

Social inequality in England and Scotland

An unequal union? Attitudes towards social inequality in England and Scotland

This chapter seeks to understand the differences and similarities in attitudes to social inequality in England and Scotland. For the first time, the ISSP module of questions on social inequality has been asked on both the British Social Attitudes and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys, facilitating a fresh investigation of attitudes to inequality. The chapter builds on previous attitudinal research which has indicated that Scotland is more socially democratic in outlook than England, though this difference is often smaller than common wisdom would suggest.

Spotlight

Most people in both England and Scotland think that the income distribution in Britain is unfair. People in Scotland are more likely than those in England to perceive the income distribution in Britain to be “very unfair”.

How fair or unfair do you think the income distribution is in Britain?



Overview

People living in Scotland tend to be more social-democratically minded than people living in England

This perception, particularly concerning economic policy, was a central theme of the independence referendum.

- Respondents in Scotland (20%) are more likely than those in England (13%) to perceive the income distribution in Britain as “very unfair”.
 - Just under half of respondents in Scotland (45%) feel that it is somewhat or definitely wrong that people with higher incomes can buy better education, compared with one third (34%) of respondents in England.
 - However, these dissimilarities primarily reflect differences in party political affiliation rather than whether someone lives in either England or Scotland.
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Perceptions of society today differ from views of how it ought to be

There is a discordance in England and Scotland between how we perceive social inequality today and how we think society ought to look.

- Shown five diagrams, respondents in England and Scotland are both most likely to say that society today can be described as “like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom”.
 - Yet half of respondents in England (50%) and Scotland (51%) feel society ought to be one “with most people in the middle”.
 - Three-quarters (77%) of respondents in England feel society today is not how it ought to be, compared with four-fifths (81%) of respondents in Scotland.
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Responsibility for reducing social inequality

Even though there are significant differences between people living in England and Scotland in terms of perceptions of social fairness, the picture is less clear cut when it comes to views on what Britain should do about it.

- There is consensus in England and Scotland that the government should be responsible for minimising the gap between the richest and poorest in society.
 - But a larger proportion of people in Scotland (36%) think that the government has been “very unsuccessful” at reducing social inequality compared with those in England (28%).
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Introduction

Attitudes towards issues of social inequality and fairness have long been central to our understanding of how political preferences form. Where individual political parties stand on issues around inequality and social mobility is an important factor when it comes to characterising where they sit on the left-right political spectrum. It is also important in more general terms, given the reverberations that high levels of social inequality can have for other areas of public policy, such as health and policing.

Within the UK, studies have previously found that Scotland is “somewhat more social democratic than England” (Curtice & Ormston, 2012: 33). We can see this with respect to both the attitudes that people in Scotland hold compared with those in England, as well as their party political preferences.

Here, we revisit attitudes held in the two countries towards issues of social inequality. We do this by, firstly, comparing overarching attitudes towards the perceived fairness – or lack of fairness – of the income distribution in Britain, before examining what people would prefer society to look like. The juncture between these two viewpoints – what society looks like now versus what it ought to look like – is especially relevant to the formation of party preferences in England and Scotland.

In political terms, issues of social inequality have been key themes in public discourse. Not only were these issues central to the 2014 Scottish independence referendum, but they have remained a vocal priority for the SNP. In its 2019 general election manifesto, the party made a central pledge to eradicate poverty and inequality (SNP, 2019: 5), indicating the perceived importance of the issue to Scotland’s governing party. In this chapter, we explore comparative public attitudes to social inequality in England and Scotland.

The evidence collected here is taken from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP) module on social inequality, which was fielded in both the British Social Attitudes survey (BSA) and the Scottish Social Attitudes survey (SSA) in 2019. Indeed, it is the first time that the questions from this module have been asked as part of SSA. This therefore provides an important opportunity to develop new insights into differences in attitudes between Scotland and other parts of Britain on matters of social inequality.

For the purposes of this analysis, we focus on the differences between England (using BSA data) and Scotland (using SSA data).¹

¹ Different age criteria were used to determine eligibility to participate in BSA compared with SSA. In BSA, anyone aged 18+ is allowed to participate, whereas in SSA those aged 16-17 can also participate. To ensure that the survey estimates are comparable, 16-17 year olds are therefore excluded from the data. All of the analysis presented here has been produced using the interview weights for the two surveys. For SSA, a specific self-completion weight has been applied to minimise the effect of non-response bias on the survey estimates. The weights in the combined BSA and SSA data have been scaled using ONS mid-year population estimates to ensure that the English and Scottish samples are proportionate to their respective populations.

Wales, on the other hand, is excluded. There are two key reasons for doing this. Firstly, the number of Welsh respondents to the British Social Attitudes surveys is relatively small. This means that analysing attitudes in Wales while also considering other cross-cutting factors would result in imprecise estimates. Secondly, Wales has a distinct political tradition compared with other parts of Britain (Wyn Jones & Scully, 2006). Like Scotland, Wales is typically characterised as more social democratic than England. Combining responses from England and Wales would therefore potentially underplay the differences between Scotland and other parts of Britain.

