

Public Services and Government

Scottish Social Attitudes survey 2009: Core module – attitudes to government, the economy and public services in Scotland

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The Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey was launched by the Scottish Centre for Social Research in 1999, with the aim of providing robust data on changing public attitudes in Scotland. This report summarises the key findings from a report exploring trends in attitudes to government, the economy and public services. It focuses in particular on questions funded since 2004 by the Scottish Government's Office of the Chief Researcher. It explores both longer-term trends in public opinion since the start of devolution in 1999 and changes in attitudes over the shorter period since the last SSA took place in 2007.

Main Findings

- The proportion who trusted the Scottish Government 'just about always' or 'most of the time' to act in Scotland's interests fell from 71% in 2007 to 61% in 2009. But this remained higher than the levels of trust recorded between 2004 and 2006. Moreover, more people trusted the Scottish Government to act in Scotland's interests than trusted the UK Government to do the same (61% compared with 25%).
- The proportion who felt having a Scottish Parliament was giving Scotland a stronger voice in the UK also fell from 61% in 2007 to 52% in 2009. However, again this was still higher than the equivalent figures for 2004 to 2006.
- 47% felt having a Scottish Parliament gave ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed in both 2007 and 2009 (though a similar proportion thought it made no difference).
- The proportion who believed the Scottish Government was 'very' or 'quite' good at listening increased from 43% in 2007 to 48% in 2009.
- There has been a gradual increase since 2000 onwards in the proportion who think the Scottish Government is the institution with most influence over how Scotland is run, from 13% in 2000 to 33% in 2009.
- In 2009, for the first time, more people thought standards in the NHS in Scotland in the previous 12 months reflected Scottish Government rather than UK Government policies.
- Men, the more highly educated, broadsheet readers, SNP supporters and those who support Scotland having its own parliament (whether devolved or independent) were more positive about government in Scotland in general than women, those with no qualifications, Labour and Conservative supporters and those opposed to devolution.
- 72% of people felt the economy in Scotland had got weaker in the 12 months prior to the 2009 survey (compared with 11% in 2007).
- Views of the general standard of living in Scotland were similarly more negative in 2009 compared with 2007. However, people did not appear to be significantly more negative about their own personal standard of living.
- The proportion of people in Scotland who favoured increasing levels of taxation and public spending fell from 56% in 2004 to 37% in 2009.
- 42% felt benefits for the unemployed were too high and discouraged job seeking in 2009, up from 32% in 2003.

Introduction

This paper presents findings from the 2009 Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) on two key questions:

- How have attitudes to government, public services and the economy changed over time? And
- Who held more or less positive views on these issues in 2009?

Changing attitudes to government in Scotland

At the outset of devolution in 1999, expectations of the new Scottish institutions of government were very high – for example, 81% believed they would trust the Scottish Parliament ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ to act in Scotland’s interests, 64% thought having a Scottish Parliament would give ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed and 70% thought it would give Scotland a stronger voice in the UK.

However, SSA data from 2000 to 2006 suggest that these initial expectations, perhaps unsurprisingly were not completely met in practice. By 2006, around half said they trusted the Scottish Government ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ to act in Scotland’s interests. Moreover, by 2006 more people believed that having a Scottish Parliament was making no difference to ordinary people’s say in government and Scotland’s voice in the UK than thought devolution was improving these things.

In 2007, this picture changed dramatically. The proportions who trusted the Scottish Government to act in Scotland’s interests and to make fair decisions increased significantly (from 51% to 71% and from 31% to 47% respectively). More people (albeit only just) said they thought having a Scottish Parliament was giving ordinary people more say than felt it was making no difference (47% vs. 45%). Similarly, for the first time since 2003 more people felt having a Scottish Parliament was giving Scotland a stronger voice in the UK than that it was making no difference (61% vs. 32%).

A key question for this study was whether or not these improvements in public perceptions of government in Scotland had been maintained into 2009. The answer appears to be no, not completely. Trust in the Scottish Government to act in Scotland’s interests fell by 10 percentage points between 2007 and 2009. The proportion of people who trusted them to make fair decisions also fell by 11 points. Trust in the UK government to act in Scotland’s interests and to make fair decisions also fell (by 10 points and 15 points respectively) between 2007 and 2009. At the

same time, fewer people felt that having a Scottish Parliament was giving Scotland a stronger voice in the UK than said this in 2007 (down to 52% from 61%).

However, there were some areas where attitudes remained similarly positive or even improved on 2007 figures. For example, there was no decrease in the proportion who felt having a Scottish Parliament gave ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed (47% in both 2007 and 2009). Meanwhile, the proportion of people who believed the Scottish Government was ‘very’ or ‘quite good’ at listening continued to rise (48%, up from 43% in 2007). Moreover, the proportion who believed the Scottish Government was the institution with most influence over how Scotland is run increased from 28% in 2007 to 33% in 2009, reflecting a gradual upward trend from 2000 onwards in the proportion who believe the devolved political institutions have most influence over Scotland’s affairs.

Further, even in those areas where attitudes were more negative than in 2007, when set against the context of 10 years of data since 1999, public opinion in 2009 arguably remained relatively upbeat. For example, the proportion who said having a Scottish Parliament gave Scotland a stronger voice in UK and the proportion who said they trusted the Scottish Government ‘always’ or ‘most of the time’ to act in Scotland’s interests were both higher in 2009 than in any year from 2004 to 2006.

