

Institute for Public Policy Research



THE AMBIVALENT UNION

**FINDINGS FROM
THE STATE OF THE
UNION SURVEY**

**Ailsa Henderson and
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SUMMARY

Brexit revealed stark differences in attitudes across the UK. Voters in England identifying as English were more likely to support Leave, while those identifying as British tended to favour Remain. Conversely, in Scotland and Wales, those identifying as Scottish or Welsh were more inclined to support Remain and it was British identifiers, including in Northern Ireland, who backed Leave. These different patterns of alignment highlight profound variations in expectations and aspirations across Britain and the extent to which Britishness means different things, and aligns with different visions of the state, in different parts of the UK.

Brexit not only revealed different attitudes within and between the UK's constituent units towards the European Union but it also revealed the ambivalence of attitudes towards the union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Surveys conducted after the referendum showed that many voters, even those who would consider themselves staunch union supporters, were open to the idea of Scottish independence and Irish reunification, viewing them as acceptable trade-offs for their preferred Brexit outcome. Additionally, a sense of 'devo-anxiety' in England, long documented in our Future of England Survey, reflecting enduring dissatisfaction with Scotland's perceived influence and resource access, is matched by a sense of grievance across the rest of the state about the perceived unfairness of resource allocation.

Based on four surveys of public opinion in England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, the Cardiff-Edinburgh State of the Union data provide a 360 degree review of attitudes to the union, including the following.

Economic and social solidarity across the UK is high in the abstract – but much lower when it comes to where resources should be shared and the uniform policy approaches which should be taken.

- We find a shared, and apparently high, willingness across each of the four nations to share resources reduces when it is specified which part of the state those resources should be redirected towards.
- On several measures, the UK is characterised as a union of grievance – in that people in all four territories tend to feel that their territory is hard done by when compared with the others – and ignorance. Most people in the three non-English territories have clear views about the relationship of their own territory with England, while answers about other territories are characterised by high levels of 'don't knows'.
- Similarly, while support for social solidarity (as measured by support for policy uniformity across the state) is also high in the abstract, contextualising with hypothetical examples see support drop.
- In most fields, there is strong support for policy uniformity between the UK and the EU – including among Leavers. However, data on responses to Covid-19 suggests the existence of strong support for a concrete and rather dramatic example of divergence – namely travel bans – between different parts of the state.

Even among many of its erstwhile supporters, attitudes towards the union are ambivalent: with support or ambivalence towards territorial independence the majority in every nation.

- A 360-degree across each of the four nations shows support for the territorial integrity of the state within its current borders as distinctly limited – with a conditional and ambivalent attitude towards the union.
- Voters in each part of the UK showing that while they might shy from independence (or reunification) for their part, they also hold conditional attitudes to the union as it stands.
- There is a high degree of support for Scottish independence among Scottish respondents and strong support for Irish unity across England, Scotland and Wales. Many in England, especially, appear to be relatively relaxed about the prospects of a reshaped state.
- Majorities on both sides of the Brexit divide in England and Wales prioritise their own preferred outcome on the nature of the future relationship of the UK with the EU over the territorial integrity of the UK itself.

Support for muscular unionism – widely regarded as been one of the hallmarks of the Johnson administration – is relatively muted in all four nations.

- Utilising a specially developed ‘muscular unionism’ index the research finds muted support at the aggregate level – but with distinct partisan groups with whom the tenets of muscular unionism resonate.
- These include Democratic Unionist party (DUP) supporters in Northern Ireland and Conservative supporters in Scotland and Wales – however, English Conservatives do not share the same view.
- We also find significant differences between Labour supporters in England and Scotland, on the one hand, and Welsh Labour supporters, on the other. The latter are less likely to support the more emphatic form of muscular unionism.
- Finally, we find Scotland (not Northern Ireland) to be the part of the state in which differences in attitudes towards the union are most polarised.

There is no uniform ‘British view’, rather the constitutional attitudes of British identifiers differ systematically depending on which of the four territories of the state they inhabit.

- Depending on the part of the union in which it is being manifested, ‘British identity’ can take on differing personas – and, ultimately, we find that there is no singular British national identity with a single, shared understanding of the state.
- Even among those who regard themselves as British and who support the continuation of the union, attitudes across the four constituent territories of the union are far more variegated, heterogeneous and, in many cases, contingent.
- Different substate national identities shape attitudes towards key constitutional questions, including both relations between the constituent territories of the UK and the state’s relationship with its nearest neighbours. These national identities tend to work in different directions.
- British identifiers in England are largely unlike British identifiers in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who find themselves sharing evaluations of the state and hopes for its future that have far more in common with those who, in England, describe themselves as English..

Overall, the findings underscore the potential implications of an ambivalent union. We highlight the potential challenges for unionist parties arising from the presence of territorially-distinct attitudes towards the union even within their own ranks. We also point out that, given the plurality of unionism, to champion a single understanding of and vision for the union is to risk alienating many of those who regard themselves as unionists as well as those who are already less convinced of the union's benefits.

While there may be (political) attraction in adopting what could ultimately be seen as a form of 'muscular' governance, the research demonstrates the counteracting risks this creates in damaging the social and economic bonds across the UK, and the ambivalence it can create.

Ultimately, we find that such an approach is out of kilter with the far more nuanced and ambivalent views of the union held by much of the wider public that it could easily become self-defeating. Instead, any party which seeks to govern in pursuit of a thriving rather than divided union, must do so by encompassing and responding to the diverse views held across the UK.

1. INTRODUCTION: THE STATE OF THE UNION

Few would deny that the result of the 2016 Brexit referendum raised fundamental questions about the future of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. This was, after all, a referendum in which two of the four constituent territories of the state voted to remain in the European Union (EU) by significant and even, in the Scottish case, overwhelming majorities, yet found themselves removed from it because of smaller, if still decisive, Leave majorities in the other two. Despite the promise of regular consultation, the devolved governments in Cardiff and Edinburgh were then to find themselves excluded from any meaningful role in the subsequent Brexit negotiations (devolution was suspended in Northern Ireland from January 2017 to January 2020). Indeed, the way in which they were sidelined served to fuel deep resentment even among the ‘good unionists’ of the Welsh government (Hunt and Minto 2017). Furthermore, the outcome of those negotiations meant that Northern Ireland continues to follow EU law pertaining to the single market and apply the EU Customs Code to goods entering its territory, creating an ‘Irish Sea border’, which Northern Ireland’s unionist parties regard as putting the union at risk.

The response of political leaders at the UK level has been to double down on their rhetorical commitment to what Theresa May was to describe on innumerable occasions as “our precious union” (BBC 2017) – or as Boris Johnson would have it, “the awesome foursome” (PoliticsHome 2019). This rhetoric has been matched by the UK government’s efforts to insert itself into what had previously been devolved policy areas, most obviously in the field of economic development where devolved governments have been largely excluded from the follow-on schemes to European structural funds. While the Labour party has, of course, lacked the same ability to act, its British-level leadership has been equally vociferous in its protestations of belief in the value and, indeed, inherently progressive nature of the union.

Yet the challenges to the integrity of the state both posed and highlighted by Brexit cannot simply be wished or talked away.

National identity played a key role in the Brexit vote in ways that underscore the fundamental differences in attitudes that exist across the state. Take, for example, the relationship between substate national identities and attitudes towards the EU. As we have shown in our previous work, those in England who felt English were much more likely to vote Leave compared with those who felt British (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a). But it is also the case that, in Scotland and Wales, those who felt Scottish or Welsh (rather than British) tended to vote Remain (Henderson et al 2020). Substate national identities were therefore aligned not just with different but also with opposite preferences for the state, reflecting very real differences in expectations and aspirations across Britain (see also Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021b). Other research suggests that territorial identity in Northern Ireland – be that Irish or Northern Irish – was also associated with support for Remain (Garry 2016, 2017).

It is not just substate or territorial identities that operate in different ways in different parts of the state. The same is true of Britishness, with British identifiers in different parts of the state holding equally divergent views on Brexit. In England,

British identifiers voted Remain, while British identifiers in Scotland and Wales voted Leave (Henderson et al 2020). Britishness, in other words, ‘works’ in different ways in different parts of the state. And it is not only with regard to the UK’s relationship with the EU that we find divergent and at times conflicting views and attitudes associating with state-wide and territorial national identities in different ways in different parts of the state.

As well as highlighting and further accentuating differences both between and within the constituent units of the state, Brexit has also served to highlight the extent to which many across all four parts of the state – including those who might be expected to be most committed to its continuation – hold what might be termed ambivalent attitudes towards the union as we know it. In our post-Brexit-referendum survey work (subsequently confirmed in other polling), we found that in England and Wales, especially, majorities on both sides of the Brexit divide regarded both Scottish independence and Irish unity as a ‘price worth paying’ for securing their desired outcome. Particularly striking was the fact that this included an overwhelming majority of Conservative and Unionist party (sic) supporting Leave voters in both countries (see Cardiff University 2017, 2018, 2019; also Ashcroft 2018, Sky News 2019).

This sits alongside other data showing that there is a well-developed sense of grievance among significant sections of the English electorate at the way the UK operates. This sense of ‘devo-anxiety’, as we have dubbed it, has a particular target – Scotland – and it manifests itself as dissatisfaction with what is perceived to be Scotland’s undue influence as well as its undue access to resources (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a). But while English grievance may be particularly marked, it is also clear that elements of grievance exist within each of the UK’s four political communities.

All of this serves to raise fundamental questions about the state of public attitudes towards and about the union., as we explore throughout this report. Unfortunately, however, these are not questions that the academic community is currently well placed to address. As we have noted elsewhere, despite its well-deserved international reputation for excellence, the UK’s survey infrastructure does little to facilitate genuine cross-territorial research into social and political attitudes (Henderson et al 2020, Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a). ‘British surveys’ usually exclude Northern Ireland altogether, while England is home to such a large proportion of Britain’s population that the numbers of Scottish and Welsh respondents included in these surveys tend to be too small to allow for meaningful analysis of attitudes in these territories. This, in turn, means that those interested in attitudes in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales have had to develop their own survey vehicles, while – paradoxically enough – England itself has been largely ignored in the context of ‘British’ surveys.

The inevitable consequence of this situation is that consideration of attitudes towards the union is very siloed. Specialists on attitudes in Northern Ireland consider attitudes in Northern Ireland, while attitudes in Wales or Scotland are analysed by their respective cadres of specialists. Meanwhile, to the extent that attitudes in England towards the union are an object of study at all, it has been largely via an England-only survey – albeit one organised by Wales and Scotland-based academics!¹

The survey from which the current report derives its data (the Cardiff–Edinburgh State of the Union Survey) is different and deliberately so, in that it has been specially developed to allow for comparative study of attitudes both within and between the four territories of the state. This involves, inter alia, ensuring large-enough sample sizes in each of the four territories to allow for proper analysis (technical details can be found in the appendix). But in addition, the questionnaires

deployed in the four territories have been designed to allow – for the first time – what we term a ‘360-degree’ view of the union. In other words, we have asked questions, for example, not only about attitudes in Scotland towards Scotland’s place in the union, but also about attitudes in Scotland towards the relationship between Northern Ireland and Wales and the union, as well as of course towards England, its place in the union and its internal governance arrangement. Adopting this approach for all four territories provides a unique insight into the state of attitudes towards the union across its constituent territories.

2. ECONOMIC SOLIDARITY

Institutional divergence across the territory of the UK has *always* been one of its most characteristic features. The UK has different church–state relationships in different parts of the state, different legal systems and so on. Consequently, policy divergence is nothing new. Key aspects of social policy in both Northern Ireland and Scotland have always been distinct from those in England and Wales, while the development of administrative devolution for Wales since the late 19th century – accelerating from the mid-1960s – also had the effect of delineating England ever more clearly as a distinctive unit. It cannot be denied, however, that differentiation and divergence have become more apparent since the late 1990s. While their respective powers may vary in detail, it is nonetheless the case that the three devolved legislatures in Belfast, Cardiff and Edinburgh now control policy affecting education, health, local government, elements of tax and social security for their respective territories. Meanwhile, Westminster acts on behalf of the whole of the UK on issues such as defence and foreign affairs, while operating as the government of England for matters that are devolved in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Devolution allows electorates with different preferences to see those preferences in action – indeed, according to its proponents, this has always been one of the key benefits of devolution (for one example among many, see Osmond 1995). Opponents were always more concerned about the potential for devolution to unleash unwelcome developments beyond the borders of the devolved territories. This included undermining a sense of state-wide solidarity across the UK, in part because devolved political communities would start to prioritise solidarity within their own borders (for a recent example of these arguments, see Johnson 2022). But in addition, there have been regular warnings about the danger of unleashing an English backlash – a sense of grievance reflecting the fact that the state’s largest political community lacked what others now had.

To what extent have the devolution reforms of the 1990s served to undermine a sense of solidarity across the state? In truth, the answer is unknowable. We simply lack adequate data from earlier eras to allow for before-and-after comparisons. Neither is it sensible to simply assume the existence of pre-devolution cross-territory solidarity given that – as already noted – significant territorial policy divergence has such a long history. This does not, however, preclude drawing conclusions about more recent times.

With respect to the much-vaunted English backlash, this had not materialised by the early 2000s (Curtice and Heath 2001), and so researchers largely stopped looking for evidence of it. But by the time we launched the Future of England Survey in 2011, it was clear that the English electorate had changed. English national identity was more prevalent and Britishness was in decline, with high levels of Euroscepticism, and a well-developed sense of devo-anxiety, closely related to Englishness (Wyn Jones et al 2012, 2013). Specifically, those who prioritised their English national identity were more likely to be Eurosceptic, but also more likely to be devo-anxious – particularly aggrieved about Scotland and its perceived privileged access to resources and undue influence within the state.

Using State of the Union Survey data to examine attitudes across the UK as a whole, it becomes clear that elements of this English story are also observable in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. This is particularly apparent when we probe attitudes to economic solidarity – the sense that resources should be shared across the state so that individuals across the state can enjoy comparable living standards. High rates of economic solidarity facilitate the transfer of resources across the polity to assist poorer or disadvantaged regions, while low levels can act as a barrier, thus exacerbating income inequality at both the aggregate and individual levels.

Pollsters often ask about economic solidarity in individual terms, probing attitudes to tax and spend policies that redistribute resources from richer to poorer individuals. But there are ways to ask about this at the level of regions or nations – that is, about willingness (or otherwise) to transfer resources from richer to poorer areas. In the State of the Union Survey, we asked respondents in all four territories whether ‘money should be transferred from the richer parts of the UK to the poorer parts, to ensure that everyone can have similar levels of public services’. The responses to this question are displayed in table 2.1. In all four countries of the UK, rates of agreement were at least 70 per cent, reaching a high of 86 per cent in Northern Ireland.

TABLE 2.1
Economic solidarity in principle (% agree)

	England	Scotland	Wales	Northern Ireland
Money should be transferred from richer parts of the UK to poorer parts to ensure that everyone can have a similar level of public services	70	73	74	86
The UK government should step in to even out economic differences between the different parts of the UK	74	73	77	87

Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Table 2.1 also reports responses to a second question, which asked whether ‘the UK government should step in to even out economic differences between the different parts of the UK’ and shows similar levels of support, with (again) a particularly high level of support in Northern Ireland. If we consider only the *principle* of economic solidarity, then across the union there appears to be strikingly high levels of support.

