

The option not on the table

Attitudes to more devolution



Summary

The Scottish referendum in 2014 will ask people one question – whether they think Scotland should be an independent country. Yet many surveys and polls suggest that another option – significantly extending the powers of the Scottish Parliament – might be better able than independence to attract support from a majority of Scots. This briefing paper examines public attitudes to further devolution. We assess its popularity among different groups in Scotland and look at what powers people would like to see devolved. We explore what people expect the practical consequences of more devolution to be. And we look at how prepared Scotland is to accept the potential political consequences of ‘devo max’ – including a shift away from the block grant and further policy divergence between Scotland and England.

‘Devo Max’, ‘More’ and ‘Plus’

When Scots go to the polls in September 2014, they will be asked only one question – ‘Should Scotland be an independent country?’. Yet ever since the Scottish Government began its National Conversation on Scotland’s constitutional future in 2007,¹ there has been growing evidence that a third option – involving significantly further devolution of powers to Holyrood – might be more popular than either the status quo or independence. In response to this, all three principal Unionist parties have now either put forward proposals for extending devolution or committed to proposing a new plan for devolution.² Various schemes proposed to date have primarily focused on further devolution of taxes. All have stopped short of proposing significant devolution of welfare benefits, on the grounds that a UK-wide benefits system is a key part of sharing ‘risks and resources’ across the UK (Scottish Labour

¹ See <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Topics/constitution/a-national-conversation>

² See Scottish Liberal Democrats (October 2012) *Federalism: the best future for Scotland – the report of the home and community commission of the Scottish Liberal Democrats*, available at: <http://scotlibdems.org.uk/files/Federalism%20-%20the%20best%20future%20for%20Scotland%20web.pdf>

Scottish Labour Party (April 2013) *Scottish Labour Devolution Commission: Interim Report*, available at: <http://www.scottishlabour.org.uk/campaigns/entry/devolution-commission>

Davidson, R (26 March 2013) ‘Strengthening Devolution, Taking Scotland Forward’ at <http://www.scottishconservatives.com/2013/03/strengthening-devolution-taking-scotland-forward/>

See also Devo Plus (2012) *A Stronger Scotland within the UK* available at www.devoplus.com plus subsequent publications from the same group.

Party) and is essential to ensuring common 'living standards and entitlements' (Scottish Liberal Democrats).

In this paper, we leave aside questions of what might be technically or legally possible in terms of further devolution, and instead look at what the public thinks. For any scheme of further devolution to be successful and enduring, it has not only to be legally feasible, but also to meet the aspirations and expectations of the people of Scotland.

Our data comes primarily from ScotGen's *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey (SSA). Run since 1999 by ScotGen Social Research, an independent, not-for-profit research organisation, SSA is a high quality survey, conducted face to face (with a self-completion section) using probability sampling methods.³ We also use data from recent opinion polls, particularly those that asked how people might have voted were there an option to vote for or against 'devo max' on the referendum ballot paper.⁴

How popular is more devolution?

As discussed above, since around 2007 political elites in Scotland have been responding to the idea that more devolution (or 'devo max', which we will use as shorthand for further devolution of taxes and/or welfare benefits) might be a more popular option than either the status quo or independence. Yet in fact, devo max is not necessarily the *single* most popular option among Scots. Since 2010, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey has asked people to choose between four options which one comes closest to who they think should make particular 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 question is designed to tap underlying constitutional preferences without using specific labels like 'independence' or 'devo max'. However, support for the first option is taken to imply support for the principle of independence. As taxation and welfare benefits are the two most important aspects of domestic policy that are still primarily reserved to Westminster, the second and third options are intended to represent 'devo max' and the status quo respectively. The fourth option implies that the Scottish Parliament should be abolished.

The findings (Figure 1) show that the Scottish public divides into three not quite even groups in terms of its constitutional preferences. In 2012, around a third (35%) supported independence (the Scottish Parliament making all decisions), a similar proportion (32%) supported 'devo max'