The research presented here focuses first on the differences in attitudes towards social inequality between England and Scotland overall. It then goes on to see whether these differences are because of cultural differences between Scotland and England or due to underlying political factors. We find the latter. But while people living in Scotland are more inclined to socially democratic politics (and parties) than those in England, it remains unclear if there is sufficient difference for direct changes to tax levels in Scotland, for instance, to be politically permissible.

Fairness and inequality in England and Scotland

The future of the Scottish economy was central to the independence debate in 2014; both in terms of prospects and danger to economic prosperity, and the opportunity to create a fairer society. Specifically, messaging for the independence campaign relayed a desire for a “better form of social democracy” (McAnulla & Crines, 2017: 487). The implications of this framing are twofold. Firstly, that those leading the independence campaign believed that there was an appetite in Scotland for more radical action on issues of social mobility and income inequality. And secondly, that these aspirations could not be realised so long as the Westminster parliament remained sovereign – be this for party political or institutional reasons.

Perceptions of social inequality do not form in a vacuum. Individual attitudes likely stem from both personal circumstances and characteristics and from society more broadly. Personal experience of hardship and poverty may, on the one hand, lead to an appreciation of the results of social inequality. Equally, stories of extreme poverty and/or wealth conveyed through the media may be just as impactful. Context is important here too. Economic hardship may be more meaningful – in terms of attitudes to social inequality – if it is popular knowledge that there are also other parts of the population that are very prosperous.

Within Britain itself, there is variation in social inequality – be this at a national, regional or local level. As such, we might expect an individual’s frame of reference to have an impact on their views on issues relating to inequality. Estimates produced by the Scottish

Government suggest that income inequality within Scotland has been consistently lower than that within England.² But even within England, there can be significant variation by area. Previous research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, for example, found Sunderland to be far more equal than London (Lee, Sissons, & Jones, 2013).

A key feature of the Scottish independence referendum campaign was the emphasis on parts of the UK being left behind. Alex Salmond, the then-leader of the Scottish National Party (SNP), argued that “an independent Scotland will be an economic counterweight to London and the South East” (Salmond, 2014). A similar sense of being left behind is shared in other parts of the UK. As such, this reflects the claim that the UK is more regionally divided than any comparable advanced economy (Raikes, Giovannini, & Getzel, 2019). The outcome of the Brexit referendum also reflects the division between parts of the UK that are perceived to have been left behind (Watson, 2018). Former mining towns and deindustrialised cities have been focal points for this mood. We can see this reflected in the Labour party’s poor performance in many “red wall” parliamentary seats in the Midlands and the North in the 2019 General Election. This includes towns and cities such as Bolsover, Sedgefield and Stoke-on-Trent, where the election of Conservative MPs would, historically, have been considered unthinkable (Lawrence, 2020). Many predominantly working-class seats, which had traditionally been Labour strongholds, saw a significant uplift in support for the Conservative party, both as a result of Brexit and because of a sense of being left behind.

The questions asked in the ISSP module on social inequality ask about Britain as whole, as opposed to England or Scotland individually (or areas within these). As such, respondents’ frame of reference will be for Britain as a whole, rather than their local area or region, so we do not expect differences in income inequality between England and Scotland to affect responses. Equally, in comparing England and Scotland at a country level, we acknowledge that differences in attitudes between Scotland and some English regions may be larger than others. We might expect this in the “red wall”, for instance.

Perceptions of income inequality are key to our understanding of the extent of socially democratic leanings in both England and Scotland. In the two Social Attitudes surveys we asked:

How fair or unfair do you think the income distribution is in Britain?

Table 1 presents the findings for this question, using responses in England to the BSA 2019 survey and all responses to the SSA 2019

² The Scottish Government has estimated the Gini-coefficient – a commonly used measure of income inequality – for each country within the UK using data from the Family Resources Survey. The Gini-coefficient is found to be consistently lower for Scotland compared with England throughout the period 1994-2018. The analysis dataset is available in the Additional Poverty Analysis 2020 <https://www.gov.scot/publications/additional-poverty-statistics-2020/>

survey¹. In both countries, the majority (52%) of respondents think the income distribution in Britain is “unfair”. This is consistent with the UK’s comparatively poor performance compared with other advanced nations by measures such as the Gini-coefficient. One in five (20%) people living in Scotland take a stronger view - that the distribution of income in Britain is “very unfair”, compared with just 13% in England.

Table 1 Perceived fairness of income distribution in Britain

	England	Scotland
Fairness of income distribution	%	%
Very fair	2	2
Fair	22	17
Unfair	52	52
Very unfair	13	20
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

That the majority of people in both England and Scotland view Britain’s income distribution as either “unfair” or “very unfair” suggests that the two countries are not completely at odds. But the comparatively more negative perception of those in Scotland of Britain’s current income distribution does suggest that Scotland may have more of a tendency towards socially democratic politics – consistent with previous analysis of BSA and SSA.

