



Findings from the Economic and Research Council's  
Research Programme on *Devolution and Constitutional Change*



### *Devolution Briefings*

## ***Why the North East said 'No': the 2004 referendum on an elected Regional Assembly***

*Briefing No. 19, February 2005*

### **Key points**

- All parts of the region and all types of elector voted heavily against establishing an assembly
- Fewer than one in four of Labour party supporters voted 'Yes'
- A clear majority think the North East receives less than its fair share of government spending
- Only 'Yes' voters thought an assembly would have a clear positive impact on the region
- The 'No' campaign was seen as the more effective
- 'No' voters appeared to be more committed to stopping an Assembly than 'Yes' voters were to setting one up

### **Context**

The referendum on establishing an elected Regional Assembly for the North East took place some two and a half years after the government published its White Paper, *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions*. In the intervening period a formal 'soundings' exercise was conducted to gauge the level of interest in holding such a referendum in each of the English regions. These 'soundings', comprising largely 'elite level' submissions to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) by a variety of individuals and organisations, led to an announcement in June 2003 that referendums would be held in the North East, North West, and Yorkshire and the Humber regions.

Although the ODPM did not draw direct conclusions from these 'soundings', it is clear from the publication *Your Region, Your Say* that only in the three northern regions did a majority of respondents favour holding a referendum, and half or more of them (as against just a quarter everywhere else in England) claimed that interest in such a referendum in the region was 'strong' or 'very strong'.

Similar inter-regional differences were not always apparent in public opinion polls carried out around the same time (see *Devolution Briefings* no. 3 in this series). These showed that about six in ten people in *every* region favoured holding a referendum on a regional assembly, but

also that there was low awareness of the government’s proposals. A plurality of respondents everywhere also said they would vote ‘Yes’ in a putative referendum, with those in the three northern regions a little more likely to be in favour.

In July 2004 the ODPM further announced that only the North East would now move forward to a referendum. Citing concern over reports of irregularities in the all-postal voting process during the June 2004 local and European Parliament elections in the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber, the Local Government Minister Nick Raynsford said that the North East had ‘consistently welcomed’ all-postal ballots and had shown ‘clear expectation and overwhelming support for a referendum’. Opposition politicians were, however, quick to suggest that the government had been influenced by Labour backbenchers reporting that any referendum in the North West or Yorkshire would be lost. Only the North East, it was believed, where Labour won 28 of the 30 seats and almost 60% of the vote in the 2001 general election and where it controlled 16 out of 25 local authorities, could be relied upon to vote ‘Yes’.

**Outcome**

Polling evidence in the run up to the referendum painted a less sanguine picture. Especially noticeable was the consistent majority against an Assembly among those who claimed to be ‘certain’ to vote. This became more pronounced as the referendum approached. A MORI poll conducted in mid-October for the *Northern Echo* showed a clear majority of such electors preparing to vote ‘No’ –see Table 1.

**Table 1. Pre-referendum attitudes to an elected Regional Assembly**

	July/August			September/October		October	
	All	‘Certain to vote’		All	‘Certain to vote’	All	‘Certain to vote’
Support	31	37	Will vote ‘Yes’	38	35	35	31
Oppose	24	41	Will vote ‘No’	33	51	42	54
Neither/don’t know	45	22	Don’t know	29	14	23	16

Note: All data taken from MORI polls. July/August = 935 interviews in 3 Northern regions; September/October = 176 interviews in North East region; October = 1,013 interviews in North East region.

That the referendum was conducted using an all-postal ballot gave an unusual twist to the campaign. Electors could, of course, vote as soon as they received their ballot papers and many of them did just that. Over a quarter (26.3%) of all votes that would be cast had been registered by two weeks before the close of poll, and more than two-thirds (68.4%) by seven days before. Although various purported leaks concerning these early votes suggested that the ‘No’s were winning by a heavy majority, the strength and unanimity of the rejection of the Assembly came as a considerable surprise.

