



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

Devolution Briefings

The English Regions Debate: What do the English Want?

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Key Points:

- The North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West have been chosen as the first three English regions to hold referendums on establishing Elected Regional Assemblies
- That choice was made following a five-month 'soundings' exercise which sought evidence on the level of interest in all English regions in holding referendums
- Only respondents from the three northern regions felt there was sufficient interest in holding referendums
- However, opinion polls commissioned for the 'soundings' suggest that levels of interest in all eight regions, north and south, was high
- Awareness of government's policy on the English regions is low, and turnouts in referendums are likely to be low
- Opinion polls suggest there will be majorities for establishing elected assemblies in the three northern regions, but that there would be in all the other English regions too
- There is little evidence that the government's requirement for local government reorganisation in regions which vote to introduce elected assemblies has any impact on support for introducing assemblies
- Pro-reform majorities are in widespread dissatisfaction with central government but may be vulnerable to accusations that elected assemblies will bring unnecessary bureaucracy and higher council tax

The Decision

So now we know: it's the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber, and the North West. Just over a year after the Government published its White Paper on the English regions, the Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott announced on 16 June 2003 that these three regions would be the first to hold referendums on establishing Elected Regional Assemblies (ERAs).

John Prescott's decision followed a consultation – or 'soundings' - exercise launched on 3 December 2002. Submissions were invited by 3 March 2003, with the deadline later extended to 16 May. The soundings process was to help the Deputy Prime Minister (DPM) consider 'the level of interest in a region' in having a referendum. He did not seek views on whether or

not referendums would be won. If the DPM found that the level of interest in any region(s) was high, they should go down the referendum route; if it was low they should not.

English Regions Policy Timeline

- *March 2001*: Commitment to set up ERAs in regions that want them reaffirmed in Labour Party Election Manifesto
- *9 May 2002*: Publication of White Paper *Your Region, Your Choice: Revitalising the English Regions*
- *3 December 2002*: Soundings exercise launched
- *3 March 2003*: Initial deadline for soundings exercise
- *8 May 2003*: Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Act received royal assent
- *16 May 2003*: Extended deadline for soundings exercise
- *16 June 2003*: John Prescott's announcement that the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the North West will be the first regions to have referendums on ERAs
- *17 June 2003*: Boundary Committee began local government reviews for those regions
- *25 May 2004*: Boundary Committee to report recommendations
- *October 2004*: Referendums in the three regions

If he found that the level of interest was high, then he would order local government review(s) in the regions concerned. Government policy is that there can only be unitary local government in regions which have elected assemblies. Following an amendment to the Regional Assemblies (Preparations) Bill as it went through Parliament in spring 2003, areas with two-tier local government (counties and districts) will have a second referendum question to adjudicate between different options for unitary local government in those areas.

Your Region, Your Say

The results of the soundings exercise were published by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) in the document *Your Region, Your Say* in June 2003. *Your Region, Your Say* summarised the submissions sent to ODPM, along with a range of opinion polls commissioned by organisations sending in views. Over 8,000 valid submissions were sent in, the vast majority by individuals, the rest from a mix of local authorities, regional chambers, the business sector, campaigning organisations, MPs, MEPs and political parties. There were big regional variations in the number of submissions, ranging from 356 in the West Midlands to almost 4,000 in the North West.

Your Region, Your Say describes, but does not analyse the submissions and makes no direct comment on how they helped the DPM to his decision. It is therefore not clear why the three northern regions were chosen, though they do match the top three in submission 'league tables' on:

- a) whether the submitting individual or organisation wanted a referendum or not (see Table 1)
- b) what the submitting individual or organisation thought the general level of interest in the region was (on a 5-point scale from 'very strong' to 'very weak' – see Table 2)

Table 1 - Soundings Responses: Do you want a Referendum in Your Region?

Region	% Yes Responses	% No Responses
Yorkshire and the Humber	72	28
North West	56	44
North East	53	47
East Midlands	41	59
South West	40	60
South East	37	63
East of England	33	67
West Midlands	16	84
Average	43.5	56.5

Table 2 – Soundings Responses: Strength of Interest in the Region in a Referendum

Region	% Very strong/strong	% Neither strong nor weak	% Weak/very weak
North East	56	10	34
North West	55	4	40
Yorkshire and the Humber	49	18	34
East Midlands	27	10	63
South West	24	17	59
South East	24	8	68
East of England	23	8	69
West Midlands	21	8	72
Average	35	10	55

Note: Due to rounding totals may not add to 100

Your Region, Your Say also presents findings of opinion polls commissioned as part of the soundings exercise and submitted to ODPM as evidence. Again it is not clear how far these data informed the DPM's decision, though it is certainly a more reliable form of evidence than that reflecting the views of individual citizens and organisations.

