

EMPOWERMENT, TRUST AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT POWERS:

A Report for the ESRC Knowledge Transfer Team

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INTRODUCTION

This report on empowerment, trust and local government powers was commissioned from the Institute of Local Government Studies (INLOGOV) at the University of Birmingham, by the ESRC Knowledge Transfer Team.

The report summarizes and analyses evidence on citizen's attitudes towards local government in a European context. We examine:

1. Citizens' attitudes to local government powers
2. Citizens' trust in politicians and perceived ability to influence local decisions
3. Citizens' attachment to the local level and attitudes towards granting more power to local authorities.

The data in this report are mainly drawn from the European Social Survey (ESS)¹ and the World and European Values Study (WVS/EVS)². Supplementary data come from the European Union's Committee of the Regions³, the Council of Europe⁴ and the Local Government and Public Reform Initiative's work on the Eastern European and the Balkan states.^{5 6} The data sources can thus be regarded as quite comprehensive.

Every section compares the United Kingdom with other national cases, which are mainly European. Where available, data are disaggregated for Great Britain and Northern Ireland to reflect the lower level of local government functions and power in the province.

Additional data on the UK are available from other sources, but is not necessarily internationally comparable.⁷

LOCAL GOVERNMENT POWERS

The importance of local government

The importance of local government in a national system of government is conventionally measured in expenditure terms. Our analysis considers local government expenditure as

¹ Jowell, R. and the Central Co-ordinating Team, *European Social Survey 2002/2003: Technical Report*, London: Centre for Comparative Social Surveys, City University (2003). Retrieved from the Norwegian Social Science Data Services (NSD).

² Inglehart, Ronald, et al. (2000). *World Values Surveys and European Values Surveys, 1981-1984, 1990-1993, and 1995-1997* [Computer file]. ICPSR version. Ann Arbor, MI: Institute for Social Research [producer]. Ann Arbor, MI: Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor].

³ Committee of the Regions (2004) *Strengthening Regional and Local Democracy in the European Union*. Vol. 1 and 2.

⁴ Council of Europe (2000). *The financial resources of local authorities in relation to their responsibilities: a litmus test for subsidiarity*. 4th General Report on Political Monitoring of the Implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government.

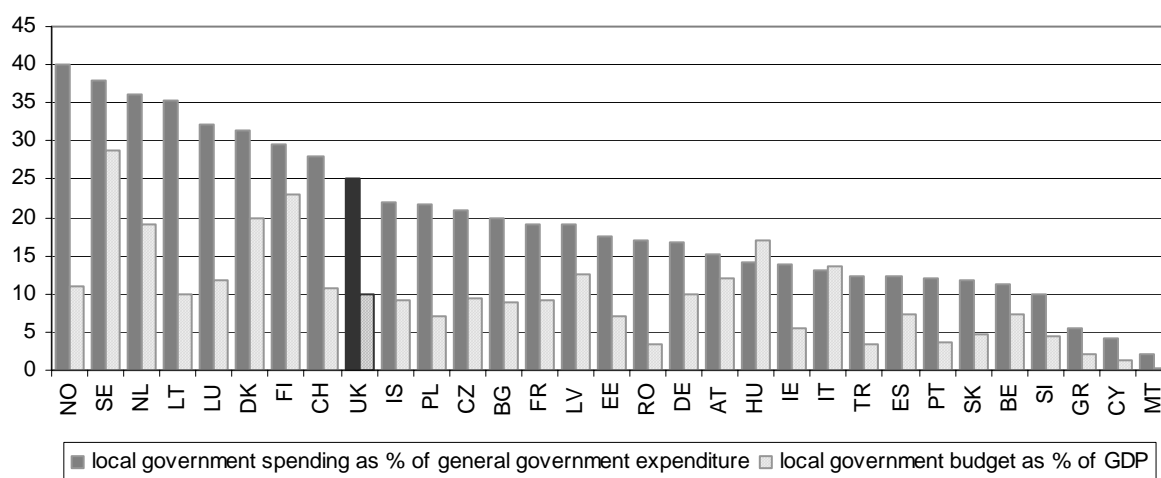
⁵ T. M Horváth (2000) *Decentralization: Experiments and Reforms, vol.1* Local Government and Public Reform Initiative

⁶ E. Kandeve (2001) *Stabilization of Local Governments*. Local Government and Public Reform Initiative

⁷ For example, the British Social Attitudes Survey, and research commissioned by the Electoral Commission and the Committee on Standards in Public Life.

% of general government expenditure, and as % of GDP. This measures both the relative and absolute size of local government.⁸

Figure 1: Local government spending as % of GDP and as % of general government expenditure⁹



Source: Council of Europe (2000). The financial resources of local authorities in relation to their responsibilities: a litmus test for subsidiarity. 4th General Report on Political Monitoring of the Implementation of the European Charter of Local Self-Government. Most financial data in the report refers to the situation in the early or mid 1990s

Figure 1 shows that the UK lies 9th out of 31 countries in relation to local government spending as a proportion of general government expenditure, following the Scandinavian countries. However much of this budget comes from specific transfers from national government.