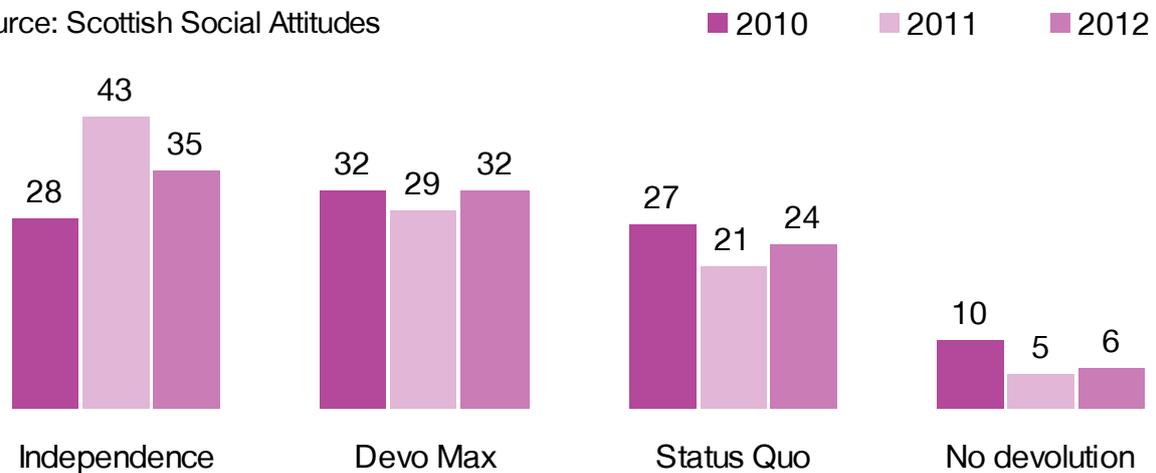
³ The 2012 SSA interviewed face to face a random probability sample of 1,229 adults aged 18 plus between July and November 2012. Data are weighted to reflect known patterns of non-response and the age and gender of the adult population in Scotland. Previous SSA surveys were conducted using a similar methodology. For further detail on methods and for full question wording for most of the questions included in this paper, see Ormston, R and Curtice, J (2013) *More devolution: an alternative road?* ScotGen Social Research/The Electoral Reform Society, available at: <http://www.electoral-reform.org.uk/images/dynamicImages/devolutionroadFINAL.pdf>

⁴ The polls to which reference is made here were conducted by a variety of methods including: face to face using quota sampling, over the telephone using random digit dialling, and via the internet using previously recruited samples of respondents.

(Holyrood responsible for all decisions except defence and foreign affairs), and a quarter (24%) favoured the status quo (defence, foreign affairs, taxes and benefits remain reserved to Westminster).

Figure 1 Constitutional preference, 2010 – 2012

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes



A similar three-way split is apparent across the various opinion polls – taking the mean of all polls and surveys in 2012 that asked people to choose between these three options, 27% supported independence, 33% devo max and 30% the status quo.⁵

On this evidence alone, it is unclear why some variation on devo max might be thought likely to attract majority support where independence currently does not. To see why this might be the case, we need to look in more detail at what further powers people would like to be devolved.

What powers would people like to be devolved?

SSA has asked people on a number of occasions since 2007 who they think should make most of the important decisions for Scotland across a range of areas, including some that are already devolved (the Health Service and schools) and other that are primarily or wholly reserved (welfare benefits, taxation, defence and foreign affairs). Responses to these questions give us our first indication that some form of ‘devo max’ might indeed be capable of attracting majority support from the Scottish population (Table 1). In 2012, over half (56%) thought the Scottish Parliament should make most decisions about taxation. Meanwhile, although at the elite level the Unionist parties are not currently considering devolving welfare benefits, the public appears to draw little distinction between benefits and areas like health and schools where powers are already devolved. Almost the same proportion (64%) think Holyrood should make most of the decisions for Scotland about benefits as think it should decide on the Health Service (66%) and schools (63%).

Yet while a majority of the Scottish public appear to favour devolving most decisions about taxes and welfare benefits, only a third (34%) think that Holyrood should make decisions about defence and foreign affairs – 59% think these should remain the preserve of Westminster. An IPSOS/MORI poll carried out in June 2012 asked about a longer list of policy areas but found a very similar split

⁵ Surveys and polls included: SSA 2012; TNS/BMRB January, June/July and December; ICM January; Panelbase February and July; IPSOS/MORI June; YouGov October.

between domestic policies – which a majority are happy to be decided in Edinburgh – and foreign policy (defence, foreign affairs and international development), which most think should be decided at Westminster.⁶ On this evidence, some variation of ‘devo max’ – involving the devolution of tax and welfare benefits but stopping short of defence and foreign affairs – does appear capable of attracting the support of a majority of Scots.

