

Public Services and Government

Scottish Social Attitudes survey 2011: 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 ScotCen Social Research in 1999, with the aim of providing robust data on changing public attitudes in Scotland. This report uses SSA data from 1999 onwards to explore changing attitudes to government, the economy and public services. It also discusses findings on who people think should be responsible for providing and paying for particular public services.

Main Findings

- Attitudes towards the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament were significantly more positive in 2011 compared with 2010 across a wide range of measures. For example:
 - 71% in 2011, compared with 61% in 2010, trusted the Scottish Government ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’ to act in Scotland’s best interests
 - 60% in 2011, compared with 42% in 2010, felt that having a Scottish Parliament gives ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed
- Perceptions of the UK Government remained more negative than those of the Scottish Government. For example, just 18% trusted the UK Government to act in Scotland’s best interests.
- Growing the economy remained the most commonly chosen priority for the Scottish Government (chosen by 36%, in comparison with 17% who chose the next most popular option, ‘cut crime’).
- Views of the economy were a little more positive in 2011 compared with 2010, though the balance of opinion remained negative (57% felt the economy had got weaker in the last 12 months). More (67%, compared with 54% in 2010) felt the standard of living had fallen in the last year.
- Mean satisfaction with people’s own standard of living changed little between 2007 and 2011 (7.79 in 2007; 7.75 in 2011).
- The most common view of standards in the health service, education and public transport in Scotland was that they had stayed the same in the previous year.
- 56% were ‘very’ or ‘quite satisfied’ with the way the NHS runs nowadays.
- More people felt that government rather than private companies would provide more cost effective (56%) and better quality (60%) services for older people who need regular help. This picture was reversed in relation to charities or not-for-profit providers – 56% felt charities would provide a more cost effective service than government, and 54% that they would provide better quality services.
- While 51% of people said that the government should always pay for personal care for older people, 46% thought who pays should depend on how much money a person has at their disposal.

Introduction

This report presents findings from the Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey on three key questions:

- How have attitudes to government, public services, the economy and living standards changed over time?
- Who held more positive views on these issues in 2011 (and how did this compare with 2010)?
- Who do people think should be responsible for providing and funding particular public services?

Changing attitudes to government

Attitudes towards the Scottish Government and Scottish Parliament were significantly more positive in 2011 compared with 2010 across a wide range of measures:

- More people said they trusted the Scottish Government 'just about always' or 'most of the time' to act in Scotland's best interests (61% in 2010, 71% in 2011)
- More trusted the Scottish Government 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' to make fair decisions (35% in 2010, 46% in 2011)
- People were more likely to say the Scottish Government was 'very' or 'quite good' at listening to people's views before taking decisions (45% in 2010, 56% in 2011)
- The proportion who felt having a Scottish Parliament gives ordinary people more say in how Scotland is governed increased from 42% in 2010 to 60% in 2011
- Similarly, people were more likely to feel the Scottish Parliament strengthened Scotland's voice in the UK (49% in 2010, 69% in 2011).

People were also comparatively more aware of the activities of the Scottish Government – 49% said they had heard 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' about these in the last 12 months, compared with 38% who said the same in 2010.

Attitudes to the UK Government remained more negative than views of the Scottish Government. For example, while 71% trusted the Scottish Government to act in Scotland's interests 'just about always' or most of the time, just 18% said the same of the UK Government.

Previous evidence from both the Scottish and British Social Attitudes surveys have shown that public views of government are often more positive in election years – an 'election bounce'. However, the size of some of the increases in positive attitudes between 2010 and 2011 was particularly marked. Perceptions of the Parliament in particular for the first time almost matched the (very high) expectations for the Parliament recorded in the 1999 survey.

How do attitudes vary?

Those most likely to express positive views about the Scottish Government and Parliament in 2011 included: men; graduates; readers of broadsheet newspapers; people with 'a great deal' or 'quite a lot' of interest in politics; those who identify with the SNP; and those who favour more powers for the Scottish Parliament.

In contrast with the Scottish population as a whole, only a minority of those who did not identify with any political party or who had 'not very much' or no interest in politics expressed positive views about the Scottish Government and Parliament. Moreover, these groups were less likely than party identifiers and the politically interested to have become more positive since 2010, suggesting that those who are least engaged with politics are less likely to be included in any 'election bounce' in public opinion.

Groups whose views shifted most between 2010 and 2011 included men, the politically interested and tabloid readers. In terms of party political identification, although SNP identifiers were significantly more positive in 2011 compared with 2010, the views of Labour and Conservative supporters also shifted. An 'election bounce' in perceptions of government in Scotland was thus apparent across the political spectrum.

Changing views of the economy and living standards

The 2011 SSA survey took place against a backdrop of ongoing economic austerity and public sector budget restraint. This was reflected in people's priorities for government and their views of the economy and standard of living. 'Helping the economy to grow faster' remained the most commonly chosen priority for the Scottish Government for the third occasion in a row (chosen by 36%, in comparison to 17% who chose the next most popular option, 'cut crime'). Views of the economy were slightly more positive than they were in 2010. However, the balance of

opinion remained very negative, with 57% saying they felt Scotland's economy had got weaker in the 12 months prior to the survey. Meanwhile, perceptions of the general standard of living in Scotland were even more negative in 2011 compared with 2010 – 67% felt that the standard of living had fallen in the last year, compared with 54% who said the same in 2010.

