

Public Services and Government

Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2007: Core Module Report 1 – Attitudes to government in Scotland

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The Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey was launched by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 1999. Since then it has tracked attitudes to devolved government in Scotland annually. This report summarises the key findings from a report exploring trends in attitudes to government from 1999 to 2007. It focuses in particular on questions funded by the Scottish Executive's Office of Chief Researcher from 2004 to 2007. The fieldwork on which these findings are based was conducted between late May and early November 2007, with 87% complete before the Scottish Executive changed its name to the 'Scottish Government'. The questions therefore referred to the Scottish Executive and the term Scottish Executive is used throughout the following report.

Main Findings

- Positive public perceptions of government in Scotland increased substantially across a range of measures between 2006 and 2007.
 - The proportion who trusted the Scottish Executive to act in Scotland's interests 'just about always' or 'most of the time' increased from 51% in 2006 to 71% in 2007.
 - Similarly, the proportion who trusted the Scottish Executive 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' to make fair decisions increased from 31% to 47%.
 - At the same time, trust in the UK government also increased – for example 35% trusted the UK government to act in Scotland's interests 'just about always' or 'most of the time' in 2007, up from 21% in 2006.
 - In 2007, the proportion who thought having a Scottish Parliament gives ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed outweighed (just) the proportion who thought it made no difference for the first time since 1999 (47% compared with 45%).
 - The proportion saying having a Scottish Parliament gives Scotland a stronger voice in the UK increased from 43% in 2006 to 61% in 2007.
 - 43% of people said the Scottish Executive was 'very' or 'quite good' at listening to people before taking decisions in 2007, compared with 36% in 2006. There was a gradual increase in the proportion saying the same of the UK government from 15% in 2004 to 21% in 2007.
- These shifts in attitudes between 2006 and 2007 were apparent across different social groups in Scotland.
- However, the increase in trust in the Scottish Executive appeared to be particularly pronounced among those with no qualifications and, to a lesser extent, among tabloid readers.
- Further years of data will be required to establish whether these findings reflect a short-term 'election bounce', or the start of a longer-term change in attitudes to government in Scotland.
- There was less change in public attitudes to standards in public services in the last year or the impact of the Scottish Parliament on public services between 2006 and 2007.
- Similarly, the change in the proportion who thought the Scottish Executive has most influence over how Scotland is run - from 13% in 2000 to 28% in 2007 - represents a slow but steady increase rather than a substantial shift from 2006 to 2007. However, far more people still said the UK government had most influence (47% in 2007).
- The average 'confidence score' with respect to the accuracy of official statistics was 5.43, reflecting the fact that most people fell between the extremes of complete confidence (10) and complete lack of confidence (0).

Introduction

This summary presents key findings from the 2007 *Scottish Social Attitudes* survey report on public attitudes to government in Scotland. It addresses the following key questions:

- How have attitudes to government changed in recent years? And
- Whose views have changed?

Related findings on public confidence in Scottish Executive statistics are also summarised.

Trends in attitudes to government, 1999-2007

Public perceptions of government in Scotland changed across a range of measures between 2006 and 2007. The proportion of people who said they trusted the Scottish Executive 'just about always' or 'most of the time' to act in Scotland's interests fluctuated between around a half and two-thirds from 2000 to 2006. However, it increased from 51% in 2006 to 71% in 2007. Trust in government to make 'fair decisions' also increased – in 2006, 31% trusted the Scottish Executive 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' on this measure, rising to 47% in 2007. Trust in the UK government remained lower than trust in the Scottish Executive. However, the UK government also saw increases in trust between 2006 and 2007 – for example, a rise from 21% to 35% in the proportion who trust them 'just about always' or 'most of the time' to act in Scotland's best interests.

In 2007, for the first time since 1999, the proportion of people who thought that having a Scottish Parliament gives ordinary people 'more say' in how Scotland is governed outweighed (just) the proportion who said it made 'no difference' (47% compared with 45%). Moreover, there was an 18 percentage point increase in the proportion saying that having a Scottish Parliament gave Scotland a 'stronger voice' within the UK (from 43% in 2006 to 61% in 2007).