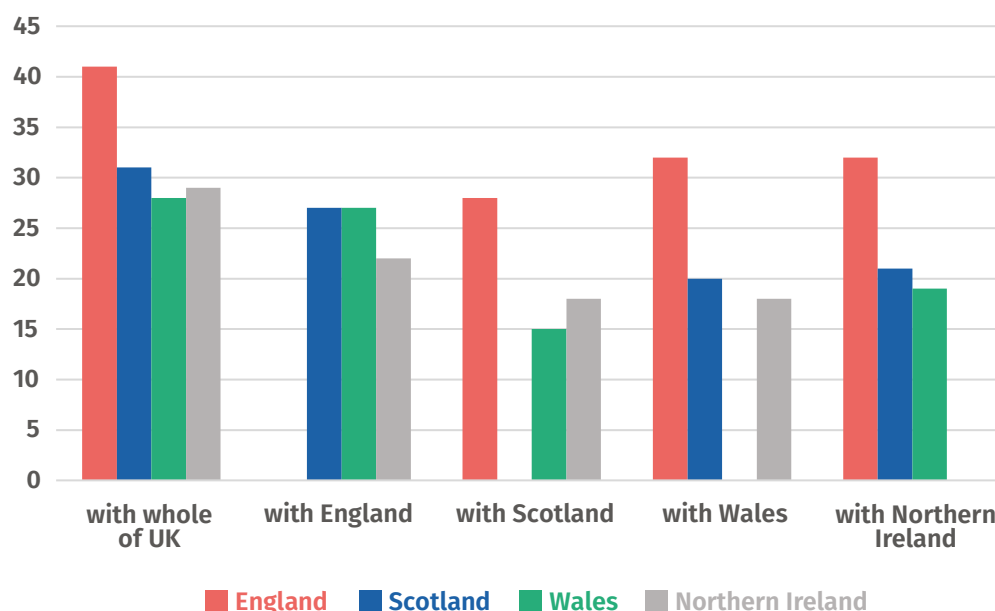
However, if we focus on who might receive these resources – in other words, who might benefit from this economic solidarity – the responses are more nuanced. Just as public opinion figures suggest that some individuals distinguish between the ‘deserving and undeserving poor’, with the former deemed worthy recipients of support, it also appears that some distinguish between deserving and undeserving territories in the UK.

This becomes apparent from the data reported in figure 2.1 where we asked whether respondents think that revenue raised from taxpayers in their own territory should be kept entirely in that territory or should be distributed to

other parts of the UK. One version of this question asked explicitly about sharing resources ‘across the whole of the UK to help support public services’, while other versions specifically referred to Scotland, Wales, England or Northern Ireland.

FIGURE 2.1

Support for sharing revenue with other parts of the state (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: Question: Revenues raised from taxpayers in England/Scotland/Wales/Northern Ireland should be shared...

We can see from the first set of bars on the left-hand side of the figure that support for sharing tax revenue with the rest of the UK is higher in England (41 per cent) than in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland (at 31 per cent, 28 per cent and 29 per cent respectively). It is nonetheless the case that in all four territories (including England), the very widespread support for sharing in the abstract, apparent in table 2.1, drops substantially when we move from broad principle to the more specific prospect of sharing with the rest of the state.

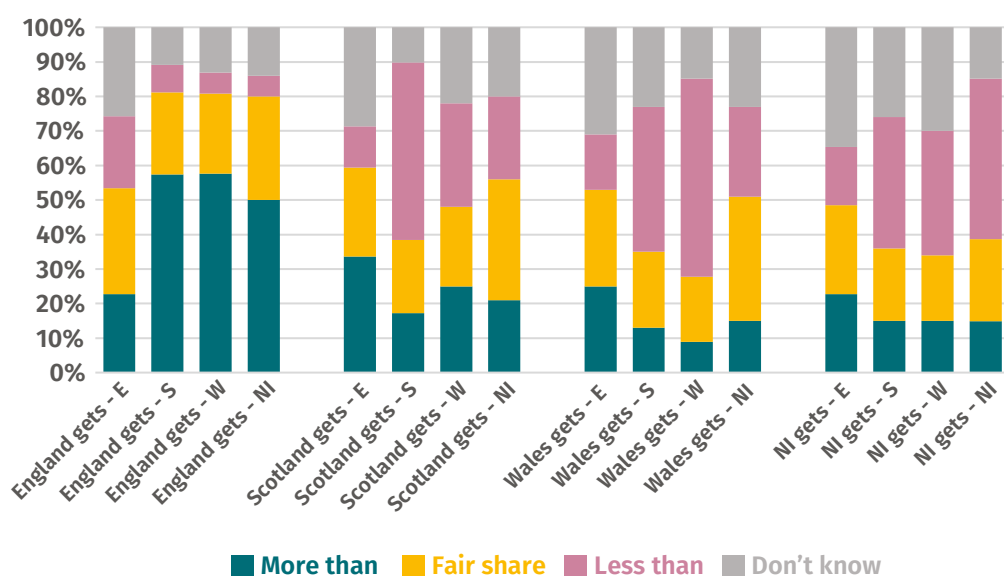
The remainder of the data presented in figure 2.1 further complicates this picture. As we shift the framing of sharing from the whole of the state to specific parts of it, levels of economic solidarity in England decline by – approximately – a further 10 points. Even so, the willingness of the English electorate to share remains higher than that observed in the other three territories. Interestingly, respondents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were more willing to contemplate sharing with England than with each other. Respondents in Wales were particularly reluctant to share with the other parts of the so-called ‘Celtic fringe’. Meanwhile, the general reluctance of respondents in Northern Ireland to share with either the rest of the state or any specific part of it stands in marked contrast to their overwhelming support for sharing in the abstract noted in table 2.1.

It is, of course, one thing to demonstrate the limits of economic solidarity and quite another to attribute this to the existence of a sense of grievance or perceived inequity between the different parts of the state. The latter becomes obvious, however, when we consider economic solidarity, not in terms of attitudes to

hypothetical sharing, but rather from the perspective of evaluations of the current practices of revenue distribution across the state.

We asked respondents in each territory whether their own as well as the other three constituent units of the state receive more than their fair share of resources, less than their fair share, or about their fair share. These results (including those who chose the ‘don’t know’ option) are summarised in figure 2.2.

FIGURE 2.2
Attitudes to the distribution of resources in the UK (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021
 Note: Question: Would you say that compared with other parts of the UK, each of these gets pretty much their fair share of government spending, more than their fair share, or less than their fair share?

Strikingly, every territory seems to believe that it is most hard done by. That said, the level of grievance varies substantially between England at one pole, where 21 per cent of English respondents feel that England receives less than its fair share of resources, and Wales at the other pole, where 58 per cent of Welsh respondents feel this way about their country. Overall, though, the sense that they are denied their fair share is clearly strongest in the three non-English territories. In this case, and in contrast to the data reported in figure 2.1, there are even some signs of inter-territorial solidarity. Around 40 per cent of Scottish respondents also feel that Wales and Northern Ireland get less than their fair share of resources, 30 per cent or more of Welsh respondents feel the same about Scotland and Northern Ireland, while around a quarter of Northern Irish respondents feel this way about the other two devolved territories.

The corollary of this is a perception that some territories receive more than their fair share – or rather, that one particular territory receives more than its fair share. Because as is clear from figure 2.2, majorities in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland believe that England gets more than its fair share of resources. Our English respondents, by contrast, are the least likely to believe this. For years, our data has shown that they have been particularly convinced that it is Scotland that receives more than its fair share. This remains the case, with more than a third of English respondents believing that Scotland gets more than its fair share of resources. Yet it is also noteworthy that one in four English respondents believe the same of

Wales and one in five believe the same of Northern Ireland. Thus, while Scotland continues to feature centrally as a focus for English grievance, the gap with the other two developed territories is not large.

Grievance is not the only aspect of public attitudes towards the union highlighted by our data on economic solidarity; so too is ignorance. Quite simply, significant swathes of the populations of each of the four parts of the UK seem to know little about what is happening in other parts of the state. This becomes apparent when we focus on the ‘don’t know’ responses reported in figure 2.2. Again, it is worth differentiating between Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, on the one hand, and England on the other.

Scottish, Welsh and Northern Irish respondents all have the lowest levels of ‘don’t know’ responses when asked to reflect on the distribution of resources to their own territories – this is a matter about which inhabitants of the state’s periphery tend to have ‘views’. The level of ‘don’t know’ responses are similarly low when asked about England. ‘Don’t know’ rates become substantially higher, however, when asked about the position of the other non-English territories. Viewed in this light, we might usefully understand the union as a series of bilateral relationships between the three non-English territories and England. Or in other words, the UK might be regarded, not so much a union, but rather as a state of unions, to use our colleague James Mitchell’s (2009) felicitous phrase.

Turning to the largest constituent unit of the state, England is, again, an outlier. Overall, our English respondents were most likely to choose the ‘don’t know’ option, this even in relation to the distribution of resources to England. Indeed, our respondents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland were more likely to posit a view on the distribution of resources to England than respondents in England itself.

With around 85 per cent of the population, it is perhaps not surprising that the union does not seem to loom quite so large in England as it does across the rest of the state. Moreover, this is not the only way in which patterns of knowledge (or lack thereof) differ. We have outlined elsewhere patterns of knowledge about legislative competence and that awareness of what is devolved/reserved across the UK is generally patchy, even if typically better in the devolved territories than in England, and typically better at identifying what is reserved than what is devolved (Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a). But the nature of the inaccuracies is also interesting and potentially significant. When English respondents get it wrong, for example, they tend to do so by overestimating the legislative competence of the Scottish parliament. Scottish respondents, by contrast, get it wrong by underestimating the legislative competence of the Scottish parliament.

There are doubtless many factors at work that help explain this state of affairs – some very deeply rooted in the origins and subsequent evolution of the state, others reflecting the nature and location of key news sources. But the way that the UK government chooses to present its double role as both government for the whole of the UK and government for England on policy areas that are devolved to Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, clearly adds to the confusion. Whatever the actual territorial extent of the policy area that they are addressing, government ministers (and, indeed, their Labour opposite numbers) almost invariably refer to ‘this country’ without clarifying whether they mean England or the UK. One can therefore hardly blame survey respondents for not knowing the ins and outs of who controls what or who received which resources if the parties vying to form the government of the UK are so stubbornly imprecise.

At any rate, our particular interest here is not so much cause as effect. What is clear from our analysis of responses across the four parts of the state to our survey items probing levels of economic solidarity is that once we move from the very

abstract to the more particular, attitudes towards the distribution of resources across the state are characterised by significant levels of grievance. This is not only the case in England but also echoed (albeit in different ways) across all of the constituent units of the state.

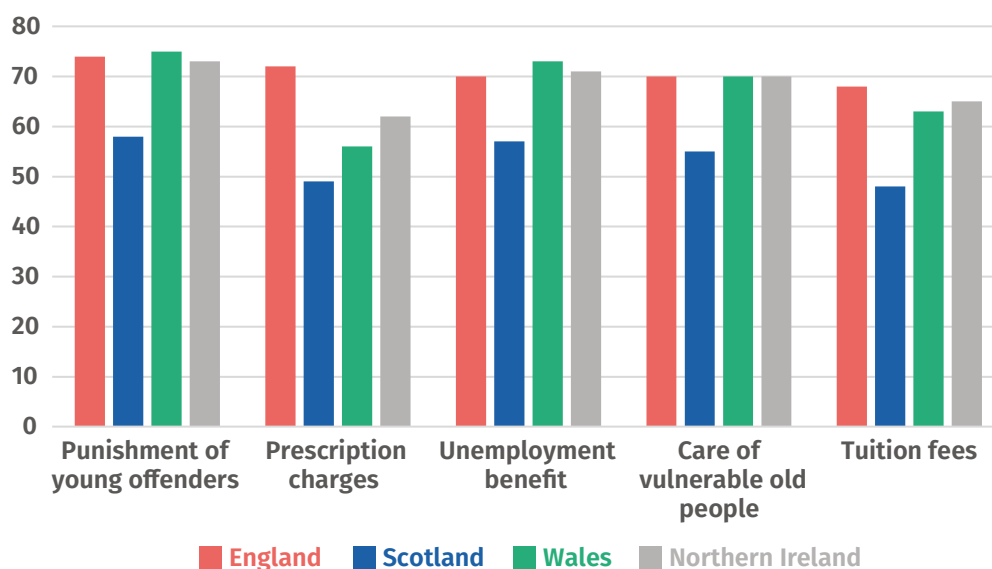
As well as being a 'union of grievance', this is also a union characterised by a considerable degree of ignorance. A significant proportion of the population of the state's core nation do not feel they know enough (or do not care enough) to posit an opinion on the distribution of resources across it. Beyond England, while respondents in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales are very likely to hold views about their own position within the state, we find much larger proportions failing to respond to questions about the other two devolved territories.

3. SOCIAL SOLIDARITY

We noted at the start of the previous chapter that divergence is nothing new in the history of the union. But there can be no doubt that the advent of democratic devolution at the end of the 1990s has not only led to greater divergence between the constituent territories of the UK but also made that divergence more politically salient – at least compared with the period that immediately preceded it. It is also the case that such policy divergence often appears to sit uneasily with a political culture in which complaints about the existence of a ‘postcode lottery’ in terms of differences in service provision are a staple. For some analysts it is also the case that support for policy uniformity across the state – for the same *social rights*, to evoke the language of TH Marshall – is equated with a shared sense of social citizenship.

To evaluate whether individuals believe that citizens across the state should have the same policy entitlement, we asked respondents from each of the four territories whether they thought that policies should be the same across the whole UK or whether they should vary if the different governments want this. To render responses more meaningful, we specified a number of different policy areas, namely unemployment benefit, tuition fees for higher education, paying for the care of vulnerable old people, the punishment of young offenders and prescription charges. These include, therefore, policy areas with a longstanding history of territorial differentiation (justice); areas of high-profile, post-devolution decisions to deviate from UK government policy, such as tuition fees and prescription charges; as well as an area (unemployment benefit) where policy is currently uniform across the UK. The results are displayed in figure 3.1. We focus only on the proportion of respondents across the state saying they wish policy to be uniform, leaving out those who want policy variation or those who do not know.

FIGURE 3.1
Support for policy uniformity across the UK (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

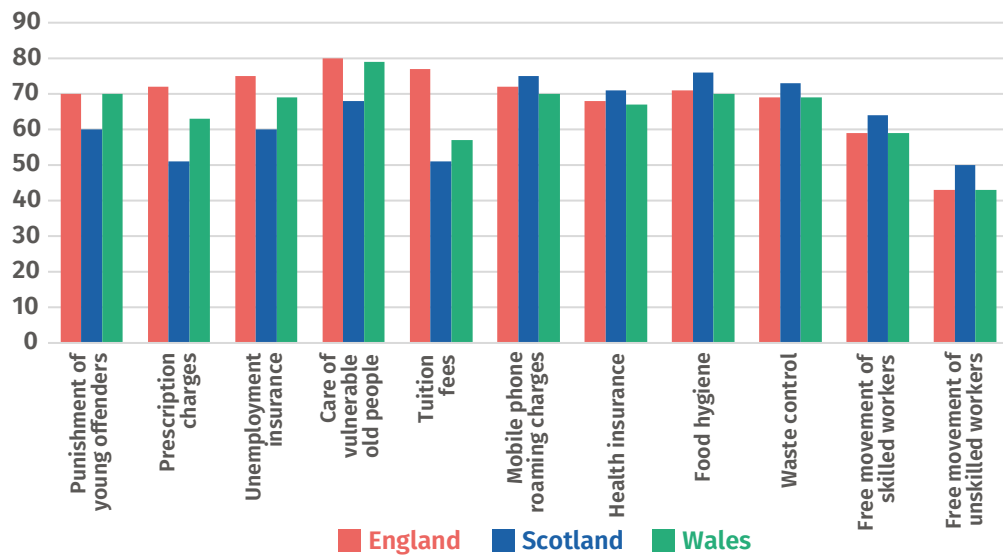
Three things are worth noting here. First and most obviously, there is strikingly high support for policy uniformity across all four territories and across all policy fields, with majority support in all but two of the 20 instances mapped here, and support in excess of 70 per cent in 10 instances. Second, while we should not exaggerate the extent of the differences, support for uniformity is clearly lowest in Scotland, where we find the lowest level of support for policy uniformity across all five policy areas, including less than 50 per cent support for cross-state uniformity with regards to tuition fees and prescription charges. Third and counterintuitively, support for policy uniformity is actually highest for the policy field on which there is the longest-standing history of variation (justice) – higher, if only marginally, than for the policy that is uniform across the state (unemployment benefit). Setting Scotland to one side for the moment, with the partial exceptions of prescription charges and tuition fees (two areas where devolved policy is tangibly different), we see negligible variation in support for uniformity between England, Wales and Northern Ireland. All of this would appear to highlight the extent of a shared sense of social citizenship, but some caution is required before reaching too emphatic a conclusion.