Local government in some countries have more extensive tax-raising powers than others, who are dependent on subsidies or transfers from central government. Table 1 summarizes the situation in most EU and some candidate countries. A distinction is made between local government power to raise revenue by means of taxes or rates, and the extent of subsidies or transfers from central government.

⁸ A better measure of 'local government power' would be % of local government expenditure that is raised from local taxes and whose level and allocation the local electorate determines. This data is not currently available internationally.

⁹ Country abbreviations are listed in table 4, in the technical appendix.

Table 1: Local government funding

	Local government revenue raising powers			Local government funding		
	Limited powers to raise revenue	Moderate powers to raise revenue	Extensive powers to raise revenue	Limited subsidy from central govt	Moderate subsidy from central govt.	Extensive support from central govt.
Austria			X		X	
Belgium		X			X	
Bulgaria			X		X	
Croatia			X	X		
Czech Republic		X		X		
Denmark		X			X	
Estonia	X					X
Finland			X	X		
France			X		X	
Germany		X			X	
Great Britain	X					X
Greece	X				X	
Hungary		X			X	
Ireland	X					X
Italy		X			X	
Latvia			X	X		
Lithuania		X				X
Luxemburg			X	X		
Netherlands		X			X	
Northern Ireland	X				X	
Poland			X	X		
Portugal		X		X		
Romania	X				X	
Slovakia		X			X	
Slovenia		X			X	
Spain	X					X
Sweden			X		X	

Source: based on: Committee of Regions (2004) Strengthening Regional and Local Democracy in The European Union. Vol. 1 and 2. Note that the definition of 'taxes' tends to differ.

Preferences for more power to local governments – international

European citizens have been asked whether they think more power should be given to local authorities (table 2). Public opinion in Great Britain is divided on the issue, with 37.7% considering more power to local authorities a good thing, and 30.6% considering this a bad thing. The number of proponents is considerably higher in Northern Ireland. Compared to other European countries, the proportion of people in Great Britain considering more power to local authorities to be a good thing is rather low (ranked 28th out of 33), while Northern Ireland is ranked 16th. We find large number of proponents in Central and Eastern European countries, and this may be related to the transition in their governmental systems during this period.

Table 2: More power to local authorities?

%	Good thing	Don't mind	Bad thing	%	Good thing	Don't mind	Bad thing
Slovakia	73,8	20,0	6,2	Finland	46,3	24,6	29,2
Romania	70,6	14,6	14,8	Croatia	46,0	21,3	32,6
Czech Republic	70,0	18,1	11,9	Germany	46,0	29,6	24,4
Malta	67,5	15,2	17,3	Denmark	43,9	19,0	37,1
Turkey	59,1	19,5	21,4	Italy	42,1	40,9	17,0
Portugal	57,3	31,4	11,4	Latvia	41,8	26,5	31,7
Ukraine	57,0	27,4	15,7	Slovenia	41,6	30,9	27,5
Poland	54,7	31,7	13,7	Spain	40,4	31,9	27,7
Russian Federation	53,9	30,8	15,3	Austria	38,2	27,5	34,3
France	52,3	32,8	14,9	Luxembourg	37,9	29,8	32,3
Estonia	51,9	32,4	15,7	Great Britain	37,7	31,8	30,6
Bulgaria	51,2	35,5	13,4	Sweden	35,1	22,5	42,4
Greece	50,9	40,6	8,5	Belarus	32,3	43,4	24,3
Lithuania	50,0	40,5	9,5	Belgium	32,2	34,7	33,2
Iceland	49,2	33,5	17,3	Netherlands	26,0	22,3	51,7
Northern Ireland	48,2	31,7	20,1	Hungary	24,6	24,1	51,3
Ireland	47,1	28,3	24,6				

