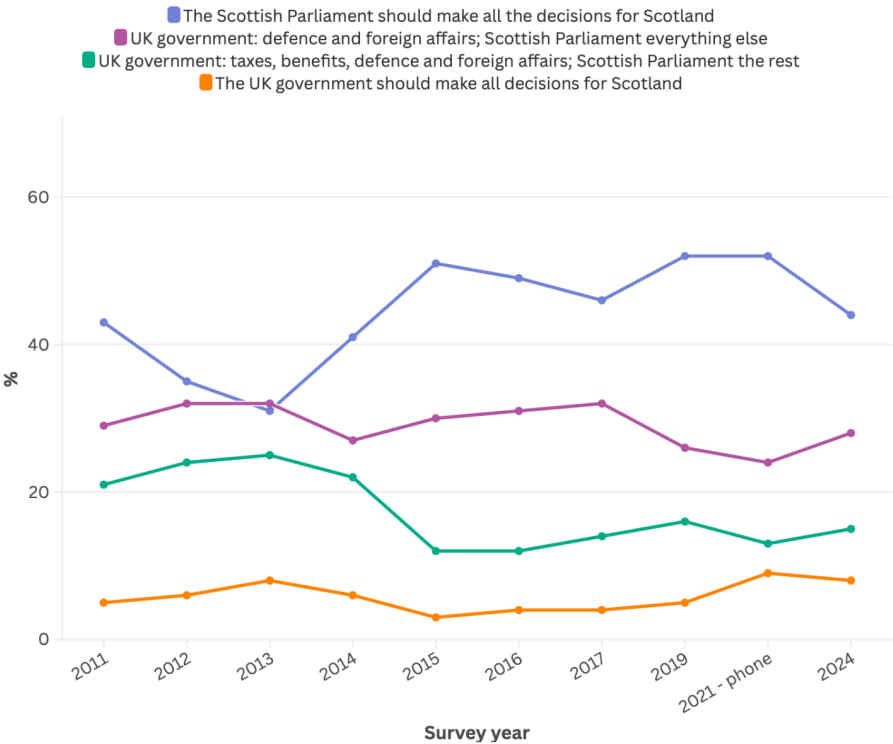
- *The Scottish Parliament should make all the decisions for Scotland*
- *The UK Government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide everything else*
- *The UK Government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament should decide the rest*
- *The UK Government should make all decisions for Scotland*

The first option, of course, implies that Scotland should be an independent state but is not explicit about saying so. The second option is intended to encapsulate ‘devo max’, while the third largely describes the powers of the parliament prior to the post-referendum increases in its powers and responsibilities. Finally, the last options implies that the Scottish Parliament should be dissolved.

Figure 14 reveals that, 2013 apart, the single most popular option has been for the Scottish Parliament to make all decisions for Scotland. Indeed, the proportion making this choice has typically been similar in any one year to the proportion who in response to our long-term question chose independence (see Figure 13). This therefore means that support for this proposition has

generally been higher since the referendum than beforehand. In contrast, those favouring a parliament without responsibility for welfare and taxes as well as foreign affairs has consistently been lower since 2015 than beforehand – while backing for a ‘devo max’ parliament remained largely unchanged. As a result, in our latest survey, nearly three-quarters said that the Scottish Parliament should be responsible for at least all of the country’s domestic affairs, and to that extent the increase in the institution’s powers after the 2014 referendum was in tune with public opinion. Certainly, with just 15% wanting a parliament that did not deal with tax and only another 8% supporting the UK Government making all decisions, the view that the Scottish Parliament should not have the enhanced powers that it now enjoys is very much a minority outlook.

**Figure 14: Who should make government decisions for Scotland?
2011-2024**



Identity, Values and Constitutional Preference

Two contrasting pictures have emerged from our analysis so far. Most people in Scotland feel Scottish more than they feel British, but this is no more the case now than 25 years ago, while for much of the intervening period there appeared to be some strengthening of British identity. Scotland is a little more left-wing than England in its outlook, but there is little sign of any marked divergence of attitudes between Scotland and England; when opinion has shifted north of the border it has typically done so in parallel with the rest of Britain. Meanwhile, the public's reactions to some of the policy challenges facing the country has again been similar to that in England. Nevertheless, support for independence has grown, primarily as a result of a movement that occurred during and in the wake of the independence referendum. That leaves us with a key question. How is it that public support for the Union has declined when the attitudinal bonds that tie Scotland to England look no weaker now than a quarter century ago?

There are two possibilities. The first is that support for independence has increased irrespective of people's sense of identity or their values and attitudes. In other words, support has increased among those who feel strongly Scottish and those who do not, among those on the left and those on the right, etc. The second is that some of the differences between Scotland and England that have always existed have become more important in shaping people's views on the constitutional question. Perhaps, for example, those who feel wholly or mostly Scottish have been more open to persuasion on the issue? Equally, given that one of the claims made during the 2014 referendum was that an independent Scotland would be a more equal country, perhaps those with a more left-wing outlook have become particularly more likely to support leaving the UK?

Table 2 shows the relationship between national identity (as measured by the Moreno scale) and people's constitutional preference at five key points during the last quarter century. It shows that those who say they are 'Scottish, not British' have always been most in favour of independence, while consistently

relatively few of those who feel wholly or mostly British have wanted to leave the UK. Meanwhile, it is among the latter group that opposition to the idea of Scotland having its own parliament has been most prevalent. However, even among this group it has always been very much a minority view; for the most part they have been supportive of the devolution settlement.