It should not be assumed (as often seemed to be the case during the Covid-19 crisis – to which we return below) that to support uniformity is to support the idea of the three devolved territories following an English ‘lead’, so to speak. This is not implied in the question wording, which leaves the frame of reference deliberately vague, reflecting our interest in levels of support for policy uniformity across the state in the abstract (albeit in specific policy areas) as a way of exploring the extent to which a shared sense of social citizenship exists. It is quite plausible, for example, that at least some of those Welsh respondents who support a uniform approach to prescription charges want the Welsh policy adopted across the state and might, therefore, oppose any attempt to universalise the (less generous) UK government/English approach.

It is also useful to contextualise these findings. First, let us briefly compare data we collected in 2018 (this time excluding Northern Ireland) on support for policy uniformity within the UK (on the left side of figure 3.2) to data on support for policy uniformity between the post-Brexit UK and the EU (on the right side of the figure). As can be seen from the figure, the results show that levels of support for policy uniformity between the UK and a EU from which the UK was in the process of departing were also strikingly high. Support for policy uniformity on food hygiene standards, waste control, mobile roaming charges and health insurance for holiday makers were all around 70 per cent. As far as these policy areas are concerned, levels of support for uniformity are at least comparable to levels of support for policy uniformity within the UK itself. The only real outlier in terms of general support for policy uniformity – and again this is a matter of degree – is for levels of support for the freedom of movement of unskilled workers in England and Wales.

FIGURE 3.2

Support for policy uniformity within the UK and between the UK and the EU (2018) (%)

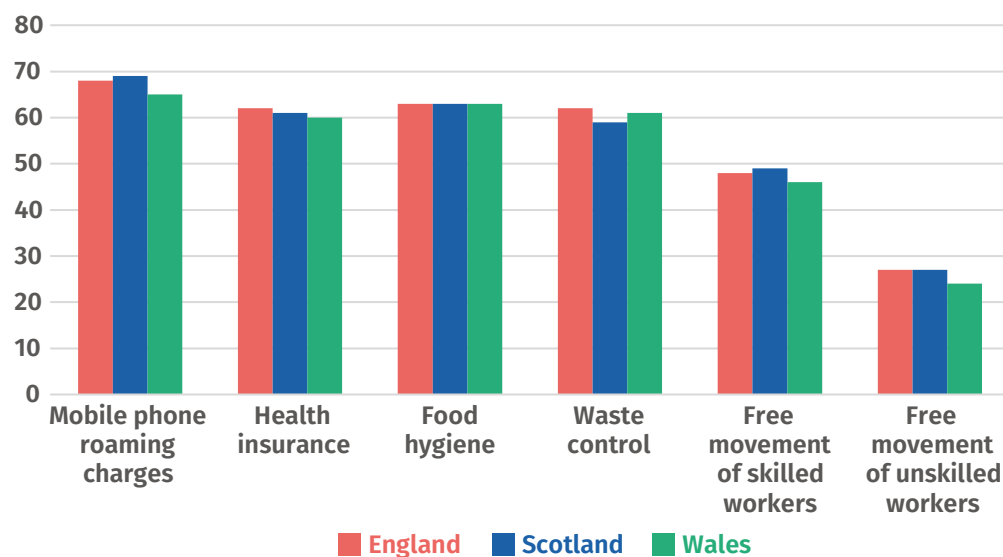


Source: State of the Union Survey 2018

We are obviously aware that these samples contained many respondents who wished to remain in the EU, and it is unsurprising that this group would have wished to maintain policy uniformity between the UK and the EU even after Brexit. In figure 3.3, therefore, we focus only on Leave voters (again in 2018). Note that even here we find strong majorities in favour of policy uniformity between the post-Brexit UK and the EU in all areas except free movement and, in particular, the free movement of unskilled workers (a matter that the UK already had the capacity to control even as a member state).

FIGURE 3.3

Support for policy uniformity between the EU and post-Brexit UK among Leave voters (2018) (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2018

Second, and as already briefly hinted at, the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 raised the issue of policy uniformity across the UK in a new and particularly pointed – and high-profile – way. A number of Conservative politicians as well as their media supporters were very critical of the prospect of, or the imposition of, travel restrictions between different parts of the UK in order to slow down the transmission of the virus. The following exchange in the House of Commons between Conservative MP for Rutland and Melton, Alicia Kearns, and Jacob Rees-Mogg (then leader of the House of Commons) on 15 October 2020 in response to travel restrictions between England and Wales gives a flavour of this type of response:

Kearns: *“Our union must be protected at all costs, so can my Right Hon Friend confirm that it would be illegal for the Welsh Labour government to introduce an intensive border within the UK to restrict movement between England and Wales, and that to do so would damage our precious union and the links between our four great nations.”*

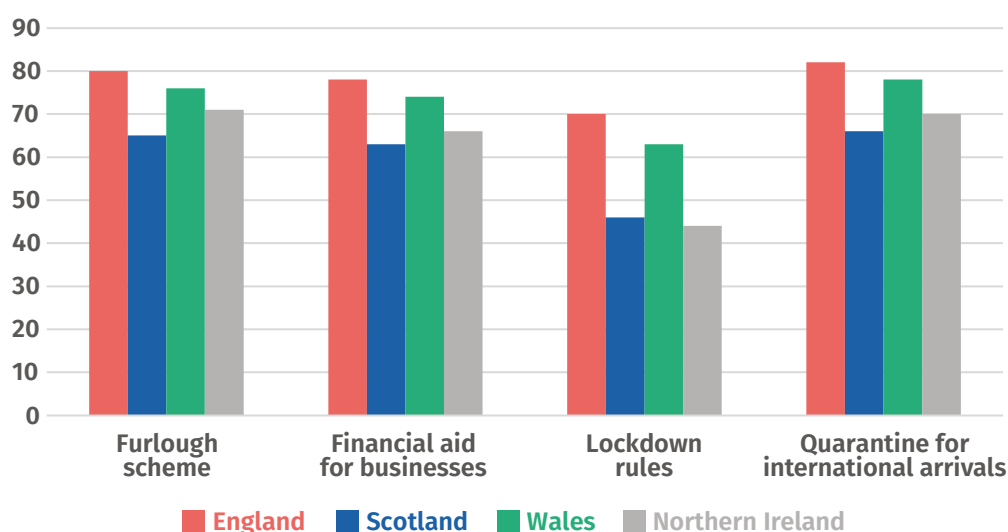
Rees-Mogg: *“Mr Speaker, what would you expect of a hard-left Labour government? The approach to putting a border between England and Wales is unconstitutional and will place the police in an invidious position considering that they serve the whole of the United Kingdom. We are one single United Kingdom and we should not have borders between different parts of the United Kingdom. I am afraid that that is what you get when you vote for socialists.”*

Policy differentiation was portrayed not only as a sign of the alleged dangers represented by the ‘hard left’ but also as a threat to the union.

We used the 2020 iteration of the State of the Union Survey to explore attitudes to policy uniformity/differentiation across the four territories of the state within the context of Covid-19. Four aspects of the response to the pandemic were included: financial assistance to workers (that is, the furlough scheme); financial assistance to businesses that needed to close temporarily; lockdown decisions about self-isolation, curfews and social distancing; and, finally, quarantine for those arriving from outside the UK. Figure 3.4 displays the percentage of respondents in each territory who said that these policies should be the same across the UK.

FIGURE 3.4

Attitudes to policy uniformity in the response to Covid-19 (2020) (%)



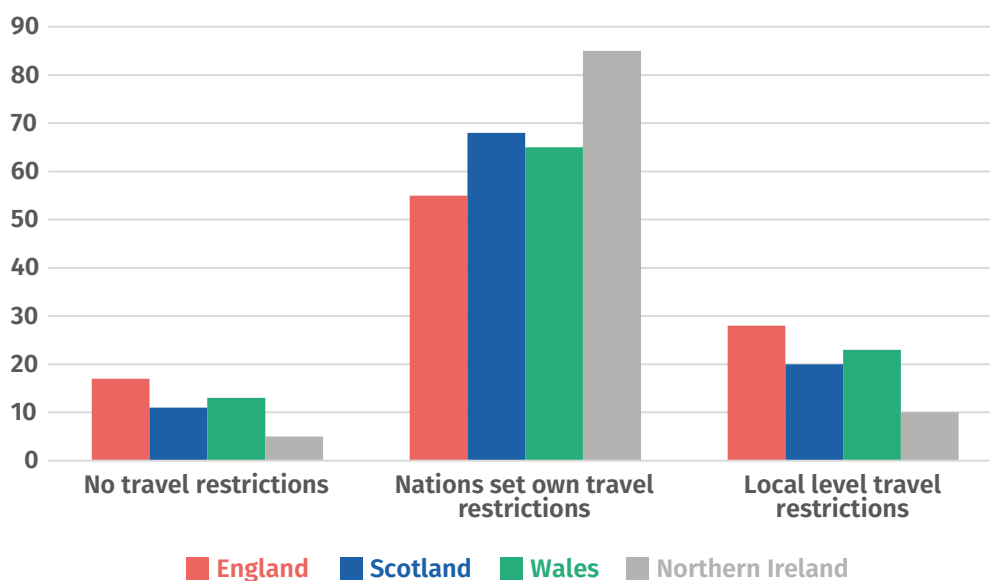
Source: State of the Union Survey 2020

While there are interesting nuances – in this case, support for uniformity is always highest in England – these overall results will come as no surprise, given the data already discussed in this chapter. A very clear majority of respondents in England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales supported policy uniformity across the four nations of the UK for the furlough scheme, financial aid to businesses and the quarantine of international arrivals to the UK. In the case of lockdown rules, while uniformity continued to be supported by majorities in England and Wales, uniformity was supported by less than half of our Scottish and Northern Irish respondents, with particularly strong support for variation in Northern Ireland.

But again, when we probe further, we discover that there is a marked contrast between support for policy uniformity in the abstract and attitudes in more concrete circumstances. In this case, given that Covid-19 did indeed lead to the imposition of travel restrictions, we asked respondents whether they preferred a situation in which there were no travel restrictions between different parts of the state, restrictions set at the local level, or restrictions set at the national (substate) level in each of the four territories. The results are displayed in figure 3.5. In each of the four territories, we find majorities supporting the view that the power to impose restrictions should reside at the English, Northern Irish, Scottish and Welsh levels.

FIGURE 3.5

Attitudes towards policy variation on Covid-19 travel restrictions (2020) (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2020

In summary, at least as far as the policy areas explored in our survey work are concerned – and as noted, we have deliberately attempted to cast the net widely – there is no doubt that the data outlined in this chapter indicates extensive support for policy uniformity across the UK. To the extent to which support for policy uniformity is regarded as a proxy for a sense of social citizenship (and the support of Leavers for extensive policy uniformity between the post-Brexit UK and the EU suggests individuals might well be thinking of policy entitlements rather than social bonds as such), this implies in turn the existence of high levels of social solidarity and social citizenship across the UK.

But as was the case in our previous discussion of economic solidarity, there is an important distinction to be drawn between the abstract and the particular. While support for policy uniformity is very strong in the former sense, when asked about travel restrictions between different parts of the state during the pandemic, we find decisive support for the notion that each territory should be allowed to decide for itself. Now of course, we might wish to argue that supporting policy variation at a time of global pandemic is actually an act of social solidarity rather than its obverse: the willingness to prioritise the protection of citizens and their public services at the cost of individual convenience may plausibly be interpreted as an act of profound social solidarity. Nonetheless, as was confirmed by extensive polling around the responses to the Covid-19 crisis, the populations of the four territories of the UK seem to have been comfortable with the differing approaches adopted by the four different administrations.

Relatedly, it is important not to assume that support for policy uniformity (where it exists) means support for following the lead of the UK government in a given policy area. It may do so, of course – at least among some. But equally, it might indicate support for the adoption of whatever is the most generous (almost invariably devolved) policy provision for rollout across the whole of the state. Given this overall context, while the data reviewed in this chapter indicates the existence of majorities across the state that conceive of a UK-wide political community with shared access to social rights, it remains unclear how much weight should be placed on this. Still more research is required in order to tease out some of the nuances involved.

4. AN AMBIVALENT UNION

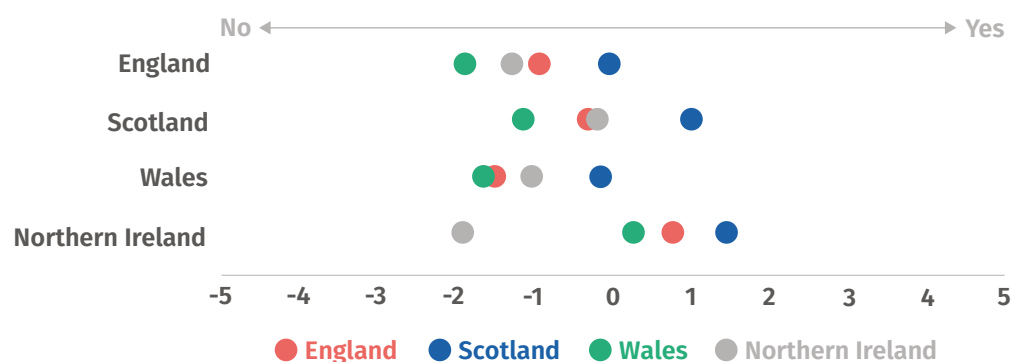
In our Introduction, we noted the obvious challenges to the union generated by the territorially/nationally differentiated result of the Brexit referendum in 2016, as well as the ways in which Brexit was ultimately implemented. Subsequent chapters have analysed patterns of economic and social solidarity across the four constituent territories. While finding that, in the abstract at least, levels of solidarity are high, we also provide evidence that attitudes towards the union are leavened by considerable levels of both grievance and ignorance. Furthermore, in a context in which politicians portrayed territorially variegated responses to the Covid-19 pandemic as a threat to the ‘precious union’, we found that once the framing moved from the abstract to the very concrete, a majority across the state expressed support for the different policy choices of ‘their’ various governments.

All of this serves to raise the question of public attitudes towards the union, which we address directly in the following chapter. We are interested here not only in the extent to which the continuation of the union enjoys public support, but also in the extent to which respondents across the four territories prioritise its continuation. As will become clear, the key theme arising from the discussion is **ambivalence**. Even among those who apparently support the continuation of the union in its current form – and as we shall see, support in Britain for the continued place of Northern Ireland in the union is at best tenuous – much of that support is conditional rather than intrinsic. While the various debates around the future of the union paint choices in stark, binary terms, public attitudes are in reality nuanced and complex.

As a starting point, we asked our respondents whether or not they wished their territory to become independent (in the cases of England, Scotland and Wales) or become part of a united Ireland (in the case of Northern Ireland). To locate these responses within the wider context of attitudes towards the union as a whole, we also asked respondents in each territory how they feel about independence/unification for the other three parts of the UK. In all cases, respondents were asked to rate their support for independence/unification on a scale that ran from -10 (no) to +10 (yes). The results are reported in figure 4.1.

FIGURE 4.1

A ‘360-degree’ view of support for independence/unification (no to yes)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

The first point to emphasise – and the first sign of the ambivalence to which we have referred – is the extent to which the average responses across all four territories are clustered towards the middle of the scale, that is, between -2 and +2 on scales that potentially reach between -10 and +10. In the aggregate, at least, attitudes towards the future of the union are finely balanced. The second and perhaps most striking finding to emerge from this data is the existence of positive support for Irish unity in every part of the state except for Northern Ireland itself. It is perhaps no surprise to many Northern Ireland unionists that their sense of loyalty to the UK is not reciprocated in the countries of Britain; nonetheless, here is particularly graphic evidence of that. In any comparative context, this is a genuinely stunning finding. Whatever the official discourse, at the popular level we find not so much ambivalence about but opposition to the territorial integrity of the state as currently constructed.

