

The Score at Half Time: Trends in Support for Independence

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The referendum campaign is now well under way. The two principal organisations campaigning for a Yes and No vote, Yes Scotland and Better Together, have both been campaigning since the middle of 2012. They now have just nine months left in which to persuade the public of the merits of their respective views.

But what impact have they collectively managed to have so far? In this briefing we address this question by examining some of the key results from the 2013 Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey, and how they compare with previous surveys in this annual survey series. In particular, we examine the following questions:

- Has there been a change in the level of support for and opposition to independence?
- Has there been a change in the kind of people who are more likely to support or oppose independence?
- Has there been a change in people's perceptions of the consequences of independence – and of the deal that Scotland gets out of the Union?
- Have people's views become more sharply defined?
- Have people come to feel better informed about what independence might mean?

Our Data

SSA is an annual probability survey of people aged 18 plus residing in Scotland. Those to be interviewed are selected at random by, first, drawing addresses from the Postcode Address File and, second, computerised selection of one person to be interviewed from amongst all those living at that address. The

survey has been conducted by ScotCen Social Research on an annual basis since the advent of devolution in 1999. In the 2013 survey 1,497 people were interviewed face to face in their own homes using computer assisted interviewing between 25th June and 23rd October, representing a response rate of 55%.

Levels of Support

Since the advent of devolution, SSA has tracked people’s views about how they would like Scotland to be governed by asking them the following question:

Which of these statements comes closest to your view?

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

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

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

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

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

In the following table we combined the first two responses under the heading ‘independence’, while the third and fourth are brought together under the label ‘devolution’.

Table 1. Trends in Constitutional Preferences 1999-2013														
	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	27	30	27	30	26	32	35	30	24	28	23	32	23	29
Devolution	59	55	59	52	56	45	44	54	62	56	61	58	61	55
No Parliament	10	12	9	13	13	17	14	9	9	8	10	6	11	9
Sample Size	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594	1508	1482	1495	1197	1229	1497

On this measure support for independence has increased by six percentage points since 2012. However, that reading was an equal record low in SSA’s series. The most recent reading of 29% falls well within the range of readings that have been obtained since 1999, and is almost exactly in line with the average of all the readings between 1999 and 2012, 28%. This suggests that there has not been any major departure from the long term pattern of public preferences for how Scotland should be governed.

More recently SSA has also asked the following question, which rather than using words such as ‘independence’ and ‘devolution’ simply invites people to consider what range of responsibilities the Scottish Parliament should have. The first of these descriptions is intended to refer to independence, the second to so-called ‘devolution max’, and the third to the constitutional status quo.

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*

As a comparison of the figures Table 2 below with those in Table 1 reveals, asking in that way about how Scotland should be governed has previously tended to produce somewhat higher levels of support for ‘independence’. In 2012, for example, while only 23% backed independence in response to our long running question, as many as 35% did not in response to our newer formulation.

Table 2. Trends in who should make government decisions for Scotland, 2010-13

	2010	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%
Scottish Parliament should make all decisions for Scotland	28	43	35	31
The UK government should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs; the Scottish Parliament everything else	32	29	32	32
The UK government should make decisions about taxes, benefits and defence and foreign affairs; Scottish Parliament should decide the rest.	27	21	24	25
The UK government should make all decisions for Scotland	10	5	6	8
<i>Sample Size</i>	1495	1197	1229	1497

This time, however, that gap has almost disappeared. At 31% support for independence under the newer formulation has fallen by four points since 2012 and is almost exactly the same as that obtained by the older one (29%). That suggests that perhaps the campaign has helped sharpen people’s understanding that the ‘Scottish Parliament should make all decisions for

Scotland' means 'independence'. But in any event, the fact that support for independence on this measure has gone down, whereas on our longer term measure it has increased, indicates that there is indeed no consistent evidence of any major change in the pattern of public opinion.

The 2013 survey also asked – inevitably, for the first time – how they intended to vote in response to the question that will appear on the referendum ballot paper, 'Should Scotland be an independent country'. The issue was addressed as follows:

If you do vote, will you vote 'Yes' or vote 'No' - or haven't you decided yet?

Note this formulation quite deliberately made it relatively easy for people to say they had not fully made up their minds as yet. Indeed, as many as 34% said they had not decided as yet. Meanwhile, 20% said that they will vote 'Yes' while 42% indicated they will vote 'No'.

Those who said they were undecided were then further asked:

At the moment, which way do you think you are most likely to vote, Yes or No?