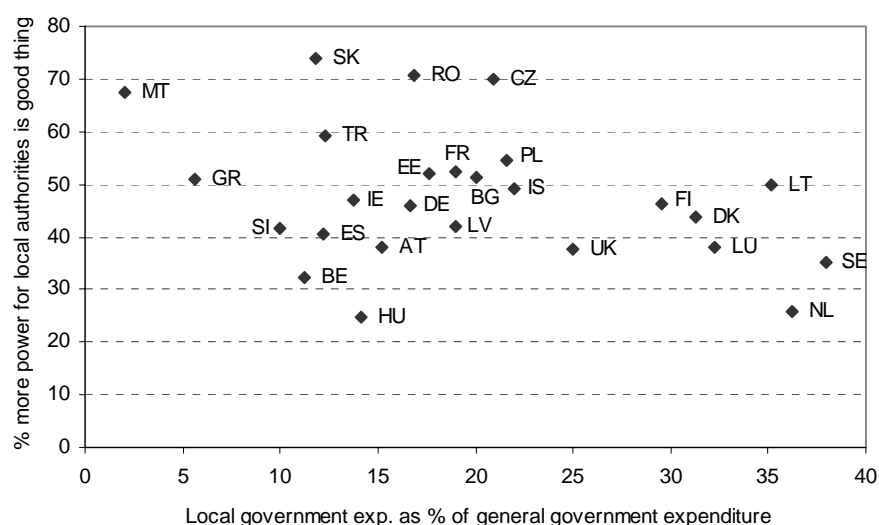
Source: European Values Study, 1999, N is approx. 1000 in every country

Comparison actual – preferred power

One explanation for the large differences between countries in table 2 could be the actual power held by local governments. In other words, popular demands for more power could be higher in countries where local authorities enjoy low autonomy and/or power. Countries where local governments are spending only a small percentage of a country's overall government expenditure could be considered as those with limited decentralisation.

We correlate budgetary measures of local government autonomy and the survey results on demands for more power in figure 2. This shows that limited local autonomy and power is not associated with higher demands for more power for local authorities.

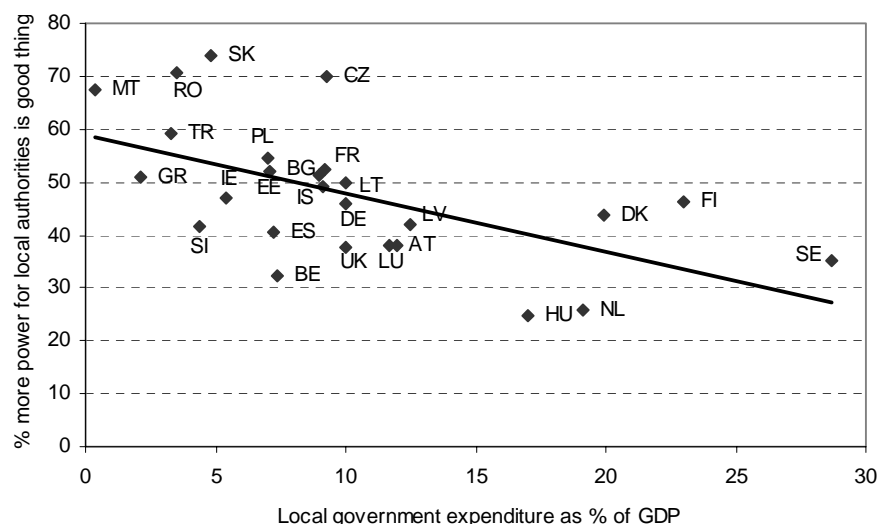
Figure 2: Expenditure of local government (relative to GGE) and preferences for more power



Source: Council of Europe 2000 and European Values Study 1999. Attitude data for Great Britain are compared to financial data for the UK. No correlation.

In figure 3, expenditure of local government relative to the GDP is compared to preferences for more power for local authorities. This shows a weak relationship between low levels of local government expenditure and demands for more local government power. However the countries where more power for authorities is considered a good thing are mostly Central- and Eastern European countries. When we only consider Western European countries, the relationship disappears.

Figure 3: Expenditure of local government (relative to GDP) and preferences for more power



Source: Council of Europe 2000 and European Values Study 1999. Attitude data for Great Britain are compared to financial data for the UK. Pearson correlation= -.573.

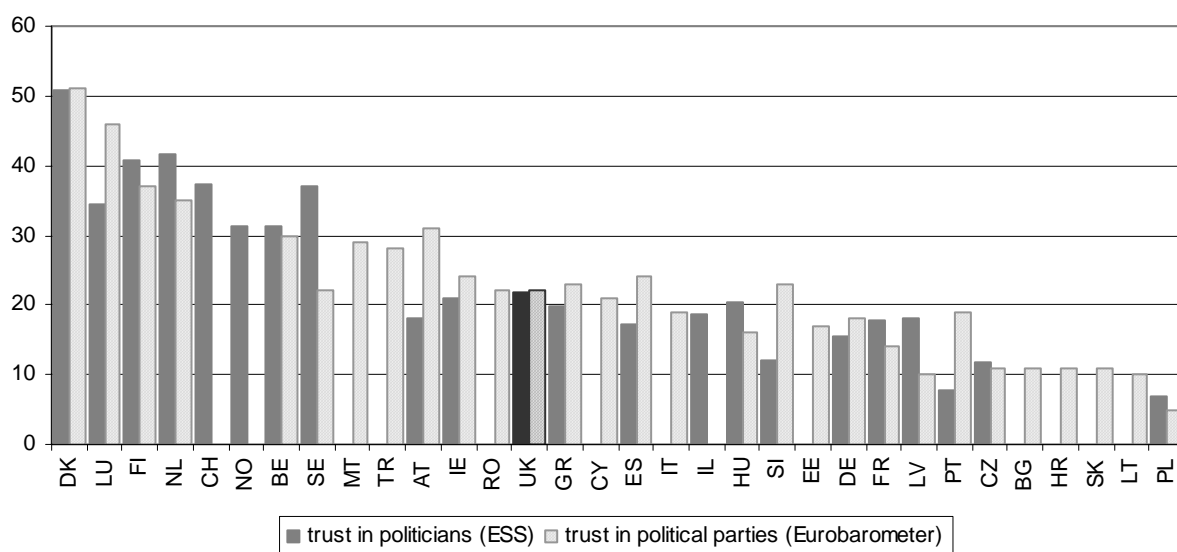
Overall, therefore, the evidence indicates that actual autonomy and power of local governments cannot be considered as determinants of citizen demands for more local government power.

