

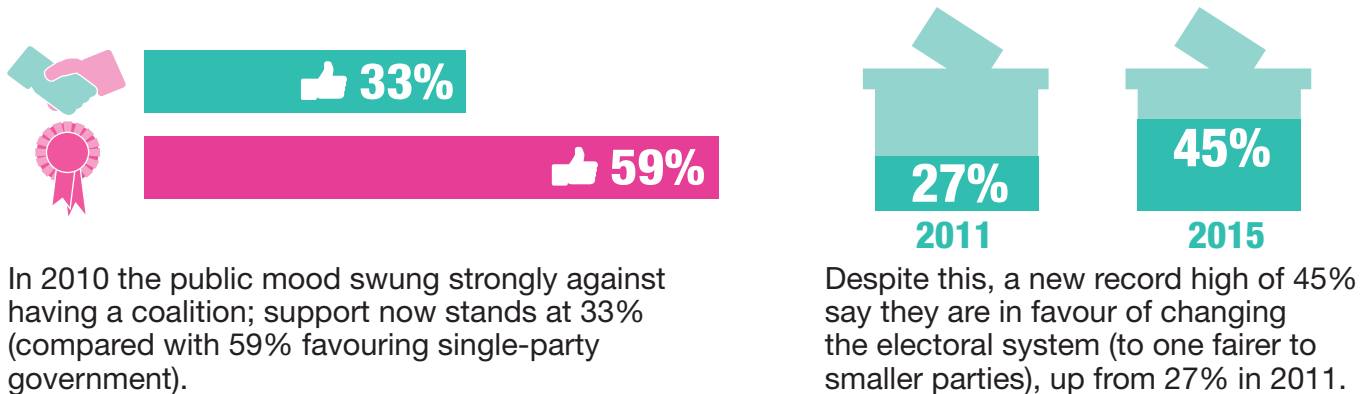
Politics

Political attitudes and behaviour in the wake of an intense constitutional debate

Since 2010 the UK has experienced coalition government and referendums on both electoral reform and Scottish independence. This chapter examines what effect these major constitutional developments have had on public attitudes and turnout in the 2015 general election.

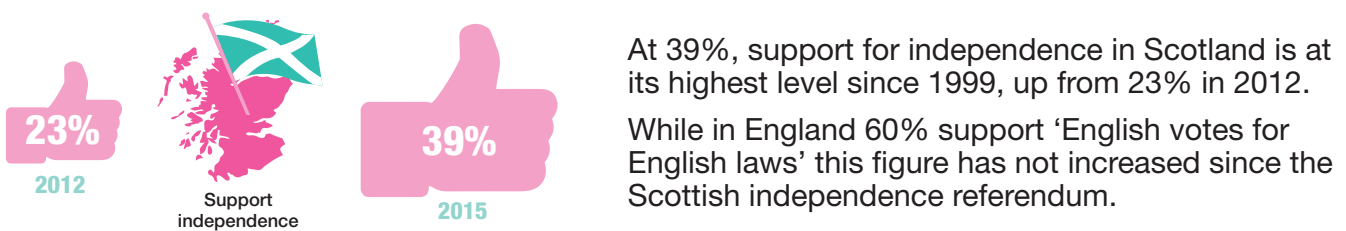
Mismatch between views on coalition government and attitudes towards electoral reform

On the one hand, voters continue to be relatively sceptical of the merits of coalition government, yet are now more supportive of changing the electoral system than ever.



No English backlash to Scottish independence debate

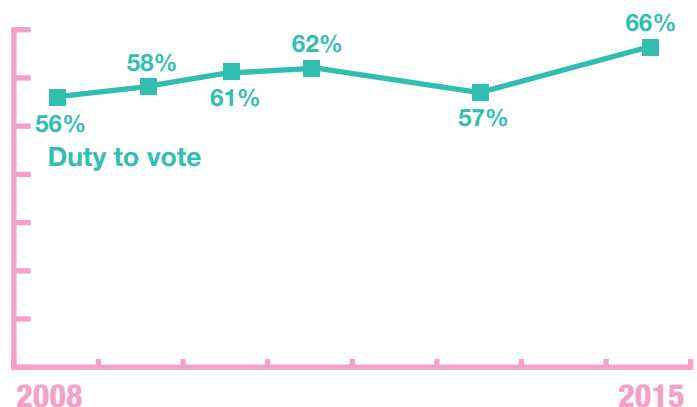
The independence referendum and its aftermath resulted in a higher level of support for independence in Scotland – but no sign of a backlash in England.



Political engagement increased, but not turnout

Despite a relatively low turnout (66%) at the 2015 election, there are signs that people are somewhat more committed to the political process.

People are more likely to feel a duty to vote, to be interested in politics and to feel a strong sense of attachment to a political party. However, those without a strong sense of political commitment were particularly likely to stay at home at the 2015 general election.



Author

John Curtice, Research Consultant, NatCen Social Research, and Professor of Politics, University of Strathclyde

Introduction

There has been considerable debate in the UK in recent years about how the country is and should be governed. First of all, between 2010 and 2015 it experienced its first peace time coalition since 1945, when, in the wake of a parliament with no overall majority, the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats agreed to go into government together. One item in the coalition agreement between them was to hold a referendum on changing the electoral system used in elections for the House of Commons, a change that, if implemented, would likely make election outcomes that fail to give any party an overall majority more common in future (Cabinet Office, 2010). Second, the success of the Scottish National Party (SNP) in winning an overall majority in elections to the devolved Scottish Parliament in 2011 instigated a referendum on whether Scotland should become an independent country, while as soon as that was over, there was a renewed interest in proposals for changing the way England is governed. However, the counterpoint to this sometimes seemingly intense constitutional debate has been an electorate that often appears disconnected and disengaged from the political process, not least as reflected in the level of turnout in elections.

In this chapter we assess, on the one hand, how the public has reacted to these recent constitutional debates and experiences, and, on the other, the extent to which voters are engaged with the way in which they are governed. We begin by looking at the evolution of attitudes towards coalition government and the way in which the Commons is elected. We then assess people's views about how Scotland and England should be governed. Finally, we look at what does and does not appear to have motivated people to vote in the 2015 general election, and whether there is any reason to believe that the political attitudes of those who vote in elections are different from those of the population as a whole.

The experience of coalition

Responding to a question about the relative merits of single party versus coalition government is one thing when voters have only had experience of single party government, it is potentially quite another when they find themselves being ruled by a coalition for the first time. Voters might find that in practice coalition more than meets their expectations - or that it confirms their worst fears. Which proved to be the case following the formation of the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010 can be ascertained by looking at the pattern of responses to a question on the relative merits of single party versus coalition government:

Which do you think would generally be better for Britain nowadays

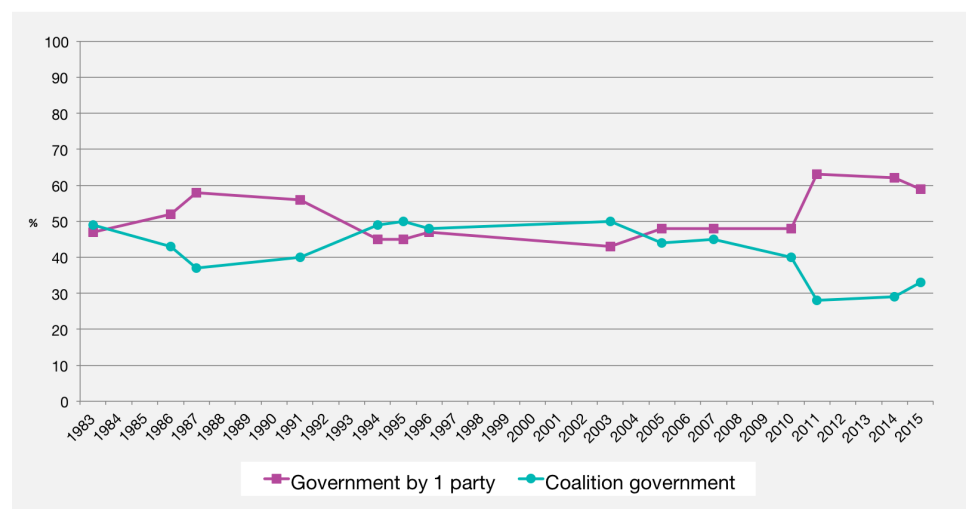
...to have a government at Westminster formed by one political party on its own,

or, to have a government at Westminster formed by two political parties together - in coalition?