Of this group, 28% thought they were more likely to vote Yes while 34% stated they reckoned they would vote No. The remainder continued to be undecided. The balance of opinion amongst the 'waverers' is thus somewhat more favourable to the Yes side than is that amongst those who already have a firm view.

If we combine the two groups of Yes and No voters, we find that 30% 'will' or are 'most likely' to vote Yes, while 54% 'will' or are 'most likely' to vote No. If we exclude from our calculation the 16% who do not know how they will vote (or are adamant that they will not vote at all), this points to a 36% Yes vote, 64%, No. The average level of support for Yes and No in opinion polls conducted between June and October 2013 was (on the same basis) not dissimilar, 39% Yes, 61% No.

Who Is in Favour/Opposed?

Previous SSA surveys and opinion polls have found that support for independence tends to be somewhat lower amongst women, older people and those in salaried middle class occupations. Those patterns remain unchanged.

In 2013 32% of men, but only 26% of women backed independence when asked our long running question, summarised in Table 1. That gender gap of six points is almost exactly the same as the gap of seven points that pertained in 2012 – and is exactly in line with the average gap of six points across all SSA surveys conducted between 1999 and 2012.

In response to the same question, only 19% of those aged 65 and older said that they backed independence, ten points below the level amongst adults as a

whole and lower than amongst any other age group. This pattern has been evident throughout the last decade and a half.

Support for independence amongst those in professional and managerial occupations stands at 24%, five points below the level amongst the population as a whole. This again has been a persistent pattern in SSA surveys.

There is thus no evidence that so far there has been any substantial change in which sections of Scottish society are most likely to support or oppose independence.

Consequences

The debate about independence is partly an argument about how good a deal Scotland gets out of the Union at present, and what would happen if Scotland were to become an independent country.

So far as the former is concerned, one question that SSA has asked on a regular basis since 1999 reads as follows:

On the whole, do you think that England's economy benefits more from having Scotland in the UK, or that Scotland's economy benefits more from being part of the UK, or is it about equal?

As Table 3, shows, the pattern of responses to this question has changed considerably since 1999. In the early years of devolution, people in Scotland were far more likely to think that England's economy benefitted more from the Union than Scotland's did. Thereafter, and especially since the SNP first gained power in 2007, the two perceptions became more or less equally widespread. More recently, however, there has been something of a reversal. Now 32% think that England's economy benefits most (up four points on 2012, and nine of 2010) and only 20% that Scotland's economy does. Here perhaps the referendum debate has had some impact on people's views.

Table 3. Whose economy benefits more from the Union, 1999-2013?

	1999	2000	2001	2003	2005	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England benefits more	36	42	38	30	36	27	28	23	29	28	32
Scotland benefits more	22	16	18	24	21	25	24	26	22	22	20
Equal	36	36	39	40	34	39	40	45	44	45	41
Sample Size	1482	1663	1605	1508	1549	1508	1482	1495	1197	1229	1497

Meanwhile, recent SSA surveys have asked people a variety of questions about what they think would happen if Scotland were to become independent. For example, people are asked whether they think Scotland's economy would become better or worse as a result of independence (or make no difference), whether Scotland would have a stronger or a weaker voice in the world, etc. In Table 4 we show the proportion of people with positive and negative responses in each of the last three years.

Table 4. Perceptions of the Consequences of Independence

	2011		2012		2013	
	More/ Better	Less/ Worse	More/ Better	Less/ Worse	More/ Better	Less/ Worse
	%	%	%	%	%	%
Pride in their country	67	2	55	3	51	4
Scotland's voice in the world	51	19	42	22	38	25
Scotland's economy	34	29	34	34	30	34
Standard of living	34	23	32	24	27	28
Gap between rich and poor	n/a	n/a	19	25	16	25
Taxes*	7	61	8	57	6	56
<i>Sample size</i>	1156		1180		1340	

*In the case of 'Taxes' those saying taxes would be lower are classified as saying that things would be 'better' while those who say taxes would go up are categorised as indicating that taxes would be 'worse'. In the case of the gap between rich and poor those who say the gap would be 'smaller' are classified as saying it would be 'better', while those who say it would be 'bigger' are categorised as saying it would be 'worse'.

Perceptions of the consequences of independence were less optimistic in 2012 than they had been in 2011, in which year support for independence was relatively high (see Table 1). A further trend in that direction is in evidence in 2013, but only marginally so. Thus for example, there has been a four point fall in the proportion who think that people would have more pride in their country, in the proportion who believe that Scotland would have a stronger voice in the world, and in the proportion who reckon that Scotland's economy would be better. There has also been a three point drop in the proportion who think that the gap between rich and poor in Scotland would be smaller, one of the key arguments put forward by the Yes campaign (including not least in the Scottish Government's White Paper on independence).