There was also an increase in the proportion who said the Scottish Executive was 'very' or 'quite good' at listening to people's views before taking decisions, from 36% in 2006 to 43% in 2007. In comparison, the proportion who thought the UK government was very good at listening was lower, at 21%. However, there has been a gradual increase in the proportion saying the UK government is 'very' or 'quite good' at listening since 2004 (from 15% to 21%).

In other areas, there has either been less change in public attitudes between 2006 and 2007 (with respect to standards in public services in the last year, for instance), or changes reflect a more gradual trend rather than a pronounced shift from 2006 to 2007. For example, there has been a slow but steady increase in the proportion saying the Scottish Executive is the institution with most influence over how Scotland is run, from 13% in 2000 to 28% in 2007. However, this was still outweighed by the proportion who considered the UK government most influential (47% in 2007).

At this stage, it is difficult to interpret the meaning of the kinds of short-term shifts in attitudes to government discussed above. The results may reflect high public aspiration for the new government. Previous surveys have shown 'election bounces' in attitudes to government which are not usually maintained in subsequent years.¹ It is possible that the shifts observed in the 2007 SSA reflect similar improvements in the political fortunes of the leading parties following elections (in Scotland) or leadership changes (in the UK) which may not be sustained in the longer-term. Alternatively, it may be that these shifts represent the start of an era of higher trust in government and improved belief in the impact of devolution. Such interpretations are, however, wholly speculative. Further years of data are required to establish whether the changes observed in 2007 are a short-term peak or the start of something more significant.

Whose views have changed?

Perceptions of government changed from 2006 to 2007 across many different social groups in Scotland, including both men and women, people of different ages, people in deprived and affluent areas and people in urban and rural areas of Scotland.

With respect to education, trust in the Scottish Executive appears to have increased more among those with no qualifications, who were shown to be *less* trusting in earlier years of the survey. For example, on the 'fair decisions' measure, a 23 point increase in trust (from 23% in 2006 to 46% in 2007) was apparent among those with no qualifications, compared with a 6 point increase (41% to 47%) among those with degrees.

Increases in trust to act in Scotland's best interests were particularly pronounced among newspaper readers, and

¹ E.g. Bromley and Curtice (2002) 'Where have all the voters gone?' in Park, A et al (eds) *British Social Attitudes: the 19th Report*. London:Sage

especially tabloid readers – another group who have previously been less trusting. For example, in 2006 just 43% of tabloid readers said they trusted the Scottish Executive ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ to act in Scotland’s interests, rising to 68% by 2007. However, broadsheet readers remained more trusting overall (77%).

SNP identifiers were particularly likely to express more positive views of government in Scotland in 2007 compared with 2006. For example, the proportion of SNP identifiers who said having a Scottish Parliament strengthened Scotland’s voice in the UK increased from 43% in 2006 to 77% in 2007. However, trust in government and belief in the impact of devolution on ordinary people’s say in government and on Scotland’s voice in the UK also increased among supporters of other political parties and none between 2006 and 2007.

Confidence in government statistics

The average ‘confidence’ score with respect to the accuracy of government statistics (measured on a scale of 0 for ‘not confident at all’ to 10 for ‘very confident’) was 5.43. This compares with 2007 ONS findings which show that hospital waiting figures are least trusted (with an average score of 4.89) and road casualty statistics most trusted (7.27).²

Those who are more trusting of other people in general and of the Scottish Executive in particular expressed higher levels of confidence, as did employers, managers and professionals compared with those in routine or semi-routine occupations.

The most common reasons for expressing low levels of confidence in the accuracy of Scottish Executive statistics were personal experience (27% of those giving a score of 0-3), the belief that official statistics are misrepresented or ‘spun’ by politicians (27%) and the belief that statistics do not tell the whole story (14%).

Methodology

The Scottish Social Attitudes survey involves c. 1,500 interviews annually, with respondents selected using random probability sampling to ensure that the results are robust and representative of the Scottish population. The 2007 survey, which was conducted between May and early November 2007, involved face-to-face interviews and a self-completion questionnaire.

² Lader, D (2008) *Public confidence in official statistics*, 2007, ONS

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The report, "Scottish Social Attitudes Survey 2007: Core Module Report 1 – Attitudes to Government in Scotland", which is summarised in this research findings is a web only document and is available on the publications pages of the Scottish Government website at

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