The third point to make concerns Scotland. Among the Scottish electorate itself, we find support for independence (at 1.02) but net opposition in the other three territories (if by fine margins in both England and Northern Ireland). Finally, it is also noticeable that support for the continuation of the union between England, Scotland and Wales (though not Northern Ireland) is consistently strongest among our Welsh respondents.¹

Even as it stands, one would be hard-pressed to interpret these results as representing anything other than a distinctly conditional and ambivalent attitude towards the union. This interpretation is further confirmed by responses to another question developed in response to the suggestion that Brexit could destabilise the situation in Northern Ireland and re-open the issue of Scottish independence – a suggestion made by former UK prime ministers Tony Blair and John Major in the run-up to the 2016 Brexit referendum. The question asks whether voters would regard such potential threats to the territorial integrity of the state as a price worth paying for Brexit – with the exact wording changing over time to reflect the changing contours of the post-Brexit referendum debate.

In our 2021 version of this question, we asked voters to consider Brexit in the light of three scenarios. First, would they be willing to risk a second independence referendum in which a majority of Scots voted to leave the UK in order to get their own way on Brexit. A second formulation asked about a border poll in which a majority of the Northern Ireland electorate vote for reunification. A third asks about the imposition of a border in the Irish Sea, this time framed as something that has already happened rather than something that might happen in the future. The results are set out in figures 3.2a, 3.2b and 3.2c, where we also disaggregate responses by past Brexit referendum vote (Leave and Remain).

There are several points worth making about these findings. First, if we combine those who would ‘like it to happen anyway’ and those who think it ‘a price worth paying for Brexit’, we find that around 60 per cent of respondents in each of the four territories of the state have priorities other than maintaining the union. Roughly the same proportions of the English, Scottish and Welsh electorates either actively support Irish reunification or think it a price worth paying for Brexit. This compares to 54 per cent of Northern Ireland voters who say that it is ‘not worth it’. It is also the case that more than half of voters in England and Wales say that they either wanted an Irish Sea border anyway, or that it is a price worth paying for Brexit. In this case, however, more than half of voters in both Northern Ireland and Scotland disagree, and regard it as a price not worth paying.

1 To re-emphasise the point, figure 4.1 reports average scores in the four territories. We are aware that, of course, deep divisions are masked by these figures. The highest standard deviations – that is, deviations from the average – are observed when exploring Scottish and Northern Irish attitudes towards their own constitutional futures. We return to variations within territories in chapter 5.

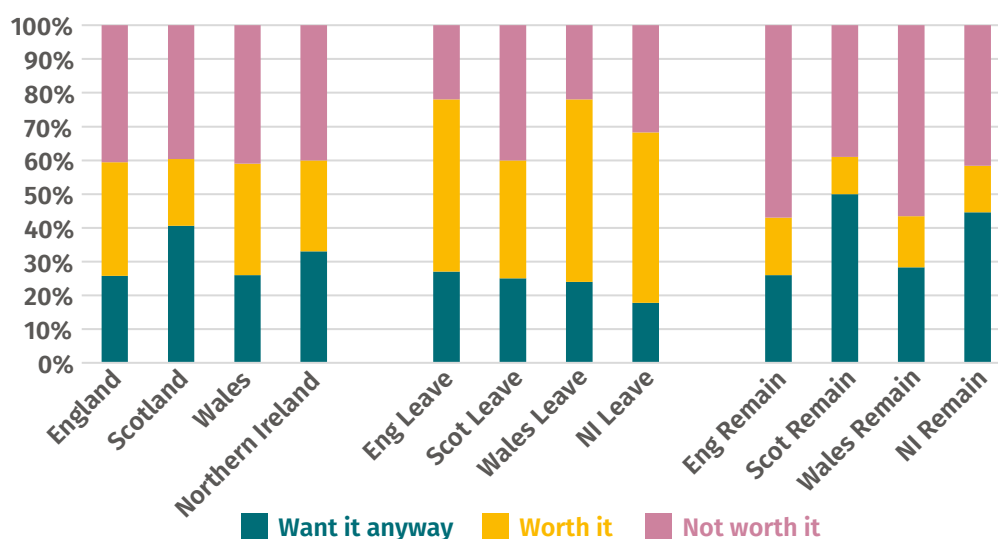
Second, there are notable differences between Leave and Remain voters. In both England and Wales, Leave voters are far less likely than their Remain-voting compatriots to prioritise maintaining the territorial integrity of the state, with more than half saying that Scottish independence and Irish unity would be a price worth paying to secure Brexit and around a quarter saying that they want this to happen anyway. It is also the case that substantial majorities of Leave voters in England (62 per cent), Wales (69 per cent) and – in this case – Scotland (55 per cent) regard an Irish Sea border as a price worth paying for Brexit.

The views of Northern Ireland Leavers are rather more complex. Half think Scottish independence is a price worth paying for Brexit, with another 18 per cent wanting it to happen anyway. In the case of Northern Ireland itself, however, 62 per cent believe that Irish unity is not worth it to achieve Brexit. With regards an Irish Sea border, when we exclude the 9 per cent of Northern Irish Leavers who say that they wanted it to happen anyway, we find the remainder almost equally divided between those who say it was a price worth paying to achieve Brexit and those who say it wasn't (45 per cent vs 46 per cent).

Turning to Scottish Leave voters, a quarter support Scottish independence, with another 35 per cent regarding it as a price worth paying for Brexit. Similarly, just over a quarter (28 per cent) of this group support Irish unity for its own sake, with 38 per cent regarding it as a price worth paying for Brexit. All of this suggests an ambivalent approach to the territorial integrity of the state as currently structured.

The comparisons with Remain voters are instructive. Remainers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and, to a lesser extent, Wales are more likely than their compatriot Leavers to say that they want Scottish independence and Irish unity anyway. English Remainers are, however, far less likely than Leavers to say that threatening the territorial integrity of the state is a price worth paying for Brexit. Meanwhile, large majorities of Remainers in all four territories – ranging from 64 per cent in Northern Ireland itself to 71 per cent in Wales – regard an Irish Sea border as a price worth paying.

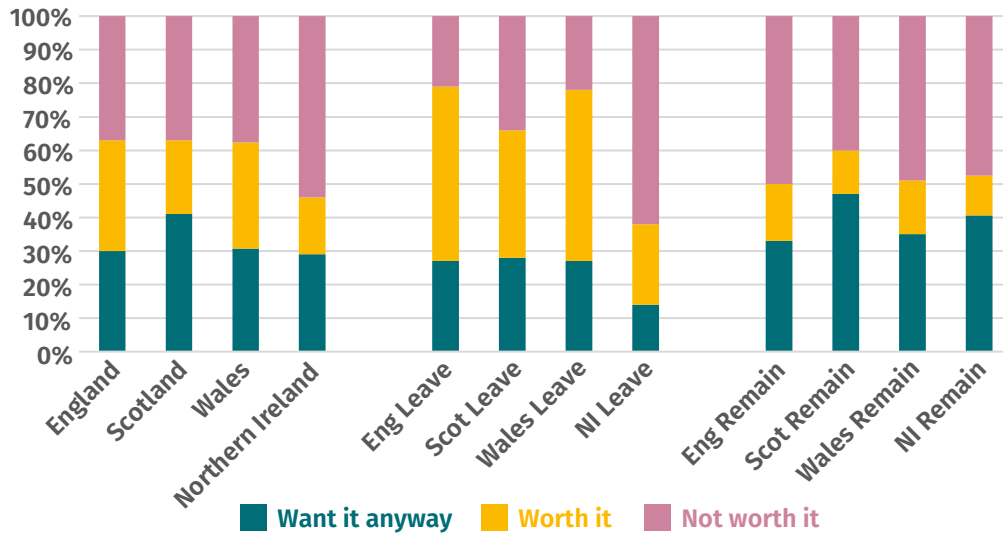
FIGURE 4.2A
Scottish independence worth it to achieve Brexit (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

FIGURE 4.2B

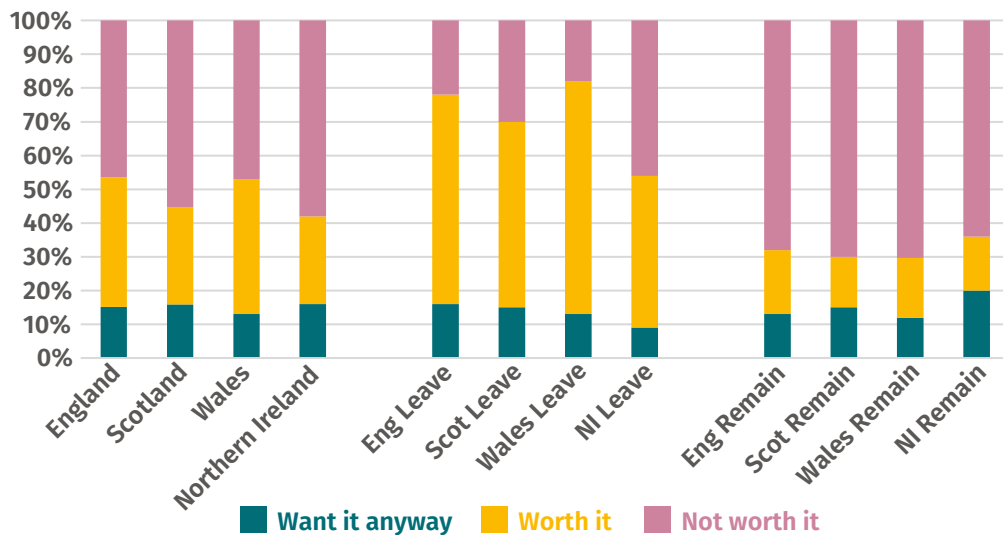
Irish reunification worth it to achieve Brexit (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

FIGURE 4.2C

Irish Sea border worth it to achieve Brexit (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

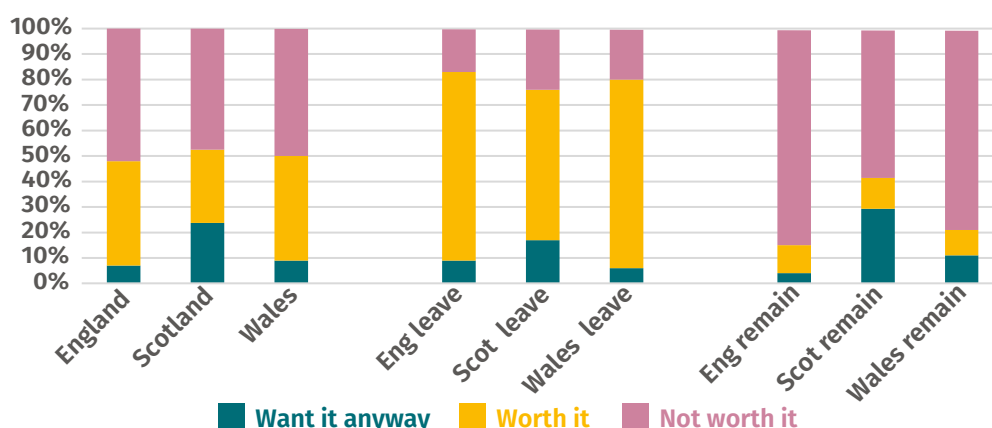
Overall, these findings provide further confirmation that support for the union as currently structured is conditional rather than intrinsic. Figures 3.2a and 3.2b, in particular, suggest that Leave voters in England and Wales were overwhelmingly more likely to prioritise a departure from the external union with Europe over maintaining the domestic union of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. In the context of the polarisation that continues to characterise the Leave–Remain argument, the latter finding may well be seized upon by

some opponents of Brexit as further evidence of the perceived recklessness of proponents of leaving the EU. As we shall see, however, it is not only Leave voters who hold such ambiguous and conditional views about the (domestic) union.

The question wording used in the 2021 survey, of course, reflects the fact that the 2016 referendum produced a pro-Brexit majority across the UK. It is, however, possible to pose a series of hypothetical questions about the consequences of ignoring the 2016 referendum result and *remaining* within the EU. In 2019 (that is, before Brexit ‘got done’) we did precisely this, asking respondents whether they saw various scenarios as ‘worth it’ in order to get their own way – be that Leave or Remain – on the EU issue. Thus, we asked not only about the risks to the domestic union that might result from the then still prospective Brexit – in this case, ‘the breakup of the UK’. In addition, we asked about attitudes to the potential threats to the domestic union that might arise from remaining in the EU despite the referendum result, specifically Leave-voting parts of the UK losing faith in the union and the prospect of English independence. The results are set out in figures 3.3a, 3.3b and 3.3c.

FIGURE 4.3A

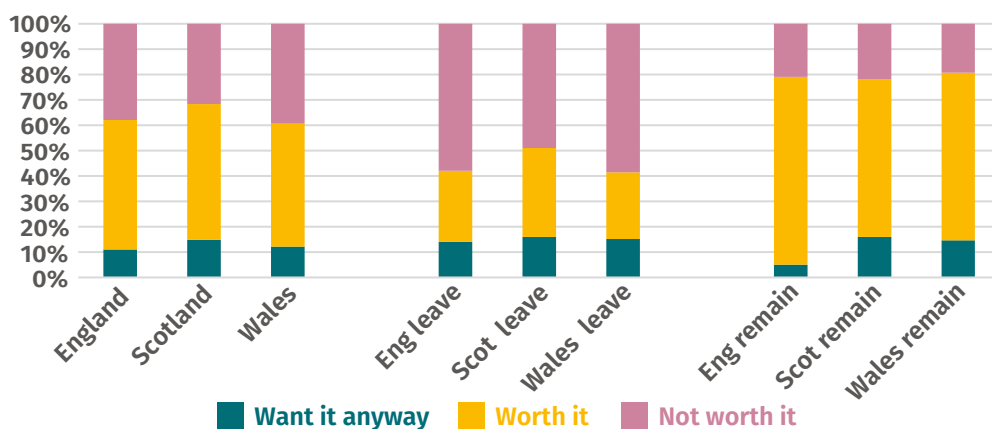
The breakup of the UK worth it to achieve Brexit (2019) (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2019

FIGURE 4.3B

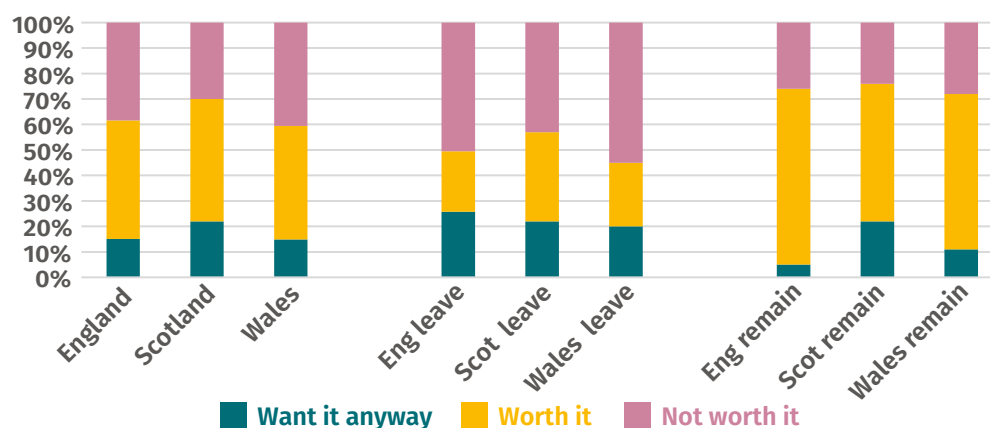
Losing faith in the union worth it to remain in the EU (2019) (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2019

FIGURE 4.3C

English independence worth it to remain in the EU (2019) (%)