We then asked about attitudes towards the ability of some members of society to purchase better health care and education:

*Is it right or wrong that people with higher incomes can...
... buy better health care than people with lower incomes?
... buy better education for their children than people with lower incomes?*

For both health care and education, there is a significant association between survey response and whether an individual lives in either England or Scotland. Those living in England are typically more positive about people with higher incomes being able to buy better health care and education. As shown in Table 2, in England 37% of people responded that it is “definitely right” or “somewhat right” that those who can afford it can purchase better health care, compared with 29% in Scotland. A similar proportion of people think it is definitely or somewhat right that they could also buy better education – 38% in England, versus 32% in Scotland.

Table 2 Attitudes towards people with higher incomes being able to buy better health care and education

	England	Scotland
Better health care	%	%
Definitely or somewhat right	37	29
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	27	26
Very or somewhat wrong	32	42
Better education	%	%
Definitely or somewhat right	38	32
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	24	19
Very or somewhat wrong	34	45
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

The differences between England and Scotland are found to be even larger at the other end of the scale. Significantly more respondents living in Scotland think that it is “somewhat wrong” or “very wrong” for those with higher incomes to be able to buy better health care, with two in five (42%) reporting this view, compared to one third (32%) in England. Similarly, 45% of respondents in Scotland feel that it is somewhat or definitely wrong that people with higher incomes can buy better education, compared with one third (34%) of respondents in England.

Images of inequality in England and Scotland

We have seen that the attitudes of those living in Scotland towards social inequality tend to indicate stronger preferences for a more equal society compared with those living in England. However, these questions offer limited insights about what people feel society should look like. For example, closing the gap between rich and poor may indicate a desire to improve the living standards of society’s poorest and expand the middle class, or a desire to curb the wealth of the elite. We therefore asked a more nuanced set of questions, to explore in more detail the beliefs and ideals of people in England and Scotland.

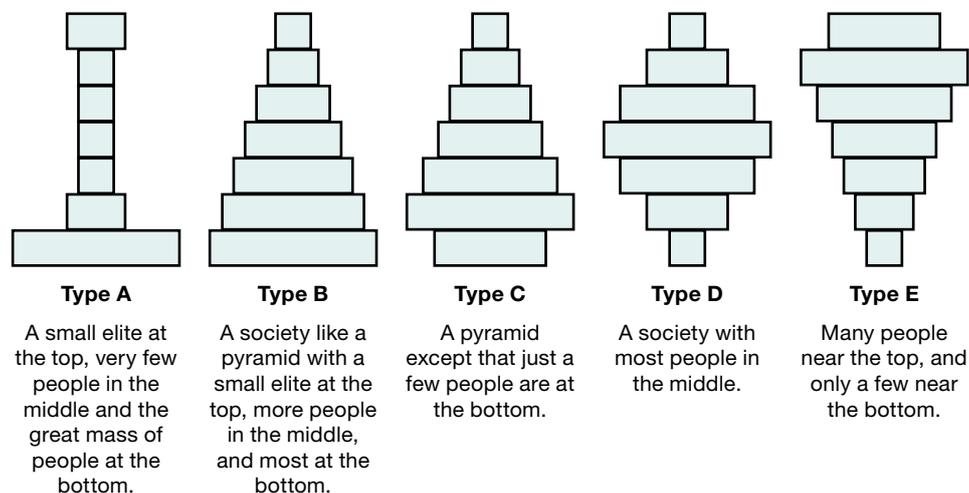
These five diagrams show different types of society. Please read the descriptions and look at the diagrams below ...

... First, what type of society is Britain today – which diagram comes closest?