Opinion polls of course have their own problems. The ones considered by ODPM asked different variations of the question whether referendums should be held. They had different sample sizes. And they had different geographical scopes ranging from an England-wide survey commissioned by the County Councils Network through to a number of surveys restricted to district council areas. But only one of them was questioned in *Your Region, Your Say* on its methodology. ODPM apparently felt the rest were broadly reliable tests of public opinion; many were conducted by well-respected polling companies.

The opinion poll findings present a different picture to the soundings findings presented in Tables 1 and 2:

- Among all the polls conducted the lowest positive result on whether or not to hold a referendum was 47%
- Nowhere did opposition to a referendum outweigh support for a referendum
- In every region the balance of opinion was in favour of a referendum
- There were only limited variations between all eight English regions and no evidence that levels of interest in the three northern regions was higher than the rest

The clear picture of general, England-wide support for referendums merits a closer look - and not just for what the opinion polls say about general public attitudes to regional referendums.

Though the soundings exercise was explicitly not concerned with *how voters would vote* in a referendum, the opinion polls generally asked that question too.

What the Opinion Polls Said: Do You Want a Referendum in Your Region?

The most comprehensive poll, conducted with a large, statistically credible sample size in each region (500 respondents) by ICM in January 2003 was that commissioned by the County Councils Network (CCN – available on-line at <http://www.lga.gov.uk/ccn/research.htm>) The headline results are in Table 3. They reveal a strikingly uniform picture:

- Respondents in **all regions wanted a referendum**, with variations between the regions statistically insignificant.
- **Everywhere around 60% were in favour of a referendum**, even in the south, where regional devolution is said to lack resonance among the public.
- And everywhere **only around 20% were opposed** with another 20% or so unable or unwilling to give a view.

Table 3 – CCN Poll: ‘Do You Want a Referendum to be Held in Your Region?’

Region	Yes	No	Don’t Know
North West	65	17	17
Yorkshire and the Humber	62	17	21
South West	61	21	18
West Midlands	61	20	20
North East	60	21	20
East Midlands	57	19	24
South East	59	20	21
East of England	58	18	24
Total	60	19	21

However, the supplementary findings in the CCN poll also give food for thought for devo-enthusiasts in the English regions:

- Awareness of government policy for the English regions was very low, with around 50% across England having heard *nothing* of government proposals.
- Support for a referendum seemed to be more about liking the idea of referendums than knowing what the issues at stake were.
- And there was a broad tendency for those who were more aware of policy detail to be less supportive of holding a referendum.
- Very few said they would be certain to turn out to vote if a referendum were held; turnout would likely be low – according to ICM’s (admittedly speculative) prediction, at less than 30%
- However, those most likely to turn out were also more likely to vote for the establishment of ERAs

Table 4 - Regional Polls: Referendum, Yes or No?

Region	Yes	No	Don't Know/ Neither-nor
North West	58	17	25
Yorkshire and the Humber	47	7	46
South West	71	20	9
South East (County Council areas only)	52	25	23

There were a number of more modest, region-wide surveys carried out during the soundings process (Table 4). The results have to be treated a little more circumspectly than the CCN results, as different versions of the referendum question were asked. Sample sizes in each case were over 1,000, though, and the polls were conducted by reputable companies. The broad picture is not much different to the CCN findings. It would seem that the public in *all* regions would like the opportunity of a referendum. So, if they had the opportunity, how would they vote?

What the Opinion Polls Said: Would You Vote FOR the Establishment of an Elected Regional Assembly in a Referendum?

This is a very different question and one ODPM wisely bracketed out of the soundings exercise. A desire to have a referendum may well be connected with an intention to say 'No' in the referendum itself. In any case ODPM would not want to be seen to pick only the likely winners.

The question of public support for having ERAs has remained unclear ever since the government first announced the policy in 1997. There has been some survey work done, but it has been patchy, based on variable sample sizes, not based on standard questions, and in part methodologically suspect. As an example, Table 5 shows data from three surveys for the West Midlands. The results diverge sharply. Given the low levels of awareness of government policy, the ESRC data, collected as part of the ESRC Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme in May 2001, is perhaps most plausible, with 'don't knows' and 'undecideds' forming the largest group in the West Midlands and, indeed, across England as a whole.

Table 5 – Do People in the West Midlands want Elected Regional Assemblies

Survey	Yes	No	Don't Know/ Neither-nor
Economist March 1999	46	37	17
ESRC May 2001	34	25	41
BBC March 2002	73	16	11

However, the burst of opinion polling carried out during the ODPM soundings process now casts a little more light. Again the best starting point is the CCN poll comparing all eight English regions on the basis of good sample sizes and a standard set of questions. The results are in Table 6.