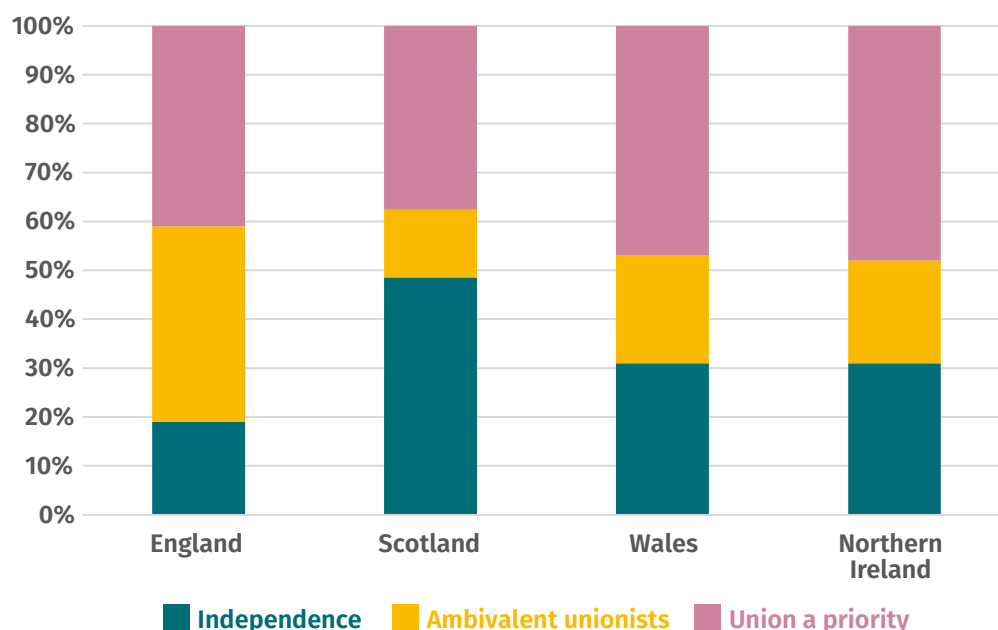
Source: State of the Union Survey 2019

What is perhaps most striking about these findings is the symmetry in the views of Leave and Remain voters. Majorities on both sides of the Brexit debate, be they in England, Scotland or Wales (Northern Ireland was not included in this iteration), regard ending the union in its current form as a price worth paying to secure their desired outcome. Given the preceding discussion, it will come as no surprise that almost three-quarters of Leavers in England and Wales and 59 per cent in Scotland regard the breakup of Britain as a price worth paying to leave the EU. But equally, almost three-quarters of Remainers in England and Wales and 62 per cent in Scotland regard Leave-voting areas losing faith in the union as a price worth paying for retaining EU membership. The proportion of Remainers regarding English independence as a price worth paying to remain in the EU is almost as high, at 69 per cent in England, 61 per cent in Wales and 54 per cent in Scotland. Here is further evidence for the argument that support for the domestic union is not unconditional but is rather more ambivalent.

This becomes yet more obvious when we introduce a further method of evaluating support for the union, namely a question that asks whether the union is regarded as a priority, whether the respondent wants independence for their part of the UK (reunification in the case of Northern Ireland), or a middle option that we regard as a form of ambivalent unionism. In this latter case, respondents select a response option that states that while they do not want independence for their own part of the UK, if one or more other parts of the UK want to 'go their own way then so be it'. This question gives us a sense of the extent to which maintaining the current borders of the union is an important priority, as well as has how people view the place of their own territory within the state.

FIGURE 4.4

Ambivalent unionism across the UK (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

The results in figure 4.4 show that once we combine supporters of independence and ambivalent unionists, we reach 50 per cent or more of the electorate in every part of the UK. The contrast is largest between Scotland (with most independence supporters and fewest ambivalent unionists) and England (with most ambivalent unionists and fewest independence supporters). In the latter case especially, we find more striking confirmation of the findings on support for independence/unity reported in figure 4.1 (above). The electorate in England might not want independence for itself, but it does not appear unduly alarmed or put off by the notion that other parts of the UK might leave the union. Again, the full-throated unionism championed by its most ardent proponents finds only limited support at the popular level where attitudes are far more nuanced and – yes – ambivalent. This ambivalence is not necessarily a cause for concern in itself, but it clearly sits uneasily with muscular unionism that has in recent years been so zealously promoted by much of the UK’s political class.

5. MUSCULAR UNIONISM

It was during Boris Johnson's brief, tumultuous premiership that the term 'muscular unionism' became a familiar part of our political vocabulary. It has become widely used to refer to the Johnson administration's approach towards maintaining the union. Rhetorically, this continued Theresa May's veneration of the 'precious union', but in addition included the (arguably, largely symbolic) addition of the role of minister for the union to the prime minister's own portfolio as well as an overhaul of institutional structures underpinning the union. These included a union directorate, a union operations committee and a union strategy committee – according to one estimate (from February 2021), the annual wage bill of saving the union totalled almost £500,000 (O'Donoghue 2021).

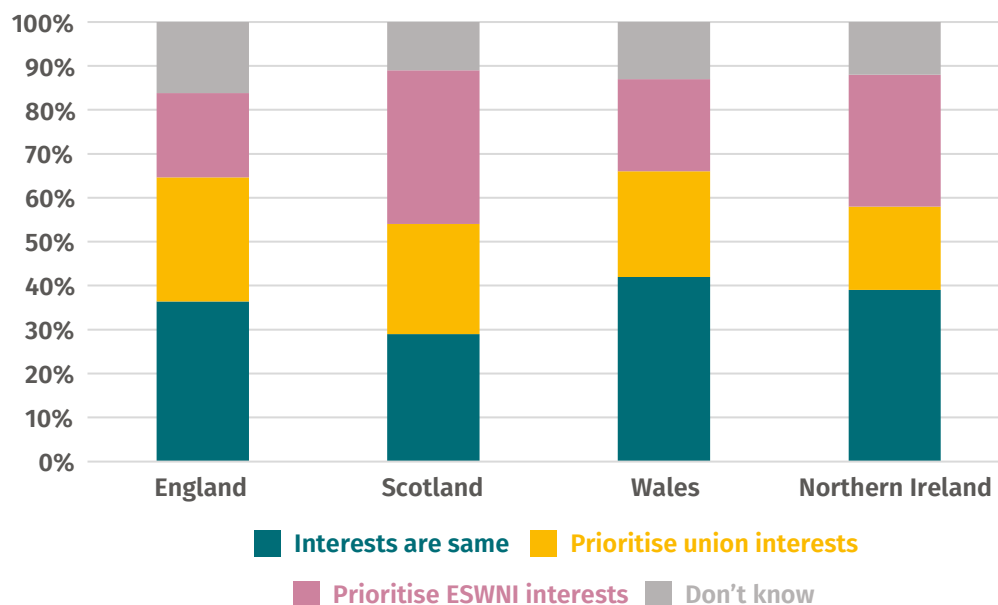
The approach to relationships with the UK's devolved governments and parliaments also changed, with the London government increasingly presenting any policy differentiation as representing an existential threat to the union. Powers were removed from the devolved level via the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, with the regular overruling of the Sewel Convention being regarded with apparent equanimity in Whitehall. All in all, the prime minister's widely reported remark (in November 2020) that he regarded devolution as having been a 'disaster north of the border' seemed to sum up the whole approach of his administration to the state's territorial constitution (BBC 2021).

It is striking, however, that the first use of the term 'muscular unionism' occurred in the context of the Scottish Labour party, where it was used to describe that party's increasingly assertive stance on the union (Henderson 2020). This serves as a reminder that it is not only the Conservative party that has doubled-down on the pro-union rhetoric and associated symbolism, or is adopting a more monist (compare pluralist) understanding of the state. Rather, with the exception (so far) of the Welsh Labour party, this seems to represent a wider response across much of the British political class to the centrifugal forces generated by Brexit.

But to what extent does this muscular unionism chime with the views of the state's citizens? And if so, who are the muscular unionists? To evaluate this we posed a series of questions about the nature of the UK's domestic union. First, we asked our respondents how they assessed the interests of the union, whether they saw these as distinct from the interests of their part of the UK or similar, and, if different, which one should be prioritised. The responses are set out in figure 5.1. As is immediately obvious, while there is some interesting variation in the aggregate numbers across the different parts of the state, we should perhaps not exaggerate those differences. The proportions believing that the union's interests should be prioritised range from 19 per cent in Northern Ireland to 28 per cent in England, with the figures for Scotland and Wales being 25 per cent and 24 per cent respectively. There are larger variations in the remaining categories. Compare, for example, Scotland, where 35 per cent believe that the interests of Scotland should be prioritised, to England, where only 19 per cent believe this. The proportions stating that the interests of the state and constituent territory are the same range from a high of 42 per cent in Wales to a low of 29 per cent in Scotland, with the proportions for Northern Ireland standing at 39 per cent and England at 36 per cent.

FIGURE 5.1

The union's interests (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Differences become far more apparent when we disaggregate responses to this question by party supported in the last UK general election (that is, in 2019). In table 5.1, we focus on those respondents who said that the union's interests should be prioritised, clustering responses together in order to facilitate comparisons across Britain and Northern Ireland. It should be stressed that these party-based clusters are crude. We are obviously aware of the very different histories and approaches of Sinn Féin, on the one hand, and the Scottish National party and Plaid Cymru, on the other. Neither are the Conservatives and the DUP easy bedfellows in a post-Northern Ireland Protocol era. Moreover, while the Liberal Democrat/Alliance party and Labour party/SDLP clusters may well appear more natural, there are (as will be seen) significant differences between their supporters with regards to constitutional attitudes. Nonetheless, when suitably caveated, this approach is helpful in order to track the poles of substate nationalism and unionism across the state.

TABLE 5.1**Prioritise the interests of the union, by party (2019 vote) (%)**

	All	Con/DUP	LD/ Alliance	Lab/SDLP	SNP/ Plaid Cymru/ Sinn Féin	Didn't vote
England	28	28	34	33	--	20
Scotland	25	57	46	30	8	21
Wales	24	38	41	17	15	18
Northern Ireland	19	24 (29 UUP)	19	13	13	15

Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: Con = Conservative party, DUP = Democratic Unionist Party, Lab = Labour party, LD = Liberal Democrats, SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party, SNP = Scottish National Party and UUP = Ulster Unionist Party.

Unsurprisingly, supporters of the unionist parties (Labour, the Conservative party, the Liberal Democrats, the DUP and the UUP) are most likely to believe that the interests of the union should be prioritised, with support for this proposition lower among supporters of the other parties. In Northern Ireland, for example, we find a sliding scale of responses from the UUP (29 per cent) to the DUP (24 per cent) to the Alliance (19 per cent) to the SDLP and Sinn Féin (both at 13 per cent). Differences are greatest in Scotland, ranging from 57 per cent of Scottish Conservatives to 8 per cent of SNP supporters who believe the union's interests should be prioritised. Unionism and substate nationalism in Scotland are markedly more polarised than in any other part of the union.

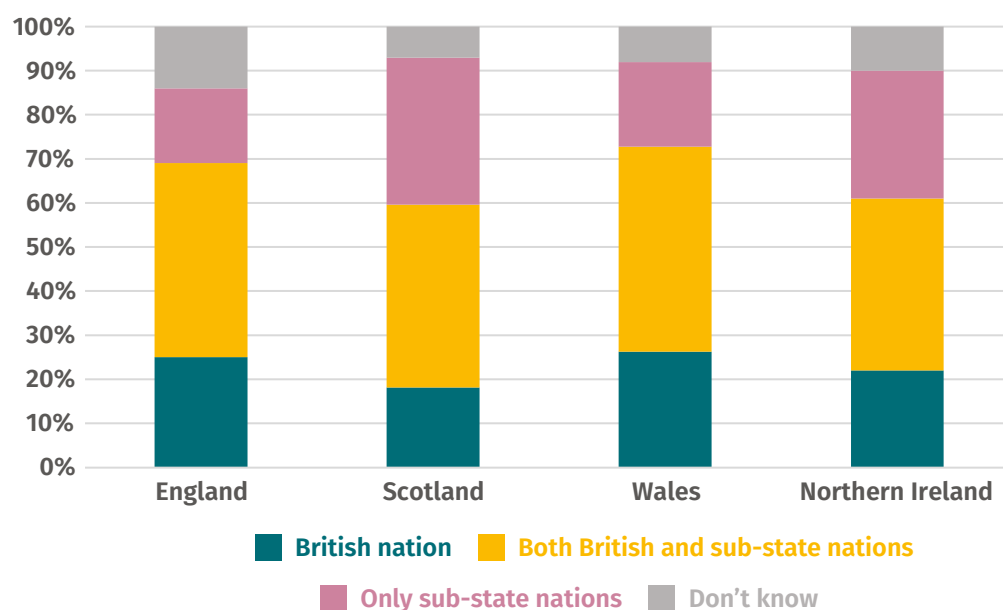
But in addition to such differences between parties, there are also notable differences *within* them. Contrast, for example, the previously mentioned 57 per cent of Scottish Conservatives who believe that the union's interests should be prioritised, with their English counterparts: there is an almost 30-point gap between English and Scottish Conservatives on this issue. While not as large (at 12 per cent), there is also a significant gap between Scottish and English Liberal Democrat supporters, and in same direction. English and Scottish Labour voters appear more similar, with around 30 per cent in each instance believing the interests of the union should be prioritised. In this case, however, we find that only 17 per cent of Welsh Labour voters believe the same. In short, for the three largest British parties, there are significant internal differences of opinion, with either their English voters (in the case of the Conservatives and Liberal Democrats) or their Welsh supporters (in the case of Labour) much less likely to believe the interests of the union should be prioritised.

In the context of what we have termed the monist interpretation/presentation of the nature of the state characteristic of muscular unionism, we also asked respondents how they conceive of the relationship between state and nation(s). Specifically, we asked whether they believe that there is only one nation in the UK (the British nation), whether they believe that there are only nations existing at the substate level (in other words, that only England, Scotland, Wales and Northern

Ireland are nations), or whether nations exist at both the state and substate level. As can be seen from figure 5.2, across the four territories we find a plurality of respondents supporting the contention that there are both substate nations and a British nation in the UK. Agreement is highest in Wales (46 per cent) and England (44 per cent) and lowest in Northern Ireland (39 per cent). We see a similar, relatively modest level of inter-territorial variation in the view that there is only one British nation, from fewer than one in five in Scotland (18 per cent) to just over one in four (26 per cent) in Wales.

FIGURE 5.2

How many nations are in the UK? (%)



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

The greatest variation is in the view that there is no British nation at all. One-third of Scottish respondents believe this, as do a slightly smaller proportion in Northern Ireland (29 per cent), but this drops substantially in Wales (19 per cent) and England (17 per cent). It is also worth noting the variation in the level of 'don't know' responses, with English respondents (at 14 per cent) twice as likely as their Scottish (7 per cent) or Welsh (8 per cent) counterparts to choose that option.

Here, however, is another example of intra-territory differences proving to be at least as telling as those we find between them. Again, table 5.2 disaggregates responses by party supporters (as measured by the 2019 general election vote). Several points are worth noting. The first is that the Conservatives and the supporters of the two Northern Ireland unionist parties are much more likely than the supporters of the other parties to see the UK as home to a single British state. Indeed, this is the view of nearly half of Conservative supporters in Wales (49 per cent) and Scotland (47 per cent).

TABLE 5.2**There is only one (British) nation in the UK by party (2019 vote) (%)**

	Con/DUP	LD/Alliance	Lab/SDLP	SNP/Plaid Cymru/Sinn Féin	Didn't vote
England	30	16	23	--	22
Scotland	47	27	25	4	12
Wales	49	27	16	16	22
Northern Ireland	44 (37 UUP)	13	4	7	19

Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: Con = Conservative party, DUP = Democratic Unionist Party, Lab = Labour party, LD = Liberal Democrats, SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party, SNP = Scottish National Party and UUP = Ulster Unionist Party.

Second, however, we find a significant difference in views between Conservatives in Wales and Scotland, on the one hand, and English Conservatives, on the other, with less than a third (30 per cent) of the latter agreeing with the single British nation view of the state. In fact, a plurality of English Conservatives (44 per cent) support the idea that both British and substate nations coexist in the same state. This contrast in attitudes poses something of a strategic dilemma for the party that forms the current UK government. As we have noted elsewhere:

"The Tories remain – comfortably – England's dominant party yet last won the popular vote at a general election in Scotland in 1959 and in Wales in 1859 (the latter is not a misprint). Given this, should the Tories really be seeking to change the way that its English supporters think of themselves in order to appease its supporters in those parts of the state where its position is dramatically weaker?"