Figure 1 reveals that, for much of the last 30 years or so, when the country was being run by a single party government, public opinion has been quite evenly divided on this issue. On most occasions the proportion saying they preferred a single party government was little different from the proportion stating they preferred a coalition. However, although there was no immediate reaction - in 2010, shortly after the election, the 48% who said that they preferred single party government were only a little more numerous than the 40% supported a coalition - thereafter the public mood soon swung strongly against having a coalition. The experience of a real coalition apparently served to change many a voter's mind, a change that many attribute to the Liberal Democrats' decision shortly after entering government to reverse their previous opposition to university tuition fees (Finn, 2015).

After 2010, the public mood soon swung strongly against having a coalition

Figure 1 Preference for single party or coalition government, 1983-2015



The data on which Figure 1 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Voters have shown little sign of swinging back again in favour of coalition government

Meanwhile, so far at least, voters have shown little sign of swinging back again in favour of coalition government. This, perhaps, is not surprising. Now that, since the 2015 election, the Conservative party is enjoying a spell as a single party government once more, those who identify with the party are keener on that option than they were either when the coalition was in existence, or indeed when the party was in opposition. No less than 77% of Conservative supporters now say they prefer single party government, well up on the 69% who were of that view in 2011, let alone the 57% who backed that position in 2007. Meanwhile, although support for single party government among Labour supporters has fallen back from the peak of 71% that it reached in 2011, as many as 59% of them still say they prefer it to a coalition, suggesting that many of them have still not given up on the possibility that their party might be in power on its own at some point in the future.

However, a rather different picture emerges when we look at the question of changing the electoral system used in elections to the House of Commons. On this subject we have regularly asked the following question:

Some people say we should change the voting system for general elections to the UK House of Commons to allow smaller political parties to get a fairer share of MPs. Others say that we should keep the voting system for the House of Commons as it is to produce effective government. Which view comes closer to your own...

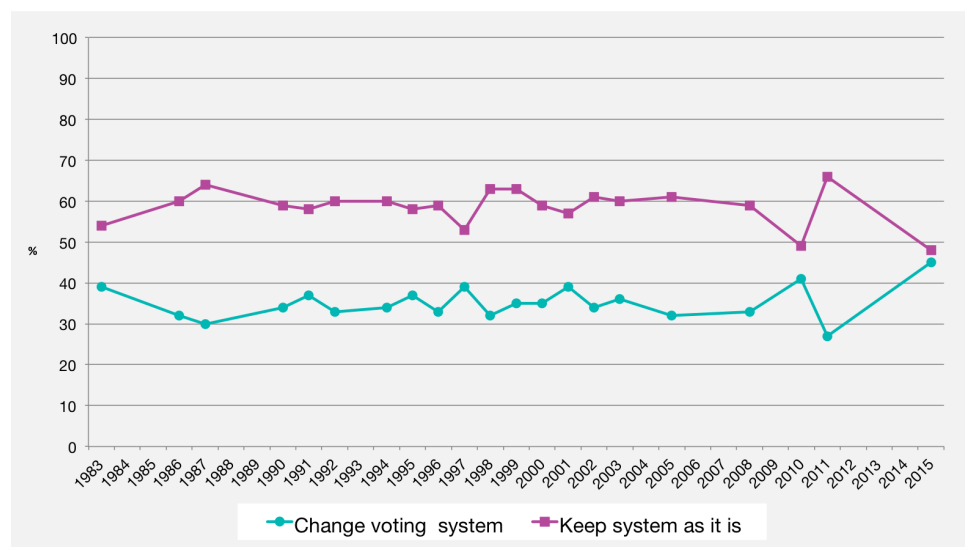
... that we should change the voting system for the House of Commons,

or, keep it as it is?

When the possibility of changing the system was actually put to voters in a referendum, held in May 2011 (albeit to a system, the Alternative Vote (AV), that is a far cry from proportional representation) it was strongly rejected. Just 32% voted in favour while 68% were opposed, although only 42% of those registered to vote actually did so (Curtice, 2013). As we can see from Figure 2, this outcome was reflected in a sharp drop of support for changing the system as registered by our regular survey question on the subject. At that point only 27%, an all-time low, backed changing the system even though just 12 months earlier a record high of 41% had said they were in favour. Now, however, following what proved to be one of the most disproportional election outcomes ever in modern British electoral history (Curtice, 2015), it appears that opinion has swung back once again. Indeed, in our latest reading a new record high of 45% say they are in favour of changing the system, almost equalling the 48% who say they would prefer to keep the system as it is.

In our latest reading a new record high of 45% say they are in favour of changing the voting system

Figure 2 Attitudes to electoral reform, 1983-2015



Source: 1983, 1992: British Election Study

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

On the one hand, then, voters continue to be relatively sceptical of the merits of coalition government, yet are now more supportive of changing the electoral system than ever before - even though any change along the lines described in our question on the electoral system would be likely to make coalitions more common. This would appear to suggest that many voters do not perceive the debate about the merits and consequences of electoral reform in the way that many advocates on the two sides of the argument do. Although those who would prefer single party government are less likely to back changing the electoral system than are those who like the idea of a coalition government, there are many who hold views on electoral reform that would appear to be inconsistent with their preferences for single party versus coalition government. For example, although 57% of those who prefer single party government wish to retain the current electoral system, 39% say they are in favour of change. Equally, while 59% of those who like the idea of coalition government say they are in favour of electoral reform, 38% are opposed.

The extent of the mismatch between attitudes to the kind of government that people prefer and their attitudes towards electoral reform suggests that many voters' attitudes towards electoral reform are not deeply rooted in a coherent view about the merits and consequences of different electoral systems (Curtice and Seyd, 2011). If so, that might help to explain both why it proved possible in 2011 to persuade many voters that changing the system would be disadvantageous, and why that mood has proven to be such a temporary one. Certainly, the increased unpopularity of electoral reform in 2011 was to be found both among those who preferred coalition government and those who did not, and indeed irrespective of which party a voter supported. Even among supporters of the Liberal Democrats, the party that has long been the principal advocate of electoral reform, only 46% were in favour of changing the system in 2011, while slightly more, 50%, said that they preferred to keep first past the post.