POLITICAL COMPETENCE AND TRUST IN POLITICIANS

Trust in politicians and political involvement

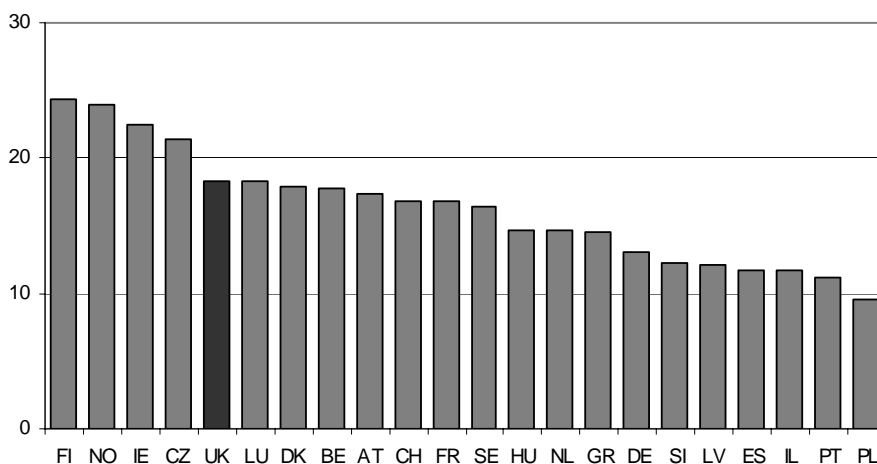
Figure 4 shows levels of trust in politicians and in political parties in all EU member and candidate countries, and in a number of other countries. The United Kingdom ranks 14th out of 32, and is at a level comparable to other major Western European countries such as Germany or France.

Figure 4: Trust in politicians and in political parties (% trust)



Source: European Social Survey, Round 1, 2002/3 (% trust, scores 6-10); Eurobarometer 63, spring 2005
The same source also contains information on the frequency of contact between citizens and government officials or politicians (figure 5). Respondents were asked whether they had contacted a politician, government or local government official during the last 12 months. In the UK, 18.3 % says they have done so. This is comparable to that in most European countries.

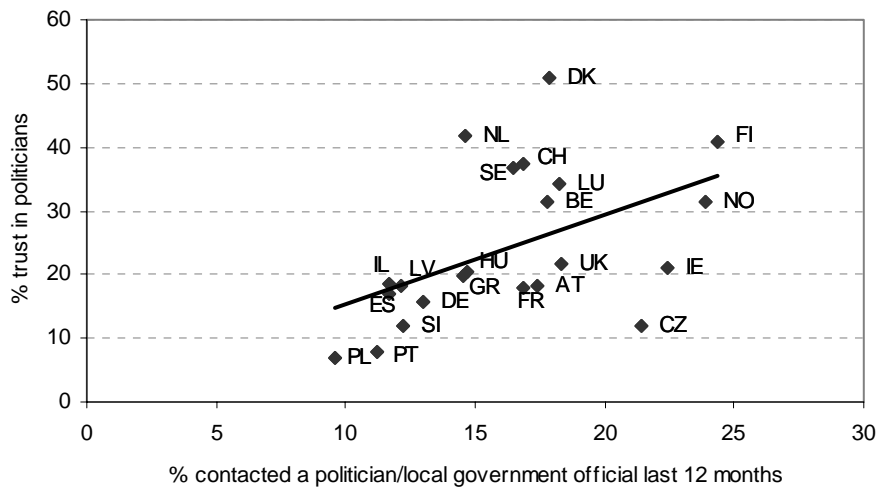
Figure 5: Have you contacted a politician, government or local government official during the last 12 months? (% yes)



Source: European Social Survey, Round 1, 2002/3.