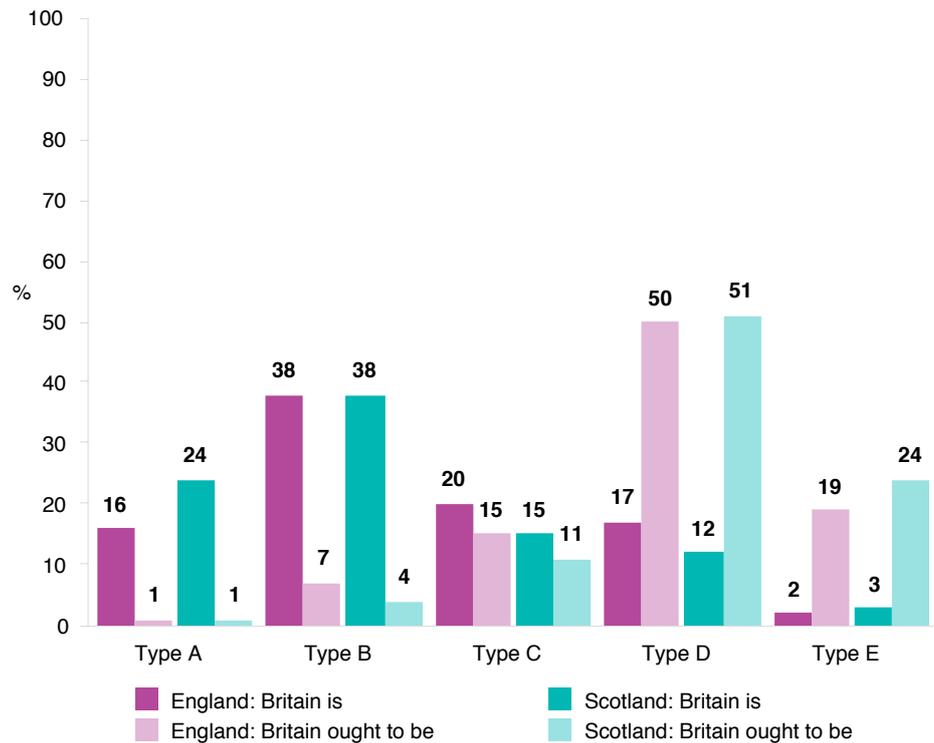
... What do you think Britain ought to be like – which would you prefer?

The diagrams that were presented to respondents are shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 Images of social inequality



Around two-fifths (38%) of respondents in both England and Scotland describe society today as “a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom” (Type B), see Figure 2. This is consistent with the findings from BSA 2016 (Evans and Mellon, 2016) which found 41% of all respondents thought society was best described in this way. People in Scotland are more likely than those in England to say that society today is best described as “a small elite at the top, very few people in the middle and the great mass of people at the bottom” (Type A) (24% Scotland; 16% England). By comparison, people in England are more likely than their counterparts in Scotland to say that society today is best described as either “a pyramid except that there are just a few people at the bottom” (Type C) or “a society with most people in the middle” (Type D). This suggests that people in Scotland perceive Britain to be more unequal, relative to people in England.

Figure 2 Attitudes to social inequality in Britain today, and what it ought to be

The data on which Figure 2 is based can be found in Appendix table A.1 of this chapter. It is based on data from *Scottish Social Attitudes* (base: all respondents aged 18+) and *British Social Attitudes* (base: respondents living in England)

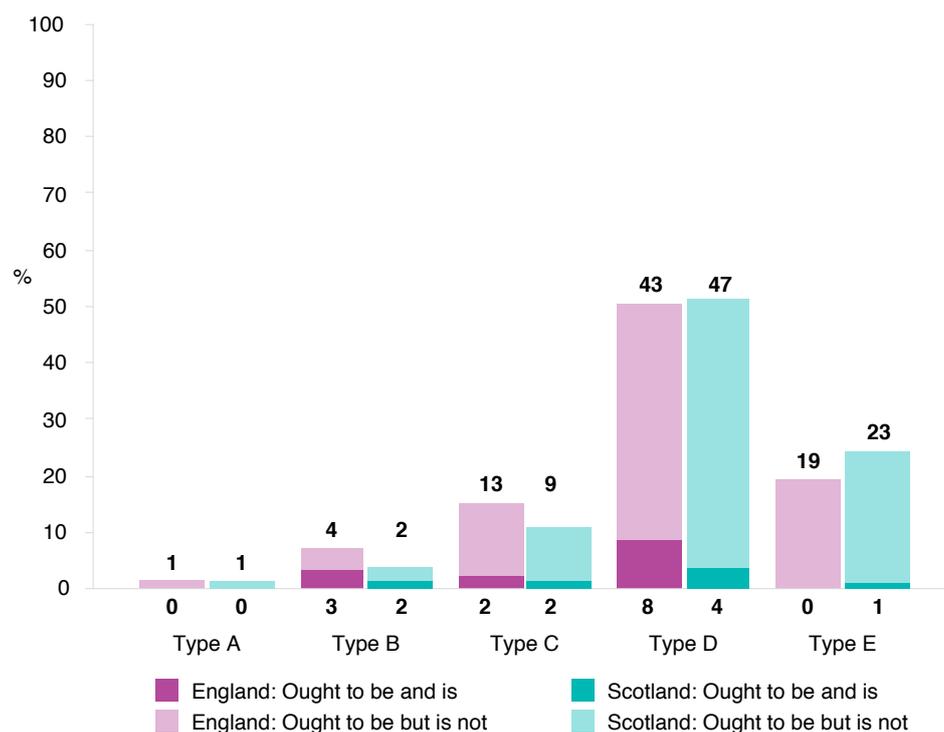
Despite a wide spread of perceptions of the type of society Britain is today, there is a much clearer preference, on both sides of the border, that Britain ought to be “a society with most people in the middle” (Type D). Half (50% and 51%) of respondents living in England and Scotland feel this way. After this, people are most likely to suggest that society ought to have “many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom” (Type E), though this view is slightly more common amongst respondents living in Scotland (24%) than in England (19%).