Attitudes towards how Scotland should be governed have then always reflected people's sense of identity to some degree. However, the table shows that the link between identity and people's constitutional preference strengthened in the wake of the referendum, and that this stronger relationship is still in evidence today. In 2010, just 44% of those who said they were 'Scottish, not British' backed independence. By 2015, that figure had increased to 66%, an increase of 22 points. In contrast, the equivalent increase among those who said they were 'more Scottish than British' was 13 points, among those who said were equally both, nine points, while the increase among those who felt wholly or mostly British was only seven points. As a result, what was a 37 point difference between those who felt most Scottish and those who felt predominantly British in their level of support for independence was now a gap of 52 points. Meanwhile, rather than being the single most popular choice across all four identity groups in the table, devolution was now no longer the most popular choice among those who felt wholly or mostly Scottish.

The relationship between national identity and how people feel Scotland should be governed is, if anything, even bigger now than it was in 2015. In our latest survey, support for independence is 60 points higher among those who say they are 'Scottish, not British' than it is among those who indicate they are wholly or mostly British. Whereas in 2010, those who said they were 'more Scottish than British' were only seven points less likely than those who say they are 'equally Scottish and British' to back devolution, now the difference is as much as 25 points. British identity may have long played second fiddle to Scottish identity north of the border, but that feature has now become a more important influence on how people regard their country's constitutional options.

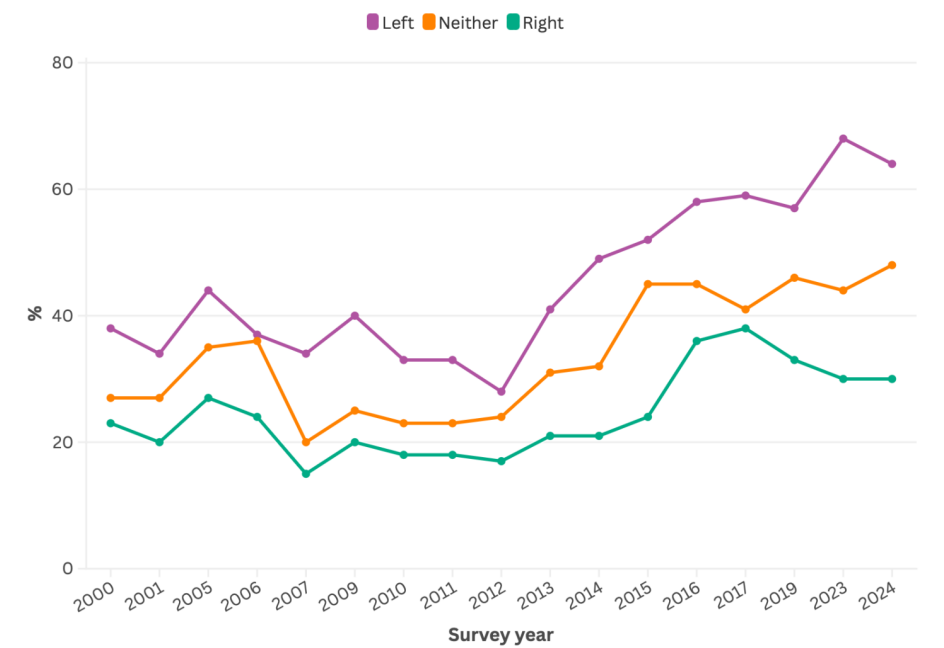
Table 2: Constitutional Preference by Moreno national identity, selected years, 1999-2024

Survey year	Constitutional preference	Scottish not British	More British than Scottish	Equally Scottish and British	More British than Scottish/British not Scottish
1999	Independence	44%	26%	10%	6%
	Devolution	47%	62%	70%	62%
	No Parliament	4%	6%	17%	28%
2010	Independence	44%	24%	9%	7%
	Devolution	46%	65%	72%	66%
	No Parliament	5%	8%	15%	27%
2015	Independence	66%	47%	18%	14%
	Devolution	22%	43%	72%	71%
	No Parliament	4%	4%	6%	15%
2019	Independence	72%	54%	23%	12%
	Devolution	19%	36%	59%	69%
	No Parliament	5%	5%	14%	16%
2024	Independence	74%	50%	14%	14%
	Devolution	22%	42%	67%	56%
	No Parliament	2%	7%	16%	26%

Figure 15, meanwhile, analyses the relationship between where people stand on our left-right scale and their constitutional preference. To construct this figure, we have for each of our yearly samples identified the one-third of respondents whose score on our scale puts them among the one-third most left-wing in that year, those whose score puts them among the one-third most right wing, with the remaining one-third in between. The figure shows that,

from the outset of devolution, those on the left were somewhat more likely than those on the right to support independence. However, in the first year for which we have a measure, 2000, the gap between the two groups was a relatively modest one of 15 points. Though it fluctuated somewhat thereafter, it was still no more than 11 points in 2012. However, by 2015, support for independence stood at 52% among those on the left, compared with just 24% among those on the right – a difference of 28 points. It seems that the argument during the referendum campaign that an independent Scotland might be a more equal country may well have proven particularly persuasive among those on the left. In any event, the widened gap is still in evidence. In our most recent survey in 2024, those on the left were 34 points more likely than those on the right to say that Scotland should become an independent country. The debate about Scotland’s constitutional status is not just a debate about where power should lie but has also come to reflect to a greater extent how people believe power should be exercised.