Henderson and Wyn Jones 2022

While the logic of muscular unionism is surely that the party should be equally assertive about the same understanding of the union across every part of the state, the risk that this poses for the Conservatives is that it could place the party at odds with the views of people in that part of the state where ambivalence is particularly marked.

Another important intra-party difference that is worthy of note is that Welsh Labour supporters are significantly less likely than English and Scottish Labour supporters to choose what might be regarded as the most assertively unionist response option. Indeed, in tables 4.1 and 4.2 we find that in Wales, the attitudes of Labour supporters are much more closely aligned to those of Plaid Cymru supporters than they are to the views of the supporters of the other two unionist parties. Finally, it is worth noting the marked difference between the responses of supporters of both unionist parties in Northern Ireland and those of the supporters of the Alliance party. The latter are substantially more likely to understand the state in more pluralist terms.

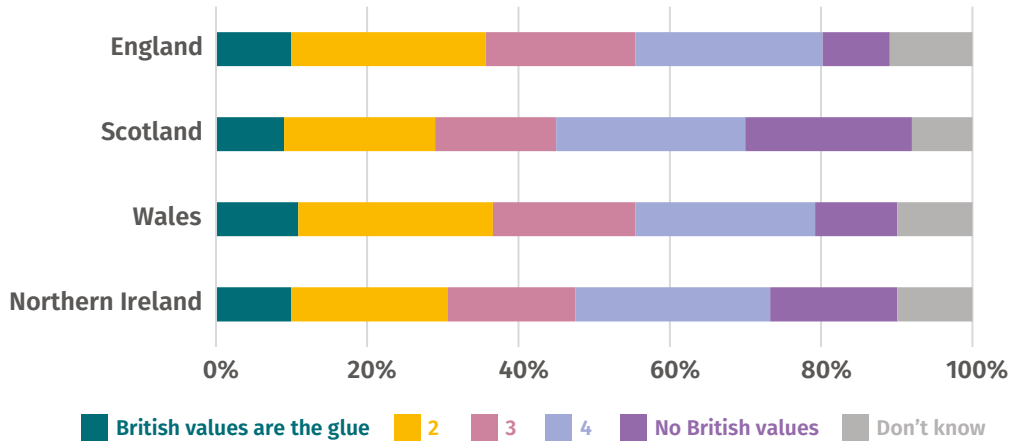
In order to further explore public attitudes towards the various views and approaches associated with muscular unionism, we devised and fielded a battery of questions with opposing statements at each pole, with respondents asked to indicate on a scale of 1 to 5 which statement they most supported. The

statements were deliberately designed to portray a positive framing for a particular perspective of the state, with one statement in each pair (in **bold**) representing what we take to be the muscular unionist standpoint. These were:

British values are the glue that holds this state together	vs	There is no such thing as British values, just different values in different parts of the state
People support constitutional change because there are fundamental problems with the current arrangements	vs	People support constitutional change because they don't know enough about the benefits of the union
The UK government should spend more time explaining the benefits of the union	vs	The UK government should spend more time listening when people say there are problems with the union
The UK government should allow referendums on constitutional change whenever particular regions or nations want them	vs	The UK government should not allow referendums that threaten to break up the state
The UK government should spend more money in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland to highlight the benefits of the union	vs	The UK government should target spending based on economic need, not political priorities

The responses – reported by territory – are set out in figures 4.3a–e below. With regards British values (figure 5.3a), two things are worth noting. First, the highest percentage support for British values being the glue that holds the state together is only 11 per cent (in Wales). Support for the converse proposition – that there are no British values – is substantially higher in both Northern Ireland (17 per cent) and Scotland (22 per cent). Second, if we sum the last two categories – that is, those indicating 4 or 5 on the 5-point scale – then this amounts to 47 per cent of respondents in Scotland and 43 per cent in Northern Ireland. The respective figures for Wales and England are lower, at 35 per cent and 34 per cent respectively. Indeed, in these countries we see marginally higher support for categories 1 and 2 (in combination).

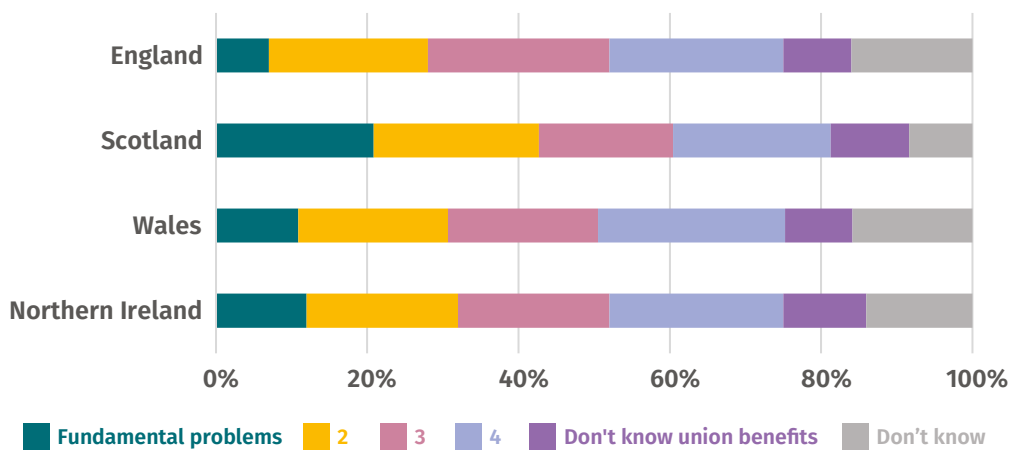
FIGURE 5.3A
British values?



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

The contrasting statements that there are fundamental problems with the union and that people do not know enough about the benefits elicited varying responses (see figure 5.3b). The proportions agreeing most emphatically with the proposition that fundamental problems exist range between 7 per cent in England and one in five of all voters in Scotland. If we compare the proportions choosing response options 1 and 2 with those choosing options 4 and 5, then in England, Wales and Northern Ireland we find more in the latter (from a unionist perspective, less problematic) category – although the differences are not great. This is not the case in Scotland, however, where the opposite is true. The Scottish responses are also noteworthy for the small number of ‘don’t know’ responses compared with other parts of the state.

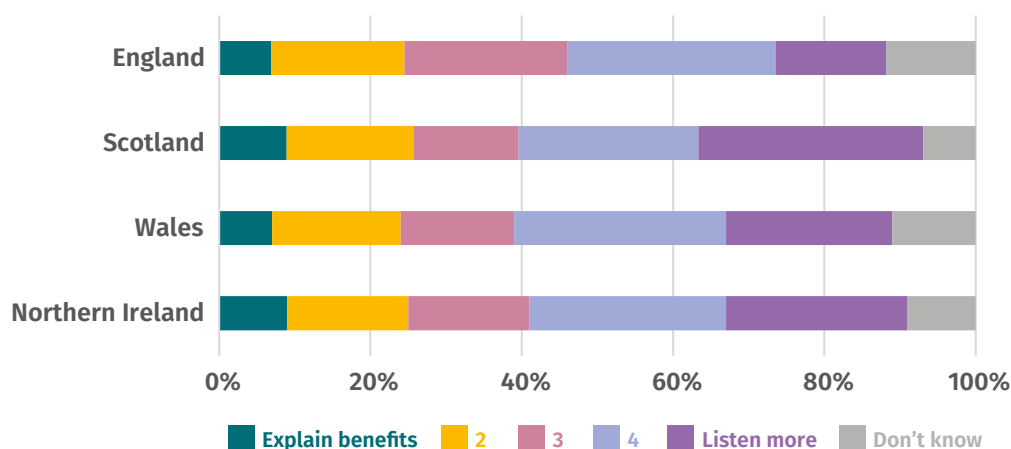
FIGURE 5.3B
Fundamental problems vs unrecognised benefits



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Turning to the next set of contrasting statements, there are higher levels of agreement for the proposition that the UK government should listen more when people say there are problems rather than for the suggestion that it should spend more time explaining union benefits (see figure 5.3c). More than half of all Scottish respondents (54 per cent) are in categories 4 or 5, but the figures are also high in Northern Ireland (50 per cent), Wales (50 per cent) and England (43 per cent). Scottish respondents may be more emphatic on this matter, with fully 30 per cent choosing the fifth response option, but on this at least their views are not markedly out of line with views across the rest of the state.

FIGURE 5.3C
Explain more vs listen more (%)

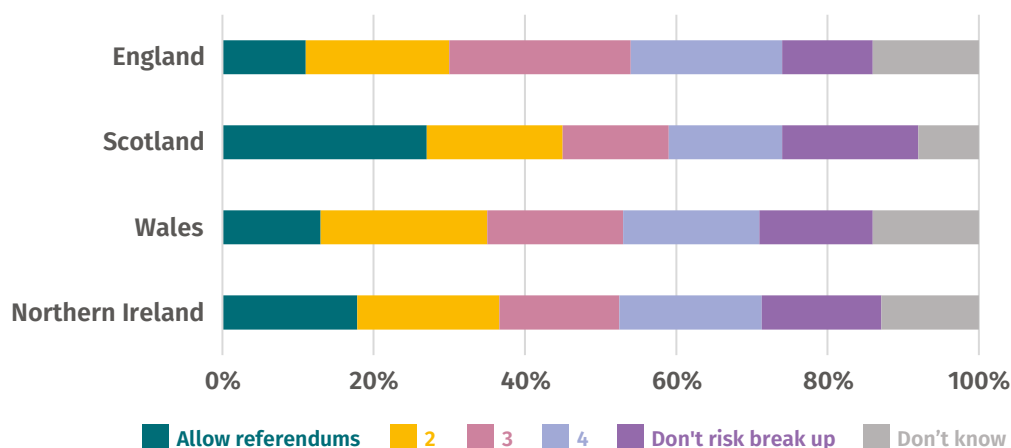


Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

It is one thing to suggest that the UK government should listen. The question of *how* popular opinion should be expressed is not necessarily straightforward. One currently contentious option is to allow citizens to express their preferences on the union via referendums. When probed about this possibility (see figure 5.3d), almost half (45 per cent) of our Scottish respondents chose response categories 1 or 2 (that is, supported the proposition that the UK government should allow referendums on constitutional change whenever particular regions or nations want them, rather than refusing to allow referendums that threaten to break up the state). Support drops in Northern Ireland (37 per cent) and Wales (35 per cent), with the lowest levels of support in England (30 per cent). But before concluding that this is another example of Scotland acting as the outlier, it might also be noted that only in England – and, even here, only narrowly – do we find more choosing options 4 and 5, in combination, rather than options 1 and 2. In both Wales and Northern Ireland, the opposite is the case (although, again, the margins are narrow).

FIGURE 5.3D

Allow referendums



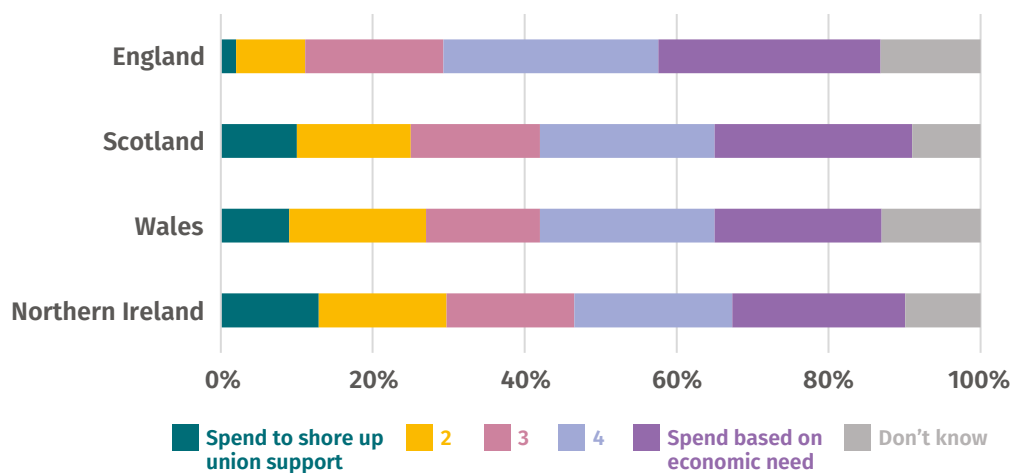
Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Finally, we turn to the issue of public spending. It should be noted from the outset that, once again, this is far from a simple matter. We know that there exists in England a sense that Scotland gets more resources than it warrants. It is also a commonplace of political debate in Wales that Scotland receives more public spending than merited on the basis of need, with Wales receiving too little. Furthermore, following the entry onto the statute book of the United Kingdom Internal Market Act 2020, it is plausible that in both Scotland and Wales, any suggestion that the UK government spends more to highlight the benefits of the union might well be interpreted as supporting the removal of devolved competences. Finally, as we have already discussed in chapter 1 of this report, there is a tendency in every one of the four constituent territories of the UK to think that it is badly done by in terms of relative levels of public spending.

Nonetheless, all caveating aside, the results reported in figure 5.3e give pause, particularly the fact that English respondents are significantly less likely than those in other parts of the state to endorse the notion that the UK government should spend money in order to highlight the benefits of the union (with only 2 per cent of English respondents providing the most emphatic support for that statement). By contrast, well over half (57 per cent) want spending to target economic rather than political priorities, all of which is to suggest that if the purpose of spending is to shore up unionist support in areas where it is lowest, then doing so runs the risk of damaging support in areas where it is currently higher.

FIGURE 5.3E

Spend for union or economic need (%)



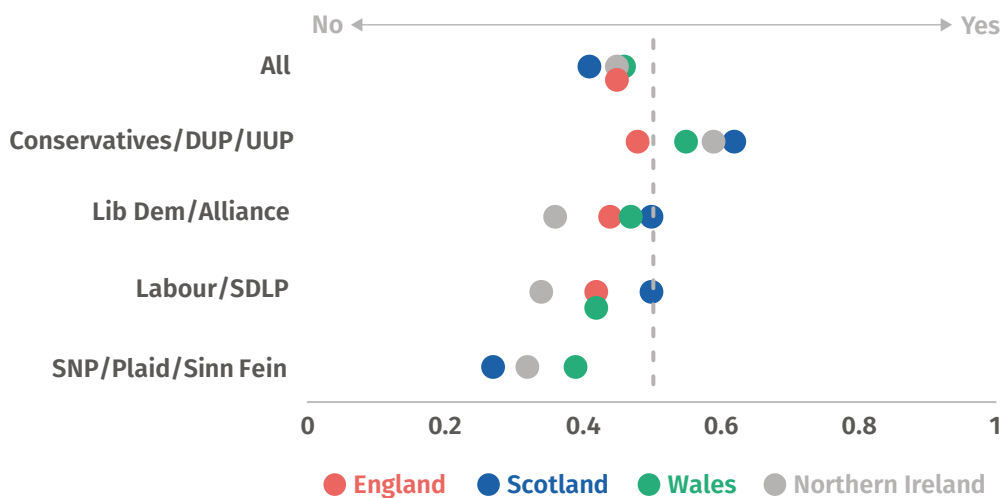
Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Taken together, the responses to this battery of questions reported so far highlight some of the risks of the muscular unionism strategy. Different dimensions either fall on deaf ears in areas where support for independence is higher (Scotland) or are in danger of putting off voters in areas where levels of ambivalent unionism are higher (England). If there is a glue that holds the state together, it appears voters are divided on whether or not it is 'British values'. Rather, one of the sources of consensus across the state is that the UK government should prioritise listening to critiques of the union over extolling its benefits – an approach that is the antithesis of muscular unionism.

The risks and, in many ways, the incongruence of the muscular unionism strategy are brought into even sharper focus when we disaggregate responses to these questions by party. To do this we have created a muscular unionism index, composed of the five items, recoding them so that higher numbers imply support for muscular unionism and then rescaling the resulting index so that it runs from 0 to 1, where higher figures imply support for muscular unionism. Figure 5.4 plots the four electorates, and then plots them by party supported in the last UK general election.