Figure 3 shows again attitudes towards how society ought to look, by Type. For each type of society, it also shows the proportion of people who think society in Britain today is the way they would like it to be.

For instance, approximately half of respondents in England (50%) and Scotland (51%) feel that society ought to be “a society with most people in the middle” (Type D). However, only 15% of respondents in England with this view feel that society today can already be described in this way. By comparison, only 7% of respondents in Scotland with this view feel this way. After Type D, the strongest preferences for how society should look was Type E; “many people near the top, and only a few near the bottom”. Of those with this preference, just 2% of respondents in England, and 4% of respondents in Scotland, feel that society already looks like this.

These findings indicate that there is a discordance in both England and Scotland between perceptions of how society is today and how it ought to be. Overall, three-quarters (77%) of respondents in England and four-fifths (81%) of respondents in Scotland feel that society today is not what it ought to be. This indicates an overall dissatisfaction with the status quo on both sides of the border.

Figure 3 Whether society in Britain is as it ought to be, by Type



The data on which Figure 3 is based can be found in Appendix table A.2 of this chapter. It is based on data from *Scottish Social Attitudes* (base: all respondents aged 18+) and *British Social Attitudes* (base: respondents living in England)

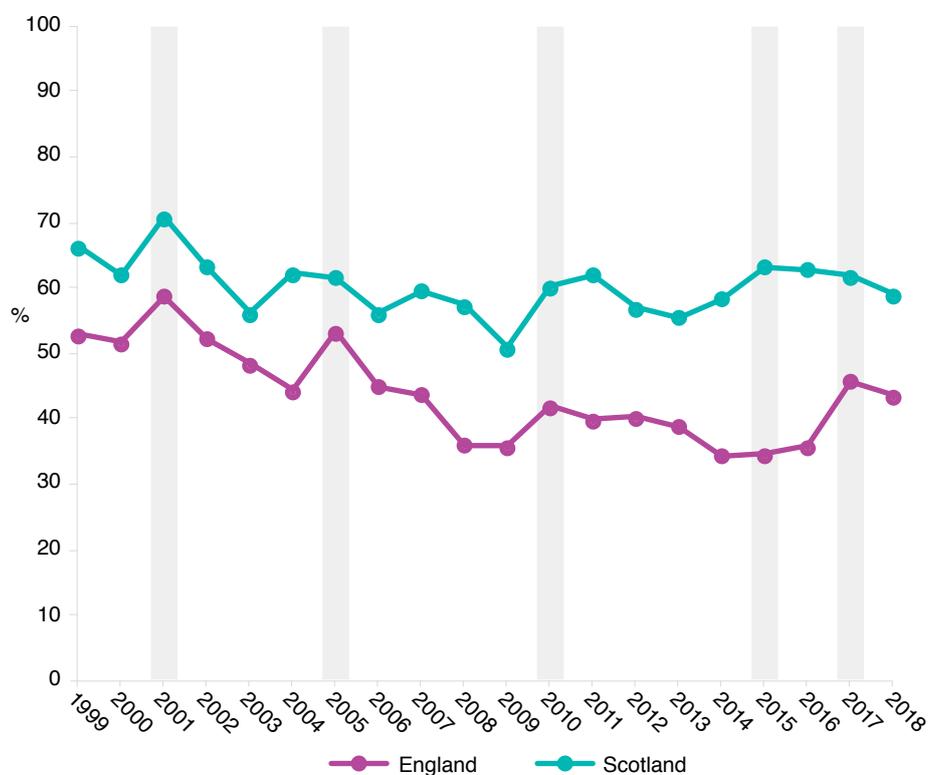
Socially democratic politics in England and Scotland

Images of how society is currently structured, in conjunction with what Britain should aspire to look like, are likely to be important in the formation of political preferences. This may also explain some of the differences we observe when looking at attitudes towards matters of social inequality on both sides of the border. If, on the one hand, a person thinks that society is currently very unequal and, also, that it ought to look a different way, this may well be an important determinant of their political preferences. If, on the other, they think that society already looks as it ought to, other considerations may play a more prominent role, such as perceptions of the fairness of the income distribution in Britain and views on whether richer people should be able to buy better health care and education.

These findings are also consistent, though, with previous analysis of the British and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys – that people living in Scotland tend to be more social democratic in outlook than people living in England (Curtice & Ormston, 2012). But while we have identified a number of significant differences between the two countries in attitudes towards social inequality, it is not clear what the underlying drivers of these differences are. On the one hand, differences in demographics and party identification could be responsible. On the other, it might be some form of cultural or historical differences between England and Scotland are the underlying cause.

The historical patterns of party support in England and Scotland are well-documented (for example, through the British Election Study). To see whether there have been systematic differences in terms of party support between the two countries we can either refer to election results or to year-on-year data taken from social surveys – including BSA. As shown in Figure 4, evidence from BSA shows that support for parties with socially democratic traditions – defined here as the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the SNP – has been consistently higher in Scotland than in England over the period since the Scottish Parliament was first instituted in 1999.