Figure 15: Support for Scottish Independence by position on left-right scale, 2000– 2024



Brexit

The 2014 independence referendum is, of course, not the only referendum to have taken place during the last 25 years. In 2016, there was a referendum on Britain's membership of the EU in which voters across the UK voted narrowly – by 52% to 48% – in favour of leaving. However, Scotland voted by 62% to 38% in favour of remaining part of the EU. Being a member of the EU in its own right was a key feature of the vision of independence for Scotland put forward by the SNP in the 2014 ballot. Those advocating remaining in the Union, in contrast, argued that remaining in the Union would be the best way of securing Scotland's continued membership of the EU. We might therefore anticipate that, in the wake of the vote to leave the EU, support for independence will have grown among supporters of membership – and maybe declined among those who took the opposite view.

Table 3 shows how, shortly before the 2014 independence referendum, people in Scotland have responded when presented with a question that offered five different options for Britain's long-term relationship with the EU:

- *to leave the European Union*
- *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?*

After the UK left the EU in 2020, the wording 'to leave' was amended to 'be outside' while 'to stay in' was amended to 'be part of'.

Despite the substantial vote in Scotland in favour of remaining in the EU, Table 3 reveals that a popular response to this question has been to say that while they would like Britain to be a member, it should be trying to reduce the powers of the EU. This group, together with the minority who have said that Scotland should be outside the EU, have between them never represented less

than just under half of all respondents (49% in 2013), and they have always outnumbered those who think Britain should be part of an EU where Brussels is at least as powerful as at present. We can regard those who pick one or other of the first two options as having a ‘Euro sceptic’ outlook, while those who pick any of the other three options as ‘Europhile’. Using that division as an indicator of people’s stance towards the EU, we are able to trace the evolution of the relationship between support for independence and people’s attitudes towards the EU from since before the 2014 independence referendum.

Table 3: What do you think Britain's policy towards the EU should be?, 2013-2024

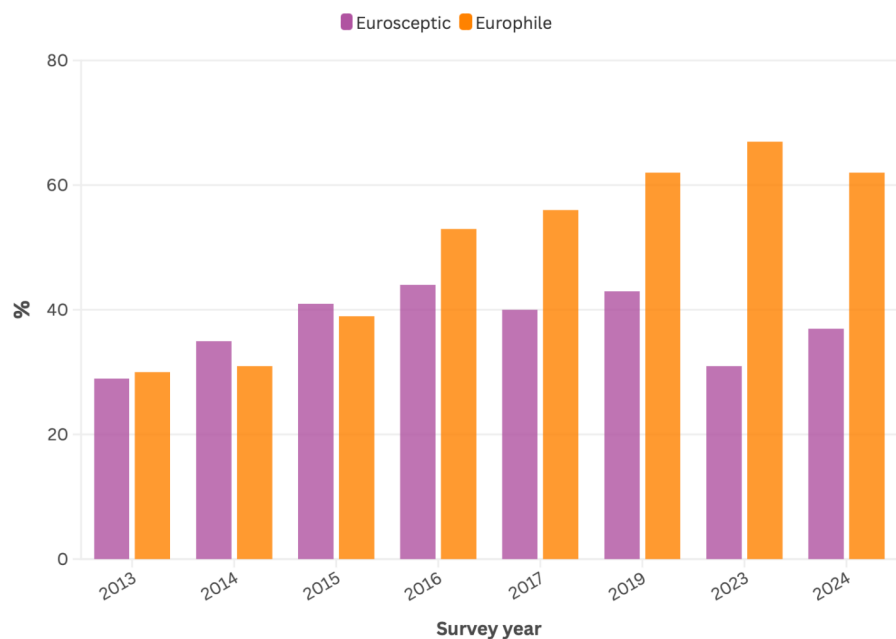
	Be outside the European Union	Be part of the EU but try to reduce the EU's powers	Be part of the EU and try to keep the EU's powers as they are	Be part of the EU and try to increase the EU's powers	Work for the formation of a single European government
2013	19%	40%	25%	8%	3%
2014	17%	40%	24%	7%	4%
2015	17%	41%	21%	10%	3%
2016	25%	42%	21%	5%	3%
2017	19%	39%	30%	5%	3%
2019	19%	34%	34%	6%	4%
2023	16%	32%	35%	8%	4%
2024	15%	36%	30%	8%	6%

This analysis is presented in Figure 16. It shows that, despite the debate during the referendum campaign over whether independence or remaining part of the UK was the better way of maintaining Scotland’s membership of the EU, between 2013 and 2015, there was little difference between Euro sceptics and Europhiles in their level of support for independence. Despite the debate about EU membership during the independence

referendum campaign, the issue seems not to have been a central consideration in voters' minds at the time that they were deciding whether to vote in favour or against independence.