However, the SSA survey again indicates that these negative perceptions of the economy and the general standard of living have not been associated with a significant decrease in people's assessments of their own standard of living or their satisfaction with their lives as a whole. In 2011, the mean score for people's satisfaction with their own standard of living was 7.75 (out of a possible 10) – little different from the mean score of 7.79 recorded in 2007. While this may seem paradoxical, it links with existing research which suggests that subjective assessments of our own lives are primarily affected by relative rather than absolute living standards. In other words, if people believe living standards have fallen across Scotland they may still be relatively satisfied with their own. Nevertheless, there remain significant differences in people's perceptions of their own standard of living by employment status, income and self-rated hardship. Those who are unemployed, permanently sick or disabled, on low incomes, or who feel they are struggling on their current income were all less satisfied with their standard of living in comparison with other groups.

Changing views of standards in public services

In 2011, the most common view of standards in the health service, education and public transport in Scotland was that they had stayed the same in the last 12 months. A minority (31% for health, 26% for education and 21% for transport) felt standards had fallen, while around 1 in 5 in each case felt standards were increasing.

Over half (56%) were 'very or 'quite' satisfied with the way the NHS was run. In contrast, just 22% felt standards in the health service had increased over the last 12 months. Even among those who felt standards had fallen in the last year, a quarter (27%) were nonetheless satisfied with NHS performance overall. This may suggest that people are basing their responses to these two questions on rather different considerations. For example, perhaps people are more likely to draw on personal experience of specific services in assessing their overall satisfaction, while perceptions of standards may be more influenced by other factors, like media coverage.

Satisfaction with the NHS in Scotland has been gradually increasing since 2005 (from 40% in 2005 to 56% in 2011).

Changing views of responsibility and influence

The proportion of people in Scotland who think the Scottish Government is the body with most influence over how Scotland is run continues to lag behind the proportion that think it ought to have most influence (38% compared with 73%). However, there has been a steady increase in the proportion saying the Scottish Government has most influence, from 13% in 2000 to 38% in 2011.

In terms of where people attribute responsibility for the performance of specific public services, the public remains divided over whether the performance of the health service reflects UK Government policies (31%) or Scottish Government policies (31%). In contrast, since 2004/2005 more people have attributed standards in education and public transport in Scotland to the Scottish Government than believe these reflect UK Government policies.

Perhaps surprisingly, perceptions of who has most influence overall over how Scotland is run and beliefs about who is responsible for the performance of particular public services, the economy and the standard of living do not appear to be particularly closely related. Rather, beliefs about who has most influence over Scotland as a whole appear to be more closely associated with general political beliefs and impressions of the efficacy of the Scottish political institutions in promoting Scotland's interests.

The 2011 survey confirms a long-standing pattern showing that the Scottish public tend to 'blame' the UK Government when they believe standards are falling but 'credit' the Scottish Government when they think standards are increasing. In relation to the economy, this uneven pattern of credit and blame was even more marked in 2011 compared with 2010. 69% of the minority who felt that the economy had improved in the last year attributed this to Scottish Government policies, while 54% of the majority who felt the economy had got weaker felt this was the result of UK Government policy.

Attitudes to providing and funding particular services

The need to restructure and maximise value from limited public sector budgets has led to increasing debate across the UK about (a) the potential role of the private and voluntary sector in delivering some public services and (b) areas in which service users might reasonably be expected to make a contribution to the costs of the services they receive (co-payment).

The 2011 SSA survey asked people to compare private companies and charities with government providers of care for older people in terms of both cost effectiveness and quality (assuming that such services were free to those who used them either way). The findings show that in comparison with the private sector a majority feel that government would provide both a more cost effective (56%) and a better quality service (60%) for older people who need regular help. In contrast, the public appears to rate third sector service providers more highly than government on both measures – 56% felt charities would provide more cost effective services than government, and 54% that they would provide better quality services.

Younger people appear more positively disposed than older people to the relative merits of both private companies and charities as service providers for older people, while those with no educational qualifications were less positive about both. Public sector employees and those who are more politically left-wing in general were more negative about private companies, but not about charities. Graduates and those on higher incomes appear to draw distinctions between the ability of the private sector to deliver more cost effective services and its ability to deliver better quality services for older people, but did not make similar distinctions with respect to charities.

The public appears divided on whether personal care for older people ought to be provided free of charge on a universal basis, or whether it should be means tested – 51% thought the government should pay for such care, no matter how much money a person has, but almost as many (46%) felt that who pays should depend on how much money the person has. Those aged 30 and older were more likely than those under 30 to support universal free care, while support for free personal care decreases as people's level of education increases.

SSA 2011 also asked people whether they were in favour or against charging people for the cost of meals while in hospital, the cost of school-based musical instrument lessons and the cost of school trips. A majority (76%) were opposed to charging patients for meals. However, opinion on charging parents for school-based activities was more divided – 41% were in favour of charging for individual school-based instrument lessons, while 51% favoured charging parents for the cost of a school trip to a local museum. Views have moved very slightly further in favour of charging since these questions were first asked (in 2007).

Methodology

The Scottish Social Attitudes survey involves c. 1,200 to 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 2011 survey, which was conducted between June and September 2011, involved 1,197 face-to-face interviews with a self-completion section.

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.