There is a significant relationship between the frequency of contacting politicians, government or local government officials and levels of trust in politicians (figure 6). However the causal relationship is not clear: does higher contact with politicians generate trust, or is high trust in politicians conducive to contacting them? This relationship disappears, however, when we analyse individual-level data in the United Kingdom, rather than country-level data: trust in politicians and the frequency of contacting politicians are not related at the individual level.

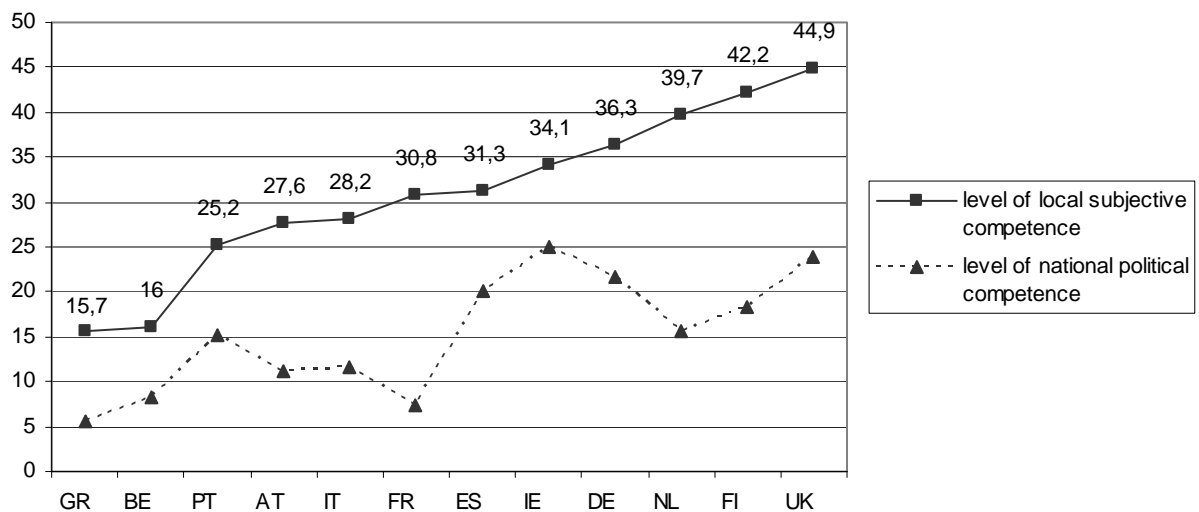
Figure 6: Relationship between contacting politicians and trust in politicians



Source: European Social Survey, Round 1, 2002/3. Pearson correlation .483, significance=.019

In a study of local government in 12 countries, Vetter measured whether citizens felt they could influence regulations or laws they considered unjust or harmful at the local and national level. The number of citizens that answered yes is indicated in figure 7. In all countries, citizens felt more able to influence decision at the local level than they did at the national level. It is notable that the UK ranks 1st out of 12 in citizens' perceived ability to influence local government decisions.

Figure 7: Political competence, % saying they think they can do something about regulations/laws considered unjust/harmful

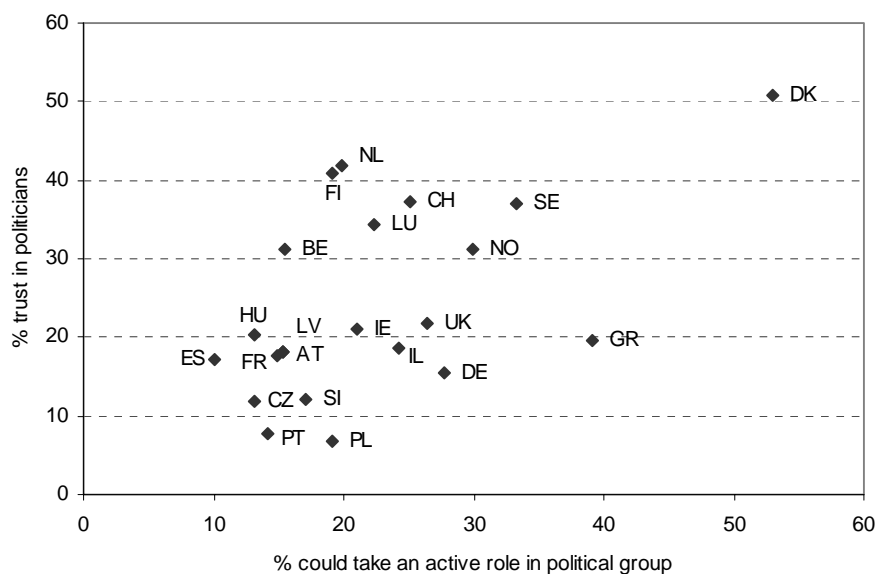


Source: Vetter, A. (2002),¹⁰ based on an INRA opinion poll commissioned by the University of Stuttgart, 1999

Higher levels of trust in politicians contribute to getting involved in political affairs (figure 8). In the European Social Survey, respondents were asked whether they thought they could take an active role in a group involved with political issues. In the UK, 65.4% answered definitely not or probably not. The percentage saying definitely or probably amounted to just 26.3%. With this percentage, the UK is again not exceptional internationally.

