

Politicians' views on drug policy

9 September 2012

This note sets out the findings of polls of Westminster MPs, Members of the Scottish Parliament, and Welsh Assembly Members, conducted for the UK Drug Policy Commission by ComRes as part of research examining how we make drug policy in the UK.

The methodology and results of the polls are detailed below.

METHODOLOGY

The polls were conducted using self-completion postal and on-line questionnaires sent to the ComRes panel of parliamentarians as follows:

Members of Parliament (MPs): 150 of the 650 MPs participated in the survey (approximately 50% of those approached) between 22nd May and 22nd June 2012. Data were weighted by party and region to reflect the composition of the House of Commons.

Members of the Scottish Parliament (MSPs): 55 of the 129 MSPs participated in the survey (approximately 50% of those approached) between 17th May and 15th June 2012. Data were weighted by party and region to reflect the composition of the Scottish Parliament.

Members of the Welsh Assembly (AMs): 31 of the 60 AMs participated in the survey (approximately 60% of those approached) between 17th May and 26th June 2012. Data were weighted by party and region to reflect the composition of the Welsh Assembly.

The ComRes panels are configured as far as possible to be representative of all parliamentarians but exclude those holding positions in Government. This needs to be borne in mind in interpreting the findings. In addition it should be noted that the sample size in the Welsh Assembly, and to a lesser extent the Scottish Government, polls are necessarily quite small (given the size of these bodies) so small differences need to be viewed with caution.

Respondents were shown five statements about drug policy, and asked to respond to each on the scale: Agree strongly, Agree, Disagree, Disagree strongly, Don't know.

FINDINGS

The results of the polls are shown below. For MSPs and AMs, only overall results are shown. For MPs, base sizes are sufficient also to show data for coalition MPs (ie combined Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs) and Labour MPs.

Among those polled:

- Clear majorities of politicians (at least 60%) in each body disagreed with the statement that current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs. MPs were most likely to think this (77%) compared with 67% of AMs and 60% of MSPs.
- Similarly, majorities of politicians felt that it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solution because drug policy is such a controversial issue. Here again MPs were most likely to agree with this statement (75% did) compared with 63% of AMs and 57% of MSPs.
- At least two thirds of politicians in each body agreed that the process of making policy about illegal drugs should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does. In this case there was less difference between MPs (76% agreed) and MSPs (70%) or AMs (67%).
- Only minorities of politicians in each body (between a quarter and a third) support consideration of changes to the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only is not treated as a criminal offence.
- While in Scotland, a majority of MSPs want more control over drug policy (68% do), Welsh Assembly Members are more evenly split on the question (44% agree and 48% disagree). Policy on drug misuse is mainly devolved to the Scottish Parliament and Welsh and Northern Ireland Assemblies but with some aspects reserved to Westminster, notably in relation to the legislation for the control of drugs.
- In general, there was little difference in attitudes to current drug policy between MPs from coalition parties and Labour MPs. Both groups were equally likely to disagree (76%) that current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs although Labour MPs were more likely to disagree strongly.
- In addition Labour MPs were more likely than coalition MPs (83% compared with 69%) to agree that "The process of making policy about illegal drugs in the UK should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does".

Among all surveyed MPs (base size = 150)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
The UK's current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs.	1%	16%	62%	16%	5%
	Total agree: 17%		Total disagree: 77%		
Policy about illegal drugs is such a controversial issue, it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solutions.	15%	60%	18%	4%	2%
	Total agree: 75%		Total disagree: 22%		
The process of making policy about illegal drugs in the UK should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does.	17%	59%	15%	1%	6%
	Total agree: 76%		Total disagree: 16%		
If we are to improve the way we tackle illegal drug problems, we need to change how we make policy about illegal drugs.	9%	58%	18%	2%	10%
	Total agree: 68%		Total disagree: 20%		
We should consider changing the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only should not be treated as a criminal offence.	7%	24%	34%	23%	12%
	Total agree: 31%		Total disagree: 57%		

Among surveyed coalition MPs (base size = 62)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
The UK's current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs.	2%	17%	66%	10%	6%
	Total agree: 18%		Total disagree: 76%		
Policy about illegal drugs is such a controversial issue, it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solutions.	16%	59%	19%	7%	-
	Total agree: 75%		Total disagree: 25%		
The process of making policy about illegal drugs in the UK should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does.	18%	52%	19%	2%	7%
	Total agree: 69%		Total disagree: 22%		
If we are to improve the way we tackle illegal drug problems, we need to change how we make policy about illegal drugs.	11%	59%	18%	3%	7%
	Total agree: 70%		Total disagree: 21%		
We should consider changing the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only should not be treated as a criminal offence.	9%	21%	29%	32%	10%
	Total agree: 30%		Total disagree: 60%		

Among surveyed Labour MPs (base size = 80)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
The UK's current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs.	-	17%	53%	23%	5%
	Total agree: 17%		Total disagree: 76%		
Policy about illegal drugs is such a controversial issue, it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solutions.	16%	64%	16%	1%	2%
	Total agree: 80%		Total disagree: 17%		
The process of making policy about illegal drugs in the UK should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does.	17%	66%	10%	-	6%
	Total agree: 83%		Total disagree: 10%		
If we are to improve the way we tackle illegal drug problems, we need to change how we make policy about illegal drugs.	9%	56%	18%	1%	15%
	Total agree: 65%		Total disagree: 19%		
We should consider changing the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only should not be treated as a criminal offence.	5%	30%	36%	11%	16%
	Total agree: 35%		Total disagree: 47%		

Members of the Scottish Parliament

Among all surveyed MSPs (base size = 55)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
Scotland's current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs.	1%	33%	42%	18%	6%
	Total agree: 35%		Total disagree: 60%		
Policy about illegal drugs is such a controversial issue, it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solutions.	7%	50%	33%	6%	4%
	Total agree: 57%		Total disagree: 39%		
The process of making policy about illegal drugs in Scotland should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does.	3%	67%	10%	-	19%
	Total agree: 70%		Total disagree: 10%		
Scotland should have more powers over policy about illegal drugs, including deciding on drug control laws	45%	23%	21%	5%	2%
	Total agree: 68%		Total disagree: 26%		
We should consider changing the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only should not be treated as a criminal offence.	5%	22%	34%	17%	19%
	Total agree: 27%		Total disagree: 51%		

Members of the Welsh Assembly

Among all surveyed AMs (base size = 31)

	Agree Strongly	Agree	Disagree	Disagree Strongly	Don't know
Wales's current policies are effective in tackling the problems caused by illegal drugs.	-	14%	56%	11%	18%
	Total agree: 14%		Total disagree: 67%		
Policy about illegal drugs is such a controversial issue, it can be difficult to have an objective debate about the best solutions.	23%	39%	25%	5%	7%
	Total agree: 63%		Total disagree: 30%		
The process of making policy about illegal drugs in Wales should make more use of evidence and research than it currently does.	10%	56%	12%	-	16%
	Total agree: 67%		Total disagree: 12%		
Wales should have more powers over policy about illegal drugs, including deciding on drug control laws	15%	28%	39%	8%	9%
	Total agree: 44%		Total disagree: 48%		
We should consider changing the drug laws so that possession of small quantities of currently illegal drugs for personal use only should not be treated as a criminal offence.	7%	26%	30%	21%	17%
	Total agree: 33%		Total disagree: 50%		