Table 6 – CCN Poll: ‘Would You Vote in Favour or Against Having Regional Government?’

Region	Yes	No	Don’t Know/ Wouldn’t Vote
North East	51	19	32
North West	50	21	29
Yorkshire and the Humber	49	18	34
West Midlands	43	21	35
East Midlands	43	16	41
South West	41	22	37
South East	40	25	35
East of England	36	25	39
Total	44	21	35

There is this time a rather clearer differentiation of results, with the North East, the North West and Yorkshire and the Humber clearly above average in their support for ERAs, the two Midlands regions close to the average, and the southern regions below average. The top three is the same as was chosen by the DPM to go forward to referendums.

Also striking is the high level of don’t knows/non-voters, which is close to that of the ESRC survey in 2001. This again reflects the ongoing problem of low awareness. It is notable how little a policy that has been ‘on the books’ since 1997 has penetrated public consciousness.

The difference between the CCN and the ESRC surveys is the shift from the ‘No’ to the ‘Yes’ camp. Potential ‘Yes’ voters outnumber potential ‘No’ voters everywhere in the CCN poll, in the North East, Yorkshire and the Humber and the East Midlands by almost 3:1 and at worst by around 3:2 in the South East and the East of England. **If this general pattern held, there would be clear majorities for the establishment of ERAs everywhere.**

Does Local Government Review Make a Difference?

Once again other single-region and local area polls conducted during the soundings confirm this broad picture. They and the CCN poll also give some fuller insights into public attitudes on the question of local government reviews: CCN found that respondents across England had significant concerns about the impact of local government reform on public services.

However, where polls asked, the **prospect of local government review had no significant impact on pro-ERA opinion** in the North West or in Cornwall. In the wider South West, the implications of local government review ‘were not noticeable considerations for respondents’. Parallel focus group research carried out during the soundings in the West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber also found that local government review was not a significant factor. Only in a survey in two-tier areas in the South East was there evidence of opposition to moving to unitary local government. There, the prospect of local government review flipped a 43:35 balance in favour of ERAs to a 40:48 balance against.

Why Were Respondents For or Against ERAs?

Finally some of the polls asked supplementary, open-ended questions about why respondents supported or opposed ERAs. Responses are summarised below.

Reasons <i>FOR</i> ERAs	Reasons <i>AGAINST</i> ERAs
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Better to have local decision-making than decisions by central government• Neglect of the regions by central government• Better knowledge of needs in the region• Better address specific issues relevant to the region• Greater voice for the region• Fresh ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Public ill-informed and unaware• Would suck up powers of local government• Cost/increases in council tax• Alienation from politics in general, at all levels• Fragmentation of the UK• Too much complexity in government already• Another tier = more 'bureaucracy'• It's fine the way it is

It has to be stressed that positive attitudes clearly outweighed negative attitudes among those who stated a view. There was a clear mood of 'us against them' ranging the needs and priorities of the region concerned against what was perceived as a remote and neglectful centre in Westminster and Whitehall. There was less of a consistent message among opponents, though – again as paralleled in focus group research in Yorkshire and the Humber and the West Midlands – there were powerful concerns on complexity/bureaucracy and, especially, cost. CCN and others found general opposition to the idea of ERAs having the power to precept council tax. In the South East the tax issue tipped the balance against ERAs further to 33:56.

Conclusions

What these concerns about 'bureaucracy' and tax show is that the pro-ERA opinion revealed in the soundings polls may be vulnerable. Pro-ERA opinion is based strongly on a negative: that of dissatisfaction with a remote centre that responds too little to regional needs. A more positive set of messages may be necessary to counter the undoubted resonance of the bureaucracy and 'tax bombshell' arguments that clearly will feature in the anti-ERA campaigns in the northern referendums next year.

Whether it is right that just the three northern regions have been chosen to have referendums is a moot point. The opinion poll evidence discussed here is clearly more reliable and representative than the opinions expressed by respondents to the soundings exercise. There appears from the opinion poll data to be a more or less equal appetite throughout England for holding referendums, with no noticeable 'north-south' divide in opinion.

The polls also show that the three northern regions appear most likely to return pro-ERA majorities. If they do John Prescott can expect strong pressure from other regions to be allowed to follow suit.

This *Devolution Briefing* was written by Charlie Jeffery, Director of the Economic and Social Research Council's Devolution and Constitutional Change Programme at the University of Birmingham. It draws on data submitted to the ODPM's soundings exercise collected by the County Councils Network and the Campaign for the English Regions, as well as work carried out in the ESRC Programme by Professor Anthony Heath at Oxford University, and by the West Midlands Governance Action Research Group for the Regional Assemblies in the West Midlands and Yorkshire and the Humber.

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.

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