Rather than persuading voters of the merits of coalition government, the actual experience of being ruled by a coalition seems to have been to turn voters off the idea relatively rapidly, and so far there is little evidence that that mood has been reversed. However, although voters initially also swung against the idea of changing the electoral system for the House of Commons, that outlook has proven to be a more temporary one. Nevertheless, even though electoral reform now appears to be as popular as it has ever been during the last 30 years or so, it is still the case that, in response to our long-running question on the subject at least, slightly more are in favour of retaining the current first past the post system than changing to one that might be more generous to smaller parties. That, together with the fact that voters' views on the subject do not appear to be deeply rooted, suggests that it would not necessarily be easy to win support for change in any further referendum on the subject that might be held in future.

How Scotland and England should be governed

The outcome of the Scottish independence referendum, held in September 2014, not only had significant implications for Scotland's future, but also for that of the rest of the UK. After all, the UK's nuclear defence capability is located on the River Clyde, while the 'break-up' of what was once regarded as one of the most stable and important democracies in the world might have dented the UK's global reputation, standing and clout. Meanwhile, within the UK, the debate about the merits of Scottish independence was not confined to Scotland itself, but also involved the rest of the UK, not least because the SNP's plans for independence envisaged considerable continuing collaboration with the rest of the UK, including an independent Scotland using the pound as part of a monetary union.

In the event, the proposition that Scotland should become an independent country was defeated in the referendum by 45% to 55%. Nevertheless, this represented a much higher level of support for independence than might have been anticipated from survey evidence collected when the referendum was called two years previously. This is evident, for example, in the answers that people give when respondents to our sister survey, the Scottish Social Attitudes survey, are asked 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

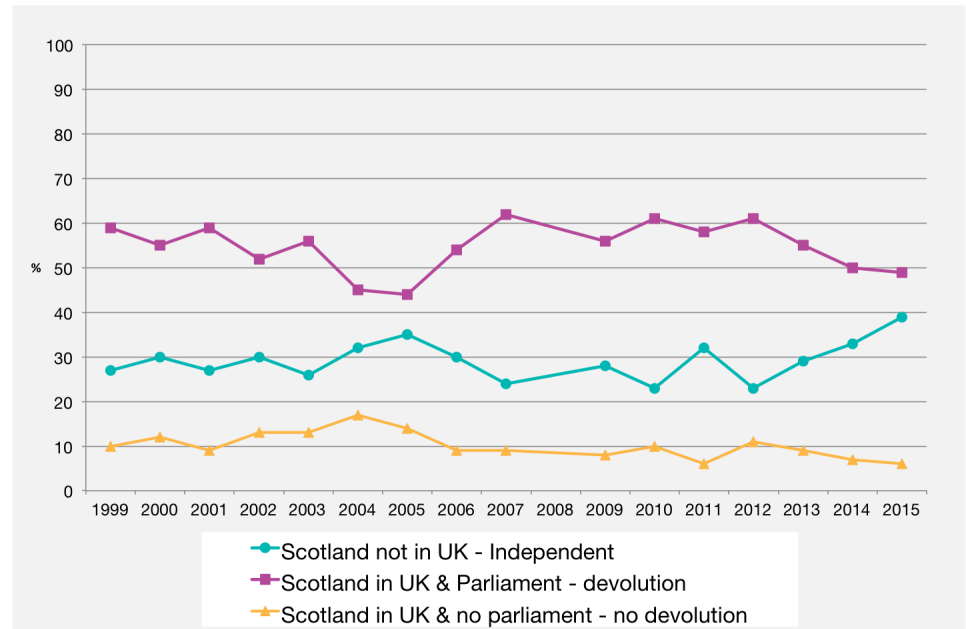
Scotland should remain part of the UK without an elected parliament

As can be seen from Figure 3, even after combining those who chose either of the first two responses involving independence, before the referendum never had more than 35% said that they backed independence. Indeed, the proportion had fallen to an equal all-time low of 23% just as plans for the referendum were being laid in 2012. Yet, by the time the referendum was over - and a UK general election had been held in which the SNP won half the Scottish vote and nearly all of the Scottish seats - as many as 39% were in favour. Although this proportion is still below the 45% who actually voted in favour of independence - around a quarter of respondents to the 2015 survey who said that they had voted in favour of independence

The referendum resulted in higher levels of support for independence than had been registered in Scotland since 1999

did not choose independence in response to this question - this latest reading confirms that the referendum and its aftermath resulted in higher levels of support for independence than had previously been registered in Scotland since the advent of devolution in 1999.

Figure 3 Attitudes in Scotland towards how Scotland should be governed, 1999-2015



Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

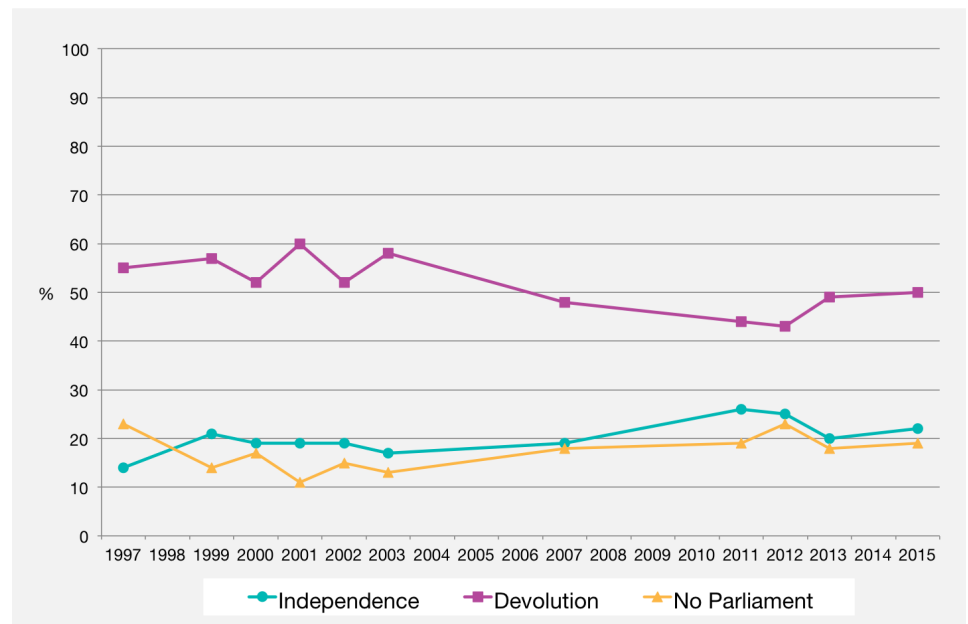
That aftermath did not simply consist of sticking with the constitutional status quo. It was followed by the introduction of further devolution in Scotland, not least in respect of responsibility for income tax (Smith, 2015), the development of proposals for more devolution for Wales (HM Government 2015), and proposals from the Conservatives for two initiatives towards more 'devolution' in England. The first of these initiatives for England, which was already being pioneered in the Greater Manchester area, was the introduction of 'city regions' headed by directly elected Mayors. Modelled in part on the city-wide government of an elected Mayor that had been established in London in 2000, these new city regions were partly simply intended to enable local government to deliver more effectively services such as public transport, housing and economic development, that require coordination in a metropolitan area, although in Greater Manchester the new authority is now also to be vested with responsibility for NHS spending, something that has not hitherto been a local government responsibility (Sandford, 2015). The second and more immediately eye-catching proposal was the introduction of 'English votes for English laws' whereby only English MPs could vote on some stages of laws that apply exclusively to that part of the UK (Cabinet Office, 2015). For some commentators, at least, these proposals were a recognition that, stimulated by the debate about Scottish independence, people in England now also

There is little sign that people in England are any keener now to see Scotland leave the UK

wanted greater recognition of their own interests and identity in the way in which the UK is governed (Jeffery et al., 2014).