Moreover, views of the Scottish Government remained more positive than views of the UK government. People in Scotland expressed greater trust in the Scottish Government than in the UK government to act in Scotland’s interests (61% vs. 25%) and make fair decisions (36% vs. 18%). Similarly, more people said the Scottish Government was ‘very’ or ‘quite good’ at listening than said the same of the UK Government (48% vs. 18%).

Changing attitudes to economic performance and public services

The 2009 SSA took place when Britain was in the middle of a severe recession. This was clearly reflected in public perceptions of the performance of the economy and the general standard of living in Scotland over the previous 12 months. While in 2007 more people thought the economy had got stronger than felt it had got weaker in the preceding year, in 2009 this picture was completely reversed – 72% thought the economy had got weaker and just 8% that it had improved. The balance of opinion on the general standard of living was similarly more negative in 2009 compared with 2007.

However, very few people appeared to attribute negative economic performance or falls in living standards to Scottish Government policies. Just 14% thought the recent standard of the economy resulted from Scottish Government policies, compared with 31% who thought it reflected UK government policies and 36% who attributed it to some other reason.

Poor perceptions of living standards in Scotland in general did not appear to be reflected in a dramatic decrease in people's levels of satisfaction with their own standard of living – at 7.64 (out of a possible 10), the 'mean' satisfaction score for people's own standard of living was not significantly lower than that recorded in 2007.

Changing public perceptions of Scotland's economic performance were reflected in changing priorities for Scottish Government action – 33% said the Scottish Government should prioritise helping the economy to grow faster, compared with 16% who said the same in 2007. At the same time, the proportion who said it should prioritise cutting crime fell from 27% to 17%.

In Scotland, as in Britain as a whole, public opinion has shifted over the last decade from a clear majority favouring increasing taxes and spending on public services, towards more people thinking that tax and spending levels should be kept the same. In 2009, 53% thought the level of taxation and spending should stay the same (up from 35% in 2004), compared with just 37% who wanted an increase (down from 56% in 2004). Similarly, 42% in 2009 said that benefits for the unemployed were too high and discourage job seeking (up from 32% in 2003), compared with 31% who felt they were too low and caused hardship (down from 41% in 2003).

In terms of perceptions of public service performance over the last year, the 2009 survey showed that the proportion of people who thought standards in the Health Service had increased outweighed the proportion who thought they had fallen, albeit only just. This was an improvement on 2004 to 2006, when more people felt standards in the Health Service were falling than increasing. At the same time, there were falls in the proportions who believed standards in education and public transport were increasing. However, the most common response with respect to each service was that standards had not changed in the previous 12 months.

In 2009, for the first time, the proportion of people who thought recent standards in the health service in Scotland reflected Scottish Government policies outweighed the proportion that attributed standards in the health service to the UK government. More generally the 2009 data again suggested that the Scottish Government gets a greater amount of the 'credit' from those who believe standards are improving, and a relatively small share of the 'blame' from

those who think things are getting worse. Previous indications that the Scottish institutions might be starting to pick up more of the 'blame' as well as the credit over time were not reflected in the 2009 data.

How do attitudes vary?

Some groups of people in Scotland were particularly likely to hold positive views of the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament in 2009. These included:

- **Men** – 43% of men, compared with 29% of women, trusted the Scottish Government 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' to make fair decisions
- Those with **higher levels of education** – 71% of those with higher education qualifications, compared with 52% of those with no qualifications, trusted the Scottish Government 'just about always' or 'most of the time' to act in Scotland's interests
- **Broadsheet readers** displayed higher levels of trust than tabloid readers in the Scottish Government to act in Scotland's interests (69% compared with 53%)
- **SNP supporters** – 65% of SNP supporters said having a Scottish Parliament was giving ordinary people more say, compared with 43% of Labour supporters, 40% of Conservatives and 35% of those who did not identify with any political party
- Those who supported either **devolution** or **independence** were much more likely than those who would prefer Scotland not to have its own parliament to hold positive views of both the Scottish Government and Parliament
- Those who **trust other** people in general also tended to be more trusting of the Scottish Government
- Similarly, those who were **more 'socially connected'** within their community were more positive about the impact of the Scottish Parliament
- And those who were **more active in making their views known** on issues of importance to them were more likely to believe that having a Scottish Parliament was giving ordinary people more say.

In comparison with findings from SSA 2007, these findings suggest something of a return to the status quo. Divides that were less apparent in 2007 – by education, party-political identification and constitutional preference – had re-emerged in the 2009 data.

Many people across all social groups felt that both the economy and living standards in Scotland had worsened in the previous 12 months. Those who were unemployed were particularly likely to feel the economy had got a lot worse, while those who were finding it difficult to cope on their income were particularly likely to feel the general standard of living had fallen.

In terms of people's perceptions of their own standard of living, those on lower household incomes, those who were unemployed or permanently sick or disabled, those who felt they were struggling to cope on their income, and those who felt their health was bad or very bad all had lower average 'satisfaction' scores than other groups. These findings were broadly in line with findings from the 2007 survey – as of 2009, there was no evidence that particular groups had become much more negative in their perceptions of their own living standards since the recession.

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 2009 survey, which was conducted between April and September 2009, involved face-to-face interviews and a self-completion questionnaire.

This document, along with full research report of the project, and further information about social and policy research commissioned and published on behalf of the Scottish Government, can be viewed on the Internet at: <http://www.scotland.gov.uk/socialresearch>. If you have any further queries about social research, please contact us at socialresearch@scotland.gsi.gov.uk or on 0131-244 7560.



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