However, a gap begins to emerge in 2016 (our survey that year was undertaken after the EU referendum). At 53%, support for independence among Europhiles was now nine points higher than among Eurosceptics (amongst whom, if anything, independence had hitherto been a little more popular). Thereafter, that difference widened considerably, such that by 2023, at 67% support for independence was as much as 36 points higher than it was among Eurosceptics (31%). Although the difference between the two groups in their level of support for independence was somewhat narrower in our most recent survey in 2024 (25 points), it appears that much of the higher level of support for independence since the two referendums has been sustained by a change of outlook among those who were most favourable to EU membership.

Figure 16: Scottish Independence support in Scotland by EU attitude towards the EU, 2013 – 2024

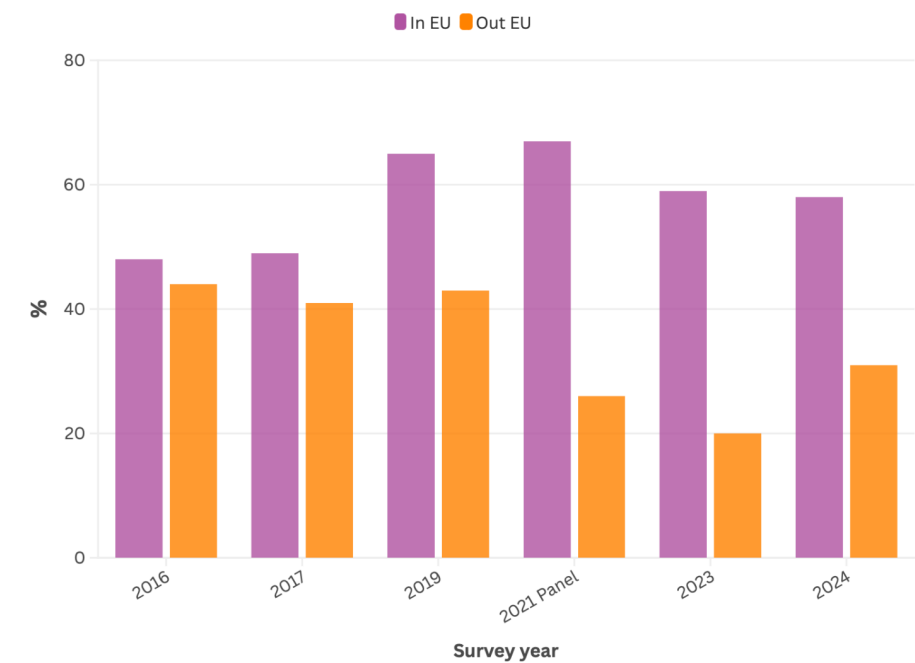


This picture is largely corroborated by Figure 17. Here we divide respondents according to how they said they would vote in another EU referendum (except

that in 2016 our measure is how people said they actually voted). Meanwhile for each year we show the proportion who said they would now vote Yes to independence in another referendum on Scotland’s constitutional status.

Those who voted Remain in the 2016 ballot were only slightly more likely than those who backed Leave to say they would likely vote Yes in another independence referendum. However, by the time in 2021 that Brexit had been done, no less than two-thirds (67%) of current supporters of EU membership were saying that they would now vote Yes to independence, compared with little more than a quarter (26%) of those who would vote to leave the EU. Once it seems largely separate subjects in voters’ minds, the two issues of EU membership and Scotland’s constitutional status had now become intertwined. The gap between supporters and opponents of Brexit in their level of support for independence has since narrowed somewhat, but still stands at as much as 27 points. Here too is also evidence that the decision to leave the EU has been a key reason for the higher level of support for independence recorded in more recent years.

Figure 17: Support for Scottish independence by current Brexit preference, 2016–2024

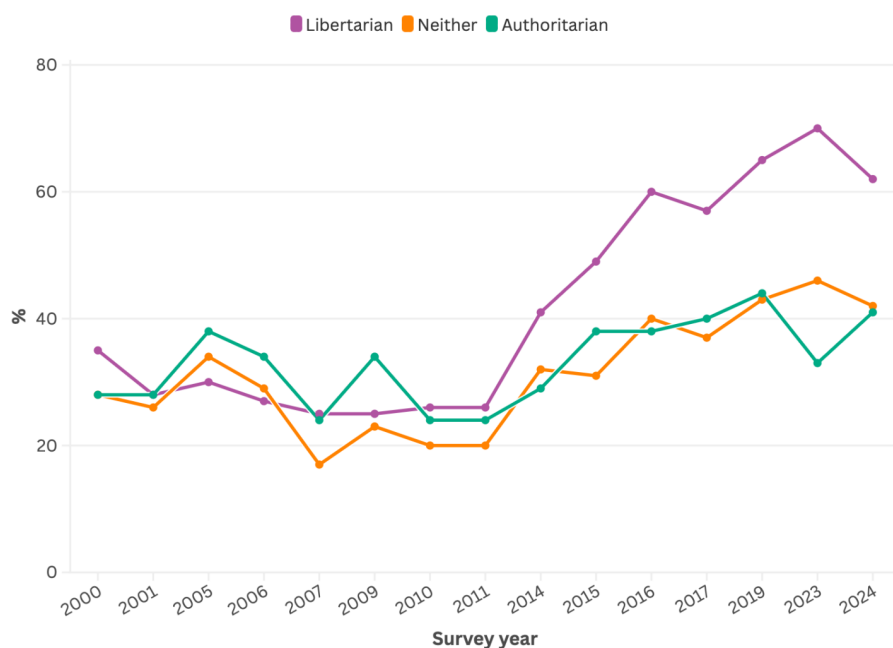


Note: In/Out EU = How respondent would vote in a EU referendum held now, except that in 2016 the figure is reported vote in the referendum. Between 2016 and 2021, the choices were Remain/Leave, in 2023 they were For/Against being a member, and in 2024, Rejoin/Stay Out. Those not declaring how they would vote in an independence referendum are excluded from the denominator on which the figures are calculated. The reading for 2021 was taken via the online panel survey.