Figure 4 Support for Labour, Liberal Democrats and SNP in England and Scotland, 1999-2018



The data on which Figure 4 is based can be found in Appendix table A.4 of this chapter. It is based on BSA surveys 1999-2018. Years in which a general election took place have been highlighted in the figure.

In 2019, the difference in combined support for parties with social democrat traditions³ was similar to that found in previous years.

Unsurprisingly, previous analysis of the Scottish Social Attitudes survey has demonstrated that party identification is associated with views on income inequalities in Scotland (Bardsley et al, 2017). This is consistent with what we would expect; people who believe in reducing social inequalities through direct policy interventions tend to support political parties on the left.

Attitudes towards social inequality are, of course, not exclusively responsible for changes to party support over time. In Scotland, the increased salience of the independence debate has also played an important part in the changing patterns of party support (Greene & McMillan, 2020). An aspect of this picture is the growth in support for the SNP, which led to the SNP winning 56 out of 59 seats in Scotland in the 2015 General Election. Evidence suggests that the independence referendum has led to a realignment in party support – particularly from Labour to the SNP (Fieldhouse & Prosser, 2018). By comparison, the Scottish Conservatives have seen recent improvements in their vote share. Back at the 1997 General Election, the party failed to win a single parliamentary seat. But by the 2017 election, the Scottish Conservatives had won the second largest number of seats (13 seats) – repeating the same feat in 2019 (6 seats). This change is attributed to a strong unionist vote (Harvey, 2020) and that the Scottish Conservatives are now seen as the party of the Brexit leave vote in Scotland (Curtice, 2019).

Table 3 shows respondents' attitudes towards Britain's income distribution, and the ability of people on higher incomes to purchase better health care and education, separately for those that identify with political parties with socially-democratic traditions and those that identify with other parties.

³ We define this here as support for either the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats or the SNP.

Table 3 Attitudes towards Britain's income distribution and people with higher incomes being able to buy better health care and education

	England		Scotland	
	<i>Socially Democratic</i>	<i>Other</i>	<i>Socially Democratic</i>	<i>Other</i>
Britain's income distribution	%	%	%	%
Fair or very fair	20	27	14	27
Unfair or very unfair	72	59	79	60
Better health care	%	%	%	%
Definitely or somewhat right	34	40	26	34
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	26	28	22	31
Very or somewhat wrong	37	28	49	32
Better education	%	%	%	%
Definitely or somewhat right	34	41	28	37
Neither right nor wrong, mixed feelings	23	26	15	26
Very or somewhat wrong	40	29	53	32
<i>Unweighted base</i>	599	807	481	230

Base for England: British Social Attitudes (all respondents in England who answered political party identification)

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents 18+ who answered political party identification)

Attitudes amongst respondents who did not identify with parties with socially democratic traditions were very similar for respondents in England and Scotland. Amongst those that identify with socially democratic parties, there are differences between respondents in England relative to Scotland, but these are relatively subtle. Half of social democrat identifiers in Scotland feel that people on higher incomes buying better health care or education is wrong (49% and 53% respectively). This compares with approximately two-fifths of respondents in England (37% and 40%) respectively. This difference may explain the perception that Scotland is more socially democratic. Indeed, these differences may be amplified because a greater proportion of respondents in Scotland identify with parties with socially democratic traditions.

Responsibility for addressing social inequality

So far, the evidence from the British and Scottish Social Attitudes surveys suggests a general consensus that social inequality is undesirable – even if there is a difference in the scale of this consensus in Scotland compared with England. Perceptions of who has greatest responsibility for dealing with income inequality are

remarkably similar. In both England (55%) and Scotland (53%) the majority of respondents say that it is the government who should be responsible for reducing differences between people on high and low incomes (see Appendix Table A.5).

Earlier in this chapter we found that the overwhelming majority of people living in both countries are discontent with the current distribution of income in Britain, with 65% of those living in England and 72% of those living in Scotland stating that the income distribution in Britain is either “unfair” or “very unfair”. Given that the majority of people living in England and Scotland view the current distribution of income in Britain negatively, we expect people in both countries to want governments to do something that results in greater equality.

To gauge the public view of the government’s record in reducing income inequality we asked:

How successful do you think the government in Britain is nowadays in reducing the differences in income between people with high incomes and people with low incomes?

The overall proportion of people who think that the government has been unsuccessful is also similar across the two countries; three in five (60%) living in England think that government had been either “quite unsuccessful” or “very unsuccessful” in reducing the gap between people on high and low incomes, while 64% of those living in Scotland adopted this stance (see Table 4). Around one in four (27% and 26%) people in both England and Scotland take a neutral view of the government’s record in reducing the differences in income between people with high and low incomes.