With turnout five percentage points higher than at June’s European Parliament and local elections, scarcely one in ten electors in the region voted for an Assembly. Every council area in the North East voted ‘No’ by a margin of greater than two to one – see Table 2. In nine councils, including Sunderland, the margin of rejection exceeded four to one.

If an assembly were to be introduced, there would have been a parallel move to single tier local government, and the referendum also gave voters in those areas which currently have county *and* district councils choices of the pattern of single-tier local government in their area. Opinion was more evenly divided about the choice of future local government arrangements. In Durham, a narrow majority preferred a single county-wide unitary authority; in Northumberland, the division of the county between two unitary authorities was the favoured structure.

**Table 2. North East Referendum outcome**

<b>Electorate</b>	<b>Votes Returned</b>	<b>Unadjusted turnout</b>	<b>Valid votes</b>	<b>Adjusted turnout</b>	
1,899,742	906,367	47.7%	893,829	47.1%	
<b>Maximum turnout: Alnwick</b>		57.4%	<b>Minimum turnout: Middlesbrough</b>		
<b>Minimum turnout: Middlesbrough</b>		42.1%			
<b>'Yes' votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>(as % of electorate)</b>	<b>'No' votes</b>	<b>%</b>	<b>(as % of electorate)</b>
197,310	22.1	(10.4)	696,519	77.9	(36.7)
<b>Maximum 'Yes': Derwentside</b>		29.8%	<b>Minimum 'Yes': Darlington</b>		12.9%
<b>Local government options</b>					
<b>Durham</b>			<b>Northumberland</b>		
Option A (Single council) 50.6%			Option A (Single council) 43.8%		
Option B (Three councils) 49.4%			Option B (Two councils) 56.2%		

### Dissecting the vote

Given such a decisive result, it is little surprise to find that opposition to an Assembly was spread across all demographic groups – see Table 3. Those in less skilled occupations were the most likely to vote ‘Yes’. Among those in the youngest age category who actually voted, opinion was almost evenly split. By contrast, those aged 55 or over came down heavily on the ‘No’ side.

Non-voters in the sample (42% of respondents said they had not voted) were disproportionately concentrated among those groups (especially the young) who show less willingness to participate in elections of all kinds. Their views on the Assembly were not, however, dissimilar to those of voters and their participation would have made no material difference to the result.

**Table 3. Referendum vote and social characteristics**

	<b>% Yes</b>	<b>% No</b>	<b>% did not vote</b>		<b>% Yes</b>	<b>% No</b>	<b>% did not vote</b>
<b>Gender</b>				<b>Social class</b>			
Male	20	40	40	AB	15	52	33
Female	14	43	43	C1	12	44	44
				C2	13	42	45
				DE	22	36	42
<b>Age</b>							
18-34	11	12	77	<b>Housing</b>			
35-54	17	37	46	Owner	16	49	35
55+	18	63	19	Non-owner	16	32	52

One other aspect of the level and spread of the rejection of an Assembly in the North East is worthy of comment. It is often assumed that the stated preferences of political parties influence how their supporters will behave in a referendum. In the referendums in both Scotland and Wales in 1997, for example, those Labour supporters who voted heavily endorsed their party's policy on devolution. Although many high profile Labour politicians, including Tony Blair himself, Gordon Brown, John Prescott and Ken Livingstone, actively engaged in the campaign in the North East, they were unable to persuade even a plurality of Labour identifiers to back them – see Table 4. Given the dominance of Labour in the region, this failure was pivotal to the outcome. The behaviour of Conservatives is not surprising given their party's stance, but Liberal Democrat identifiers were also reluctant to follow their party on this issue.