There have thus only been modest changes in people's perceptions of the benefits of the Union and of the consequences of independence, and those that have occurred have not all been in the same direction. People are a little more likely to think that England gets the better deal economically out of the Union, but also a little less likely to feel that Scotland's economy would be better under independence. All in all it seems that there has not been a decisive shift in the balance of opinion on some of the key arguments in the referendum campaign.

Have People's Views Become More Sharply Defined?

Even if the overall balance of opinion does not shift during an election or referendum campaign that campaign could still be making a difference. As they hear the arguments on both sides, people's views could become more sharply defined - that is people's views on the arguments for or against independence could have become more consistent with the way in which they intend to vote. They might, for example, come to the view that they really do reckon that Scotland's economy would be better under independence and thus ought to vote in favour – or, equally, have long felt that Scotland should not be independent and are now inclined to put aside any doubts they might have about the practical consequences of staying in the Union.

But which perceptions matter in the first place? To ascertain this we use a statistical technique called regression analysis, which tells us which of the various perceptions are most clearly related to whether or not people are for or against independence. The details of this are not reported here, but in previous years such analysis has told us that the perception that most sorts people out into those who are in favour of independence and those who are against is what people think would happen to Scotland's economy. That continues to be the case in 2013, whether we measure attitudes towards independence using our long running question on attitudes to Scotland's constitutional future or how they 'will' or are 'most likely' to vote in the referendum. Moreover, people's perceptions of the economic consequences of independence appear to sort voters into supporters and opponents of independence to an even greater extent than they have done in previous years.

Table 5. Support for Independence by Perceptions of Economic Consequences

% support independence	Long Running SSA Measure			Referendum Vote 2013
	2011	2012	2013	
As a result of independence Scotland's economy would be				
A lot better	78	73	88	86
A little better	46	45	62	67
No difference	32	20	23	23
A little worse	10	4	7	5
A lot worse	4	3	5	2

The degree to which perceptions of the economic consequences of independence sorts people into Yes and No supporters is illustrated in Table 5. The more optimistic someone is about the economic consequences of independence, the more likely they are to be in favour. Thus, for example, in 2012, 73% of those who thought that Scotland's economy would be a lot better under independence were in favour of the idea (as measured by our long

running SSA measure), while at the other end of the spectrum just 3% of those who thought the economy would be a lot worse backed leaving the UK. That gap of 70 points has, however, grown to 83 points now. As many as 88% of those who are most optimistic about the economic consequences of independence now support the idea, while just 5% of those who are most pessimistic do so. Meanwhile, the figures for how people will or are likely to vote in the referendum are much the same.

Our statistical analysis reveals that some of the other perceptions we have examined also help identify those in favour and against independence. In particular, people are more likely to be in favour of independence (however measured) if they think that England's economy benefits more from the Union – another economic measure – together with whether they think that Scotland would have a stronger voice in the world, and whether people would have more pride in their country. And, unsurprisingly, people's sense of national identity matters too.

However, none of these matter quite so much as perceptions of the economic consequences of independence and not all of them have become more effective now at sorting out people into Yes and No voters. Thus for example, 56% of those who think that England's economy benefits most from the Union support independence (on the long running measure) compared with just 10% of those who think that Scotland's benefits most. The difference between those two figures – 46 points – is smaller than the equivalent difference of 83 points between those who are most and less optimistic about the economic consequences of independence. Meanwhile, that difference was already 44 points in 2011.

Similarly, while there is a substantial 69 point difference between the level of support for independence amongst those who think that an independent Scotland would have a stronger voice in the world (74% of whom back independence) and those who believe it would be a lot weaker (5%), that figure is still rather smaller than the equivalent figure of 83 points in respect of the economic consequences of independence. However, in this case the gap is somewhat bigger than the 63 point gap that pertained in 2012 and the 56 point one that existed in 2011.

The issue at the heart of the independence debate remains as it was – the economy. No other issue seems to have quite the same power to push voters into the Yes or the No camp. Indeed, if anything this observation seems to have even somewhat greater force now than previously. To that extent at least the campaign so far does seem to have helped sharpen and focus voters' views.

Have We Missed Anything?