Higher levels of trust in politicians increase the number of people saying they think they could take an active role in a group involved with political issues.¹¹ This finding can be interpreted in two different ways: high trust stimulates people to participate in the political process, or their opinion on being active in politics is an expression of a latent political attitude, which also influences political trust. In the UK, 26.4% of citizens say they could probably or definitely take an active role in a group involved in political issues.

Figure 8: Potential political involvement and trust in politicians



Source: European Social Survey, Round 1, 2002/3.

Trust in politicians and the local electoral system

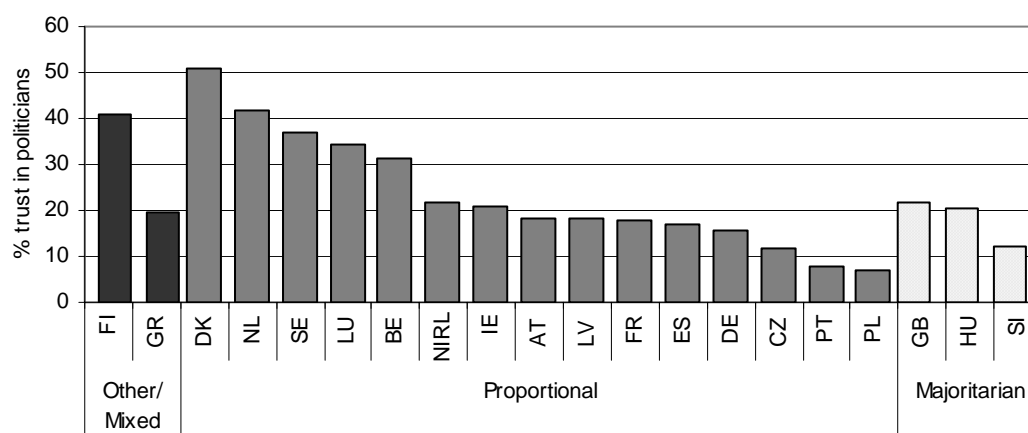
Local councillors are elected using a proportional system in some of the countries analysed in this report, while in other countries a majoritarian system is used. Figure 9 shows levels of trust in politicians, and countries are grouped based on the electoral system they use for local elections. The figure clearly reveals the electoral system does not influence levels of trust. Unfortunately, none of the major international surveys contain specific trust data for the local level or local politicians, so we were forced to use a general question on trust in politicians. Similar analyses of national electoral systems revealed no

¹⁰ Vetter, Angelika (2002). Local political competence in Europe: a resource of legitimacy for higher levels of government? In: International Journal of Public Opinion Research 14 (1): 3-18

¹¹ Pearson correlation coefficient = 0.543.

relationship between levels of trust and whether a country has a majoritarian or a proportional system¹².

Figure 9: Trust in politicians and the local electoral system¹³



Source: European Social Survey, Round 1, 2002/3.

ATTACHMENT TO THE LOCAL LEVEL

Citizens may identify with different levels of government. The European and World Values survey contained a question on the geographical group one identified with in the first place. Possible answers were the locality/town, region, country, continent/Europe, and the world as a whole. We have separate data for Great Britain and Northern Ireland for 1981, 1990 and 1999 (table 3). A remarkable finding is the increase of people who primarily identify with the local level. In Northern Ireland, this may be influenced by the peace process and creation of new institutions of government.

Table 3: To which geographical group would you say you belong to first of all?

%		Locality/town	Region	Country	Continent	The world	N
Great Britain	1981	35,3	17,1	31,8	2,6	9,6	1231
	1990	41,0	19,1	27,6	2,3	7,9	1484
	1999	48,9	13,7	28,4	1,9	7,2	1000
Northern Ireland	1981	41,7	34,9	17,3	1,0	3,8	321
	1990	48,0	22,7	21,4	1,3	6,3	304
	1999	63,1	11,2	21,4	2,0	2,3	1000