Table 1 Who people think should make most of the important decisions for Scotland about various policy areas, 2007-2012						
		The Scottish Parliament	The UK government at Westminster	Local Councils in Scotland	The EU	Sample size
Health Service						
2007	%	63	25	10	*	1594
2009	%	65	25	6	1	1482
2010	%	66	26	5	*	1495
2012	%	66	24	8	*	1229
Schools						
2007	%	62	13	23	*	1594
2009	%	65	12	19	1	1482
2010	%	62	14	23	*	1495
2012	%	63	11	24	*	1229
Welfare benefits						
2007	%	63	18	16	1	1594
2009	%	60	19	16	1	1482
2010	%	62	25	9	1	1495
2012	%	64	19	13	*	1229
Taxation						
2007	%	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	1594
2009	%	59	33	4	1	1482
2010	%	57	37	3	*	1495
2012	%	56	36	4	*	1229
Defence and Foreign Affairs						
2007	%	33	58	*	4	1594
2009	%	31	61	1	3	1482
2010	%	31	63	1	3	1495
2012	%	34	59	*	4	1229

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

Notes: * indicates that <0.5% of respondents chose this answer. n/a: not asked.

The reason that more people support devolving taxes and welfare benefits than support ‘devo max’ as their first preference is because the proposal that these issues be devolved is backed by most Nationalists together with at least half of Unionists. An overwhelming majority of Nationalists

⁶ Ipsos/MORI Poll for Future of Scotland group, 7-14.6.12

want Holyrood to decide on taxes and welfare benefits. Meanwhile, over half of Unionists, who say that they want Scotland to remain part of the UK,⁷ also support devolving taxes and welfare benefits. Thus ‘devo max’ looks capable of attracting majority support not because it is the first choice of a majority of Scots, but because it is the first choice of over half of Unionists and looks capable of satisfying at least some of the aspirations for further self-government of most Nationalists.

Further evidence that ‘devo max’ might be the option best capable of attracting consensus support comes from polls conducted prior to the October 2012 decision only to include one question on the referendum ballot. Several such polls asked people how they might vote if (a) there were two questions on the ballot or (b) they were allowed to pick a first and second preference from a multi-option ballot paper. A majority of respondents to polls conducted by YouGov and Ipsos/MORI⁸ (58%/68%) said they would have voted Yes to ‘devo max’, whereas in the same polls only minorities (39%/38%) indicated they would vote Yes to independence. Meanwhile, although only 36% of respondents to a YouGov poll in February 2012⁹ said they would have chosen Devo Max as their first preference (making it only marginally more popular than independence), 54% said they would choose it as their second preference. Indeed, devo max was the second preference of almost everyone (95%) who said their first choice would be independence together with most (83%) of those whose first preference was the status quo. As a result, it was clear that a majority preferred ‘devo max’ to independence and equally that a majority preferred it to the status quo, thereby making it the only option around which a consensus seems at all capable of being generated.

Who supports devo max?

The previous paper in this series¹⁰ looked at differences in levels of support for independence between different groups in society. While for the most part it concluded that independence does not appear to pit one section of Scottish society against another, there are some differences – women are less likely to support independence than are men,¹¹ older people are less in favour than younger people, and those in middle-class jobs are somewhat less likely to support independence than those in more working class occupations. National identity also matters. In particular, it is those with the weakest sense of British identity who are most in favour of independence. How Scottish you feel makes less difference, since most people in Scotland feel strongly Scottish.

In general, support for ‘devo max’ is not strongly patterned by socio-demographic difference either. Unlike independence, it is a little more popular among women (35%) than men (29%). It is

⁷ As measured on SSA’s longer-standing question, which asks people to choose between 5 options – independence within the EU, independence outwith the EU, devolution with tax raising powers, devolution without tax raising powers, and no Scottish Parliament. For further details see R. Ormston and J. Curtice (2013), *More Devolution: An Alternative Road?*, available at www.electoral-reform.org.uk and www.scotcen.org.uk.

⁸ YouGov poll for The Sun 12-15.1.12; Ipsos/MORI polls for The Times, 25-29.8.11 and 1-4.12.11

⁹ YouGov poll (no client), 22-24.2.12.