Given that this is the case, we might also wonder whether it has changed the character of support for independence. Where people stood on the left/right divide was largely unrelated to how they voted in the 2016 referendum. However, it was strongly related to whether they were libertarians or authoritarians.^[11] Libertarians voted heavily for Remain, while authoritarians mostly backed Leave. The subsequent intertwining of attitudes towards independence with people's views on the EU might therefore lead us to anticipate that a divide has also opened up between libertarians and authoritarians in their attitudes towards independence.

In Figure 18 we examine the level of support for independence over time within the two groups in much the same way we earlier compared the level of support among those on the left and those on the right. As in that case, for each year respondents are divided into three equal sized groups based on their score on our scale. The figure shows that prior to the referendum there was little difference between authoritarians and libertarians in their level of support for independence, and that such differences as could be observed were not consistent in direction. However, since the two referendums, libertarians have consistently been more inclined to back independence than both authoritarians and those who are not at either end of the spectrum (between whom there is little difference in their level of support).

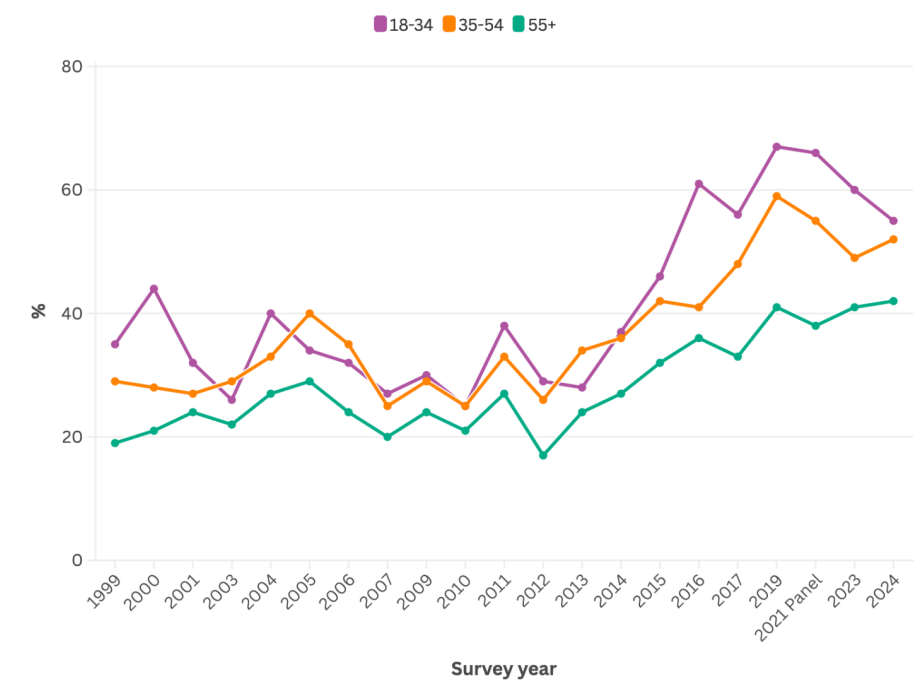
Figure 18: Scottish Independence support in Scotland, by libertarian–authoritarian scale, 2000– 2024



Support for leaving the EU also varied markedly by age. Older people mostly voted Leave while most younger people backed Remain.^[12] We thus might anticipate that the intertwining of the two issues means that an age gap has opened up in the level of support for independence. Meanwhile, we might also bear in mind that those aged under 35 today have largely not known a time when the Scottish Parliament was not a prominent feature of the country's political landscape. This may have also made them more open to the prospect of Scotland governing itself.

Figure 19 reveals that until 2016 there was only a modest difference between younger and older people in their level of support for independence. However, in 2016, support for independence increased to 61% among those aged under 35, while it stood at just 36% among those aged 55 and over – a difference of 25 points. The gap between these two age groups was still as high as 28 points in 2021. A substantial age gap in the level of support for independence had indeed emerged in the post-Brexit environment. That said, more recently there has been a decline in support for independence among those aged under 35 and, as a result, the gap between younger and older people is now 13 points. It is possible that some of the enthusiasm for independence among younger Scots has somewhat abated.

Figure 19: Support for Scottish Independence by age, 1999 – 2024



Does the issue matter?

Our analysis has revealed that, during the 25 years of devolution, there have been some important long-term changes in people's attitudes towards Scotland's constitutional status and how those attitudes are related to people's sense of identity and their values. But perhaps none of this really matters. Irrespective of the answers people give when asked on a survey to state how they think Scotland should be governed, maybe 25 years of devolution have served to defuse the issue in voters' minds. One way of assessing whether that might be the case is to examine how people have voted in elections in Scotland over the last quarter century has reflected their stated views on how Scotland should be governed. If the issue no longer matters to voters then supporters of independence should have become less likely to vote for the SNP and more likely to support one of the three main unionist parties, the Conservatives, Labour, and the Liberal Democrats. At the same time, those who back devolution should have become more willing to support the avowedly pro-independence SNP.