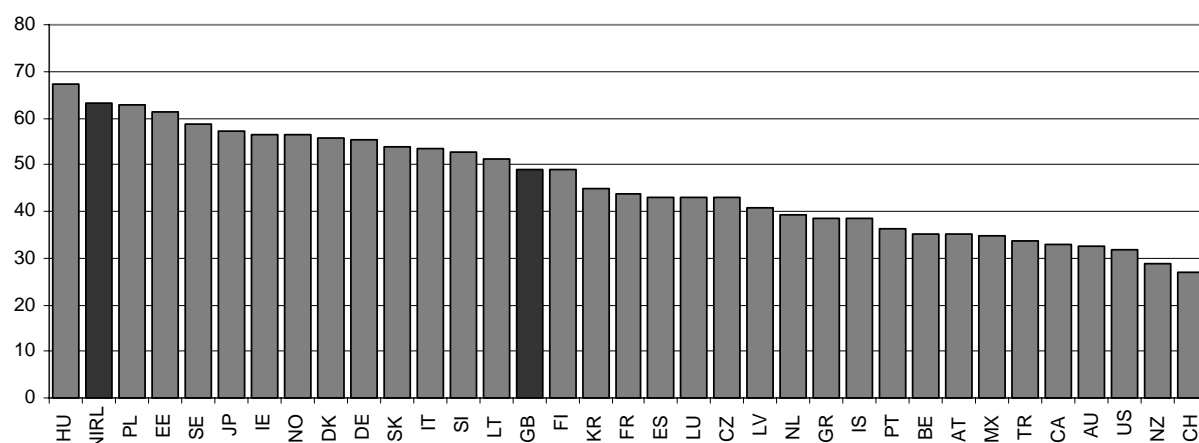
Source: European Values Study

Similar statistics are available for most EU and OECD countries. Figure 10 shows the percentage of respondents in each country stating their primary identification is with their town or locality. This reveals that the percentage is rather high in Northern Ireland, while Great Britain is situated around the average.

¹² Norris, P. (1999). Institutional explanations for political support. In: P. Norris (ed.). Critical citizens: global support for democratic governance (pp. 217-235). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

¹³ 'Trust in politicians' has only been measured for the UK as a whole. The same percentage is therefore used for Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Figure 10: Primary identification with the local level, EU and OECD countries, 1999

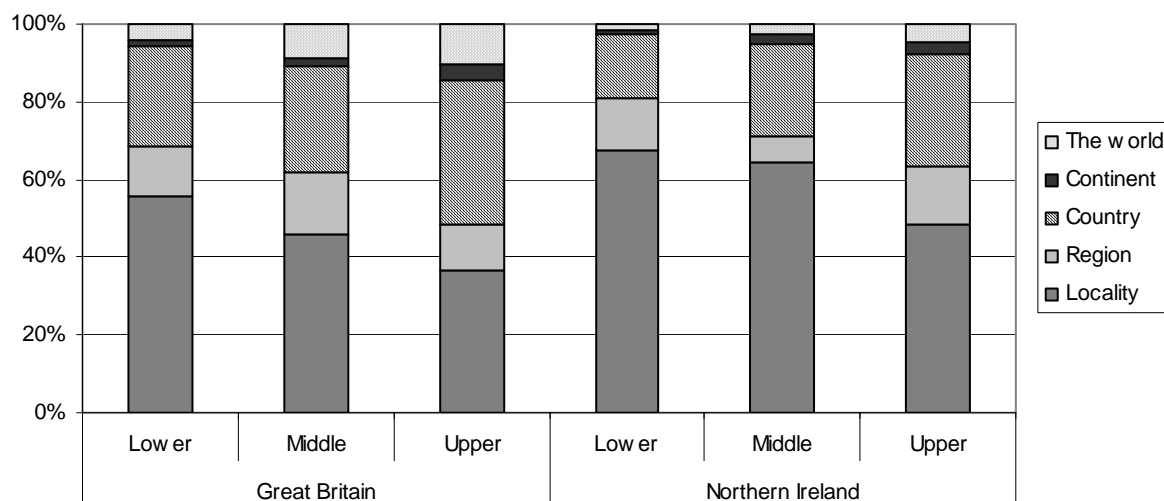


Source: World and European Values Study, 1999, or latest available wave

Determinants of attachment to the local level

In Great Britain and Northern Ireland, education is the main socio-demographic determinant of attachment to the local level (figure 11). A lower level of education leads to a higher attachment to the local level. Higher levels of education lead to more attachment to the country.

Figure 11: 'To which geographical group would you say you belong to first of all?' by education



