Executive summary of key points

- The referendum on Scottish independence was seen to have a lasting impact for their respective countries by a majority of respondents both in Scotland and in England in a survey conducted in February 2015 (and for about one third of respondents in Wales and Northern Ireland respectively)
- There is great variation in the satisfaction with the current constitutional arrangements in the UK, with Welsh respondents being least satisfied with their share of government funding
- Welsh and Northern Irish respondents feel much less represented in discussions about constitutional change than their English or Scottish counterparts
- The process of constitutional change is seen largely as elite-driven with little perceived efficacy for ordinary people
- Contrary to many commentators, there is great public interest in discussions of how the UK is governed across all of the UK and a general willingness to engage
- Regarding English devolution, “English Votes for English Laws” is the constitutional preposition that has the highest support across all English regions
- However, “English Votes for English Laws” is not a comprehensive solution to address the West Lothian question, as there is also majority support for other options (regional assemblies and power for city regions), suggesting that for most people alternatives for English devolution are rather complimentary than exclusive
- There is substantial variation between English regions in the relative preference for different combinations of constitutional options
- There are also substantial differences in support for different alternatives for devolution by age (most pronounced for “English Votes for English Laws” with support increasing continuously with older age)
- Enfranchising 16-year olds to vote in the Scottish referendum had strong positive effects on youth civic engagement and attitudes
- To successfully engage younger people in politics across the UK early enfranchisement could achieve positive outcomes, but needs to be coupled to strong formal civic education in schools and explicit discussions of political issues in the classroom

1. Background for evidence base of this submission

1.1. Unless stated otherwise this evidence submission draws on data from a large-scale project conducted in the period between the Scottish independence referendum and the 2015 General Election, a period filled with extensive discussions about constitutional change across the UK. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and carried out by researchers at the University of Edinburgh’s School of Social and Political Science (Lindsay Paterson, Jan Eichhorn, Daniel Kenealy and Richard Parry from Social Policy and Alexandra Remond from Politics & International Relations).

1.2. At the core of the project was a large scale representative survey conducted across all four constituent parts of the UK to allow for meaningful comparisons. The survey was administered online for over 7,400 adult respondents and over 800 further respondents aged 16-17 in February 2015. In addition to ensuring sufficient sample sizes in each of the four parts of the UK, the survey also contained sufficient samples to investigate differences between English regions. The questions contained in the survey largely focussed on issues of
constitutional change, political attitudes towards the processes governing these changes and the perceived satisfaction and efficacy of respondents.

1.3. The sampling design employed a stratified approach across the key geographical units within which random sampling from a large online panel population was used, applying relevant further within-geography stratification and monitoring variables. Weights were applied to all analyses to account for deviations from known population parameters.¹

2. Evaluations of the current process of constitutional change

2.1. The referendum on Scottish independence had an impact on civic engagement and attitudes beyond the vote on 18 September 2014 in Scotland. Voting turnout in the General Election increased to over 70% and levels of non-electoral political participation are now also higher in Scotland than elsewhere. The differences are particularly strongly pronounced for younger age groups, while the differences between Scottish respondents and those elsewhere diminish for older age groups.²

2.2. There is also a perception within the Scottish public that the referendum continued to affect their country. 82% of Scottish respondents (excluding “don’t knows”) agreed or strongly agreed that there was a lasting impact on Scotland. Interestingly, a majority of respondents in England thought the same about their country: 52% agreed or strongly agreed that there was a lasting impact of the independence referendum on England. People seemed to feel that current changes were partially occurring as a consequence of the referendum. There was also a sizable proportion of people who felt the referendum had an impact on Wales and Northern Ireland respectively, though the numbers here were smaller (31% and 28% respectively).³

2.3. There is great variation between the four constituent parts of the UK in terms of the satisfaction with the current devolution settlement. When asked to evaluate whether their part (England, Scotland Wales or Northern Ireland respectively) received more than, less than or a fair share of total government spending, levels of satisfaction varied substantially. While 38% of respondents in Northern Ireland said that they received “a little or much less than their fair share” (excluding those who expressed no view), the degree of dissatisfaction was slightly higher in England (43%) and Scotland (44%), but markedly higher in Wales with about two thirds of evaluations being negative (68%).⁴

2.4. Significant differences do not just exist for evaluations of devolution outcomes, but also for the perceived degree of representation of the interests of the different parts of the UK in the process of constitutional change currently taking place. While satisfaction was highest in England and Scotland, with 48% and 44% of respondents respectively stating that the interests of their parts were represented “rather well” or “very well” in the “discussions of how the UK is governed”, only 28% of respondents in Wales and 25% of respondents in Northern Ireland thought the same (excluding those not expressing a view).⁵

2.5. These findings illustrate two important conclusions: i) we need to take substantial differences in evaluations of devolution across all parts of the UK seriously and ii) evaluations of the outcomes of devolution (2.1.) and of the process of constitutional change (2.2.) are not always fully congruent (see for example public opinions in Northern Ireland).