Table 4 examines this possibility by showing, for each of the six Scottish Parliament elections that have been held since 1999, how supporters of independence, devolution, and Scotland not having any parliament at all, have divided their constituency vote between the four parties. Table 5 further below undertakes the same analysis for the seven Westminster elections that have been held during the last 25 years.

The analysis in Table 4 suggests that, far from having become less of an issue in voters' minds, people's constitutional preferences have come to be reflected more in how they have voted. At the first two Holyrood elections, only around three in five supporters of independence voted for the SNP, while around two in five supported one of the three main unionist parties. And although support for the SNP was much lower among those who preferred devolution, the party was still able to secure the support of between one in six and one in five of this group. Only the small minority of voters who did not want any kind of Scottish Parliament at all were largely beyond the SNP's reach; indeed, this is a group where the Conservatives have consistently been relatively successful.

Table 4: Constitutional preference by Scottish Parliament constituency vote, 1999-2021

Election		Independence (%)	Devolution (%)	No Parliament (%)
1999	Conservatives	3	15	44
	Labour	25	48	34
	Liberal Democrats	9	17	18
	SNP	62	19	4
2003	Conservatives	4	18	50
	Labour	22	43	26
	Liberal Democrats	9	16	13
	SNP	58	16	8
2007	Conservatives	3	14	40
	Labour	12	40	29
	Liberal Democrats	4	20	17
	SNP	79	24	8
2011	Conservatives	2	10	43
	Labour	15	37	39
	Liberal Democrats	2	10	10
	SNP	80	41	5
2016	Conservatives	4	30	36
	Labour	9	31	37
	Liberal Democrats	3	10	3

2021 Panel	Conservatives	2	23	51
		—	—	—
	Labour	7	29	26
		—	—	—
	Liberal Democrats	2	13	15
		—	—	—
	SNP	83	28	5
		—	—	—

Note: The data for 2021 were obtained as part of the online panel survey conducted in 2021.

In 2007, when the SNP first (narrowly) gained power, support for the party among supporters of independence rose to nearly four in five (79%). Yet, at the same time, the party also made some progress among those who supported devolution; its support among this group now stood at nearly one in four (24%). Meanwhile, backing for the SNP among those who preferred devolution increased even further in 2011 to more than two in five (41%). At that point it seemed that for many of those who preferred their still relatively new devolved parliament to independence, the question of Scotland's constitutional status was far from being a central consideration in deciding how to vote. Although the 2011 election paved the way for a referendum on independence that many advocates of devolution had hoped could be avoided, the SNP's success in that election was achieved by increasing its support among those who wanted to retain the existing devolution settlement.

However, the last two Holyrood elections during this period saw a substantial gap emerge in votes were cast between those who support devolution and those who back independence. The party continued to secure the support of around four in five of the (now larger) group of people who would prefer Scotland to become independent. However, support for the SNP among those who backed devolution fell to little more than the 24% the party had secured in 2007. Far from suggesting that the issue had been defused in voters' minds, the link between people's constitutional preference was now much stronger than it had been at the first Holyrood election in 1999.

Much of this picture is also reflected in how people have voted in elections to the UK House of Commons. Indeed, in 2001 and 2005, little more than one in three of those who supported independence voted for the SNP. Labour was

the most popular choice among both those who supported independence and those who preferred devolution (while, again the Conservatives were most popular among those who did not want any kind of parliament in Edinburgh). The SNP struggled to persuade many of those who agreed with its stance on the constitutional issue, let alone those who did not, to vote for the party in a Commons election. However, after becoming the government at Edinburgh, in 2010 the SNP secured the vote of over half of those in favour of independence (55%), while barely being any more popular among supporters of devolution than the party had been in 2001.

Then, in 2015, when the SNP won all but three of Scotland's 59 Westminster constituencies, the party secured the backing of over four in five (84%) of those in favour of independence. However, with just 29% support, the SNP was not able to repeat the scale of its success in 2011 among those who preferred a devolved parliament. Rather, the large difference between the party's support among supporters of independence and backers of devolution in 2015 presaged the bigger gap that was to emerge in the Holyrood election the following year and again in 2021. The gap was also on much the same scale in the 2017 and 2019 Westminster contests. Meanwhile, although the overall level of support for the SNP was much lower in 2024, including among those who still supported independence (60%), at 54 points the difference between the level of the party's support among those who backed independence and those who preferred devolution (where the party won a record low of just 6%) was still much the same as it had been at the last three Westminster elections. In short, here too, there was clear evidence that the constitutional question had come to matter more to voters – on both sides of the constitutional divide.