Not that there is any immediate sign of a ‘backlash’ in England against the fact that Scotland enjoys a considerable and increasing measure of autonomy in its domestic affairs. In Figure 4 we show the pattern of response that has been obtained when people in England have been asked the same question about how Scotland should be governed that has also been asked regularly on the Scottish Social Attitudes survey. Although, at 19%, opposition to the idea of Scotland having its own parliament is somewhat higher now than it was when the body was first established in 1999, it still lies in the 18-23% range within which the figure has been oscillating since 2007. At the same time there is little sign that people in England are any keener now to see Scotland leave the UK than they were before the independence referendum was held.

Figure 4 Attitudes in England towards how Scotland should be governed, 1997-2015



Source: 1997: British Election Study

The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Much the same impression is gained when we look at attitudes towards one of the issues that has long appeared to be a potential point of contention between voters in Scotland and those in the rest of the UK: the level of public spending north of the border. Public spending in Scotland has consistently been higher per head than in the rest of the UK and looks set to remain so for the foreseeable future, even though a significant proportion of public spending in Scotland is now due to be funded out of taxes collected north of the border (McLean et al., 2008; Bell et al., 2016). As Table 1 shows, voters in England are much more likely to say that Scotland secures more than its fair share of spending than they are to claim that it

The proportion who believe Scotland secures more than its fair share of spending is still well below half

gets less than its fair share. Even so, at 39% the proportion who believe Scotland secures more than its fair share is still well below half. Moreover, it is on a par with every other reading since 2008, since when the proportion who hold that view has consistently been between 36% and 44%. While it does appear to be the case that concern in England about Scotland's share of public spending increased at around the time the SNP first took over the reins of Scotland's devolved government in 2007, there is little sign that people in England have become increasingly critical of the position since then.

Table 1 Attitudes in England towards Scotland's share of public spending, 2000-2015

Compared with other parts of the UK, Scotland's share of government spending is...	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
... much more than its fair share	8	9	9	9	16	21	18	21	22	21	18	18
... a little more than its fair share	13	15	15	13	16	20	22	17	22	23	18	21
... pretty much its fair share	42	44	44	45	38	33	30	29	30	30	37	31
... a little less than its fair share	10	8	8	8	6	3	4	3	3	4	4	7
... much less than its fair share	1	1	1	1	1	*	*	1	*	1	*	1
Don't know	25	23	22	25	22	23	25	28	23	22	22	22
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1928</i>	<i>2761</i>	<i>2897</i>	<i>1917</i>	<i>859</i>	<i>982</i>	<i>980</i>	<i>913</i>	<i>967</i>	<i>937</i>	<i>925</i>	<i>940</i>

Base: Respondents in England only

But what of proposals for changing the governance of England, either by introducing some form of 'city-region' government or by introducing 'English votes for English laws'? Is there any indication of an increasing demand for such changes among those living in England?

Figure 5 shows how people in England have responded since the advent of devolution in the rest of the UK when presented with the following question:

With all the changes going on in the way the different parts of Great Britain are run, which of the following do you think would be best for England...

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

for each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health,

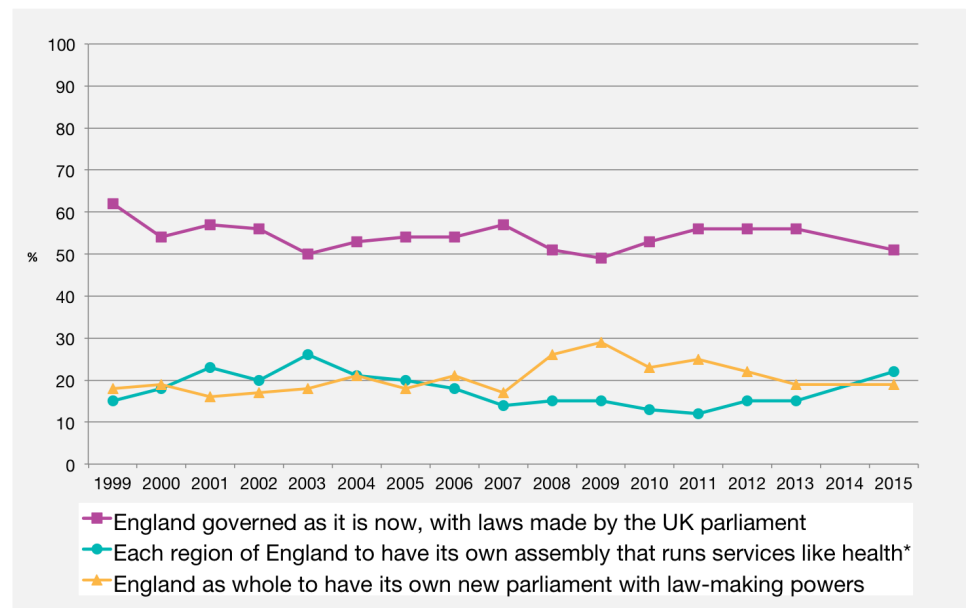
or, for England as a whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers?

The question was first crafted at a time when the principal proposal for some form of 'regional' government for England was to create assemblies in each of the 'government regions' in the country. That, for example, would have meant that both Greater Manchester and Merseyside would be part of the same 'North West' region, together with their more rural hinterland and including all of Cumbria. In the event, the idea died when, in 2004, voters in the North East region voted in a referendum against a proposal for establishing such a regional assembly there (Sandford, 2009). In contrast, the current government's proposals are for much smaller units, with each major city such as Manchester and Liverpool forming the focus of a separate 'region'. Still, if the idea of the 'city region' is a relatively popular one, we might anticipate that this would be reflected in people choosing the regional assembly option in our long-standing question.

For the most part, the answers to this question over the years (see Figure 5) have suggested that there is nothing like the demand in England for some form of devolution (or more) that we have seen is evident in Scotland. Typically, rather more than half have said that England should continue to be governed as now, with its laws made by the UK parliament. However, that proportion has fallen somewhat in our most recent survey to 51%, not an unprecedentedly low figure (see the similar proportions obtained in 2003, 2008 and 2009) but certainly lower than most previous readings. At the same time, support for the idea of creating regional assemblies has increased to a level not seen since the voters of the North East turned down the idea of creating a regional assembly there. Here, perhaps, is an indication that the government's promotion of 'city regions' has helped generate a measure of popular, if far from majority, support for regional devolution within England.

Support for the idea of creating regional assemblies has increased

Figure 5 Attitudes in England towards how England should be governed, 1999-2015



* In 2004–2006 the second option read “that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing”. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined

The data on which Figure 5 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter.

However, if that is the case, the government has not been particularly effective at promoting the idea among its own supporters. Just 17% of those in England who identify as a Conservative supporter choose regional assemblies as their preferred option, whereas 26% of Labour supporters do so. Perhaps some Labour supporters recognise that their party is more likely than the Conservatives to win any election for a directly-elected Mayor in any ‘city region’. Meanwhile, there is no sign that the idea is more popular in more urban England, where the idea has so far been most heavily, albeit not exclusively, promoted, than it is elsewhere. At 23%, support for regional assemblies among those living in the most urban parts of England is exactly the same as it is across England as a whole.