2.6. Especially regarding the latter issue many commentators assert that the majority of people do not care much about issues related to constitutional change. Our research shows that such assertions are incorrect, not just in Scotland, as may be expected after the
referendum, but across the whole of the UK. When asked to evaluate whether they thought that too much, too little or the right amount of time had been spent discussing ideas put forward about changes to how the UK is governed, respondents across the UK showed high levels of interest. Only about a quarter of respondents stating a view said that too much time had been spent discussing these issues. A clear plurality in each part said that too little time had been spent (50% in Wales, 48% in Scotland and 44% in both England and Northern Ireland). The often-claimed disinterest in the population to discuss how their country is governed is not backed up by our survey results.  

2.7. When asked however, about their own ability to influence the debate on constitutional change people across all parts of the UK showed low levels of self-perceived efficacy. When asked to evaluate for a range of groups of actors to what extent they could influence the debate on how the UK was governed, respondents across the UK saw ordinary people by far as least able to shape the debate – with 17% in Wales saying that they were “able to influence somewhat” or “greatly”, compared to 18% in Northern Ireland, 21% in England and 25% in Scotland (excluding “don’t know” responses).  

2.8. There was little variation between different parts of the UK in assessing the influence of other key actors. On average 32% thought campaign groups could exert some or great influence compared to 38% for trade unions and 55% for businesses. The greatest extent of influence was clearly attributed to political parties (73%) and politicians in the UK parliament (77%). These findings suggest that people across perceive the process as largely elite-driven, by party-political processes with little space for the involvement of ordinary people.  

2.9. Public perceptions regarding the influence of politicians in the devolved legislatures (Scottish Parliament, Welsh Assembly and Northern Ireland Assembly) differed substantially however. While only 29% of respondents in Northern Ireland thought that the politicians in their assembly could exert some or great influence on the process of constitutional change, 42% of Welsh respondents held a positive view on this issue about their Assembly members. While the perceived ability to influence was still significantly lower for Scottish Parliament members compared to their UK counterparts, Scottish respondents held the most favourable view about their devolved parliament members with 57% saying that they could exert influence in this process.  

3. Evaluations of proposed changes to the constitution of the United Kingdom  

3.1. The interest in constitutional change discussed earlier also translates into a willingness of most people to be involved in discussions about the topic if the opportunity was given to them. In each part of the UK 60 to 61% of respondents (“don’t knows” excluded) agreed or strongly agreed with the preposition to hold a constitutional convention “to develop proposals for how the UK should be governed”, while only 8 to 9% respectively opposed it. The vast majority of people – 70 to 76% in each part of the UK – would be willing to give up at least a few hours to take part in such a convention if they were invited to do so.  

3.2. While evaluations on the current devolution arrangements differ across the UK, there is less variation regarding the question whether devolution should be a project that affects all devolved administrations in the same way or not. In England, Northern Ireland and Wales roughly six out of ten respondents (58-59%) said that the three devolved administrations should have control over the same powers (“don’t knows” excluded), while in Scotland a slightly lower proportion (50%) agreed with the preposition and equally many respondents say that they should be able to have different powers. So while there is quite some division
on this issue across the UK, for many people changes in the devolution arrangements for one part of the country should be associated with changes elsewhere.

3.3. A majority of people in each part of the UK agreed that further devolution should be linked to the ability to pay for it by the relevant devolved administration. However, the extent to which people agreed with this principle varied greatly. While 82% of those expressing a view on this question agreed in England, a smaller percentage did so in Scotland (67%) and Northern Ireland (64%). In Wales there was nearly an even split with only 54% agreeing.12

3.4. England is of particular interest as – in contrast with the other constituting parts – it does not have a comprehensive devolution structure in place. A range of proposals have been presented for how the West Lothian question could be addressed to enable targeted decision making mechanisms for issues relating to concerns in England specifically. As other researchers have already demonstrated, the proposition to have an “English Votes for English Laws” decision-making mechanism in the UK Parliament is evaluated very favourably by English survey respondents.13 As this specific suggestion received more support than alternative proposals in previous surveys, several researchers have suggested to choose this as the option best suited to address the West Lothian question.