**Table 4. Referendum vote and partisanship** (those identifying with a party only)

	% Yes	% No	Did Not Vote
Conservative (14% of sample)	4	66	30
Labour (53% of sample)	23	40	38
Liberal Democrat (11% of sample)	17	54	29

In other cases where referendums have resulted in a clear rejection of a government-initiated reform, it has been argued that voters are simply casting a cost-free opinion on the performance of the government rather than engaging with the issue at hand. Certainly there was a degree of dissatisfaction with both the government and the Prime Minister among electors in the North East, and scepticism about politicians in general. These feelings were more prevalent among 'No' voters –see Table 5. Nonetheless, more than 60% of all those who voted and were satisfied with the government and/or the Prime Minister also voted 'No'.

**Table 5. Referendum vote and feelings satisfaction and trust**

	Yes voters	No voters	Did not vote
% dissatisfied with government	42	59	45
% dissatisfied with Prime Minister	33	60	46
% 'almost never' trust politicians to tell the truth	31	51	48
% attack on Iraq to remove Saddam Hussein 'unjustified'	34	50	42

One particular articulation of dissatisfaction can be seen in respondents' perception of how the North East is treated by the government at Westminster. More than three-quarters thought that the government 'looks after some parts of England more than others', and 70% that the North East received 'a little' or 'much less than its fair share of government spending'.

Such views might be thought to be compatible with support for an Assembly to help redress the imbalance. However, the idea of regional government was hardly embedded in everyday life – two-thirds of respondents (including 60% of even 'Yes' voters) knew nothing about or had never heard of the current appointed Assembly. And few, except 'Yes' voters, seemed to expect that an elected assembly would have much impact –except perhaps by leading to an increase in taxes –see Table 6.

**Table 6. Referendum vote and perceived impact of Assembly**

<b>% believing</b>	<b>Yes voters</b>	<b>No voters</b>	<b>Did not vote</b>
taxes would be ‘a lot’/‘a little’ higher	48	80	52
region’s economy would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ better	62	10	20
region’s voice in Europe would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ stronger	54	16	22
pride in the region would be ‘a lot’/ ‘a little’ stronger	39	11	13
ordinary people will have more say in how region is governed	63	29	30
regional assembly would be a ‘waste of money’	15	80	45

These findings contrast sharply with the situation in Scotland and Wales at the time of the devolution referendums in 1997. Then, some 64% of all Scottish electors and 41% of Welsh ones thought a devolved institution would lead to a better economy; 77% and 54% respectively that it would give them more pride in their nation; and 79% and 54% that it would give ordinary people more say in how the nation was governed. A much higher proportion than in the North East also felt they could trust the new institution to work in the nation’s (in the North East: the region’s) best long-term interests. 84% in Scotland and 67% in Wales said they would trust it to do this ‘just about always’ or ‘most of the time’; in the North East only 41% of respondents felt the same.

It is clear then that the regional assembly as proposed struck few positive chords with a large majority of the North East electorate. One explanation may be that they had too little information about it. More than a third of respondents felt that to be the case as against just 7% who said that they had had ‘too much’ information. However, some 70% of the electorate reported receiving leaflets from both the ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns, and two-thirds of these claimed to have read them. Nearly half had also watched a campaign broadcast on television – with similar numbers tuning in for each side. Indeed regional television programmes were the single most cited source of information about the referendum.

For a good many respondents, though, the decision to vote ‘No’ seemed to be based on an assessment of the campaign and the issues involved. The ‘No’ campaign was seen as the more effective by both ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ voters and by those who did not vote alike – see Table 7. Many more ‘No’ (37%) than ‘Yes’ (17%) voters strongly agreed that they ‘cared a good deal about the result of the referendum’. Nearly a third (31%) of ‘No’ voters offered their desire to stop the regional assembly going ahead as one of the prompts behind their decision to vote; only 19% of ‘Yes’ voters were similarly motivated by a wish to ensure the assembly was set up.