¹⁰ Curtice, J (2013) *Who supports and opposes independence – and why?* ScotCen Social Research, available at <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/1106700/who%20supports%20and%20opposes%20independence%20and%20why.pdf>

¹¹ Discussed in more detail in the first paper in this series, Ormston, R (2013) *Why don’t more women support independence*, ScotCen Social Research, available at <http://www.scotcen.org.uk/media/1102775/gender%20and%20indep%20paper%20final%20260413.pdf>

a little more popular among those aged under 40 than among the over 40s, who are more likely than younger age groups to favour the status quo. There is less evidence of a class divide on ‘devo max’ than on independence – between 28% and 35% support devo max across all socio-economic groups.

However, there is a clear and important difference between those whose first preference is devo max and those more inclined to independence in terms of their national identity. As Table 2 shows, support for independence is far higher amongst those with a weak or nonexistent sense of British identity than it is amongst those with strong feelings of Britishness. In contrast support for devo max tends, if anything, to be rather higher amongst those with at least moderately strong feelings of Britishness than it is amongst those whose feelings in that direction are rather weaker. Devo max, it seems, appeals more to those who, while content for Holyrood to be relatively powerful, still retain a sense of affinity with the rest of the UK.¹²

	1 - Not British	2	3	4	5	6	7 - Very strongly British
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	72	54	49	33	25	19	21
Devo Max	20	29	27	38	38	35	31
Status Quo	5	11	22	21	30	38	30
No devolution	3	3	2	4	6	6	15

Strength of British feeling was ascertained by asking respondents to say how British they felt on a scale from 1 to 7, where 1 meant not British at all and 7 very strongly British

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2012

However, these figures only consider those for whom ‘devo max’ is their first choice. What about the broader ‘coalition of support’ that appears to exist around devolving taxes and benefits? Are there significant differences between this group and those who would prefer to keep the balance of powers between Holyrood and Westminster as it is? Looking separately at patterns of support for the Scottish Parliament making most of the important decisions for Scotland about (a) taxes and (b) benefits indicates that:

- There is no gender divide – men and women are equally in favour of devolving taxes and benefits
- Those aged 65 and older are slightly more sceptical about devolving either area (49% of those aged 65+ favour the Scottish Parliament deciding taxes, compared with 55-62% of other age groups; 57% of those aged 65+ support the Scottish Parliament deciding on welfare benefits, compared with 66-68% of other age groups)
- Employers, managers and professionals are more sceptical about devolving taxes (49% of this group supported the Scottish Parliament deciding on taxes, compared to 58-64% of other socio-economic groups)

¹² These warmer feelings towards the rest of the UK amongst supporters of devo max are also evident when respondents are asked to say whose economy benefits most from the Union, England’s, Scotland’s, or both equally. Amongst those who say that England’s economy benefits most, 51% prefer independence and only 20% devo max. In contrast 51% of those who think the two economies benefit equally favour devo max, while only 36% back independence.

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- Those who are politically furthest to the left in terms of their general beliefs¹³ are, if anything, more likely to think the Scottish Parliament should decide on taxes (68%, compared with 45% of those furthest to the right) and are no less likely than those further to the right to feel that Holyrood should decide benefits (67%, compared with 52-70% of those further to the right). Thus arguments from left-leaning Unionist parties against devolving welfare in order to maintain solidarity of shared rights and resources across the UK do not necessarily appear to resonate with left-leaning members of the public.

What do people think more devolution would deliver?

If 'devo max' is the only option capable of attracting a majority consensus, does this mean that people have significantly higher expectations of what it might deliver for Scotland compared with full independence? The answer to this question appears to be no. Respondents to SSA 2012 were asked whether they thought things would be better, worse or no different across a variety of different areas if the Scottish Parliament decided on everything apart from defence and foreign affairs (see Table 3). They were also asked what they thought the impact of independence would be across the same areas. In each case, very similar proportions felt 'devo max' would lead to improvements as said independence would make things better. For example, 51% said that Scotland would have more pride in itself as a country under 'devo max', while 55% felt Scotland would have more pride if it were independent. People's views on the likelihood of either devo max or independence improving the economy were also similar, though more sceptical. Just 34% said that Scotland economic fortunes would be improved by either devo max or independence.

However, although people do not appear to be particularly more optimistic about what 'devo max' could deliver compared with independence, they are less likely to be concerned that it could make things worse. For example, while 34% thought independence would make Scotland's economy worse, just 25% said the same of 'devo max'. Thus although people's expectations of what 'devo max' could deliver are modest at best, they are at least less worried about it than they are about independence. Indeed in response to a separate question just 32% said they would be worried if 'devo max' were to be introduced, whereas 59% said they would be worried if Scotland became independent.

