

The people think it's good to talk about how they are governed

 blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/the-people-think-its-good-to-talk-about-how-were-governed/

4/1/2015

Underestimating the public's interest in being involved in discussions about the UK's constitutional future is a mistake, find [Jan Eichhorn](#) and [Daniel Kenealy](#) in a wide-ranging survey. Moreover, when asked how decisions should be made about how England should be governed, the most popular option in all regions of England was to hold a referendum.



The issue of how the UK is governed is, in the aftermath of Scotland's independence referendum, firmly on the political agenda. Recent months have seen a spate of developments in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, and the North West of England. Along with colleagues at Edinburgh University, we have over the past three months been conducting research on attitudes of decision-makers, opinion formers, and the public, about how the UK is governed. We interviewed over 25 politicians, civil servants, and representatives of civic society and used insights from those interviews to help construct a survey of over 7,400 people across the UK in February 2015.



It was striking that, even in Scotland – where a revival of civic engagement has been attributed to the referendum – those we interviewed who were part of the [Smith Commission](#) process were broadly of the view that people did not want to spend considerable amounts of time discussing how the UK is governed and what further powers might be devolved to Scotland. There was a sense that the momentum of the referendum had to be maintained and that a package of new powers for Scotland had to be agreed according to a rapid timetable, set by the Prime Minister.

Within that accelerated timetable, the Smith Commission did contain a public engagement exercise. Over 18,000 submissions were received and, remarkably, civil servants made a serious effort to distil and summarise those submissions into some sort of usable format. However, despite this, the public engagement remained rather superficial. Those we interviewed reported to us that submissions were largely used to support the pre-existing positions of the political parties and those submissions from individual citizens, as opposed to those of prominent organisations, were largely ignored.

It is fair to say that a combination of two views – first, that people did not particularly want to spend time discussing devolution and second, that the views of the public were fairly well known to politicians – served to marginalise public involvement in the Smith Commission.

Underestimating the public's interest in being involved in discussions about the UK's constitutional future is a mistake, as our survey findings show. Only a minority of people (around one quarter) in each part of the UK (of those who expressed a view) thought that too much time has been spent discussing how the UK is governed, while the most common answer was that too little time was being spent on such discussions.

Table 1: Evaluation of how much time has been spent discussing how the UK is governed by country (%)

	England	Scotland	Northern Ireland	Wales
Too much	27	24	29	25
Right amount	29	27	25	25
Too little	44	48	46	50

Total (100%)	3285	1410	487	940
--------------	------	------	-----	-----

Note: “Don’t know” responses were excluded from this analysis; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

What may surprise some is that this interest is not only present in post-referendum Scotland. Indeed, there seems to be a referendum effect on Scots engagement with 76 per cent saying they are certain to vote in the May general election, compared to 63 per cent in England, 64 per cent in Wales and 55 per cent in Northern Ireland (see Table 1).

None of this means however, that people in other parts do not care about the relationship between their respective country and the United Kingdom. Looking at England, for example, we see a clear public desire to engage with the process of deciding how the country is governed.

Table 2: Decision making preference over how England is governed by region (row %age)

	Westminster	Referendum	Constitutional convention	Total (100%)
North East	30	60	10	362
North West	30	61	9	405
Yorkshire and Humberside	30	60	10	406
West Midlands	37	55	8	394
East Midlands	38	51	11	396
East Anglia	35	59	6	356
South West	34	57	9	398
South East	37	55	8	397
Greater London	43	46	11	407

Note: Don’t know responses were excluded from the analysis (Full sample: 4027); Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

When asked how decisions should be made about how England should be governed, the most popular option in all regions of England was to hold a referendum, strongly ahead of support for the UK parliament deciding (except for Greater London, where that option was nearly as popular) and a constitutional convention (see Table 2).

A referendum is the top choice for a majority of all political party identifiers in England (UKIP 73 per cent, Green Party 61 per cent, Labour 56 per cent and the Liberal Democrats 47 per cent) with the exception of people feeling close to the Conservatives where the largest number of respondents chose the UK Parliament at Westminster deciding as their top choice (51 per cent).

The bottom line is this: people in England want to discuss the issue of how they are governed and they want to have a say in the actual decision. It is unfortunate that the most significant development in English devolution in many years, the [devolution of powers](#) to the Greater Manchester Combined Authority, has so far failed to engage the public

in any significant way. Indeed the proposals have been developed in bilateral conversations between officials at the UK Treasury (strongly supported by Chancellor George Osborne) and senior Labour politicians in Greater Manchester. This failure to engage the public was recognised by some of those we interviewed in the North West. Others told us that politicians saw themselves as ahead of the public on this issue and that the new powers would be more easily sold to the public once secured and being used.

A range of different options has been discussed for the devolution of powers in England. Three major suggestions that have dominated the debate are ‘[English Votes for English Laws](#)’ (EVEL), regional assemblies, and the transferral of powers to city regions. While often presented as mutually exclusive options, all three proposals have appeal with the people of England. While the most extensive support can be observed for EVEL, with over 7 in 10 respondents agreeing with that proposition, the other two options also gather over 50 per cent support. This suggests that many people are looking for a package of governance reforms, rather than a single silver bullet.

However, there is great variation in support across different groups of the population. Support for EVEL increases with age: 52 per cent of those aged 18-24 agree with the proposal, while 84 per cent of those aged 65 or above support it. We see strong differences between people who feel close to different political parties (see Table 3). While Conservative and UKIP identifiers clearly support EVEL as the best option, Labour and Green identifiers do not have a particular priority choice.

Table 3: Agreement with different constitutional options for England by political party affinity

	% agreeing with propositions for		
	EVEL	Regional assemblies	City regions power
Conservative Party	84	47	51
Labour Party	59	58	60
Liberal Democrats	64	52	57
UK Independence Party	86	54	58
Green Party	64	64	64
Not close to any party	69	51	56
Sample size	3327	3241	3278

Note: Don’t know/Prefer not to say responses and parties with fewer than 5% of people feeling close to them were excluded from the analysis (Full sample: 4027). Responses missing to 100% are ‘neither agree nor disagree’ and ‘disagree’; Percentages are weighted, sample size is unweighted

The survey responses suggest that Ed Miliband’s suggestion of a constitutional convention, to consider the issue of how the UK is governed in a more holistic way, may find broad support amongst the public. Although people do not want a constitutional convention to take the final decision (see Table 2), 60 per cent or more of people in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland are supportive of such a convention developing proposals for reforming how the UK is governed. Whilst EVEL is popular and Labour may well wish to re-evaluate their stance on the matter, they should not do so at the expense of taking a broader view and seeking to construct a package of reforms. And, crucially, they should do it in dialogue with the public.

Note: Details about the methodology and the briefings with our detailed findings can be found [here](#). This article gives

the views of the authors, and not the position of the British Politics and Policy blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please read our [comments policy](#) before posting.

About the Authors

Jan Eichhorn is Chancellor's Fellow in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science.



Daniel Kenealy is Lecturer in Social Policy at the University of Edinburgh's School of Social and Political Science.