**Table 7. Referendum vote and perceived effectiveness of ‘Yes’ and ‘No’ campaigns**

	<b>Yes voters</b>	<b>No voters</b>	<b>Did not vote</b>
<b>% believing ‘Yes’ campaign to be:</b>			
‘very’ or ‘fairly effective’	34	16	12
‘not very’ or ‘not at all effective’	63	79	52
<b>% believing ‘No’ campaign to be:</b>			
‘very’ or ‘fairly effective’	63	70	34
‘not very’ or ‘not at all effective’	31	26	30

## Conclusions

Initial findings about public reaction to the referendum on a North East regional assembly paint a bleak picture of the current prospects for regional government in England. In the most Labour-dominated part of the UK, a plurality of even current Labour party supporters voted against a policy closely identified with the Deputy Prime Minister, John Prescott, and to which both the Prime Minister and Chancellor of the Exchequer had lent their visible support.

Part of this reaction may have been due to dissatisfaction with government policy and a distrust of politicians in general. Discontent which extended to a feeling that the North East was unfavourably treated compared to other parts of England.

An even more telling concern, however, appeared to be what an elected Assembly might (or might not) offer the region. Only 'Yes' voters thought it would have a clear positive impact. Those who voted 'No' were especially sceptical. For them it would waste money and lead to higher taxes, and have little impact in boosting the region's economy or voice in Europe. There was little hope either that an Assembly would lead to ordinary people having more of a say in government.

These attitudes were cleverly both tapped and promoted by the 'No' campaign. Their white elephant symbol seemed to sum up what many electors already felt, whereas attempts by the 'Yes' side to characterise the 'No's as RATS - 'Rather Arrogant Toff Southerners' – appeared to backfire. Indeed, even 'Yes' voters accept that the 'No' campaign was more effective than their own. Such a feeling is likely to have played a part in the apparently greater motivation reported by the 'No's as well.

Some important, more general lessons about referendums can also be drawn from the result of the contest in the North East. As with the Scottish and Welsh referendums in 1997, electors seem to have confounded those commentators who believe that referendum outcomes tell us more about the popularity of the government of the day than about the issue on which the referendum is fought. Opinions about the establishment of an elected Regional Assembly appear to have played a crucial role in influencing behaviour, and for many voting 'No' was not incompatible with continuing support for a party whose official policy was 'Yes'.

The referendum result does, however, lend credence to the view that voters who are uncertain of the consequences and benefits of a proposed change take the cautious option and vote 'No'. This tendency is compounded by the fact that those who are most likely to vote are also most likely to distrust change. For example, whereas six in ten of those aged 55 or over thought that England should continue to be governed 'as it is now', only a third of those aged 18 to 34 took a similarly conservative view. However, 80% of the first group, but less than a quarter of the second group actually voted.

Such a pattern may yet have an impact on any future referendum on either the European constitution or the single European currency. In this survey, at least, opposition to these was noticeably greater among older groups, those who voted and, especially, those who voted against a North East Assembly.

*This Devolution Briefing was written by Professors Colin Rallings and Michael Thrasher of the Local Government Chronicle Elections Centre, University of Plymouth. It draws on a*

*survey conducted by MORI among electors in the North East following the referendum on November 4<sup>th</sup> 2004. The project is funded by the ESRC as part of its Devolution and Constitutional Change programme (grant number RES 219252003). The Electoral Commission provided additional support which enabled the sample size to be increased and questions on the process of the election to be asked. The data used in this Briefing are preliminary and unweighted. The exact figures may therefore change when the final data become available, but the pattern of findings will not.*

The Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme was set up by ESRC in 2000 to explore the series of devolution reforms which have established new political institutions in Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland, London and the other English regions since 1997. It has commissioned 35 projects around the UK to carry out top-class academic research and to contribute to the policy debates surrounding devolution.

For more information see the Programme website at [www.devolution.ac.uk](http://www.devolution.ac.uk) or contact the Programme Director, Professor Charlie Jeffery at ESRC Devolution Programme, School of Social and Political Studies, Adam Ferguson Building, George Square, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9LL. Tel 0131 650 8489, fax 0131 650 6546, email **[charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk](mailto:charlie.jeffery@ed.ac.uk)**.