¹³ Respondents' positions on a left-right scale is determined by combining their answers to a series of questions covering attitudes to government redistribution of wealth, attitudes to big business and management, and beliefs about how fairly wealth is currently shared.

Table 3 Expectations of devo max and independence, 2012						
	Devo max			Independence		
	More/better	No difference	Less/worse	More/better	No difference	Less/worse
	%	%	%	%	%	%
People in Scotland's pride in their country	51	42	3	55	39	3
Scotland's voice in the world	42	41	15	42	32	22
Scotland's economy	34	33	25	34	23	34
The standard of living in Scotland	31	46	17	32	36	24
The gap between the rich and poor in Scotland*	17	53	23	19	47	25
Taxes in Scotland**	6	36	49	8	27	57

Sample size: Questions on devo max = 1,229 (all 2012 respondents), questions on Independence = 1,180 (everyone who completed the self-completion section of the survey)

* For the questions on the gap between rich and poor, the 'less/worse' column contains those who say the gap will be bigger and the 'more/better' column those who say the gap will be smaller

** For the questions on taxes, the 'less/worse' column contains those who say taxes will be higher and the 'more/better' one those who say taxes will be lower.

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes 2012

Interestingly, further analysis of the views of those whose first preference is for the Scottish Parliament to make all decisions compared with those who draw a line at defence and foreign affairs shows that it is Nationalists rather than 'Maximalists' who are most enthusiastic about the possible consequences of further devolution. For example, 53% of Nationalists compared with only 37% of those who favour 'devo max' think 'devo max' would result in a better economy. Support for 'devo max' may be broad, but enthusiasm about what it might deliver seems in rather shorter supply.

Are people ready to face the consequences?

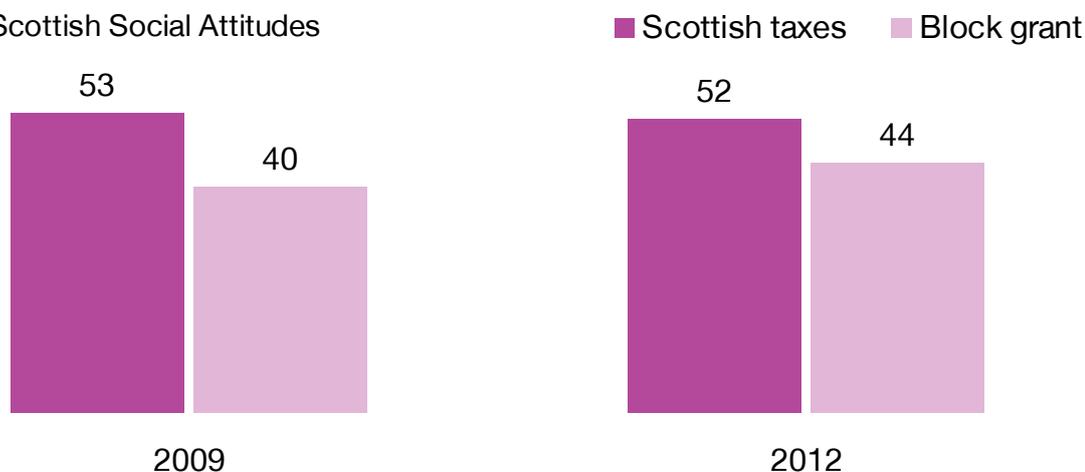
So far, we have seen that over half to two-thirds of people in Scotland favour the Scottish Parliament making most decisions for Scotland about taxes and welfare benefits and that, in spite of lukewarm expectations about the benefits it might bring, a clear majority of people would probably have voted for 'devo max' if it had been an option on the ballot next year. However, supporting a change in the constitution is one thing; being prepared to accept all of the practical and political consequences this change might result in is another. If taxes and welfare benefits were substantially further devolved to Holyrood, such consequences would include (a) a move away from the block grant currently passed by Westminster to Holyrood via the Barnett formula towards more of Holyrood's budget coming directly from taxes set and raised in Scotland, and (b) the scope for significant further policy divergence between Scotland and other countries in the UK, specifically in relation to the levels of taxes paid and benefits received in different countries. In the final section of this paper, we look at evidence for whether or not people are indeed prepared to tolerate or even embrace such consequences.