But if support for regional devolution, or indeed any form of devolution, in England still appears to be relatively muted, the same cannot be said of the idea of banning Scottish MPs from voting on English laws, a limited version of which was introduced into the procedures of the House of Commons shortly after the 2015 general election (Cabinet Office, 2015). As Table 2 shows, ever since the advent of devolution elsewhere in the UK, it has persistently been the case that a majority of people in England have agreed Scottish MPs should not be able to vote on laws that only apply in England. Moreover, the strength of that support, as measured by the proportion who say they “strongly” agree with the proposition, has increased from around 1 in 5 in the early years of devolution to around 3 in 10 more recently, though there is no evidence that the strength of support for ‘English votes for English laws’ has increased further in the immediate wake of the Scottish independence referendum.

Ever since devolution a majority of people in England have agreed Scottish MPs should not be able to vote on laws that only apply in England

Table 2 Attitudes in England towards banning Scottish MPs from voting on English laws, 2000-2015

	2000	2001	2003	2007	2010	2012	2013	2015
Now that Scotland has its own parliament, Scottish MPs should no longer be allowed to vote in the House of Commons on laws that only affect England	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Agree strongly	18	19	22	25	31	29	30	28
Agree	45	38	38	36	35	36	34	32
Neither agree nor disagree	19	18	18	17	17	15	25	20
Disagree	8	12	10	9	6	7	7	9
Disagree strongly	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1695</i>	<i>2341</i>	<i>1530</i>	<i>739</i>	<i>773</i>	<i>802</i>	<i>815</i>	<i>1576</i>

Base: Respondents in England only

Note: In 2013 respondents were not offered the opportunity to say 'Can't choose' (not shown in the table)

It is, however, a somewhat divisive issue politically even though, following the success of the SNP in the 2015 UK general election, Labour only has one MP from north of the border, putting it in exactly the same position as the Conservatives. As many as 77% of Conservative supporters agree with the proposition, compared with just 51% of Labour supporters. Indeed, it looks as though the political division on the subject may have sharpened somewhat - in 2013 as many as 60% of Labour supporters agreed with banning Scottish MPs from voting on Scottish laws, as did 64% in 2012. Perhaps the mood among Labour supporters has been influenced by the fact that in the event the issue is one that has been pursued by a Conservative government.

It would thus seem that, apart from some limited evidence of increased support for regional devolution in England, the reaction of people in the UK's largest country towards the debate about the UK's constitutional structure instigated by the Scottish independence referendum has proven to be a rather muted one. Being governed by Whitehall and Westminster remains the most - if far from overwhelmingly - popular option. That said, the introduction into the procedures of the House of Commons of a limited version of 'English votes for English laws' certainly reflected a long-standing mood among voters in England.

Participation in elections

One of the most notable features of the Scottish independence referendum was the very high level of turnout. No less than 85% of the registered electorate cast a ballot, more than in any previous nationwide ballot in Scotland since the advent of the mass franchise. Such a high turnout was even more remarkable given that turnouts in UK general elections have been relatively low in recent years. Indeed, in the UK general election the following May turnout (across Britain as a whole) proved once again to be on the low side. At 66%, it was only

one percentage point up on the previous election in 2010, leaving it still well below what it had been at any parliamentary contest between 1922 and 1997, during which period it never fell below 71%.

Yet there are signs in our survey data that people have in fact become somewhat more committed to the political process (see also Hansard Society, 2016). One of the noticeable trends in recent years was an apparent decline in the proportion of voters who felt that they had a duty to vote when they were asked the question (Lee and Young, 2013):

Which of these statements comes closest to your view about general elections? In a general election...

It's not really worth voting

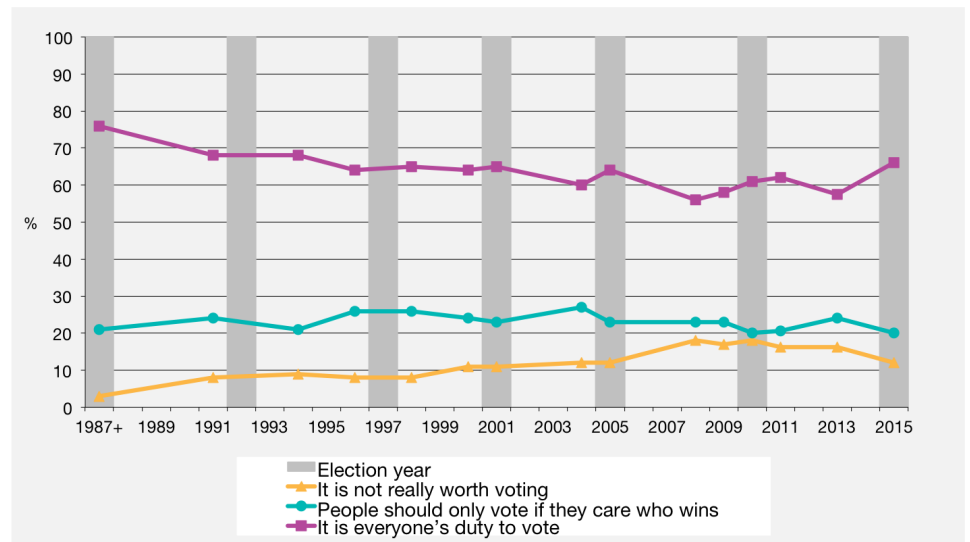
People should vote only if they care who wins

It's everyone's duty to vote

According to our most recent survey that decline has now been reversed. As Figure 6 shows, the proportion who say that it is "everyone's duty to vote" now stands at 66%, up by no less than 9 percentage points on when the question was last asked in 2013, and noticeably up on the 61% that was obtained immediately after the country last went to the polls in 2010.

The proportion who say that it is "everyone's duty to vote" now stands at 66%

Figure 6 Duty to vote, 1987-2015



+ Source: 1987: British Election Study

The data on which Figure 6 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Much the same picture is presented if we look at the extent to which people say they are interested in politics. We ask respondents:

How much interest do you generally have in what is going on in politics

... a great deal, quite a lot, some, not very much, or, none at all?

The proportion of the public who report “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest has, as Table 3 shows, tended to be remarkably stable, typically representing the outlook of around 30%. Only once, in 2008, has the figure reached as high as 35%. Yet in our most recent survey the figure stands at 36%. While not enough of an increase for us to conclude that there has necessarily been a marked stirring of interest in matters political among the public, it does make it all the more remarkable that turnout remained relatively low in the general election.

Table 3 Trend in interest in politics, selected years, 1986-2015

	1986	1991	1994	1997	1999	2001
How much interest in politics	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great deal/quite a lot	29	32	32	30	28	31
Some	31	31	35	33	34	35
Not much/none at all	39	36	33	37	38	34
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1548	1445	2302	1355	3143	3287

	2003	2005	2008	2010	2013	2015
How much interest in politics	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great deal/quite a lot	30	34	35	31	32	36
Some	33	34	33	34	32	33
Not much/none at all	37	32	32	34	37	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3199	4268	1128	1081	1063	4328

One other feature of the public’s attitudes towards political parties that, other things being equal, also serves to depress levels of participation is the proportion who do not feel any sense of attachment to a political party.¹ As Table 4 shows, that proportion doubled between 1987 and 2010 from 8% to 16%. Conversely, the proportion who feel either “very” or “fairly” strongly attached to one of the parties fell over the same period from 46% to 36%. However, it appears that this change too has been somewhat reversed. True, at 15%, the proportion who do not feel attached to any political party is much the same as it was five years ago, but the proportion who feel “very” or “fairly” strongly attached to a party now stands at 41%, higher than at any election year between 1997 and 2010.