Table 5 Constitutional preference by UK general election, 2001-2024

Election		Independence (%)	Devolution (%)	No Parliament (%)
2001	Conservatives	3	11	41
	Labour	48	57	33
	Liberal Democrats	9	19	21
	SNP	35	10	3
2005	Conservatives	8	15	49
	Labour	38	47	25
	Liberal Democrats	17	27	20
	SNP	33	9	3
2010	Conservatives	2	16	42
	Labour	28	45	33
	Liberal Democrats	14	23	20
	SNP	55	14	3
2015	Conservatives	1	17	34
	Labour	7	38	37
	Liberal Democrats	1	14	10
	SNP	84	29	14
2017	Conservatives	4	35	50
	Labour	19	37	35
	Liberal Democrats	2	11	7
	SNP	72	16	8

2019	Labour	10	23	23
	Liberal Democrats	3	13	11
	SNP	79	27	10
2024	Conservatives	0	17	34
	Labour	20	50	34
	Liberal Democrats	3	16	12
	SNP	60	6	2
	Reform UK	6	7	16

Note: The data for 2019 were obtained as part of the online panel survey conducted in 2021. In this instance, people's constitutional preference was that expressed by them at the time of their first SSA interview in 2015, 2016, 2017 or 2019. In most instances, how they voted in 2019 was collected as part of previous waves of the panel.

Conclusion

So far as public opinion is concerned, devolution has not turned out in the way that either its advocates or its critics anticipated when the Scottish Parliament first met on 1 July 1999. On the one hand, it has not resulted in any long-term marked decline in Scots' willingness to acknowledge a British identity or in any marked divergence of attitudes and values between Scotland and England. On the other hand, far from persuading Scots of the merits of being part of the UK, the decision to put the independence question to voters in 2014 occasioned a marked long-term increase in support for leaving the UK. Yet, at the same time, although support for independence may now be higher, it is still a long way from looking like a 'settled will' in the way that, by 1999, the idea of Scotland having its own parliament appeared to be.

Rather, in many respects the key legacy of the last 25 years is that the debate about Scotland's constitutional status has come to look more polarised. It now more markedly divides those who feel mainly Scottish from those who feel mainly British. It also now divides left from right, libertarians from authoritarians, and Remainers from Leavers. At the same time, the constitutional question has become a sharper dividing line in the country's electoral politics. In short, far from being a constitutional abstraction, many people have come to invest their identity and their attitudes in their stance on the debate.

Two implications follow. First, finding a new 'settled will' on how Scotland should be governed looks far from straightforward. Devolution was to some extent a compromise between those who wanted Scotland to have a high degree of autonomy and those who wanted to retain Scotland's strong links with the rest of the country. However, that compromise is struggling to stick. Second, although at present the debate about Scotland's constitutional status has seemingly gone on to the back burner of political debate, the raw material needed for it to engage the public once more is still there. What remains uncertain is when and how the touch paper that rekindles the debate will eventually be lit.

Appendix

Table A1: Percentage of those who describe themselves as both Scottish and British

Survey year	Both Scottish and British (%)
1999	35
2000	43
2001	41
2002	43
2003	47
2004	38
2005	43
2006	33
2007	33
2009	36
2010	37
2011	44
2012	45
2013	37
2014	44
2015	41
2016	43
2019	31
2021 - Panel	33

2023 22

2024 13

Methodology

The Scottish Social Attitudes survey is a high-quality survey designed to chart long-term changes in public opinion, to examine particular subjects in depth, and to facilitate the comparison of attitudes in Scotland with those in England and Wales. It has been conducted annually with between 1,000 and 1,500 people, except in 2008 and 2018, together with (because of the pandemic) 2020 and 2022.

1999 – 2019

Between 1999 and 2019, the survey was conducted face to face with a random sample of adults. Until 2016 the sample comprised those aged 18 and over. Following the lowering of the voting age for devolved and local elections, from 2016 onwards, the survey interviewed those aged 16 and over.

The survey was designed to yield a representative sample of adults, living in private households in Scotland. The sample frame was the Postcode Address File (PAF), a list of postal delivery points compiled by the Post Office.

Addresses at which interviews were to be conducted were selected as follows:

- Postcode sectors were stratified by a set of key demographic and other characteristics, typically including the Scottish Government's six-fold urban-rural classification^[13], region and percentage of household heads recorded as being in non-manual occupations (SEG 1-6 and 13, taken from the most recent Census).
- A random sample of the postcode sectors in which interviews were to be conducted was selected with probability proportional to size.
- Then, within each selected postcode sector, a sample of addresses were selected at random.

-
- Interviewers could only undertake interviews at the selected addresses. If more than one adult was living at an address, interviewers made a list of all adults at the address and their computer then selected at random the person who should be interviewed.
 - Interviews were conducted face to face using a computer assisted questionnaire, while respondents were also invited to respond to a short self-completion questionnaire. Interviewing typically took place over a period of around four months. At least six attempts were made to visit or contact those living at a selected address.

2021

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic made it impossible to undertake face-to-face interviewing. To maintain the survey and its time series, fieldwork was undertaken in 2021/2022 via two separate surveys. One was a telephone survey and was conducted as follows:

- Households with whom it was hoped to make contact were selected at random from the postcode address file after locations had been stratified by the Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation and an urban-rural classification.
- The number of addresses drawn from each stratum took into account differences in response rates to SSA 2019 by Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation (SIMD) quintile and urban-rural classification. The aim was to achieve a target of at least 150 responses from each urban-rural category and SIMD quintile.
- Those living at a selected address were invited by letter (and subsequent reminders) to submit details of their phone number.
- Interviews were conducted over the telephone using computer assisted telephone interviewing and were sought with up to two adults at each responding address. A total of 1,130 interviews took place between 21st October 2021 and 27th March 2022.