FIGURE 5.4

Muscular unionism index: support for muscular unionism



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: DUP = Democratic Unionist Party, LD = Liberal Democrats, SDLP = Social Democratic and Labour Party, SNP = Scottish National Party and UUP = Ulster Unionist Party.

When we plot the results by territory, we can see, first, that the electorates as a whole are tightly clustered together, all below the 0.5 line – that is, tending away from the muscular unionist standpoint. The scores for the English, Northern Irish and Welsh respondents all overlap, with Scotland less supportive still – although by a relatively narrow margin.

Separating out these results by political party, we find that only three sets of party supporters across the state score above 0.5 on the muscular unionism index, namely Scottish and Welsh Conservatives as well as DUP supporters. In contrast to their Scottish and Welsh counterparts, the responses of English Conservative supporters place them below the 0.5 mark. This serves to underline once again the extent to which the Conservative party houses within it considerable variation in its views of the union. Scottish Conservatives are more likely than any other group of voters across the state to espouse muscular unionist views – which, *inter alia*, serves to distance them from the views of their compatriots, including even the unionists among them. The views of English Conservatives on the union, by contrast, are much more closely aligned with those of the English electorate as a whole. Indeed, it is striking how little variation by party we find in England: English Conservative, Liberal Democrat and Labour supporters all fall within .06 points of each other on the muscular unionism scale.

There is, as can be seen, greater diversity in Wales and Northern Ireland. Nonetheless, perhaps the most striking feature of figure 5.4 is that, at least as measured by the muscular unionism index, opinions are more polarised in Scotland than anywhere else in the state. It is home to both those voters who are most supportive of muscular unionist arguments and standpoints (Scottish Conservative supporters) as well as those who are most hostile towards them (SNP supporters). There is a considerable irony here. Analysis of voting in Northern Ireland has tended to be separated out from the analysis of voting in the rest of the UK, in large part because the factors driving voting there have been regarded as being different and the political context more polarised. Yet, by each measure of muscular unionism we have utilised here, the nationalist–unionist divide is in fact deeper in Scotland than it is in Northern Ireland. In such a context, it is hard to

know how proponents of this particularly assertive form of unionism imagine that it might successfully persuade those currently on the 'other side'. Moreover, to the extent that it has become generalised as the British political class's approach to the union, our findings suggest that muscular unionism is so out of kilter with the far more nuanced and ambivalent views of the union held by much of the wider public that it could easily become self-defeating.

6.

THE COMPLEXITIES OF BRITISH IDENTITY

Thus far we have explored attitudes towards the union – and unionism – across the four constituent territories of the state, disaggregating our findings by constitutional attitudes and the 2019 general election vote where useful in illuminating our analysis. In this chapter we consider the ways in which national identities shape attitudes towards the union. One of the key arguments that emerges from our analysis is so fundamental – and so potentially far reaching in its implications – that it is worth drawing attention to it at the outset as something to be borne in mind throughout.

Many, it would seem, continue to regard Britishness – that is, a sense of British national identity – as the foundation stone on which unionist sentiment is built. Yet as will become clear, not only is the UK home to several different substate national identities that are associated with different and sometimes contradictory views of the union, but also Britishness manifests itself in a number of different and equally contradictory ways across the state. One might even argue that there is no single British national identity with a shared understanding of the union but instead there are multiple versions of Britishness across the state, each associated with different and at times contradictory visions of that state.

Let us begin by recalling our first analyses of constitutional attitudes in England in which we demonstrated that attitudes to the external union (the EU) and to the domestic union were linked – the more Eurosceptic were also more devo-anxious – and, crucially, significantly associated with national identity. Those who identified as English identifiers tended to be both more suspicious of devolution and less supportive of the EU. In subsequent work we have extended this analysis to Scotland and Wales, showing that, as far as Euroscepticism is concerned, substate national identities there work in the opposite way to Englishness. That is, Scottish and Welsh national identities associate with a more positive attitude towards the EU.

Data from the State of the Union Survey allows us to extend this analysis for the first time to Northern Ireland, while also developing our comparative analysis in a more comprehensive fashion. In what follows, we use the Moreno-Linz scale to measure national identity. While widely used and particularly useful for visualising differences in analyses such as the present one, it is not without its limitations (for some of the issues involved, see the discussion in Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021: 35–56; also Griffiths 2022). It is important to note two particular limitations in the present context.

First, in our analysis of Northern Ireland, we utilise British and Irish identity as the poles on the national identity scale (so British not Irish, more British than Irish, equally British and Irish, more Irish than British or Irish not British). Northern Irish identity is therefore not included even if it has been the subject of much discussion in recent years. Second, more than a quarter of voters in Wales were born in England and there is plentiful evidence that Englishness is part of the identity profile of a significant segment of the Welsh electorate. But, again, we have simply assumed that the identity spectrum in Wales runs from Welsh not British to British

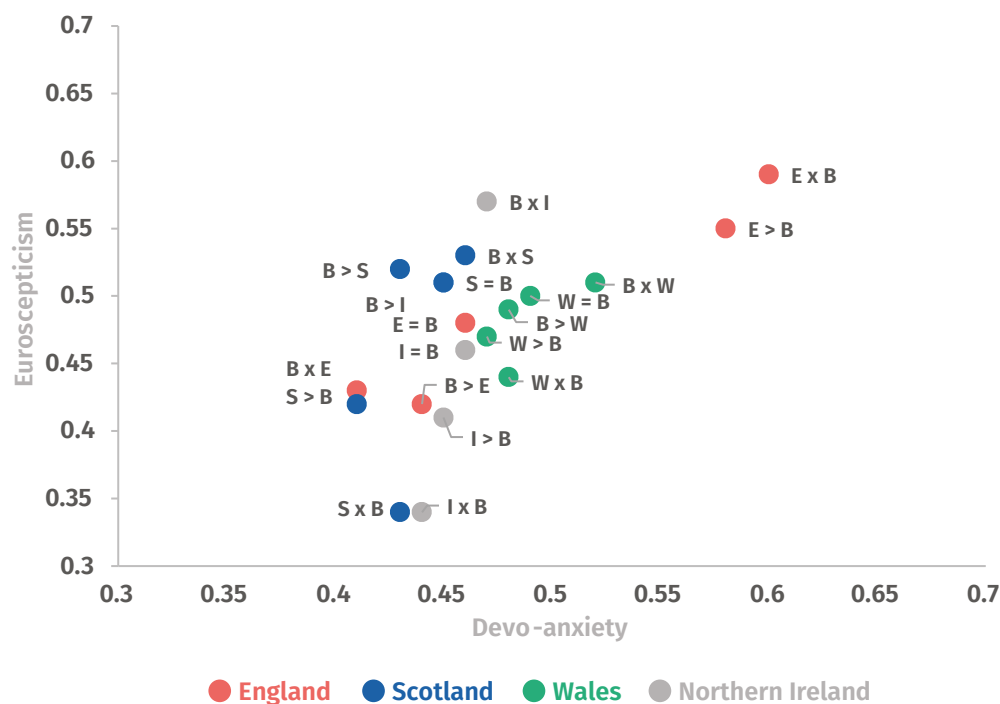
not Welsh. While there is clearly much intrinsic merit in examining the relationship between Northern Irish identity and the attitudes in which we are interested in the current report – as well as the attitudes of the English diaspora in Wales – we anticipate it will merely reinforce that national identities across the UK relate to union attitudes in nuanced and often contradictory ways.

Figure 6.1 shows the relationship between national identity, Euroscepticism and devo-anxiety. Euro-scepticism is measured via a battery we developed in order to explore both the cultural and the institutional dimensions of opposition to EU membership. Items include the view that the EU has made migration too easy, that it has produced too many regulations, that membership is less necessary because of the UK's special relationship with the US, or that, as an island, Britain does require such close ties with its continental neighbours. We also included questions about positive elements of EU membership, including that it helps to protect human rights, it promotes freedom and democracy, it facilitates opportunities for British people to live and work abroad, and that the UK has a great deal in common with the cultures and peoples in Europe. These positive statements were recoded so that everything runs from 0 (low Euroscepticism) to 1 (high Euroscepticism).

Our devo-anxiety scale includes a series of separate variables and indices – such as a sense that one's own part of the UK is receiving fewer resources than it should, that other parts are receiving more, that the devolved legislatures have made the governance of the UK worse, that public spending levels in the devolved territories should be reduced, that MPs from devolved territories should not vote on legislation affecting England, as well as that no MP from a devolved area should sit in the UK government. The resulting index runs from 0 (low devo-anxiety) to 1 (high devo-anxiety).

We used these two scales to plot the attitudes of the different national identity groups across the UK to the 'two unions' – domestic and external. The results demonstrate that the relationships that we first identified in England over a decade ago persist. Those who identify as English identifiers are more devo-anxious and more Eurosceptic than other identity groups in England. Furthermore, we can still detect considerable polarisation within England across both axes. Those who prioritise their British identity are markedly less devo-anxious and Eurosceptic than their English-identifying peers. This is in contrast to Wales, for example, where Welsh and British identifiers are clustered around the midway point of both scales.

FIGURE 6.1
Eurocepticism and devo-anxiety by national identity



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: The labels describe the various national identity options. E x B, for example, is English not British, E > B is English more than British and E = B is equally English and British.

A third finding relates to the nature of Britishness in the UK. It is clear that those in Scotland and Northern Ireland who emphasise their Britishness exhibit similar levels of Eurocepticism to those in England who emphasise their English (but not their British) identity. They differ from these English identifiers in that they exhibit far lower levels of devo-anxiety. Indeed, it is worth pointing out that levels of devo-anxiety are relatively low (below 0.5) for all identity groups except for those in England who prioritise their English identity and those in Wales who identify as British not Welsh.

The results confirm that different substate national identity groups in the UK hold fundamentally different attitudes to the state. The English not British are at the opposite end of the scatter plot from the Scottish or Irish not British. But it is also the case that those who prioritise their British identity differ in fundamental ways depending on which part of the state they inhabit. While the British not Irish in Northern Ireland are among the most Euroceptic of all national identity groups across the state, those in England who prioritise their Britishness are among the least. Meanwhile, the British not Welsh are among the most devo-anxious of all identity groups, while the British not English are, again, among the least.

But if those who prioritise their substate identities differ on some issues, they also align on others, including on matters of import for the union. Returning to economic solidarity, the focus of chapter 1, and specifically to the question on which respondents tended to be most solidaristic (sharing with the whole of the UK vs keeping resources in one's own region), we find that more than four in five (82 per cent) of English-only identifiers want to keep resources within England rather than distribute them throughout the UK, compared with half that figure for

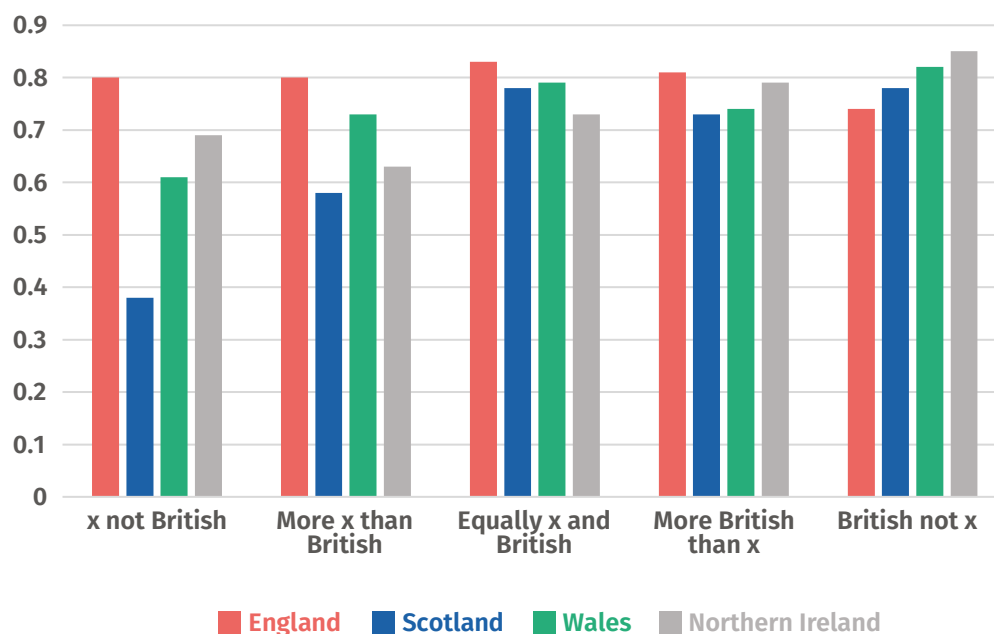
British-only or more British than English respondents. Meanwhile, almost nine in 10 (88 per cent) of those who say they are Scottish not British want to keep resources in Scotland compared with fewer than 40 per cent of those living in Scotland who prioritise or exclusively hold a British identity. This pattern is repeated in Wales, with 87 per cent of the Welsh not British compared with 'only' 52 per cent of the British not Welsh seeking to retain resources in Wales. In Northern Ireland, almost four in five (78 per cent) of the Irish not British compared with around 60 per cent of British not Irish identifiers wish to retain funding in their own part of the UK. These results echo one of our previous findings, namely that polarisation is highest in Scotland, not only across parties but in this case also across the identity divide. It is also true, however, that those who prioritise their substate identities are, in all cases, less willing to share than those who prioritise their British identity (and thus, one might argue, display lower levels of UK-wide economic solidarity).

To explore levels of social solidarity (the subject of chapter 2), we can employ our scale of policy uniformity, tracking whether respondents want the same UK-wide policy on issues such as unemployment benefit, tuition fees, prescription charges, care for vulnerable old people or sentencing for young offenders. Here, levels of support are coded as running from 0 (support for policy variation in all instances) to 1 (support for a single UK-wide policy in all policy areas). When we examine responses by national identity (see figure 6.2) we find that, while British-only identifiers tend to exhibit the highest levels of support for policy uniformity, the scores of all those who emphasise their British identity over a territorial identity (that is, the British only and more British) as well as those who view themselves as equally British are in fact all fairly similar (and high) across the four territories of the state.

In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, support for policy uniformity (and thus, in our terms, levels of social solidarity) is lower among those who emphasise their territorial national identity, and lowest of all among those who feel Scottish not British. By contrast, however, we find that levels of support for policy uniformity among those in England who prioritise their English identity is not only as high as it is among those who emphasise their Britishness, but is also as high as it is among those outside England who emphasise their British identity. Thus, as was the case with economic solidarity, we find that social solidarity is higher among British identifiers. But in this case, territorial identity discriminates differently in different parts of the state.