The proportion who feel “very” or “fairly” strongly attached to a party now stands at 41%, higher than at any election year between 1997 and 2010

¹ See the Technical Details for full details of the questions asked about people’s party identification.

Table 4 Trends in strength of party identification, election years between 1987 and 2015

	1987	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
Strength of party identification	%	%	%	%	%	%
Very strong	11	10	7	7	7	9
Fairly strong	35	27	29	28	29	32
Not very strong	40	46	49	46	41	38
None	8	10	12	13	16	15
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2847	1355	3282	4268	3297	4328

It would thus seem that voters were, if anything, more strongly motivated to go to the polls in 2015 than they had been at other recent general elections. They were more likely to feel a duty to vote, were a little more likely to be interested in politics, and were more likely to feel a strong sense of attachment to the political party. Perhaps, then, the explanation for the failure of turnout to increase very much lies in voters' perceptions of what was at stake. Maybe they felt that it would not make much difference who won the election; after all, the Conservatives had demonstrated a willingness to share power with the Liberal Democrats, while Labour accepted the need for further reductions in the country's fiscal deficit. If so, this perception might have reduced voters' impetus to go to the polls.

Table 5 shows the extent to which voters thought there was a difference between the Conservative and Labour parties in 2015, and how this compares with their perceptions at each and every election since 1964. We asked respondents:

Now considering everything the Conservative and Labour parties stand for, would you say that that ...

... there is a great difference between them,

some difference,

or, not much difference?

As we can see, voters were, if anything, slightly more likely to think there is a "great difference" now between the parties than they were in 2010. They were certainly much more likely to be of that view than they were in 2001 and 2005, when the experience of a relatively centrist 'New Labour' government appears to have persuaded voters that there was less of a difference between the parties than for at least the last 30 years. True, at 27%, the most recent proportion is still below that recorded at any time before 2001, and thus voters are still less likely to feel that there is a great deal at stake in a general election than they once did. But even so, there is nothing in these figures to suggest that voters' apparent increased commitment to the political process was negated by an increased feeling that there was little to separate the parties.

Table 5 Perceived difference between the parties, 1964-2015

	1964	1966	1970	Feb-74	Oct-74	1979	1983
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great difference	48	44	33	34	40	48	88
Some	25	27	28	30	30	30	10
Not much	27	29	39	36	30	22	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1699	1804	1780	2391	2332	1826	3893

	1987	1992	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Great difference	85	56	33	17	13	23	27
Some	11	32	43	39	43	43	42
Not much	5	12	24	44	44	34	31
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3776	1794	2836	1076	1049	1035	2056

Source: 1964-1997: *British Election Study*.² Figures for 1964-1992 as quoted in Crewe et al. (1995) Respondents saying “don’t know” or who refused to answer have been excluded

The explanation for the failure of turnout to increase appears to lie in the fact that while those voters with a strong sense of political commitment were indeed just as likely to make it to the polls as before, those without that sense of commitment were particularly likely to stay at home. This pattern is apparent, for example, if we look at the reported level of turnout at recent elections according to how interested people say they are in politics (see Table 6). Whereas no less than 87% of those who say they have a “great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics claim to have voted, among those with “not much” or no interest in politics at all, the proportion was as low as 45%, lower than at any other recent general election.

Among those with “not much” or no interest in politics at all, the proportion who claim to have voted was as low as 45%

Table 6 Political interest and electoral participation, 1997-2015

	% who voted	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
Interest in politics						
Great deal/quite a lot		87	81	82	86	87
Some		81	72	72	71	77
Not much/None at all		67	51	52	53	45

Source: 1997: *British Election Study*

The bases for Table 6 can be found in the appendix to this chapter

A not dissimilar pattern is in evidence if we undertake an equivalent analysis of turnout by whether or not people feel a sense of duty to vote. As can be seen in Table 7, no less than 84% of those who feel that there is a duty to vote report having cast a ballot in the 2015

² Between 1964 and October 1974 the question read, ‘Considering everything the parties stand for would you say there is a good deal of difference between them, some difference or not much difference?’.

Just 24% of those who say that “it’s not really worth voting” claim to have voted

election. In contrast just 24% of those who say that “it’s not really worth voting” claim to have voted, a proportion which is lower (albeit not significantly so) than the 31% who did so in 2010, although it is no lower than the equivalent proportion in 2001 and 2005.

Table 7 Turnout, by civic duty, 1987-2015

% who voted	1987	2001	2005	2010	2015
It’s not really worth voting	37	24	24	31	24
People should only vote if they care who wins	75	49	50	60	54
It’s everyone’s duty to vote	92	85	85	86	84

Source: 1987: British Election Study

The bases for Table 7 can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Quite why voters who were not strongly motivated to vote were particularly disinclined to vote at this election is not immediately apparent. One possibility is that the focus during much of the campaign on ‘process’ questions about which party might be willing to do a deal with whom in the event that no single party were to win an overall majority (as anticipated by the opinion polls), did not capture the imagination of those with little interest in politics (Cowley and Kavanagh, 2016). Certainly those with little or no interest in politics (17%) are much more likely than those with “a great deal” or “quite a lot” of interest in politics (3%) to say they do not know whether they prefer single party or coalition government, a pattern that is not necessarily in evidence on other questions in our survey.

Low levels of turnout are often a source of considerable concern. One reason is that if turnout is relatively low, there is seemingly a greater risk that those who make it to the polling station are not representative of the public as a whole (Citrin et al., 2003). In that event the outcome of an election may not necessarily reflect the views of the majority of voters. Certainly those who belong to some social groups are more likely to vote than others. A particularly striking example is the difference between the level of participation among younger and that among older people. As Table 8 shows, such a difference has always been in evidence, but when turnout first fell markedly in 2001, it did so particularly among those aged less than 45, and this pattern was repeated in 2005 and 2010 (although the figure for 18-24 year olds in 2010 should be treated with caution as it comprised fewer than 100 respondents). Unsurprisingly therefore, the age gap in turnout was in evidence once again at the most recent election, although it is not quite as big as it was at the three previous elections.

The age gap in turnout was in evidence once again at the most recent election

Table 8 Turnout by age, 1997-2015

% voted in	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
1997	61	68	78	85	89	87
2001	43	55	65	78	74	82
2005	40	55	66	76	80	85
2010	45	49	67	75	84	88
2015	56	55	64	75	80	84

The bases for Table 8 can be found in the appendix to this chapter

Although the difference in turnout by age is the biggest, it is not the only one of note. In particular, those who are engaged in routine or semi-routine occupations (60%) are also less likely to vote than those in a professional and managerial job (80%). All in all, there would thus appear to be plenty of scope for the attitudes of those who participate in elections to be different from those who do not.

First, let us address this question by looking at the issue that is arguably central to most elections, and is certainly one whose salience has been particularly marked since the financial crash of 2008, namely what the level of public spending and taxation should be. Ever since the first British Social Attitudes survey in 1983 we have asked:

Suppose the government had to choose between the three options on this card. Which do you think it should choose?