Taking funding first, SSA has asked on two occasions how people think public services in Scotland, like health and education, should be paid for – 'out of a sum of money decided by the UK government and funded out of taxes collected across the UK' (i.e. the block grant) or 'out of taxes decided and collected by the Scottish Government in Scotland' (referred to below as

'Scottish taxes'). In both 2009 and 2012 there was a narrow majority in favour of public services being paid for from Scottish taxes (Figure 2).

Figure 2 How people think public services in Scotland should be paid for

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes



Sample size: 2009 = 1,482; 2012 = 1,229

Those who believe that Holyrood should make most decisions about taxes appear reasonably consistent in terms of accepting that Scotland should therefore pay for services out of its own taxes – 70% of those who think the Scottish Parliament should decide on taxes said this. However, a substantial minority (27%) said the Scottish Parliament should make most decisions on taxes in Scotland but nonetheless wish to retain the block grant.

What about the second potential consequence of introducing more devolution – greater variation between Scotland and other countries in the UK on tax and benefit levels? In spite of the apparent appetite for further devolution of both these areas, it is less clear that the Scottish public is willing to tolerate significant divergence in policy from England. SSA 2012 asked people whether they thought (a) the basic rate of income tax and (b) the old age pension should always be the same in Scotland and England, or whether it was OK for them to be different – either higher or lower – in Scotland than in England.¹⁴ Just 44% said it was OK for the basic rate of income tax to be different in Scotland than in England, while only 34% felt it was OK for pensions to be different. Fifty-one per cent and 63% respectively wanted them to be the same.

Moreover, although a majority (64%) of those who said Holyrood should make most decisions on taxes felt it was OK for Scotland to set a different rate to England, among those who want benefits to be devolved, only 42% felt it would be OK for Scotland to pay a different pension to England. Fifty-seven per cent of this group wanted pensions to be the same in Scotland as in England. Thus insofar as people do want benefits to be devolved to Scotland, perhaps they have in mind, at least so far as a major universal benefit such as the old age pension is concerned, something similar to the situation that currently exists in Northern Ireland, where responsibility for benefits is devolved but where they are usually administered in the same way as in the rest of the UK. While people want Holyrood to have the right to take decisions on benefits, in practice they may hope or expect that they will simply decide (as Stormont has) to implement the same framework as the rest of the UK.

¹⁴ In fact, to test whether the order in which the two countries were included about made a difference to people's responses, half the sample were asked if it was OK for Scotland to be different from England, and half whether it was OK for England to differ from Scotland. The findings reported here are based on the half of the sample who were asked about Scotland differing from England.

Conclusion

In insisting that the referendum should be a straight choice between independence or continued membership of the UK, the UK government argued that this would help ensure that the outcome would be 'decisive'. If Scotland does vote Yes that will clearly be the case. But if it votes No it is far from clear that the referendum will settle Scotland's constitutional future. The contours of the current constitutional settlement do not match those of majority public opinion so far as the division of powers between Westminster and Holyrood is concerned. The immediate reaction at least of most people in Scotland is that more or less all of the country's domestic affairs, including taxation and welfare benefits that are still primarily Westminster's preserve, should be determined by Holyrood. Only when it comes to defence and foreign affairs do most people think that Westminster should clearly be in charge. It is thus not surprising that in practice all three principal unionist parties are now formulating plans for the further extension of devolution should Scotland vote No. Rather than proving to be 'decisive' it would seem that a majority No vote will simply instigate yet further debate about Scotland's constitutional future.

Providing a stable basis for that future will not be easy. At present at least, no one single option, including 'devo max', appears to command majority support amongst the Scottish public. That a majority say they would like Holyrood to make the key decisions about taxation and welfare benefits, and a majority say they would be willing to vote for 'devo max', reflects the fact that not only are around half of unionists willing to back giving Holyrood more power and responsibility, but so also are most nationalists, albeit only as a second best. The idea of more devolution thus looks like an idea around which a consensus might be capable of being constructed rather than a project for which there is a great deal of enthusiasm. Indeed expectations of what it would achieve are modest, and there would appear to be limits to how far the public in Scotland would be willing to embrace having a system of welfare benefits that was significantly at variance with provision in England. What however the idea seems to tap into is a wish amongst many Scots to have at least formal control over most of their own affairs, but without breaking entirely the ties they have with the rest of the UK. It perhaps no more than we might expect in a country where many apparently still have dual identities.

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