FIGURE 6.2

Social solidarity by national identity



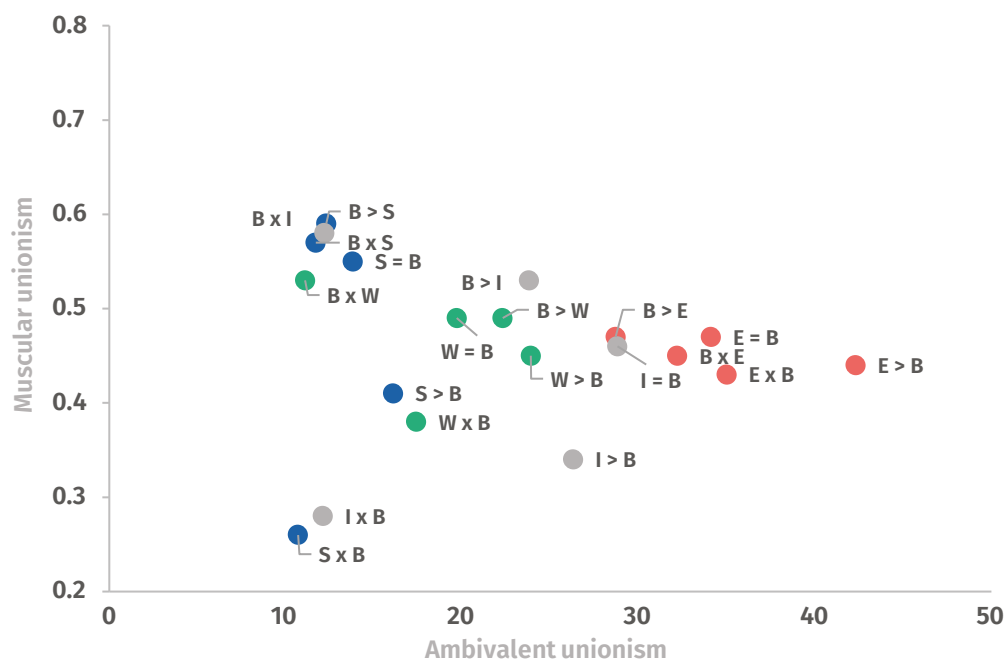
Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Finally, just as we have plotted attitudes to the UK’s two unions – domestic and external – by national identity, we can also plot attitudes to the two forms of unionism we have discussed in this report, that is, ambivalent and muscular unionism. Here (in figure 6.3) we plot the two in slightly different formats. The x axis, ambivalent unionism, relies on the percentage of respondents in each identity category selecting the ‘so be it’ option if one or more other parts of the UK go their own way. The y axis, muscular unionism, is the mean score on the muscular unionism index as utilised in chapter 4.

The results show, first, that we can distinguish **territorial** effects from **identity** effects. When we see a clustering of identity groups within a single territory, this reflects a territorial influence on attitudes. Such is the case with attitudes in England, with all national identity groups having among the highest ambivalent unionism scores but with middling scores for muscular unionism. These scores are remarkable for the extent of ambivalence towards the constitutional status quo – neither full-throated unionists nor seeking radical change. This is particularly true for those who say that they are more English than British, 42 per cent of whom are ambivalent to the union as we know it, a score that is higher than for any other identity group either in England or outside it. Around one-third (32 per cent) of those who describe their identity as British not English hold attitudes that distinguish them as ambivalent unionists. The English figures are also remarkable because they are so tightly clustered in their degree of support for muscular unionism, varying by no more than .04 on a scale that runs from 0 to 1.

FIGURE 6.3

Ambivalent and muscular unionism by national identity



Source: State of the Union Survey 2021

Note: The labels describe the various national identity options. E x B, for example, is English not British, E > B is English more than British and E = B is equally English and British.

We also find a noticeable clustering among our Welsh respondents, even if it also the case that the Welsh not British are located further from other identity groups in Wales, exhibiting lower levels of support for muscular unionism. Even so, those in Wales who eschew a British identity are more tolerant of muscular unionism (as measured by our scale) than those who do not hold a British identity in either Scotland or Northern Ireland.

Territorial effects are separate from identity effects, which are visible when the different identity groups within a single territory are spread out across one or the other axis. Given what we know of polarisation in Scotland, it is perhaps not surprising that the different Scottish identity groups are spread out across almost the entire run of the muscular unionism scale, recording the lowest degrees of support among those who are Scottish not British, but also the highest levels of support among the British not Scottish. The other identity categories in Scotland are distributed between these two poles. By contrast, we find little variation among our Scottish respondents on the ambivalent unionism scale. This is, however, merely another manifestation of a society in which views are very polarised and hence levels of ambivalence are relatively low. Those who prioritise a Scottish identity are unlikely to be ambivalent unionists because they support independence, while – conversely – those who prioritise a British identity in Scotland are unlikely to be ambivalent unionists precisely because they believe the union is a priority.

Patterns of support for the two forms of unionism in Northern Ireland are more varied. Here – as in Scotland – we see significant variation on the muscular unionism scale, with the second highest level of support across the state as a whole among the British not Irish and second lowest level of support among the

Irish not British. But in addition, and unlike Scotland, we also see considerable variation in levels of ambivalent unionism. Exclusive identifiers, whether Irish or British, are not ambivalent. Levels of ambivalence are, however, considerably higher among those who feel equally Irish and British, among those who feel more Irish than British and also among those who feel more British than Irish.

Two key analytical points emerge from the discussion in this chapter. First, we have shown how different substate national identities shape attitudes towards key constitutional questions, including both relations between the constituent territories of the UK and the state's relationship with its nearest neighbours. These national identities *tend* to work in different directions. Thus, those who prioritise their Irish, Scottish and Welsh identities are notably more pro-autonomy and pro-European than their devo-anxious and Eurosceptic English counterparts. There are, as we have seen, some commonalities, which should not be overlooked. All of those across the UK who emphasise their substate national identity have a tendency to display lower levels of intra-state economic solidarity than their various compatriots. Nevertheless, the key takeaway is not only that substate national identities matter, but also that Englishness usually works in the opposite direction to Irishness (in Northern Ireland), Scottishness and Welshness.

Second, British national identity also aligns with constitutional attitudes, but in different ways in different parts of the state. This is not the first time that we have drawn attention to this. As already noted, our previous work has shown that those in England who feel predominantly British tended to be pro-Remain at the time of the 2016 Brexit referendum, while those in Scotland and Wales who felt predominantly British tended to support Leave (Henderson et al 2020). What is new in the current analysis is that we have been able to broaden our analysis to include British identifiers in Northern Ireland while also simultaneously widening the scope of our questions in order to improve our understanding of attitudes towards both unions (internal and external).

The result has been to confirm and indeed dramatise that what was and remains true of attitudes towards the EU is also true with regards many (though not all) of the issues that pertain to the future of the union of the UK. There is no uniform 'British view', rather the constitutional attitudes of British identifiers differ systematically depending on which of the four territories of the state they inhabit. As we have seen, these differences in attitude are greatest between the predominantly British in Scotland and the predominantly British in England. But, in truth, there are important distinctions – and often contradictions – among 'the British' both between and within each of the four territories.

7.

CONCLUSION: THE IMPLICATIONS OF AN AMBIVALENT UNION

We established the Future of England Survey in 2011 because we felt that UK social science required a survey vehicle to understand the dimensions of Englishness. This, we felt, would help us to understand whether English national identity had become politicised and, in particular, whether it connected to assessments of the state and preferences for its future. It became clear that this was indeed the case. English identity aligned with attitudes to its two unions, specifically a sense of Euroscepticism but also devo-anxiety.

Our goal here is similar. For a state that has spent much of the past 20 years debating and enacting radical constitutional change, we lack surveys that enable us to evaluate political attitudes in all four parts of the state. The result is the Cardiff-Edinburgh State of the Union Survey, now it is fourth year, which provides a four-territory evaluation of national identity and attitudes to the state. It is designed to offer a genuinely 360-degree review of attitudes to the union – its benefits and faults – and its capacity to instil attachment, pride and identification. This allows us to identify what people want from the union, but also how, if at all, they wish it to change.

Much of the current writing on the UK assumes that it is a polarised place, divided by the Brexit identities that now underpin the widely differing ways that Remainers and Leavers assess and evaluate the state and its future. While correct in its way, this is an Anglo-centric view. Different polarisations matter in different parts of the state, not least in Scotland and Northern Ireland, where those seeking constitutional change under the label of nationalism must compete against different forms of unionism. Our goal in this report is to provide something of a corrective and a reminder of the UK's pluralism. British identification is varied, and low in some parts of the state, but more importantly, British national identity aligns with different evaluations of the state, different constitutional preferences and different values, depending on where in the state one lives. Britishness means different things – it values different things – in different parts of the state, and the variation is such that anyone tempted to insert a 'British' variable in any kind of modelling and expect it to operate in a similar way regardless of where a respondent lives should, quite simply, desist from doing so.

The UK's pluralism is not new – this was true well before devolution. Neither is it news that individuals evaluate their political worlds through their own experiences and local contexts. What has changed is that the four electorates in the UK now have very different political institutions, led by different parties of different partisan and constitutional stripes. It is not surprising, therefore, that variation in understandings of the state – and preferences for how it might work better – are visible in plain sight. Nor is this necessarily a fatal blow to the state. After all, if most in the UK wish their state to continue, does it matter if they arrive at the same destination via different routes? The challenge is rather that support for

the union is often better characterised as a form of ambivalence, as we go on to discuss further.

Our 360-degree review of attitudes across the state offers new insights. Beyond those supporters of independence/reunification who are the subject of so much attention, there are others whose support for the union as currently constructed can be characterised as ambivalent. This is certainly true of Brexit supporters who continue to see the departure of Scotland and Northern Ireland as a price worth paying to leave the EU – something we have been showing in our data since 2017. But it is also true of the electorates as a whole.

Electorates in England, Wales and Scotland are, on average, sympathetic to the departure of Northern Ireland from the UK with, as we have seen, average scores for Irish reunification above the midpoint. Northern Ireland is also routinely the least understood part of the state to British electorates – the levels of ‘don’t know’ responses for questions involving Northern Ireland are typically among the highest in our data. Psychologically speaking, our understanding of the state would require minimal disruption were the UK to become Great Britain. Indeed one might argue that, as far as our practices of labelling the state, including its very national identity, are concerned, no adjustment at all would be required. Given that Northern Ireland has never been incorporated into much of it, the same is true of much of the social science infrastructure for understanding that state.

We have shown that the proportions of ambivalent unionists vary throughout the state. There are fewer of them in Scotland (but far more independence supporters) and more in England (where there are fewer backers of English independence). But if we add together the proportion of those who support radical constitutional change (either independence or reunification) with those who react ‘so be it’ to the prospect of one or more other parts of the UK going their own way, we capture more than half of the electorate in every part of the state. Support for the UK as it stands is contingent and ambivalent.

There are no doubt a number of historical factors that help to explain this ambivalence – some relating to the very construction of the state over a several-centuries-long period. Other contributing factors are of more recent origin, including the confusion that arises from the asymmetry of the UK’s current political institutions. At the UK government level, this presents as the continued elision of its dual role as government of England and government of the whole of the UK. This is neatly encapsulated in the tendency of the members of the present UK government (but also those seeking to form the next one) to announce policy initiatives for ‘this country’, an entity whose borders are only very rarely specified. In such a context it is perhaps little wonder that understandings of the state as a whole are so limited – and ambivalence about it such a striking facet of popular attitudes.

Our goal here has been to reconceptualise our understanding of attitudes across the state towards that state. We have emphasised its plurality, reminding observers that Britishness is not uniform throughout the state. Above all, we have sought to outline the contours of an ambivalent union. We have been less concerned here with modelling predictors (although we have done so elsewhere – see Henderson and Wyn Jones 2021a, 2021b) and more with developing concepts that we feel help to clarify the nature of the union. But what are the implications of this analysis? Most obviously, it raises a series of challenges for the state.

We are well accustomed to seeing calls for change from those who desire independence or reunification for their part of the UK. Demands for more minimal reforms – often deployed as a way of seeing off larger, even-more-threatening changes – are also something of a recurring theme in UK politics.

The practice of instituting changes so that things can remain fundamentally the same was seen by Rose (1964) as an explanation for the Reform Act 1832 and, more proximately, by Nairn (1998) as an explanation for the devolution reforms of the late 1990s. A pardine preference for ‘change so things remain the same’ can also explain ‘The Vow’.²

Far from advocating that the state’s structures be preserved in aspic, unionists have typically adopted what might be characterised as a ‘doing the bare minimum’ approach to reform. This attitude is still in evidence – what, after all, was ‘English votes for English laws’ (EVEL) if not an effort to identify the minimal possible change so as to deal with the ‘English question’? But in addition, we now see signs of very different attitudes within unionism. Some unionists now demand the wholesale reform of the state, arguing that this is the only way of preserving the union over the longer term. This view is perhaps best exemplified by the calls of Welsh Labour – electorally speaking, the most successful political force in the UK over the past hundred years – for a root-and-branch review of the state’s constitutional arrangements, premised on the acceptance that all four constituent units of the state should be regarded as sovereign. This view is, of course, in marked contrast to the muscular unionist approach famously adopted by recent UK governments, which appears to be premised on the view that reforms to the territorial constitution of the state have gone too far already.

This fracturing of unionism poses two obvious challenges. First, we see divisions within unionist political parties. Consider the Conservatives, where the more muscular forms of unionism advocated by Welsh and Scottish supporters sit uneasily with the views of the party’s English supporters (on this point, see also Henderson and Wyn Jones 2022). Or consider the perhaps more difficult position of the Labour party, where Scottish adherents of muscular unionism (the very phrase was coined to describe Scottish Labour) sit alongside the reformist attitudes of Welsh Labour and the more ambivalent views of English Labour. How to devise party policy on such matters if there are such different views within the parties themselves? It is not for us to argue that such parties should perhaps separate and organise themselves along purely territorial lines, but this is certainly not an uncommon approach in other multilevel states.

Second, the UK government’s muscular unionist turn faces the unavoidable obstacle of four electorates, sizeable proportions of whom either want change for its own sake or are ambivalent about certain forms of change. Less dramatically, we find many identifying with substate political communities more than the state itself, while support for the principle of inter-regional solidarity within the state is not always matched by support for sharing with specific parts of it. Navigating this potentially treacherous terrain is arguably rendered even more difficult by the asymmetric governance arrangements to which we have just alluded. How can the UK government avoid being regarded as an English government asserting its will over territories in which it currently does not enjoy a political mandate? Perhaps, as a first step, we would argue, by acknowledging the variety and, above all, the ambivalence of the public attitudes with which it is faced.

2 ‘The Vow’ was a pledge made by the, then, leaders of the three main Westminster parties – David Cameron, Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg – printed on the front page of the *Daily Record* two days before the Scottish independence referendum vote (*Daily Record* 2014). Among other things, it promised further powers for the Scottish parliament in the event of a ‘no’ vote.

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APPENDIX: METHODOLOGY

Data for the Future of England Survey/State of the Union Survey has been gathered by different pollsters. From 2011 to 2019, fieldwork in England was conducted by YouGov. The same was true in Scotland and Wales in 2014 and then again in both 2018 and 2019. Panelbase was responsible for the fieldwork in all three territories from 2020 to 2021. In each case the surveys were administered online to their British panels. Fieldwork in Northern Ireland was conducted by YouGov (2019) or Panelbase (2020), with access to Lucid Talk respondents. In 2021, Panelbase relied on its own panel for the Northern Ireland sample.

Samples were drawn to quota for region (in England), age, gender and various political variables to facilitate a sample that is representative of the territory. In each instance, separate samples were drawn for the four parts of the UK (rather than for GB/UK as a whole). Respondents were then reweighted to correct for any over- or under-representations in the data. Sample sizes are shown in Table A1.

TABLE A1

Sample sizes for the Future of England/State of the Union Surveys 2011–21

	2011	2012	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
England	2,836	3,600	3705	3,451	5,103	3,168	2,741	1,594	1,507	1,603
Scotland	–	–	1,014	–	–	–	1,502	1,006	1,515	1,610
Wales	–	–	1,027	–	–	–	2,016	1,503	1,512	1,610
Northern Ireland	–	–	–	–	–	–	–	1,029	818	1,580

Note: No surveys were conducted in 2013.

Over the 10 years from 2011 we drew on a range of funding sources for the fieldwork. In 2011 and 2012 this included Cardiff University, the University of Edinburgh and the Marie Curie International Incoming Fellowship. An extension to the Future of the UK and Scotland ESRC grant held by Michael Keating provided funding for the 2014 surveys in England, Scotland and Wales. From 2015 to 2020, fieldwork was predominantly funded by Cardiff University. In 2021, the Royal Society of Edinburgh funded fieldwork in Scotland and England, while the Welsh government funded fieldwork in Wales and Northern Ireland.

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The image features a solid yellow background. At the top center, the text 'Institute for Public Policy Research' is written in a white, serif font. Below the text, there is a large, abstract graphic composed of two main shapes. On the left, a teal-colored shape starts with a curved top edge that follows the curve of the text, then drops down to a horizontal line, and then continues as a vertical line. On the right, a larger teal shape starts with a curved top edge that follows the curve of the text and extends downwards to the bottom of the page. The overall composition is clean and modern.

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