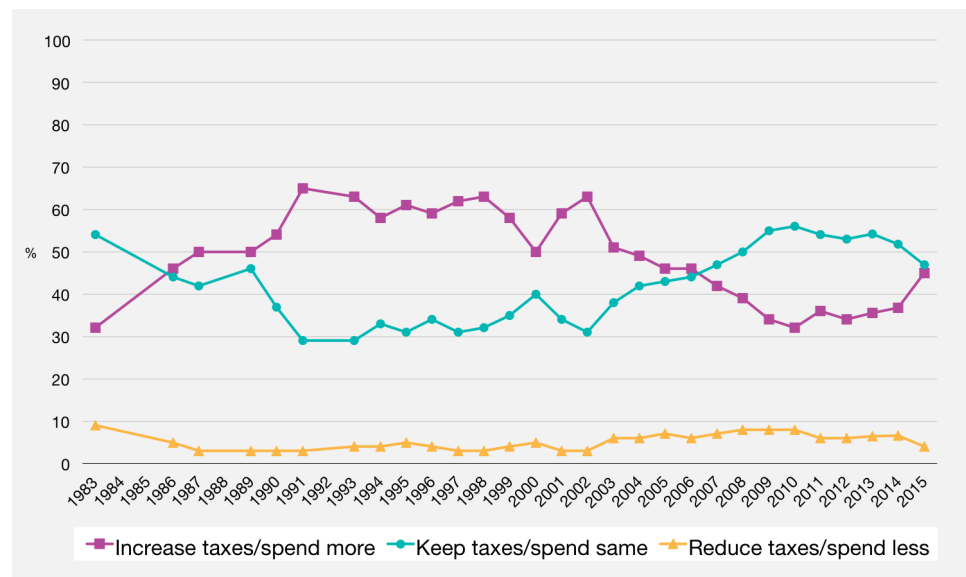
Reduce taxes and spend less on health, education and social benefits

Keep taxes and spending on these services at the same level as now

Increase taxes and spend more on health, education and social benefits

As Figure 7 shows, the distribution of responses to this question has changed quite considerably over time. The proportion who said that taxation and spending should be increased rose during the 1980s and 1990s, and was still as high as 63% in 2002. But thereafter the then Labour government presided over a substantial increase in public spending and the proportion began to fall away. By 2010, shortly after the financial crash did serious damage to the health of the government's finances, only 32% wanted more taxation and spending. On coming to power that year, the Coalition government formed by the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats, embarked on a programme of public expenditure cuts in an attempt to reduce the fiscal deficit, a decision to which the public might have been expected to react by swinging back again in favour of more spending (Curtice, 2010). However, until now there was little sign of any such reaction. Even four years into the programme of expenditure cuts, still only 37% said that they would like taxation and spending to increase.

Figure 7 Attitudes to taxation and spending on health, education and social benefits, 1983–2015



The data on which Figure 7 is based can be found in the appendix to this chapter

45% now say that taxes and spending should be increased, the highest proportion for nearly 10 years

However, there are now signs that this mood may finally be changing. In our latest survey as many as 45% now say that taxes and spending should be increased, the highest proportion to have done so for nearly 10 years. It is, though, a change that might be thought to be at odds with the fact that the Conservatives managed to win an overall majority in the 2015 election. Perhaps the explanation lies in the fact that those who were in favour of more spending and taxation were less likely to go to the polls, thereby delivering the Conservatives a majority they might not otherwise have obtained?

Of this, however, there is little sign. In fact, if anything, those who are in favour of increased taxation and spending (76%) were more likely to vote in the 2015 election than were those who felt that the level of taxation and spending should remain as it is (67%) or the (relatively small) group of people who would like a reduction (64%). As a result, among those who voted in the 2015 election, slightly more people were in favour of increased spending and taxation (49%) than wanted to keep taxation and spending as they are (45%). Still, while these differences may not help us account for the Conservatives' electoral success, they would seem to suggest that the views of those who participated in the 2015 election are not necessarily representative of the public as a whole.

For the most part, the views of those who turned out to vote in 2015 prove to be quite similar to those of the country as a whole

However, this finding is not typical. For the most part, the views of those who turned out to vote in 2015 prove to be quite similar to those of the country as a whole. This is even true of other questions in our survey that address various aspects of public spending and the delivery of public services. For example, at 24%, the proportion of those who voted in the 2015 election who agree that "benefits for unemployed people are too low and cause hardship" is exactly the same as that for respondents to the survey as a whole. The same is

true of the 59% who believe that “benefits for unemployed people are too high and discourage them from finding jobs”. Meanwhile, among those who voted in the election, 25% support limiting the NHS to those on lower incomes, while 55% are opposed, very similar to the equivalent figures for all respondents of 26% and 54% respectively.

Much the same pattern is also to be found if, instead of looking at attitudes towards specific aspects of public spending, we also look at people’s underlying views on the issue that lies at the heart of the division between those on the left and those on the right in British politics, that is the extent to which the government should intervene in the economy with a view to securing greater equality. This underlying attitudinal dimension is addressed by the set of questions that comprise our left-right scale, details of which are to be found in the technical appendix. The scale runs from 1 (left) to 5 (right). Among those who turned out in the 2015 election, 56% had a score of 2.5 or less, thereby classifying them as being inclined towards the left. At 58%, the equivalent figure for all respondents is only a little higher.

Conclusions

In some respects, the UK’s intense constitutional debate and experience in recent years has left its mark. We are, for the time being at least, none too enamoured of being governed by a coalition. More people in Scotland now support independence for their country, albeit they still constitute a minority of voters north of the border. Meanwhile in England a measure of interest in the idea of regional devolution seems to have emerged for the first time since the idea was knocked back by the voters of the North East of England.

Yet in other respects it is remarkable how little impression the debate seems to have made on public opinion. The sharp swing against the idea of changing the electoral system used in elections to the House of Commons that was in evidence on the occasion of the referendum on the Alternative Vote in 2011 has disappeared entirely, though this does not necessarily mean that the idea is now a particularly popular one. People in England have not reacted to the Scottish independence debate by adopting a more critical outlook towards Scotland’s place in the Union than they did already, though the introduction of at least a limited form of ‘English votes for English laws’ is an acknowledgement of a long-standing grievance among voters in England.

At first glance, then, it is not surprising that these major constitutional debates did not ensure that significantly more voters made it to the polls in the 2015 general election. Voters were for the most part apparently not moved by the arguments. Nevertheless, there are signs that some of the decline in political commitment among the electorate has been reversed, including not least an increase in the proportion who believe that they do have a duty to vote at election time. Yet for those who lack commitment to or interest in politics,

In other respects it is remarkable how little impression the debate seems to have made on public opinion

an election in which much of the campaign was dominated by arguments about process seems to have done little to encourage them to participate, albeit that the views of those who did vote seem to have been reasonably representative of the electorate as a whole.

As a result, for all its intensity, it is far from clear that the recent constitutional debate has done much to resolve any of the key questions about how Britain is and should be governed. The question of whether or not Scotland should remain part of the UK now divides voters north of the border. Attitudes towards the electoral system used in Commons elections appear to rest on weak foundations. While voters in England are not sure about devolution, only half of them endorse the status quo of rule from Westminster, and they might yet come to the conclusion that the version of 'English votes for English laws' that has now been put in place is inadequate. Meanwhile, getting voters to make it to the polls at all is still proving to be difficult. The days when Britain was a country that was confident in the stability and strength of its democracy still seem a long way away.