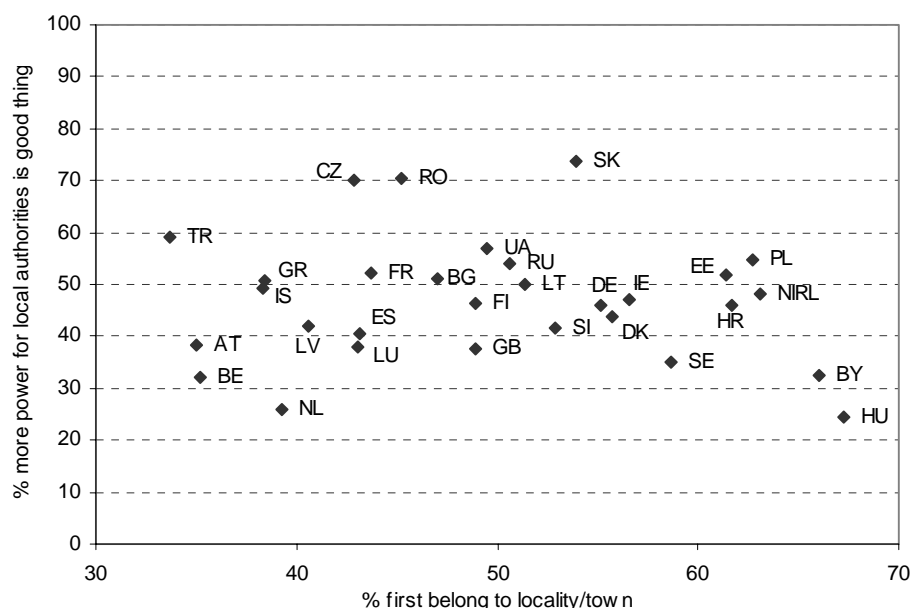
Source: European Values Study, 1999

Education is the only characteristic consequently influencing attachment to the local level, even in a multivariate analysis, controlling for sex, age, and income level. There are also some other effects: In Great Britain, female respondents say they feel to belong more to the local level than do male respondents. In Northern Ireland, attachment to the local level is somewhat higher in the age groups above 55 and between 35 and 44. Average population size of local government units (at country level) does not have an effect on attachment to the local level.

Effects of attachment to the local level

We now return to the earlier question on whether local authorities should get more power. A possible hypothesis is that people who feel more attached to local government, are also in favour of granting local government more power. Testing this for 30, predominantly EU, countries reveals there is no relationship between both attitudes (figure 12). Feeling attached to local government does not mean one also wants to grant it more power.

Figure 12: Primary identification with local government and attitudes towards granting local authorities more power



Source: European & World Values Study, 1999

CONCLUSION

In this report we compared local government powers and citizen attitudes towards politicians and towards local government. More specifically, attitudes towards granting more power to local authorities, trust in politicians, political involvement and attachment to the local level were studied. Local government powers differ substantially across countries, and a variety of indicators can be used to map the extent of power. We mainly focused on budgetary indicators.

A key finding in the report is that citizens' preference to grant local authorities more power is not related to actual powers enjoyed by these local authorities, nor by the level of attachment to the local level. When compared internationally, attitudes towards the local level and towards politics are in many respects not substantially different in the UK. We did find interesting differences, however, in attitudes towards local government between Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

TECHNICAL APPENDIX

Question phrasing

- *ESS: Trust in politicians:* ‘Using this card, please tell me on a score of 0-10 how much you personally trust each of the institutions I read out. 0 means you do not trust an institution at all, and 10 means you have complete trust’. For the figures, trust was calculated by adding scores in categories 6-10.
- *Eurobarometer: Trust in political parties:* ‘I would like to ask you a question about how much trust you have in certain institutions. For each of the following institutions, please tell me if you tend to trust it or tend not to trust it: political parties’.
- *EVS: More power for local authorities:* ‘Here is a list of various changes in our way of life that might take place in the near future. Please tell me for each one, if it were to happen whether you think it would be a good thing, a bad thing, or don't you mind? More power to local authorities’.
- *EVS: Local attachment:* ‘Which of these geographical groups would you say you belong to first of all? Locality or town where you live; region of country where you live; your country as a whole; Europe; the world as a whole’.
- *ESS: Contacting politicians:* ‘There are different ways of trying to improve things in [country] or help prevent things from going wrong. During the last 12 months, have you done any of the following? Contacted a politician, government or local government official’.
- *ESS: political involvement:* ‘Do you think that you could take an active role in a group involved with political issues? Definitely not; probably not; not sure either way; probably; definitely’.

Table 4: Country abbreviations

Code	Region/country	Code	Region/country	Code	Region/country
AT	Austria	GB	Great Britain	NL	Netherlands
AU	Australia	GR	Greece	NO	Norway
BE	Belgium	HR	Croatia	NZ	New Zealand
BG	Bulgaria	HU	Hungary	PL	Poland
BY	Belarus	IE	Ireland	PT	Portugal
CA	Canada	IL	Israel	RO	Romania
CH	Switzerland	IS	Iceland	SE	Sweden
CZ	Czech Republic	IT	Italy	SK	Slovakia
DE	Germany	JP	Japan	TR	Turkey
DK	Denmark	KR	Republic of Korea	UA	Ukraine
ES	Spain	LU	Luxemburg	UK	United Kingdom
FI	Finland	MX	Mexico	US	United States
FR	France	NIRL	Northern Ireland		