Table 4 Perceptions of government record in reducing the differences between people on high and low incomes

	England	Scotland
Government success	%	%
Very successful	1	1
Quite successful	5	2
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	27	26
Quite unsuccessful	32	28
Very unsuccessful	28	36
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

As was the case for the perceived fairness and unfairness of Britain’s income distribution, very negative attitudes were significantly more prevalent north of the border. In Scotland, 36% of people think that the government in Britain had been “very unsuccessful” in reducing

differences in income, compared with 28% of those in England. What is not clear is whether the differences found are rooted in adversarialism. Supporters of opposition political parties may, for instance, be more likely to take a relatively dim view of government performance. Yet comparing perceptions of respondents who identify with the governing party in England and Scotland indicates that this may not be the case (see Table 5). Indeed, respondents in Scotland who identified with the SNP were more likely to express dissatisfaction with government effectiveness at tackling inequality than respondents who identified with other parties.

Table 5 Perceptions of government record in reducing the differences between people on high and low incomes, by party identification

	England		Scotland	
	<i>Conservative</i>	<i>Opposition parties</i>	<i>SNP</i>	<i>Opposition parties</i>
Government success	%	%	%	%
Very or quite successful	7	6	3	3
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	36	24	22	29
Very or quite unsuccessful	53	64	70	60
<i>Unweighted base</i>	493	1020	267	507

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

Equally, an opponent of existing governance arrangements in Britain may be more likely to think that government in Britain has been unsuccessful. Ardent supporters of Scottish independence may fall into this category (see Table 6). Around three-quarters (73%) of respondents in Scotland who think that Scotland should be independent feel that the government had been very or quite unsuccessful in reducing inequality, compared with just over half (55%) of Unionists.

Table 6 Perceptions of government record in reducing the differences between people on high and low incomes, by preference for Scottish governance

	Independent	Unionist
Government success	%	%
Very or quite successful	2	4
Neither successful nor unsuccessful	21	31
Very or quite unsuccessful	73	55
<i>Unweighted base</i>	354	381

Base: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

The context of income tax policy is also important here. The Smith Commission – formed to review Scotland’s devolution settlement in the aftermath of the independence referendum – recommended that the Scottish Parliament should be granted the power to set rates and bands on earned income (Smith Commission, 2014). This recommendation was subsequently implemented in the Scotland Act 2016. But there is still scope for the Scottish Government to introduce changes that could lead to a reduction in the differences between people on high and low incomes. The Scottish Government has already used these powers; the top rate of income tax is 41% in Scotland, compared with 40% in England and the top tax band starts at a lower threshold (£43,431 in Scotland, £50,000 in England).

Attitudes towards current levels of taxation, for those on the high incomes, are gauged by the following question:

Generally, how would you describe taxes in Britain today for those with high incomes? Taxes are...

... much too high

... too high

... about right

... too low

... much too low

As indicated in Table 7, the appetite for higher levels of taxation is slightly higher in Scotland. Just under half (44%) of respondents think that tax for higher earners is “too low” or “much too low”, compared with about a third (36%) in England. Meanwhile, a third (33%) of people in England think that the current level of tax for high earners is about right, compared with 29% of those in Scotland.

Table 7 Attitudes towards current tax levels for people with high incomes

	England	Scotland
Tax levels for high earners	%	%
Much too high	6	3
Too high	18	15
About right	33	29
Too low	30	33
Much too low	6	10
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

Other survey questions relating to taxation paint a less clear picture, however. In the BSA and SSA surveys we also asked:

Do you think people with high incomes should pay a larger share of their income in taxes than those with low incomes, the same share, or a smaller share?

When asked the question in this way, a much larger proportion on both sides of the border indicated higher earners should face a larger tax burden. The majority of respondents (see Table 8) think that either a “larger” or “much larger” share of income should be paid in tax by high earners. One in five (20%) respondents living in Scotland think that those on high incomes should pay a “much larger” share of their income in tax, with 18% taking the same view in England. There was a similar proportion of people who thought high earners should pay a “larger” share in tax – 53% of respondents in England adopt this stance, as do 55% of those in Scotland. In contrast with the pattern of responses to the previous question on levels of taxation for high earners (see Table 7), the differences in these margins were not statistically significant.

	England	Scotland
Income share paid in tax by high earners	%	%
Much larger share	18	20
Larger	53	55
The same share	20	16
Smaller	1	1
Much smaller share	1	*
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

** indicates the proportion was less than 0.5%*

Conclusions

In this chapter, we explore similarities and differences in attitudes to social inequalities in England and Scotland. For the first time, SSA has included the ISSP module of questions on this topic, facilitating a fresh investigation of our perception of fairness in the distribution of income and wealth in Britain and how this differs on either side of the border. Past research, including analysis of BSA data, has shown that people in Scotland tend to be more socially democratic in outlook than people in England. Yet these differences tend to be subtle, rather than indicative of fundamental differences in ideology.

Our findings are consistent with these themes. Respondents in both England and Scotland appear discontent with the status quo; though respondents in Scotland are slightly more likely to perceive Britain's income distribution to be very unfair. Yet these findings tell us little about the type of society that people would like to live in.