However, it might be thought that we have failed to capture some of the key issues in the campaign, and thereby are at risk of exaggerating the degree to which the economy is the central issue in the campaign. To guard against that risk we included in the 2013 survey a number of new questions about what the consequences of independence might be.

Table 6. Other Perceptions of the Consequences of Independence

	More/Better	Less/Worse
	%	%
Old Age Pension	22	13
Money for Public Services	32	30
Dealing with threat from Terrorism	12	41
Protect Deposits in a Failing Bank	15	51
Personal Finances	9	29
<i>Sample Size: 1340 except personal finances, 1497.</i>		

The results of these new items are summarised in Table 6. As can be seen there is more or less an even balance of opinion on the implications of independence for spending on public services and the old age pension, but that there is a degree of concern about the ability of an independent Scotland to deal with the threat from terrorism and to ensure that customers did not lose money in the event of a bank failure. Meanwhile, the most common answer to whether or not people thought independence would make a difference financially to them personally was that it would make any difference at all; no less than 52% were of that view.

However, that does not mean that people’s perceptions of the financial consequences of independence do not matter. There is a big difference in the level of support for independence between those who do take an optimistic view of its personal financial consequences and those who take a pessimistic view. Indeed, none of the other perceptions in Table 6 proves to be as effective as this one at sorting voters into Yes and No supporters. No less than 95% of those (admittedly not very many people) who think that they would be a lot better off under independence say they will or are likely to vote Yes in the referendum, while just 3% of those who think they would be a lot worse off appear willing to vote Yes.

This finding of course simply underlines rather than questions the role that the economy is apparently making in shaping people’s views about the merits of independence. It thus should come as no surprise that as was the case in the 2011 SSA, people say they would be much more likely to support independence if they thought they would be £500 a year better off than if they thought it would not make any difference, let alone leave them £500 a year worse off. This pattern emerges when people are asked the following set of questions:

1. Say that it was clear that if Scotland became an independent country, separate from the rest of the UK, it would make little difference to the standard of living, and on average people would be no better or worse off.

In those circumstances, would you be in favour or against Scotland becoming an independent country?

2. Now, let us say it was clear that if Scotland became an independent country, (separate from the rest of the UK), the standard of living would be lower and people would on average be £500 a year worse off.

In those circumstances would you be in favour or against Scotland becoming an independent country?

3. Finally, say it was clear that if Scotland became an independent country (separate from the rest of the UK) the standard of living would be higher and people would on average be £500 a year better off.

In those circumstances would you be in favour or against Scotland becoming an independent country?

As Table 7 shows, around half (52%) say they would support independence if they thought it would make them £500 a year better off, while only 30% would be against. In contrast just 15% would be in favour if they reckoned they would be £500 a year worse off, while nearly three-quarters (72%) would be opposed. However, we might note too that under all three sets of circumstances the level of support for independence is rather lower now than it was two years ago, and to that extent it would appear that people now have to be even more convinced of the economic benefits of independence if they are to vote in favour.

Table 7. Attitudes Towards the £500 Question, 2011 and 2103.

	2011			2013		
	Better Off	No Difference	Worse Off	Better Off	No Difference	Worse Off
In Favour	65	47	21	52	34	15
Neither	19	24	12	12	9	16
Against	24	32	66	30	40	72
Sample size	1197	1197	1197	1497	1497	1497

The responses to such a question might, of course, be regarded as rather hypothetical. We might question whether people really would behave as they claim. However, the results are in line with the findings that we obtained when we look at the views of those who do think they personally would be better or worse off. It seems that the perceived impact of independence on people's pockets really does matter.

Do People Feel Better Informed?

It would seem that for the most part the referendum campaign has had rather little impact on voters. It does not seem to have given rise to a major change in willingness to back independence or in perceptions of what the consequences of leaving the UK might be. At most it seems to have helped sharpen some people's views, and in so doing made it even clearer that the debate about the economic consequences of independence holds centre stage. But are voters now at least somewhat clearer about what independence might entail?

It seems not. In 2012, just 8% of people said they were 'very sure' what would happen if Scotland became independent, while a further 26% reckoned they were 'quite sure'. Those proportions have, if anything, fallen rather than risen.

Just 7% say they are now 'very sure' what would happen while 22% are quite sure. Most (47%, up two points in 2012) still say they are 'quite unsure', while 17% (up four points) say they are 'very unsure'. Although we should bear in mind that our survey was conducted before the Scottish Government's White Paper was published in November, it would seem that up to that point at least the campaign had done little for satisfy voters' wish for greater clarity, if not indeed certainty, on what independence would bring.