The second 2021 survey was conducted via the ScotCen Opinion Panel. This comprises people living in Scotland who have been interviewed as part of a previous Scottish or British Social Attitudes survey (and originally recruited in the manner described above) and have agreed to undertake further interviews. For this survey, the panel consisted of people who had responded to a SSA survey between 2015 and 2019 or to BSA in 2018 or 2019 (or in a few instances 2020). A total of 1,203 panellists responded to the survey between 23rd September and 24th October.

2023 onwards

Finally, the surveys conducted since 2023 have been undertaken using a push to web design. A random sample of addresses from across Scotland was selected from the postcode address file after locations had been stratified by a range of key demographic and other characteristics. Letters, containing a unique identifier and details of how to log on, were sent to selected address as well subsequent reminders. The letter invited up to two adults per household to respond. In 2023, 1,574 people did so over a two-month period while in 2024, 1,208 participated.

Weighting

After fieldwork, all SSA surveys are weighted so that the sample reflects the known characteristics of the adult Scottish population in terms of region, gender and age. The weights are intended to correct for potential sources of bias in the sample including in some years deliberate over-sampling of rural areas and/or the most deprived SIMD quintile as well as differences in the level of non-response.

The figures reported in this briefing are those obtained after that weighting has been applied.

For further details, see:

- S. Reid, I. Montagu, and A. Scholes, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2019: Technical Report, Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2020. Available at [\[link\]](#)

<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2020/10/scottish-social-attitudes-2019-technical-report/documents/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-technical-report/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-technical-report/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2019-technical-report.pdf>

- L. Dean, A. Scholes, A. Keyes, and P. Bradshaw, Scottish Social Attitudes 2021/2: Core Module: Technical Information. Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2022. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/research-and-analysis/2022/10/scottish-social-attitudes-2021-22-core-module-technical-information/documents/scottish-social-attitudes-2021-22-core-module-technical-information/scottish-social-attitudes-2021-22-core-module-technical-information/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-social-attitudes-2021-22-core-module-technical-information.pdf>
- L. Dean, C. Jessop, M. Mezzananza, D. Shah, D. Hussey, and R. Whitford, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2021: Public Attitudes towards Gaelic in Scotland: Technical Information. Inverness: Bòrd na Gàidhlig, 2022. Available at <https://www.gaidhlig.scot/wp-content/uploads/2022/06/Dean-et-al-2022-Public-attitudes-to-Gaelic-PR20-07-Technical-info.pdf>
- A. Scholes, J. Curtice, P. Bradshaw, S. Birtwistle, and O. Martina, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2023 Report, Edinburgh: Scottish Government, 2023. Available at <https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2024/07/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report/documents/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report.pdf>

Publication details

© National Centre for Social Research 2025

First published 2025

You may print out, download and save this publication for your non-commercial use. Otherwise, and apart from any fair dealing for the purposes of research or private study, or criticism or review, as permitted under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form, or by any means, only with the prior permission in writing of the publishers, or in the case of reprographic reproduction, in accordance with the terms of licences issued by the Copyright Licensing Agency. Enquiries concerning reproduction outside those terms should be sent to the National Centre for Social Research.

National Centre for Social Research

35 Northampton Square

London

EC1V 0AX

info@natcen.ac.uk

natcen.ac.uk

Footnotes

1. Scottish Social Attitudes | National Centre for Social Research:
<https://natcen.ac.uk/scottish-social-attitudes> [↑]
2. A. Scholes, J. Curtice, P. Bradshaw, S. Birtwistle and O. Martini, Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2023: Technical Report, Edinburgh: Scottish Government.
Available at
<https://www.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/statistics/2024/07/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report/documents/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report/govscot%3Adocument/scottish-social-attitudes-survey-2023-technical-report.pdf>. Some caution does, however, need to applied to the results of the 2021 survey conducted by phone, where it is possible that the difference in methodology may have had some impact on the pattern of response. [↑]
3. British Social Attitudes | National Centre for Social Research:
<https://natcen.ac.uk/british-social-attitudes> [↑]
4. See Table A1 in the appendix. [↑]
5. The questions on standard of living and the standard of the NHS were not asked in 2024. [↑]
6. This question was not asked in 2024 [↑]
7. This question was not asked in 2024. [↑]
8. This question was not asked in 2024 [↑]
9. This question was not asked in 2024. [↑]
10. This question was not asked in 2024. [↑]
11. J. Curtice, 'One dimensional or two dimensional? The changing dividing lines of Britain's electoral politics', in E. Clery, J. Curtice, and C. Jessop (eds), British Social Attitudes: the 41st report, London: National Centre for Social Research. Available at <https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-06/BSA%2041%20Changing%20Dividing%20Lines.pdf> [↑]

-
- 12.** J. Curtice, 'The vote to leave the EU: litmus test or lightening rod?', in Clery, E., Curtice, J. and Harding, R. (eds), *British Social Attitudes: the 34th report*, London: National Centre for Social Research. Available at https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2023-08/bsa34_brexit_final.pdf ↑
- 13.** See <http://www.gov.scot/Topics/Statistics/About/Methodology/UrbanRuralClassification> for details. ↑

A Company Limited by Guarantee
Registered in England No.4392418

A Charity registered in England and Wales (1091768) and Scotland
(SC038454)

This project was carried out
in compliance with ISO20252

National Centre
for Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX
020 7250 1866
www.natcen.ac.uk