To explore this issue with more nuance, we showed respondents five diagrams, each illustrating different social structures. Respondents in both England and Scotland are mostly likely to describe society today as one "like a pyramid with a small elite at the top, more people in the middle, and most at the bottom". Strikingly, very few people felt that society today was structured the way it ought to be. Three-quarters (77%) of respondents in England feel that society today does not look as it ought to, compared with four-fifths (81%) of respondents in Scotland. Whilst perceptions of society today are spread across the different diagrams of social inequality, there is a clear preference for how society ought to be. Half of all respondents, both in England (50%) and in Scotland (51%) feel that society ought to be one "with most people in the middle". However, just 15% of those in England and 7% of those in Scotland with this view feel that society is already structured this way. This discordance indicates a desire for change and that this feeling may be stronger for people in Scotland.

The differences in ideals may explain the consistently stronger performance of socially democratic political parties in Scotland relative to England. Indeed, a core theme of the Scottish independence campaign focused on a desire to make different social and economic choices to address the national and regional inequalities within the UK. Yet living in England or Scotland is not the only factor that leads to differences in attitudes towards social inequality. In England, respondents who do not identify with the government (the Conservatives) are more likely to express dissatisfaction with how inequality has been addressed. Yet in Scotland, those that had voted for the Scottish Government (the SNP) are more likely to be dissatisfied than those who had voted for other parties, indicating a close association with political party affiliation. Furthermore, respondents in Scotland who feel that Scotland should be governed independently are also more likely to express their dissatisfaction with government's effectiveness in reducing inequality.

Under the provisions of the Scotland Act 2016, the Scottish Government has already made small increases to income tax in Scotland. Yet, the evidence presented here does not definitively indicate a greater appetite for higher levels of taxation in Scotland than in England. With Scottish independence now back at the forefront of Scottish politics, the future social and economic prospects in Scotland will no doubt feature heavily in the independence and unionist campaigns. However, throughout this chapter we have seen that despite subtle differences, people in England and Scotland show relatively consistent attitudes around how society should look. The overall dissatisfaction with the status quo may therefore suggest a desire for change, not just within Scotland, but across Great Britain as a whole.

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Appendix

Table A.1 (Figure 2) Perceptions of social inequality

		Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E	Unweighted base
Society in Britain today is							
England	%	16	38	20	17	2	1513
Scotland	%	24	38	15	12	3	774
Society in Britain ought to be							
England	%	1	7	15	50	19	1513
Scotland	%	1	4	11	51	24	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

Table A.2 (Figure 3) Whether society in Britain is as it ought to be, by Type

	Type A	Type B	Type C	Type D	Type E
England	%	%	%	%	%
Society in Britain today...					
Ought to be and is	0	3	2	8	*
Ought to be but is not	1	4	13	43	19
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	1513	1513	1513	1513
Scotland	%	%	%	%	%
Society in Britain today...					
Ought to be and is	*	2	2	4	1
Ought to be but is not	1	2	9	47	23
<i>Unweighted base</i>	774	774	774	774	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes respondents living in England

** indicates the proportion was less than 0.5%*

Table A.3 Whether society in Britain is as it ought to be

	England	Scotland
Society today is as it ought to be	%	%
Yes	14	9
No	77	81
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes Respondents Living in England

** indicates the proportion was less than 0.5%*

Table A.4 (Figure 4) Trends in total support for the Labour party, the Liberal Democrats and the Scottish National Party, 1999-2018

	England	Scotland
% Support for Lab/LD/SNP	%	%
1999	53	66
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2718	279
2000	52	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2887	325
2001	59	71
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2761	324
2002	52	63
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2897	339

Table A.4 continued

	England	Scotland
% Support for Lab/LD/SNP	%	%
2003	48	56
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3709	448
2004	44	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2684	331
2005	53	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3643	398
2006	45	56
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3666	389
2007	44	60
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3517	393
2008	36	57
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3880	391
2009	36	51
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2917	315
2010	42	60
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2795	313
2011	40	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2859	273
2012	40	57
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2793	296
2013	39	55
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2799	272
2014	34	58
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2449	264
2015	35	63
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3778	335
2016	36	63
<i>Unweighted base</i>	2525	252
2017	46	62
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3478	319
2018	43	59
<i>Unweighted base</i>	3356	354

Source: British Social Attitudes 1999-2018

Table A.5 Responsibility for reducing differences between people on high and low incomes

	England	Scotland
Greatest responsibility is for...	%	%
Government	55	53
Private companies	15	17
Low-income individuals themselves	3	3
Income differences do not need to be reduced	4	2
Trade unions	2	3
High-income individuals themselves	1	2
<i>Unweighted base</i>	1513	774

Base for Scotland: Scottish Social Attitudes (all respondents aged 18+)

Base for England: British Social Attitudes Respondents Living in England

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