3.5. Our survey also finds that “English Votes for English Laws” has the greatest support of any constitutional option across all regions of England (lowest in Greater London with 66% of respondents agreeing and highest in East Midlands with 75%, excluding “don’t knows”). However, considering our survey results further, suggesting this particular policy proposal as a single, comprehensive solution to the question of English devolution is problematic and would most likely be unsuccessful.14

3.6. For the majority of respondents different proposals for constitutional options for England are not mutually exclusive, but rather complimentary, as they address different concerns. In addition to the high support for “English Votes for English Laws” we also found that at least 50% of respondents in each region supported regional assemblies (ranging from 50% support in five English regions to 56% in Yorkshire and Humberside, excluding “don’t knows”). Furthermore, there was also extensive support for giving more powers to city regions, albeit with slightly more variation (ranging from 49% in East Anglia to 60% in Yorkshire and Humberside, excluding “don’t knows”).15 Presenting alternative approaches to devolution as fully distinctive alternatives, rather than potentially complimentary, does not allow for a clear reflection of public attitudes.

3.7. Given the above findings, it may not appear surprising that when artificially asked to select a singular, best option for how England should be governed that “English Votes for English Laws” was the most popular option. However, it fails to reach 50% of respondents choosing this option in all English regions. There was a substantial amount of variation with 34% selecting it as best choice (excluding “don’t knows”) in the North West and Yorkshire and Humberside at the lower end and 45% choosing it in the East Midlands, East Anglia and the South West at the higher end. Treating it as a comprehensive way of addressing English devolution therefore seems not appropriate.16

3.8. When asked to select only one option for English devolution, what was selected second most varied greatly between regions, further highlighting that the specific preferences for how decision making in England should be organised differ between regions and are not addressed comprehensively through simple, singular mechanisms. While the current status quo is the second most selected response in Greater London, the South East, East Anglia and
East Midlands, respondents in the North East, North West, and South West selected Regional Assemblies as their second preference.17

3.9. Support for different constitutional options in England respectively did not only vary by region, but also strongly by the age of respondents. Support for regional assemblies was rather uniform across age groups (48-53%), but varied significantly for city region powers and in the most pronounced way for “English Votes for English Laws”. Support for city regions was greatest in the “middle” age groups (35-44 and 45-54 with 63% and 68% respectively) and lowest in the youngest (18-24) and oldest (65+) age groups (52% and 54% respectively). Support for “English Votes for English Laws” increased continuously with age. While 52% of 18-24 year olds supported it, the support steadily rose to 84% for the oldest age group. For the youngest age group, there was no significant difference in support between the three prepositions presented here.18

3.10. In terms of public engagement in these discussions, several actors have proposed to reduce the voting age to 16 across the UK in order to engage younger people in politics earlier. With the experience of the Scottish independence referendum and the reduced voting age there, we were able to conduct a comparison between a boost sample of over 400 16-17 year olds respondents in Scotland and over 400 of their counterparts in the rest of the UK in a natural quasi-experimental setting in our survey to assess the effect of the lowered voting age.

3.11. The effect has to be evaluated as positive. Political participation (in representative and non-representative forms), confidence in making political decisions and levels of political information amongst 16-17 year olds were significantly higher in Scotland than in the rest of the UK five months after the referendum.19

3.12. The research shows that there were many influences beyond the referendum itself that contributed to the higher sustained engagement of 16-17 year olds. These influences are non-specific to the referendum and applicable more generally. A successful strategy to engage young people in politics more extensively would combine an earlier enfranchisement and utilise the opportunity to reach nearly all young people through schools to enable them to participate. Our research demonstrates that civic education generally increases political knowledge, but specifically discussing political issues in the classroom had many positive civic payoffs for political engagement that could not be replaced fully through other mechanisms of early socialisation (for example through parents).20

3.13. The earlier enfranchisement of young people is publically evaluated in a positive way in Scotland. Support for 16-year olds being allowed to vote in all elections is at 50% there (excluding “don’t knows”). This is far greater than support elsewhere in the UK (30-34% in England, Wales and Northern Ireland) where there are no experiences of comprehensive earlier enfranchisement.21

3.14. Our research on young people has been cited and used extensively by the Scottish Parliament’s Devolution (Further Powers) Committee to inform their conclusions in the report on the Reduction of Voting Age Bill, passed in June 2015.22

October 2015

1 A summary of the methodological approach can be obtained here: http://www.aog.ed.ac.uk/__data/assets/pdf_file/0012/171111/Briefing_-_Project_Overview.pdf

Ibid., p. 4 (see table 4)

Ibid., p. 8 (see table 11)

Ibid., p. 2 (see table 1)


Ibid.

Ibid.

Eichhorn et al. 2015a. (see above: p. 6, table 7)

Ibid., p. 5 (see table 6)

Ibid., p. 4 (see table 5)


Ibid.

Ibid., p. 4 (see table 4)

Ibid.

Ibid., p. 3 (see table 3)


Ibid., p. 7 (see table 3)

Ibid., p. 2 (see table 1)