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Appendix

Tables

The data on which Figure 1 is based are as follows:

Table A.1 Preference for single party or coalition government, 1983-2015							
	1983	1986	1987	1991	1994	1995	1996
Government by 1 party	47	52	58	56	45	45	47
Coalition	49	43	37	40	49	50	48
Don't know	4	4	3	3	6	4	5
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1761</i>	<i>1548</i>	<i>1410</i>	<i>1445</i>	<i>1137</i>	<i>1227</i>	<i>1180</i>
	2003	2005	2007	2010	2011	2014	2015
Government by 1 party	43	48	48	48	63	62	59
Coalition	50	44	45	40	28	29	33
Don't know	6	8	7	11	9	8	8
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1160</i>	<i>1075</i>	<i>992</i>	<i>1081</i>	<i>2215</i>	<i>971</i>	<i>2140</i>

The data on which Figure 2 is based are as follows:

	1983	1986	1987	1990	1991	1992	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	39	32	30	34	37	33	34	37	33	39	32
Keep system as it is	54	60	64	59	58	60	60	58	59	53	63
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3955	1548	1410	1397	1445	3534	1137	1227	1196	1355	1035

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2005	2008	2010	2011	2015
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Change voting system	35	35	39	34	36	32	33	41	27	45
Keep system as it is	63	59	57	61	60	61	59	49	66	48
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1060	2293	1099	2287	1160	1075	1128	1081	2215	2140

Source: 1983, 1992: British Election Study

The data on which Figure 3 is based are as follows:

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scotland not in UK - Independent	27	30	27	30	26	32	35	30
Scotland in UK & parliament - Devolution	59	55	59	52	56	45	44	54
Scotland in UK & no parliament - No devolution	10	12	9	13	13	17	14	9
Don't know / Not answered	5	3	4	6	6	5	8	7
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1482	1663	1605	1665	1508	1637	1549	1594

	2007	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Scotland not in UK - Independent	24	28	23	32	23	29	33	39
Scotland in UK & parliament - Devolution	62	56	61	58	61	55	50	49
Scotland in UK & no parliament - No devolution	9	8	10	6	11	9	7	6
Don't know / Not answered	5	8	5	5	5	8	10	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1508	1482	1495	1197	1229	1497	1501	1288

Source: Scottish Social Attitudes

The data on which Figure 4 is based are as follows:

	1997	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2007	2011	2012	2013	2015
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Independence	14	21	19	19	19	17	19	26	25	20	22
Devolution	55	57	52	60	52	58	48	44	43	49	50
No parliament	23	14	17	11	15	13	18	19	23	18	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2536	902	1928	2761	1924	1917	859	967	939	925	1865

Source: 1997: British Election Study

Base: Respondents in England only

The data on which Figure 5 is based are as follows:

	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
Following is best for England...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	62	54	57	56	50	53	54	54
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health*	15	18	23	20	26	21	20	18
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	18	19	16	17	18	21	18	21
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2718	1928	2761	2897	3709	2684	1794	928

	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2015
Following is best for England...	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
England governed as it is now, with laws made by the UK parliament	57	51	49	53	56	56	56	51
Each region of England to have its own assembly that runs services like health*	14	15	15	13	12	15	15	22
England as whole to have its own new parliament with law-making powers	17	26	29	23	25	22	19	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	859	982	980	913	967	939	925	1865

* In 2004–2006 the second option read “that makes decisions about the region’s economy, planning and housing”. The 2003 survey carried both versions of this option and demonstrated that the difference of wording did not make a material difference to the pattern of response. The figures quoted for 2003 are those for the two versions combined

Base: Respondents in England only

The data on which Figure 6 is based are as follows:

Table A.6 Duty to vote, 1987-2015								
	87	91	94	96	98	00	01	04
It is not really worth voting	3	8	9	8	8	11	11	12
People should only vote if they care who wins	21	24	21	26	26	24	23	27
It is every-one's duty to vote	76	68	68	64	65	64	65	60
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>3413</i>	<i>1224</i>	<i>970</i>	<i>989</i>	<i>1654</i>	<i>2008</i>	<i>2795</i>	<i>2609</i>
	05	08	09	10	11	13	15	
It is not really worth voting	12	18	17	18	16	16	12	
People should only vote if they care who wins	23	23	23	20	21	24	20	
It is every-one's duty to vote	64	56	58	61	62	57	66	
<i>Unweighted base</i>	<i>1732</i>	<i>990</i>	<i>1017</i>	<i>921</i>	<i>1909</i>	<i>904</i>	<i>1812</i>	

Source: 1987: British Election Study

Bases for Table 6 are as follows:

Table A.7 Bases for political interest and electoral participation, 1997-2005						
	% who voted	1997	2001	2005	2010	2015
Interest in politics						
<i>Unweighted base (Great deal/quite a lot)</i>		939	1009	1422	333	1551
<i>Unweighted base (Some)</i>		1066	1107	1484	369	1409
<i>Unweighted base (Not much/None at all)</i>		901	1171	1362	365	1365

Bases for Table 7 are as follows:

Table A.8 Bases for turnout, by civic duty, 1987-2015						
	% who voted	1987	2001	2005	2010	2015
<i>Unweighted base (It's not really worth voting)</i>		109	317	210	157	221
<i>Unweighted base (People should only vote if they care who wins)</i>		697	644	379	169	351
<i>Unweighted base (It's everyone's duty to vote)</i>		2586	1798	1122	579	1200

Bases for Table 8 are as follows:

	18-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-64	65+
% voted in						
<i>Unweighted base (1997)</i>	316	580	566	518	386	532
<i>Unweighted base (2001)</i>	226	567	712	555	467	755
<i>Unweighted base (2005)</i>	330	627	870	713	730	996
<i>Unweighted base (2010)</i>	76	160	211	164	180	286
<i>Unweighted base (2015)</i>	290	635	728	764	711	1193

The data on which Figure 7 is based are as follows:

	1983	1984	1985	1986	1987	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	1993
View on level of taxation and spending	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increase taxes/spend more	32	n/a	n/a	46	50	n/a	50	54	65	n/a	63
Keep taxes/spend same	54	n/a	n/a	44	42	n/a	46	37	29	n/a	29
Reduce taxes/spend less	9	n/a	n/a	5	3	n/a	3	3	3	n/a	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1761	n/a	n/a	3100	2847	n/a	3029	2797	2918	n/a	2945
	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004
View on level of taxation and spending	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increase taxes/spend more	58	61	59	62	63	58	50	59	63	51	49
Keep taxes/spend same	33	31	34	31	32	35	40	34	31	38	42
Reduce taxes/spend less	4	5	4	3	3	4	5	3	3	6	6
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3469	3633	3620	1355	3146	3143	2292	3287	3435	3272	2146
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015
View on level of taxation and spending	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Increase taxes/spend more	46	46	42	39	34	32	36	34	36	37	45
Keep taxes/spend same	43	44	47	50	55	56	54	53	54	52	47
Reduce taxes/spend less	7	6	7	8	8	8	6	6	6	7	4
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2166	3240	3094	2229	1139	3297	3311	3248	3244	2878	3266

n/a = not asked

Party political identification questions

The British Social Attitudes questions to ascertain party identification are as follows.

First, all respondents are asked:

Generally speaking, do you think of yourself as a supporter of any one political party?

Those who do not name a party in response are then asked:

Do you think of yourself as a little closer to one political party than to the others?

Those who still do not name a party are then asked:

If there were a general election tomorrow, which political party do you think you would be most likely to support?

Finally, all those who named a party at any of these questions are asked about the strength of their support or allegiance:

Would you call yourself very strong (party), fairly strong, or not very strong?